

## Question 9

### Policy 7 – Durham City Strategic Housing Sites

1. The Authority's attack on the Green Belt stems from its over-concentration on Durham City and a consequent search for housing sites within 5km radius. Its methodology in choosing housing sites is misguided, for there should have been an initial investigation of all potential sites over a more generous area in which Green Belt locations were assigned extremely negative weightings, since one of the two essential characteristics of a Green Belt is permanence. The methodology is further misguided in using environmental impact or landscape value to select which parts of potential Green Belt locations should be selected for housing, since openness and not landscape quality is the other essential characteristic of Green Belt. (NPPF, para 79).
2. The City's Green Belt was only conceded by the previous County Council at the third time of asking; its first proposal did not constitute a 'belt' at all (County Structure Plan Review: Deposit Plan, 1995, p.82). The present Green Belt is acknowledged in the present *Preferred Options* to be "drawn extremely tightly around the City" (4.183). In fact, it is so tightly drawn that it is the smallest Green Belt of any historic city. This was noted by the government-appointed Inspector at the 2002 Local Plan Inquiry: "[M]ost GBs are many miles wide.....The general extent of the GB around Durham...as defined on the Proposals Map is seldom more than 5km wide and in parts is as little as about 0.8km." (para 7). Notwithstanding its acknowledged minimal extent, and NPPF stating that, "once GBs have been established, local authorities should plan positively to enhance the beneficial use of the GB" (para 80), the Council now wishes to remove three sizeable chunks.
3. Such action appears contrary to NPPF: "Once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances" (para 83). The Authority itself expressed doubt in a Council Policy Statement reviewing the major implications of the NPPF two months after its appearance: "The Government has also reasserted the need for Green Belt protection and the requirement to demonstrate exceptional circumstances for any Green Belt deletion remains. As such, it is highly unlikely that proposals that involve the development of Green Belt land will be viewed favourably in the light of this Paper" ('Assessing Development Proposals in a changing National Planning System', May 2012, p.136, para 3.18)
4. The present *Preferred Options* document does not spell out what the Council considers to be the "exceptional circumstances" – indeed, the phrase is not used in the document, but in response to a formal question to the Authority by the Trust, the Council's Portfolio Holder for Economic Regeneration (25 July 2012) gave this answer:

*As Mr Clark correctly identifies the NPPF states that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances and through the preparation of a Local Plan.*

*The County Durham Plan is therefore the correct mechanism for a review of the Green Belt and the exceptional circumstances which justify this review are the same as those that underpin the entire Plan and its Strategy:*

- *The poor state of County Durham’s economy and the resulting high levels of unemployment and deprivation;*
- *The lack of government investment available to assist our deprived communities and significant reduction in public sector expenditure to support economic development and training;*
- *Low land values in many parts of the County with the resultant lack of interest from developers;*
- *The need to be build [sic] on the County’s assets such as Durham City to ensure the delivery of new development; and*
- *Significant underperformance against national averages on all indicators of prosperity and economic wellbeing.*

*It is clear that what has been tried in the past, which although there has been some successes, has not been sufficient to lift County Durham from its position as the poorest performing economy in the Region , which is in turn the poorest performing in the country. The Council must have an ambitious Plan if it is to change this and the current economic difficulties mean that we need to redouble our efforts to achieve this. It is the Council’s view therefore, that these circumstances are indeed exceptional.*

The Council’s *Durham City Green Belt Site Assessment Phase 3* (September 2012) para 1.5 later repeated the identical reasons. The Trust does not doubt the serious economic situation in the country and county, but finds it profoundly unsatisfactory to argue in such general terms to adjudicate between specific locations. The case is not thereby made for altering specific boundaries within the Green Belt.

5. It should be noted that the Inspector in 2002, in anticipating possible future development, came to a different conclusion. Acknowledging the small size of the Green Belt, and recognising the need for sustainability, he concluded that development outside such a comparatively narrow Green Belt could “be located so as to minimise travel distances for work and leisure by being at existing or proposed public transport nodes and close to existing facilities in the larger settlements with better facilities beyond the GB.” (para 7). The outer edge of the Durham Green Belt in fact can be reached in any direction in 10-15 minutes by public transport. The Trust therefore maintains that the Council is (a) flying in the face of time-distance reality, as well as the Inspector’s conclusion, (b) turning a blind eye to the NPPF. (The latter also states that authorities “should consider the consequences for sustainable development ...towards locations beyond the outer Green Belt boundary” (para 84).)
6. As a result of the above facts, the Trust objects to the three proposed Strategic Green Belt Alterations in order to develop housing on such land at Sniperley Park, north of the

Arnison Centre and Sherburn Road. Again, the Inspector's 2002 Report is instructive, for his "Housing Chapter" strongly asserts the primacy of Green Belt over housing development:

"Its [Durham's] unique character and setting make it physically unable to absorb new housing at levels which market forces might indicate. It is largely for these reasons that the GB has been proposed.....Housing development which extends either into the countryside surrounding the City, or into important open spaces or undeveloped areas within it, will be resisted" (paras 4.9,10).

7. For all three sites the Authority itself presented a comprehensive case against development with a long list of negative factors in its Consultation Report: Durham County Green Belt Assessment Phase 2 (December 2010). North of the Arnison Centre has 11 "cons" or negative factors (pp.45-6), Sniperley Park 9 (pp23-4) and Sherburn 8 (p.115).
8. The building of what is effectively a new town on the northern outskirts, with its town centre opposite the Arnison Retail Centre, will further damage the established City centre, and is entirely contrary to NPPF (para 24). It can hardly be called a sustainable development when it will be beyond a comfortable walking distance for a large part of the site, while this out-of-town shopping centre will attract – need to attract? – car-borne shoppers from a distance. Neither "exemplar of design" (4.104), nor "new and enhanced landscape structure" can compensate for the loss of the openness of Green Belt. The topography beside the long north-eastern boundary, demarcated by the railway, will mean that the "break" between Chester-le-Street and Durham will be significantly reduced.
9. The Inspector in 2002 did not mention the proposed North of the Arnison Centre since it was accepted as Green Belt by all sides, but he did pronounce on both Sniperley Park and the Sherburn Road sites. On the former, he wrote:

"In general the A167 forms a firm and appropriate boundary to the GB. The limited housing to the west at Witton Grove is rightly excluded from the GB, but because of its limited size its harmful effects on the GB are not great. Any consolidation of this development, however, by the extension of the residential area to the north would be likely to cause disproportionate harm to the effectiveness of this part of the GB"

The Trust agrees with the Inspector's comment that the A167 is "a firm and appropriate boundary".

10. On the Sherburn Road site he commented thus:

" I accept that it would be possible for such mitigation works to reduce very greatly the harmful impact of development here. I also accept that because of the existing development and topography any impact on views of or from the Cathedral tower

would be likely to be relatively small. At the same time it is clear that similar arguments could be put forward in respect of development in many parts of the GB. Given the relatively small scale of this GB and the importance of the general size and scale of Durham as aspects of its character I am doubtful whether such arguments should prevail. There would certainly be some advantage if land could be removed from the inner edge of the GB to be safeguarded for potential longer term.....However in this case the harm done to the purposes of the GB would be too great. It is an integral part of the GB and should not be deleted from it” (paras 25, 26).

The Trust does not concur with the Council’s opinion that the development would provide “an attractive gateway to the City” (4.110) for motorists travelling northwards on the A1(M).