

This document is in three parts:

1. Comments
2. Appendix 1 observations to the assessment tables and commentary in the revised sustainability report
3. Appendix 2 Supporting narrative to points 7

Reference paragraphs 54 and 55 of Interim Report Exam 131:

54. Further SA work needs to be carried out in order to ensure that all reasonable alternatives have been assessed at the same level of detail as the option taken forward in the submitted Local Plan.

55. A review of the relevant material prepared previously for the Council and for those promoting alternative sites should form an input to this work, and any errors should be corrected.

Comments invited on:

Section 5, all (pages 75-86)

Appendix A, pages A8 & A9 only

Appendix B, all (pages B1-B10)

Appendix C, pages C6 - C28 only

Appendix D, pages D14 - D16 only

Non-Technical Summary, Table Headed "Choice of Options over reasonable alternatives in respect of the SUE and Strategic Employment Site", on pages viii - ix

Comments

1. Without knowledge of the scoring mechanisms used by Birmingham City Council (BCC) we are unable to determine whether all reasonable alternatives were assessed at the same level of detail as the option taken forward in the submitted Local Plan. When reading the above sections the assessment of alternatives is not so distinctive to highlight the different sustainability implications so that a meaningful comparison can be made. Robust arguments to explain why Areas A, B or B1, B2, C1, C2 (or any combination of those for housing development) have been discounted are not clear. Why Area C is the preferred option is less than clear when looking at the assessment scorings and commentary (Table 5.2). Also Area C seems to be the preferred option as it scores higher in SA Objective 11 and 19 which means that "it is likely to be very sustainable and contribute significantly to the SA Objective". **However A8/GA5 (Area C) the commentary says that the sustainability credentials will only become apparent towards the end of the plan period.** This is just one example of inconsistency in the scorings.

Please also refer to Appendix 1 for additional comments on the assessment tables and commentary. The comments in Appendix 1 are not exhaustive and just examples.

2. Our understanding is that the content of the SA should be appropriate for the content and level of detail in the Local Plan. As this is a significant development and one that requires exceptional circumstances to release the land for the development our expectation had been that there would be more detailed narrative on the merits and disadvantages with regards to the social, economic and environmental dimensions when assessing the Areas.
3. Planning Guidance advises that assessment should be made of their “likely evolution without implementation of new policies”. This narrative is missing but it would have been a useful commentary in the SA to understand the social, economic and environment implications should the developments not be taken forwards versus being released for development.

Guidance also states that “The sustainability appraisal should identify, describe and evaluate the likely significant effects on environmental, economic and social factors using the evidence base.” Please refer to Project Fields written statement for examination which outlined our concerns with regards to the evidence database.

4. Our understanding is that assessments of “the significance” are a matter of professional judgement but they also need to be proportionate and realistic particularly when testing the impact of development scenarios between 10,000 and 5,000 dwellings or appraisal of alternative sites expected to cater for a 5,000 dwelling urban extension. But without this context it is purely a subjective process as opposed to one based on relevant and detailed specifics for these Areas. Due to the size of the potential SUE and the significant release of Green Belt which requires exceptional circumstances we would have expected more certainty in the choice of preferred option.
5. To assess a development of this geographical and population impact on Sutton Coldfield SA Objectives would have been more relevant if they had been specific to the local area instead of overall Birmingham objectives. This would have helped to ensure sustainability issues and effects of a development of this scale were identified against the key issues of the SUE in this location.
6. Whilst I realise the Inspector had asked the BCC *to ensure that all reasonable alternatives have been assessed at the same level of detail as the option taken forward in the submitted Local Plan with specific reference to Areas A, B, C and D*, it is still very unclear why BCC have limited reasonable alternatives to within the City of Birmingham boundaries. Planning policy (NPPF 47) says that the objectively assessed need for housing should be met in the Housing Market Area (HMA), and therefore not limited (in this instance) to within Birmingham's boundaries. To limit the assessment of reasonable alternatives to land within the city boundaries is presumptive and premature until all reasonable alternatives (not just within the city boundaries) have been considered.

The assessments in EXAM 146 do not alter our views regarding the consequences of developing Green Belt land and our argument that exceptional circumstances have not been demonstrated to release Green Belt for development.

Please refer to Appendix 2 for additional information

Appendix 1

The following are observations to the assessment tables and commentary in the revised sustainability report. The list is not exhaustive and these are just examples of anomalies:

7. When testing the SUE development scenarios or appraisal of Areas A, B,C, & D and sub-areas A2, B2, & C2 for a 5,000 dwelling urban extension, the scoring performance has understated the impact a development of this size and the extent of the effects (geographical/population size) will have in any of the proposed Areas. The scoring has not taken into account that as a baseline a SUE whether for 10,000 or 5,000 dwellings will mean: a large loss of openness; a significant impact on landscapes, a loss as a visual amenity; a detrimental effect on recreational opportunities and significant environmental loss with an adverse loss of soil carbon and natural fertility of farmland. All of which are not reversible. Our view is that any assessment of reasonable alternatives should have accurately reflected this baseline with regards to (but not limited to) SA Themes 1, 2,3,4,5 and SA Objectives 1,8,5,6,9,12,13,14,15,16,17,18*. Our understanding is that assessments of the “significance” are a matter of professional judgement / subjective but they also need to be proportionate and realistic particularly when testing the impact of development scenarios between 10,000 and 5,000 dwellings or appraisal of alternative sites expected to cater for a 5,000 dwelling urban extension.

(*) These are in the order of the SA Objectives.

8. Page 77 - Bullet point three states “ *A development of around 5,000 dwellings in a single location is preferable over a series of small sites because of the ability to deliver supporting infrastructure as part of a single master plan which can be appropriately phase.*” This contradicts later commentary in the SA that says the “*use of sustainable transport, trip generation, and waste management for example, will determine its sustainability credentials, but these will only become apparent towards the end of the plan period*”.
9. The following are examples of where the information used to conclude on the assessments is considered imprecise:

Page 79/80 - When comparing potential development areas A, B, C and D for housing development the commentary says that Area D performs poorly due to its impact on the historic environment and has therefore been discounted as a possible SUE. However, based on this assessment it is unclear why Area D is then considered the more sympathetic option for an employment site despite performing poorly in the area of historic environment.

Comments on landscape – the basis and reasons for the landscape assessments are not clear. The Green Belt provides a significant and positive visual amenity in all four areas. It is imprecise to state Area C has “medium to low sensitivity “when Area C has the same if not greater landscape aspect to Area A and B.

The impact in both Areas C and B will in fact be a significant negative impact due to the low, exposed aspect facing the current residential area.

Comments on transport provision - the commentary says that “Area A exhibits relative remoteness from basic transport provision /accessibility and the statement of impacting A5127 Birmingham Road and Whitehouse Common Corridor”

- Re: “A5127 Birmingham Road and Whitehouse Common Corridor” using an example of traffic *into Birmingham*:

There are in fact three main arterial roads which carry traffic from Sutton Coldfield into Birmingham these are the Birmingham Road, “Walmley corridor” and the A38. All three roads run in relative parallel and the capacity is impacted by Area A, B, and C. The A38 is impacted by all four areas including D.

The only planned infrastructure change is the A38 entry/exit into Area D. Therefore the current arterial roads as mentioned above taking the additional capacity from the SUE will be the Birmingham Road, “Walmley Corridor” and the A38. The scoring assessment on transport provision has not acknowledged the cumulative impact of when existing traffic from Areas A and B meets the existing traffic in Area C in addition to the forecasted additional capacity (whether by car, bus or cycle) from the “to be” SUE.

- Re: “Remoteness from Basic Service Provision”

The scoring assessment is unclear for the following reasons:

- Area B is the more remote location from any basic service provision (I include as public transport and retail facilities).
- The cross city train stations are remote from Areas B, C and D but not Area A.
- Areas C and D have limited basic service provision in comparison to Area A and B.
- Area B and C residents travel to Areas A and/or D for use of supermarkets.

10. Page 80 - the background to the following sentence is unclear “...whilst area C2 on its own could accommodate a SUE it is logical to use the whole of Area C, thereby not leaving a remnant of land to the north between A38 and Fox Hollies Road “

Our understanding is that Area C2 is designated as the land between the boundaries of Springfield Road, Oxley’s Road, A38 and Thimble End/Webster Way; Area C1 is the land where Springfield Road meets Oxley’s Road and extends to Lindridge Road; Area C being the totality of the area.

Using the Map on page C8 it is unclear why there would be a remnant of land between the A38 and Fox Hollies Road if only Area C2 was used and where exactly it is.

11. Page 81 Table 5.3 – This table is only comparing Areas C and D for assessment. During the “Options consultation” we were asked to comment on which of the four areas were suitable for release and which option for housing and/or employment site. There has previously not been a request to comment on C v D specifically.

12. Page A8 (GA5) - the commentary states that “*The character of the development in respect of high quality design, the provision and use of sustainable transport, trip generation, and waste management for example, will determine its sustainability credentials, **but these will only become apparent towards the end of the plan period***”.

However the scoring performances for sustainable transport are “Likely to be sustainable and contribute to SA Objective”. But if credentials are not apparent until end of plan period this surely undermines the very theme of NPPF which pursues sustainable development. It is unclear how an Area can be considered to be realistic and deliverable if many characteristics of the development are not expected to be delivered until plan end. This is in fact an impediment to sustainable development.

The assessment of reasonable alternatives has not acknowledged or correctly assessed the vulnerability of any of the sites being a suitable and sustainable location .

13. Page 85 paragraph 6 states *“In the case of the sustainable urban extension....the development of services which meet new and existing needs, sustainable transport infrastructure, green infrastructure and waste management measures.”*

It is unclear how the “existing needs” for each of the four main Areas and sub areas have been identified, presented as evidence and then scored accordingly particularly with regards to sustainable transport. During consultation many of the residents comments raised concerns that existing needs had not been taken into consideration.

14. Page A9/GA6 - Peddimore - the existing constraints which indicated the “necessity for this allocation” have now been mitigated with the release of up to 33ha best quality employment land at Washwood Heath. This information was known prior to March 20th and the issue of Exam 146.

Appendix 2

Additional commentary to point 7

In considering reasonable alternatives, limitations in the scope of EXAM 146 mean that the Examination is unable to consider reasonable alternatives in the housing market area which lie beyond Birmingham's boundaries.

The SHNS [GBSLEP Strategic Housing Needs Study, phase 2 report] has in fact identified sites across the HMA, sufficient for 74,300 homes [Refer Project Fields response to EXAM 145 (Appendix B) Table 5] which may be developable if policy and viability hurdles can be overcome. The sustainability of these sites is currently being examined during phase 3 of the SHNS. Furthermore, the SHNS phase 3 examinations may find that Birmingham could release safeguarded employment sites for housing and reduce cross-boundary travel to work if its overspill housing needs were also associated with a need to also provide overspill employment sites.

Therefore the Birmingham Plan should be subject to an early review in the event the SHNS phase 3 report(s) indicates that Birmingham should allocate additional sites to meet the OAN for housing in the Housing Market Area (HMA). Additional sites which are not Green Belt and are sustainable. An early review will also provide an opportunity to incorporate any changes in land use, which arise from the Kerslake review.

We note that, based on the latest DCLG projections the shortfall in sites for homes across the HMA. (Please refer to Project Fields response to EXAM 145 (Appendix B) Table 3] is circa 25,000 dwellings, much lower than some Examination participants have suggested. So the pressures on the housing market due to a shortage of land may have been overstated. We ask that the Inspector reject plan modifications to incorporate larger SUEs and more extensive Green Belt land releases. We propose that the plan be modified to include an early review condition, so that the allocation of any additional sites (whether within Birmingham's boundaries or elsewhere) in its HMA can be informed by the SHNS phase 3 report.

Our argument remains that whether we have a 50,000 housing shortage or 80,000 or 115,000 we have little open space remaining and the debate we should really be having is how to tackle this long term problem not just a short term land grab policy. We strongly believe more clarity is required in chapter 9 of planning policy in how to deal with a situation where a city in fact is verging on capacity. Policy seems to assume that a swathe of green belt exists around most cities, reality is in Birmingham and we are sure other cities too, are actually at capacity and in danger of being 100% urban sprawl.