

ROCHFORD DISTRICT REPLACEMENT LOCAL PLAN INNER GREEN BELT BOUNDARY STUDY

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on the inner green belt boundary project, and seek Members' approval for a set of criteria to be used to assign a value to each distinct area of green belt abutting a built-up area. The chosen criteria will be used to carry out a site assessment process which, depending on the outcome of the Urban Capacity Study, could then be used in the selection of potential housing sites.
- 1.2 The preparation of a Local Plan is a statutory function for the authority.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Policy C4 of the Essex Replacement County Structure Plan requires that Local Planning Authorities undertake comprehensive and co-ordinated reviews of inner Green Belt boundaries, including safeguarded land, to meet housing and employment needs. Such a review was also recommended by the Inspector presiding over the last review of the Local Plan.
- 2.2 Officers have been undertaking this work during the course of the year. In Rochford's case, the review has two basic objectives:-
 - a) To map the position of the Green Belt boundaries on the ground, and transfer these to the Council's computer mapping system (GIS), and 'fine tune' these boundaries to remove any ambiguities;
 - b) To study and consider the contribution each parcel of land abutting the built-up areas makes to the Green Belt, and from this produce a hierarchy of sites; from those that serve a crucial purpose and which should not be released from the green belt under any circumstances to those that make a lesser contribution to the Green Belt and could, therefore, be considered for release, should the District's housing demands so require.

3 MAPPING THE GREEN BELT BOUNDARIES

- 3.1 The District's existing Green Belt boundaries were largely interpolated from those of the Approved Review Development Plan (1976) when the first Local Plan was prepared in the 1980's. The Local Plan Proposals Maps were produced at a correspondingly small scale (1:10,000) and, when using these, there have been a few occasions when it has been difficult to establish the location of the Green Belt boundary on the ground.
- 3.2 Accordingly, the first stage of the Green Belt Boundary Study was to examine all of the District's green belt boundaries, in relation to existing landscape features. This work has now been completed and all boundaries have now been transferred to the GIS. The boundaries are accurate to a scale of at least 1:20. The existence of this resource should, therefore, avoid any ambiguity or argument regarding the position of boundaries in the future.
- 3.3 In transferring the boundaries to GIS, there have been instances where slight alterations have been desirable, though these changes have been of a very minor nature and should have no future implications. Whilst there is no need for the inner Green Belt boundary to follow features on the ground, the Review has thrown up some anomalies in the position of boundaries and these will need to be closely examined.
- 3.4 It should be clarified, however, that for development control purposes, the adopted Green Belt boundaries remain as drawn on the Proposal Maps accompanying the operative Local Plan. The boundaries being transferred to the GIS will form part of the Local Plan Review, and will be available for Members to examine in detail at a future meeting of the Sub-Committee.

4 SITE APPRAISAL

- 4.1 The second part of the boundary study concerns an appraisal of Green Belt land that directly abuts the built-up areas of the District. To this end, all such land has been broken into parcels, based on its land use, be it arable, grazing, woodland, garden, housing, industry, nursery, etc. All these parcels of land have been reproduced on GIS for ease of viewing, and comparison.
- 4.2 Members will be aware that a firm of planning consultants is currently undertaking an Urban Capacity Study on behalf of the Council. The results of this study are expected early in the New Year. Should the results of this study indicate that insufficient land would be likely to come forward from existing built-up areas to meet the District's housing commitment until the year 2011, the Council would have to consider the release of land from the Green Belt to meet this need. Moreover, on the basis of the results of the Urban Capacity Study, the Council

may also consider the reallocation of green belt land as Areas of Special Restraint, to meet housing demand in the longer term, say to 2016.

5 THE CRITERIA FOR SITE SELECTION

- 5.1 Government guidance (PPG3: Housing) advises that sites for housing development should be chosen using a search sequence, starting with the re-use of previously-developed land within urban areas (identified in the Urban Capacity Study), then urban extensions, and finally new free-standing developments situated around good transport nodes. In Rochford's case the phrase 'urban extensions' would effectively mean the release of Green Belt land bordering existing settlements – the land being considered in the inner Green Belt boundary study.
- 5.2 The guidance makes clear that Councils should not extend their search further than necessary to fulfil their housing requirements. So, if adequate and suitable sites can be found within or adjoining existing settlements, the provision of new settlements divorced from existing settlements need not be contemplated.
- 5.3 The guidance provides a number of criteria against which the suitability of each site should be judged. These may be summarised as follows:-
- a) the availability of previously-developed sites and empty, or under-used buildings;
 - b) the location and accessibility of sites to jobs, shops and services other than by car, and the potential for improving such accessibility;
 - c) the capacity of existing infrastructure, inc. public transport, water, sewage and social infrastructure (such as schools) to absorb further development, and the cost of adding further infrastructure;
 - d) the ability to build communities to support new physical and social infrastructure; and,
 - e) the physical and environmental constraints on land, such as contamination, flood risk, etc.
- 5.4 These criteria do not take account of a number of other matters that would have a bearing on the search process. In Rochford's case, additional criteria would need to be introduced to rank each site in terms of its contribution to the Green Belt, to consider the implications of other designations on each site (e.g. SSSIs), to consider whether each site abuts land in use for purposes incompatible with residential use (e.g. scrapyards), etc.
- 5.5 A full list of the suggested criteria to be used to consider each site is attached as Appendix 1.

6 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The sites to be considered all lie within the Green Belt and comprise fields, woods, scattered housing, etc. It is clear that the provision of housing development on any of the sites would have an impact.

7 RECOMMENDATION

It is proposed that the Sub-Committee **RECOMMENDS**

- (1) That, subject to any specific comments from Members, the criteria laid out in the attached Appendix be approved for use as a site selection tool to establish a shortlist of sites for possible release from the Green Belt.
- (2) That an exempt report be brought back to the Sub-Committee once the appraisal process has been completed, to assess amendments to the Green Belt boundary and the implications of the assessment process. (HPS)

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