

Note to Council from Inspector

Policy SS3: Delivering New Employment Land – Rural Settlements

Following consideration of the Council's response to my post-hearing request for clarification regarding new employment land in rural settlements, the situation remains unclear.

There are many rural settlements in the District and they are defined as locations where there will be a presumption against development unless key sustainability criteria can be met. They are considered to be in the open countryside for planning purposes (LP paragraph 4.28). Paragraph 4.35 confirms that the starting point is 'no development unless certain conditions are met'. In that regard they are significantly different from the other settlements that are specifically listed in policy SS1.

As I understand it total employment land required in rural settlements is 6.13ha. The foundation for this figure is summarised in Appendix 2 of the note for the Examination Suspension Project Management Board – Item 4B, Workshop 30 (CD 167). This is confirmed in the proposed Table 1 of PMM4. The last column in Appendix 2 is entitled 'Total Employment Land Required'. One could therefore conclude that 6.13ha is the total required for the plan period 2006-2028 (as referred to in the title of the Table). This is also the conclusion one could draw from the monitoring target under policy SS2 which refers to a target of 6ha of employment land over the local plan period. However, it is my understanding that this figure is in fact in addition to existing employment commitments – thus giving the total of 13.99ha.

The Council's policy SS3 as updated by Main Modification refers to the April 2011 employment land commitment being 7.86 ha in rural settlements. However, in the paragraph under Table 2 in the Council's response (HD016) it is confirmed that there is currently 12.96ha of employment land committed in rural settlements. This therefore leaves an outstanding requirement of 1.03ha.

In my opinion the detail of the Council's strategy regarding employment provision in rural settlements is not sufficiently clear and therefore I cannot conclude that it is justified or the most appropriate strategy.

The figures relating to employment provision in rural settlements are a matter of soundness but I am reluctant to request that the Council undertakes further work, especially as there is another alternative to ensure that the plan is sound in this respect.

I consider that there should be no reference to a specific employment hectareage figure for rural settlements. Proposals for employment uses in such locations can be assessed against advice in the NPPF (supporting a prosperous rural economy) and local plan policies SS2 (Development in Rural Settlements), EP4 (Expansion of Existing Businesses in the Countryside) and EP5 (Farm Diversification). This may in fact provide a more flexible approach towards employment provision because if the circumstances were appropriate the 1.03ha outstanding requirement could be exceeded.

I consider that this modification would not significantly threaten the balance between housing and employment across the District. Employment in rural settlements will still come forward; indeed the Council acknowledges in HD016 that 'typically in the rural settlements development comes forward via barn conversions, agricultural diversification schemes, and extensions to existing small scale development – schemes that assimilate into the countryside and support the role and function of rural areas'. There is no reason to doubt that this will continue to be the case.

I would welcome the Council's response to this Note as soon as possible but my initial advice to the Council is that a further Main Modification is required to remove the specific employment figure for rural settlements and to make it clear that any such proposals would be assessed against the policies referred to above.

David Hogger

Inspector

14th July 2014