



# Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan Examination

Hearing Statement: Matter 6



# Boyer



## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

1. Introduction	2
2. Matter 6 – Employment, Retail and Town Centre and Tourism Policies	3

# 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This hearing statement has been prepared by Boyer on behalf of the East of England Co-operative Society, in response to the Inspector's questions relating to the Babergh Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan Examination.
- 1.2 East of England Co-operative Society is an independent co-op, owned entirely by over 280,000 members, and with over 120 food stores, more than 60 funeral branches and 500 investment properties across the East of England Region, the Society provides key services at the heart of local communities throughout Babergh and Mid Suffolk and is a significant regional landowner and landlord.
- 1.3 The Society's Headquarters is located just off Junction 56 of the A14, and close to A12/A14 interchange at Wherstead Park (within Babergh District), which it owns and operates as a successful business park, conference and events facility.
- 1.4 This hearing statement relates to Matter 6 – Employment, Retail and Town Centre and Tourism Policies. It is to be read in conjunction with the earlier representations made by the East of England Co-operative Society in response to Regulation 19 consultation, the principal focus of which related to the Society's operations at Wherstead Park.
- 1.5 East of England Co-operative Society welcome participation in the preparation of the Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils (BMSDC) Joint Local Plan (JLP), including the opportunity for involvement in the forthcoming Examination.

## 2. MATTER 6 – EMPLOYMENT, RETAIL AND TOWN CENTRE AND TOURISM POLICIES

- 2.1. On behalf of the East of England Co-operative Society, a number of questions from the Inspector's Matters and Questions have been addressed below. For ease of reference, the question number and questions have been provided along with a response in each instance.

**Q6.1: a) Is the plan sufficiently clear as to what the need is for employment land over the plan period?**

- 2.2. Broadly speaking, it is considered that the Joint Local Plan provides the flexibility to ensure a deliverable supply of employment sites to accommodate the needs of the local economy as well as recognising the contribution made to the national and international economies.
- 2.3. However, the East of England Co-operative Society is concerned that there is not enough land being provided in the most appropriate locations to meet the needs identified. As outlined by the Council in paragraphs 09.14 and 09.15 of the Joint Local Plan, the needs (quantitative) identified in the Employment Land Needs Assessment (Core Document EC02) are very modest, but there is a greater qualitative need to secure the future prosperity of the Districts.
- 2.4. Core Document EC03 is the Ipswich Economic Area Sector Needs Assessment, which was prepared collectively by the Ipswich Strategic Planning Area (ISPA) comprising of Babergh, Mid Suffolk, East Suffolk, Ipswich Borough, and Suffolk County Council in September 2017. This document considers the main sectors within the Ipswich Economic Area and identifies that areas surrounding Ipswich are the "Primary Market Area" for a wide number of sectors. Based on this evidence, the Council should be focussing their need for quality allocations on accessible locations within these areas.
- 2.5. The Council's Employment Land Needs Assessment (Document EC02) and the Sector Needs Assessment (Document EC03), both identify that Ipswich is the main economic driver in the area and has the largest concentration of businesses and activities. They also highlight the importance of the A14 and the A12. It therefore stands to reason that sites which fit into these characteristics should be favoured as they can provide opportunity to meet needs over the plan period in the most effective and sustainable manner. At Regulation 19 stage the Society objected to deletion of the previously allocated land adjacent to Wherstead Park (site reference SS1027 and Policy reference LA101) within the Submission Local Plan.
- 2.6. The site at Wherstead, in common with Wherstead Park itself, is well placed to meet the objectives of the Local Plan strategy in that it is well related to "transport corridors" and is within the "Ipswich Fringe". It also provides scope to expand upon the already established employment hub in this location, whilst also providing betterment through improved access arrangements (as set out in previous representations and below).

- 2.7. Recent planning permissions granted in the area (DC/19/02798 and DC/19/05093) approve improvement works to the roundabouts at J56 of the A14. These improvements include (and provide approval for) a new spur from the southern roundabout to provide access into the previously proposed allocation site (SS1027/LA101). This provides direct connection to the highway, including the strategic network and provides a clear impetus for delivery of development on the site. It therefore seems illogical to remove the allocation from the plan at this stage.

**b) The Councils have confirmed that the minimum objectively assessed need for employment land is 2.9ha in Babergh and 9.4ha in Mid-Suffolk (table 3.7 in Doc EC03). Is there robust evidence to justify this?**

- 2.8. No comment

**Q6.2: a) Is the plan's approach to employment land in policy SP05 positively prepared and consistent with national policy.**

- 2.9. The East of England Co-operative Society is broadly supportive of the plan's approach to employment land as set out in Policy SP05 as this references the Society's headquarters and other enterprises at Wherstead Business Park.
- 2.10. However, the Society is concerned that the overall strategic approach has not been positively prepared because additional sites which accord with the conclusions of the Council's evidence base have not been identified despite being included within previous versions of the Joint Local Plan.
- 2.11. Land adjacent to Wherstead Business Park, previously identified as "Land north of the Street" under policy reference LA101 or site reference SS1027 was included within the plan. This allocation provided for development to come forward over the plan period. The site would have contributed to the qualitative requirements identified by the Council but it is unclear as to why the allocation was removed.
- 2.12. Although the Society are broadly supportive of Policy SP05 insofar as it identifies Wherstead Business Park as a strategic allocation, there is concern that the plan fails to take other opportunities by identifying additional sites that would be consistent with the objectives of securing accessible locations within the A12/A14 corridors and the Ipswich Fringe.

**b) Are the requirements clear and how are they justified by evidence?**

- 2.13. As outlined above, the Society is broadly supportive of Policy SP05 and the identification of land at Wherstead Business Park. The requirements relating to that site are clear.
- 2.14. Despite this, the Society is concerned that appropriate opportunities on a neighbouring site have not been taken. In the Sustainability Appraisal published in June 2019, it includes assessment of site LA101, which shows it generally performs positively against objectives.

Site LA101 was included within the report approved at the meeting of Babergh Full Council in June 2019 but was subsequently removed from, the Preferred Options document published for consultation in July 2019 under regulation 18. It is unclear as to why site LA101 was been removed at such a late stage in the production of the document.

- 2.15. In the Council's JLP Consultation Statement (Core Document A06 which is the Regulation 22 Consultation Statement) dated March 2021 it gives little justification for the removal of Policy LA101 besides stating '*as the site is adjacent to the AONB and was not considered suitable for allocation in the draft JLP*'. The Council's has completely changed their stance considering that sensitive issues, listed under Policy LA101, could have been mitigated through formulation of suitable proposals, supporting evidence and the imposition of planning conditions. The removal of Policy LA101, has not been appropriately justified and the evidence base provides conflicting information. As such, it is not considered that all aspects of Policy SP05 have been justified and it is thus contrary to Paragraph 35 (b) of the NPPF.

**c) Is it sufficiently flexible and would it be effective in providing an appropriate amount and type of employment land?**

- 2.16. No. While the wording of policy SP05 appears to be flexible and is supportive of economic growth, in reality it is not, due to the lack of additional sites which are available to provide additional economic opportunities over the plan period.
- 2.17. Should the Council have chosen to identify additional sites such as land to the north of the Street, Wherstead the Joint Local Plan would have had greater flexibility over the plan period to meet the amount and type of employment land required.
- 2.18. Identifying additional allocations would have provided opportunity for a new link road as part of an allocated site which would have given greater opportunity to expand economic activities in the District and to also explore alternative uses under Class E which was introduced in September 2020. It is considered that the policy is restrictive and has not been carefully thought out or positively prepared contrary to Paragraph 35 (a) of the NPPF.
- 2.19. In this regard it should also be recognised that the new Class MA permitted changes from the Commercial Use Class E to residential use that come into effect from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2021 may lead to greater loss of employment space over time, reinforcing the need for more sites to be allocated in order to ensure adequate flexibility.

**d) Is SP05(4) consistent with national policy and is it effective?**

- 2.20. No. Use Class E 'Commercial, Business and Service' was introduced in September 2020 to allow greater flexibility to existing use classes. Class E brings together existing classes A1 (shops), A2 (financial and professional services), A3 (restaurants and cafes) and B1 (business) as well as parts of classes D1 (non-residential institutions) and D2 (assembly and leisure) into one single use class to allow for changes of use without the need for

planning permission, but in some cases would require prior approval to allow the Council to assess the impacts and risks of the proposal. As currently drafted, SP05(4) implies that flexibility across the range of uses now comprising Use Class E will only be considered under certain circumstances, which is considered to run counter to the intentions of Government in introducing this new flexible use class.

**Q6.3: a) Is policy LP12 consistent with national policy?**

2.21. No comment

**b) Is the policy clear, especially in relation to what is meant by an “employment use” • “significant” in part 3d and how this will be assessed.**

2.22. No comment

**c) Would the requirements be effective and flexible enough to support appropriate proposals for both new employment uses and the expansion of existing uses / sites?**

2.23. No comment

**d) to be found sound does the policy also need to cover live/work units?**

2.24. No comment.

**e) Is LP12(2) necessary given it simply repeats SP05(4)?**

2.25. No, it is not necessary to repeat the policy.

**Q6.4: a) Are the requirements of policy LP13 consistent with national policy and SP05?**

2.26. The East of England Co-operative Society is concerned that Policy SP05 and how it interacts with Policy LP13 is not consistent with national policy as they will collectively result in a barrier to economic activity and delay changes which businesses need to make. Often businesses need to react quickly to changing market conditions, legislation, and competition. Paragraph 81(d) of the NPPF is very clear that planning policies should be flexible enough to accommodate needs not anticipated in the plan and to enable a rapid response to changes in economic circumstances.

2.27. Policy SP05(4) and LP13 both require businesses to engage with the local authority to identify and provide evidence which demonstrates the need for a business to evolve and change practices. This is not considered to be consistent with national policy and raises concern for economic activities which operate from sites such as Wherstead Park.



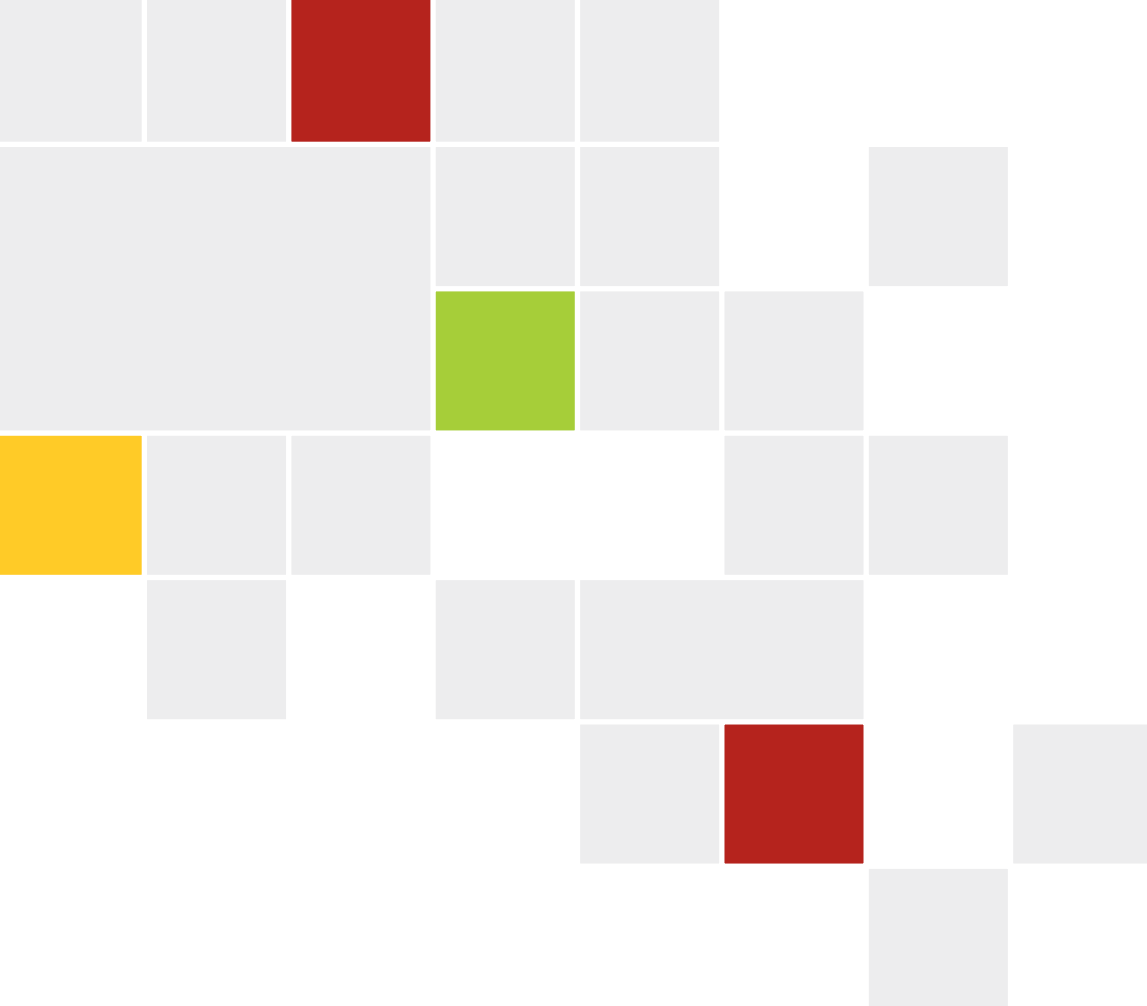
**b) Is the policy clear and would its requirements be effective and sufficiently flexible?**

2.28. No comment

**c) Is there robust evidence to justify the requirements in part 3 and how would the required financial contributions be calculated?**

2.29. No comment





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