

Leeds City Council Response to Site Allocation Plan Remittal Inspector's letter of 16th October 2023

The Inspector wrote to the Council on 16th October 2023. She noted:

"On 4th October 2023 the Prime Minister announced that HS2 funding was to be redirected to other projects and confirmed that the Phase 2 line from Birmingham to Manchester will not be delivered."

The Inspector identified that this announcement may have implications for the employment sites in the Leeds area currently covered by the HS2 safeguarding direction and has asked the Council to respond.

Background

The background to the Council's position is as follows:

- safeguarding has, from the start of the process, been a key factor in the Council's justification for the proposed allocation of the Barrowby Lane site for employment use as part of the Leeds Site Allocations Plan (SAP) Remittal policies
- the Council's submitted position (in March 2021) is that it proposes to retain, as an allocation, land that was formerly a mixed housing/employment site allocation in the SAP
- this land was taken out of the Green Belt by the SAP but reverts back to Green Belt pending the SAP Remittal
- rather than accommodate part of the site for housing – as the Council's evidence since adoption of the SAP now shows that there are sufficient non-Green belt sites in the District to meet Core Strategy targets for housing – the Council proposes that the site be allocated for purely employment uses – as there are insufficient non-Green Belt sites in the District to meet Core Strategy targets for employment
- the land supply for employment up to the end of the Core Strategy plan-period (up to March 2028) is significantly influenced by other allocated sites being safeguarded for rail projects and therefore unavailable
- the impact that the Government's safeguarding has had on employment land supply in the District is an exceptional circumstance for releasing the land from the Green Belt through this process

During the examination there has been some uncertainty as to the future of the safeguarding directions, which have been linked to Government policy around the national rail network, as follows:

- in March 2021 when the Council submitted modifications to the SAP the Government indicated that it was committed to progress the High Speed 2 (HS2) rail project and the safeguarding was in place until this project was completed
- in November 2021 the Government published an Integrated Rail Plan, which paused the development of the HS2 phase 2 B East project, but set out a commitment to bring high speed rail to Leeds

- It noted that to do this a rail study would be needed that looked at bringing high speed rail alternatives to Leeds, meanwhile the safeguarding remained in place. The Terms of Reference for the Leeds Study were finally published on the 17th July 2023.
- in June 2023 the Inspector held a period of further consultation during which the Council clarified that the rail study remained to be progressed and the safeguarding remained in place.

Throughout the examination the Council has clarified to the Inspector that whilst employment land may originally have been safeguarded for the HS2 project, the Government's view of the safeguarded land was that it may now be necessary for other rail projects e.g. Transpennine Upgrade, Northern Powerhouse Rail or the IRP's plans for high speed rail alternatives, which are now all set out the Government's Network North proposal which was published on the 5th October 2023.

To that end, the Council has clarified that despite various national announcements on the HS2 phase 2b project, the status of safeguarded land remains a separate consideration and has updated the Inspector accordingly (as above).

Position as at October 2023

The Government's position on the safeguarding of land has now been updated following announcements by the Prime Minister on 4th October. The Council's understanding of the position is as follows:

- a national announcement that the Government will not proceed with HS2 Phases 2a and 2b (which includes the leg to Leeds)
- instead the Government will address a range of pressing transport priorities elsewhere, as set out in the Department for Transport (DfT) publication "*Network North: Transforming British Transport in October 2023*" (attached to this letter). This includes:
 - Northern Powerhouse Rail
 - Leeds to Sheffield upgrades
- The DfT note at paragraph 36 that "*Phase 2b safeguarding [i.e. the Leeds leg] will be amended by summer next year, to allow for any safeguarding needed for Northern Powerhouse Rail.*" Noting the Leeds to Sheffield route forms the Northern Powerhouse Rail network.
- DfT will start discussions with Combined Authorities and Local Authorities about the suitability of retaining safeguarded land for Northern Powerhouse Rail and non-HS2 related projects
- therefore, at the current time it is not known whether safeguarded land within Leeds is required to support Northern Powerhouse Rail plans and/or Leeds to Sheffield Upgrades, for example, there may be a requirement for a depot for NPR on the land safeguarded as a strategic important depot for HS2
- the safeguarded land remains and prevents development at least until Summer 2024, but with the potential – subject to further DfT scrutiny – of much longer

From a wider contextual perspective the following are also factors, which may directly impact on the length of time that the land in Leeds may remain safeguarded:

- the National Infrastructure Commission, the Government's advisor on infrastructure, has recommended the retention of safeguarding until a national plan for rail is produced – the Government has not responded to this at the time of writing
- there will be a general election in 2024 and inevitably, this is likely to impact upon the pace at which Government may be able to reach views on what safeguarding may be needed for Northern Powerhouse Rail
- the Labour Leader has committed to maintaining Northern Powerhouse Rail

Conclusion

In conclusion, as far as the Government's recent announcements are concerned, there remains significant uncertainty over the safeguarded land in Leeds.

This in turn causes significant uncertainty to the likelihood that Leeds will be able to deliver sufficient employment land to meet identified needs within the plan period to March 2028. This is because the safeguarding and prospects for its retention for projects such as Northern Powerhouse Rail would be a material consideration for any planning applications on the safeguarded employment land.

To that end, and without the proposed allocation of EG2-37 Barrowby Lane remains 41.9 hectares below target (based on evidence previously submitted).

Noting the above the Council - having reviewed the implications that this would have on its position - considers that due to the continued uncertainty surrounding the safeguarded land in Leeds it is of the view that the situation has not changed materially from that at submission and therefore exceptional circumstances remain for the allocation of Barrowby Lane. In sum these are:

- lack of non-Green Belt employment land alternatives to meet Core Strategy targets up to March 2028, due to a continued safeguarding of allocated employment land in Leeds for rail projects (including Northern Powerhouse Rail)
- lack of clarity from Government on when safeguarding for these will be removed
- narrowing of the time available to developers to bring forward and complete schemes on previously safeguarded land by March 2028 so as to meet Core Strategy employment land targets