The Planning Inspectorate

The Stevenage Local Plan 2011-2031 Partial Update
Examination

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Examination Website:
https://www.hwa.uk.com/projects/stevenage-local-plan-partial-update

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EXAMINATION GUIDANCE NOTES

Background and Introduction

1. The Stevenage Borough Local Plan 2011-2031 was adopted in May 2019 (the adopted Plan) (CD1).

2. Stevenage Borough Council (the Council) undertook a formal review of the adopted Plan, as required by Regulation 10A of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 (as amended) (the Regulations) and concluded that only parts of the adopted Plan required updating at that time and thus only a partial update to the adopted Plan was required. The Council's process for reaching this decision is summarised in a briefing note available on the Examination Website (CD16).

3. The Council therefore undertook a consultation under Regulation 19 of the Regulations in November 2024 on a schedule of changes it proposed to make to update the adopted Plan (Partial Update of the Stevenage Borough Local Plan 2011-2031 Schedule of Changes from Regulation 18 to Regulation 19) (CD2c), in other words the Council's proposed partial update. However, the Council undertook a further consultation under Regulation 19 of the Regulations in August 2025 on an addendum which effectively set out a small number of further changes, superseding some of the changes detailed in CD2c (Partial Update of the Stevenage Borough Local Plan 2011-2031 Schedule of Changes from Regulation 19 to Pre Submission) (CD2b).

4. I have been appointed by the Secretary of State to conduct the examination of the partial update to the adopted Plan. This note provides guidance on the procedural and administrative arrangements for the examination. Further information on the examination process can be found in the Planning Inspectorate's publication 'Procedure Guide for Local Plan Examinations' which is available via the following link:

   https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-plans

5. For the avoidance of any doubt, I am examining the partial update to the adopted Plan. This means I am examining the changes proposed in CD2c except where they have been superseded by the changes proposed in CD2b. I am not examining any elements of the adopted Plan which are not being updated or in other words sections of the adopted Plan which are not identified in CD2c or CD2b as subject to changes. Sections of the adopted Plan which would be unchanged by the partial update are outside of the scope of my examination.

6. The Council has produced a consolidated document (Partial Update of the Stevenage Borough Local Plan 2011-2031 Schedule of Changes from Adopted Local Plan to Submission Version – Changes since Adoption of Local Plan in May 2019) (CD3) which simply combines CD2c and CD2b and is intended to assist the Examination. Thus, when I refer to the partial update, I am referring to both CD2c and CD2b, but for ease of referencing, I will use the reference numbers of the changes as identified in CD3 except where I explicitly indicate otherwise.

Programme Officer

7. Helen Wilson is the Programme Officer (PO) for the examination. She is working under my direction and is independent of the Council. Her contact details are given above.

8. The main tasks of the PO are to communicate between the Inspector, the Council and representors and hearing participants, liaising with all parties to ensure the smooth running of the examination. Any questions or other matters that you wish to raise should be directed to the PO.

Examination Webpages and library

9. The examination website and library content is controlled by the Inspector and the PO. All documents for the examination, including the evidence base and the procedural material, are published on the examination webpage – the link is provided above. If you do not have access to the internet, please contact the PO so that alternative arrangements can be put in place.

The Inspector's Role

10. My role is to consider whether the partial update to the adopted Plan complies with the relevant legislation and is sound. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (paragraph 35) makes it clear that in order to be found sound the Plan must be:

    a. positively prepared – providing a strategy which, as a minimum, seeks to meet the area's objectively assessed needs; and is informed by agreements with other authorities, so that unmet need from neighbouring areas is accommodated where it is practical to do so and is consistent with achieving sustainable development;
    b. justified – an appropriate strategy taking into account the reasonable alternatives, and based on proportionate evidence;
    c. effective – deliverable over the plan period and based on effective joint working on cross boundary strategic matters that have been dealt with rather than deferred, as evidenced by the statement of common ground; and
    d. consistent with national policy – enabling the delivery of sustainable development in accordance with the NPPF's policies and other statements of national policy, where relevant.

11. It is not my role to make improvements to the partial update to the adopted Plan, provided that it is sound and legally-compliant.

The NPPF

12. The partial update to the adopted Plan is being examined under the December 2023 National Planning Policy Framework. This is because the Implementation Annex to the latest December 2024 National Planning Policy Framework includes transitional arrangements which are applicable to this Examination. The transitional arrangements apply because the partial update was consulted on under Regulation 19 of the Regulations before 12 March 2025 and includes a draft housing requirement which is more than 80% of local housing need calculated according to the revised standard method published in December 2024.

Outcome of the Examination

13. There are three possible outcomes to the examination:

    a. the submitted plan is sound and legally compliant;
    b. the submitted plan is not sound and/or legally compliant but could be made so by changes (known as main modifications), if necessary, following the preparation of additional evidence; or
    c. the submitted plan is not sound and could not be made sound by changes. If so, I would be likely to recommend that the Council withdraw the plan. The same would apply if there is a failure of legal compliance which cannot be remedied (for example, a failure to comply with the duty to cooperate).

14. After the hearing has closed, I will prepare a report for the Council setting out my conclusions and recommendations. My report will deal with the main issues of soundness and legal compliance, taking into account the representations made but without responding to each of them.

Changes to the Plan

15. The starting point for the examination is that the Council have submitted a plan which they think is ready for examination. Now that the partial update to the adopted Plan has been submitted there are only two means by which changes can be made to it:

    a. as main modifications recommended an Inspector; or
    b. as additional modifications made by the Council.

16 I can only recommend main modifications if they are necessary to make the partial update to the adopted Plan sound and/or legally-compliant. Any potential main modifications must be subject to consultation before I recommend them, and in some cases they may also require further sustainability appraisal, and Habitats Regulations Assessment. Additional modifications (sometimes also referred to as “minor modifications”) are changes which do not materially affect the policies in the Plan. They may be made by the Council on adoption and do not fall within the scope of the examination. The Council is accountable for any additional modifications that are made.

17. The Policies Map is not defined in legislation as a development plan document. This means that I have no powers to recommend Main Modifications directly to it. However, as the role of the Policies Map is to illustrate geographically the application of policies in the Plan, if the geographical illustration of a policy is flawed, the policy will be unsound. In such circumstances, I would ask the Council to draw up a proposed change to what is shown on the submission Policies Map.

Representations made on the Plan

18. The Council has prepared a Regulation 22 Consultation Statement which includes details of the consultation that has taken place on the partial update to the adopted Plan, and a summary of the main issues raised in the representations. A full set of the representations made on the Plan at both the pre-submission (Regulation 19) stages have been provided to and I will take them all into account. For the avoidance of doubt I will be taking into account the representations made in response to both the Councils consultations undertaken under Regulation 19 of the Regulations in response to either documents CD2c or CD2b. The legislation does not require me to take account of any representations made at any earlier stage, including under Regulation 18.

Examination hearing and Programme

19. The examination hearing, which forms part of the examination of the Plan, will commence at **0930 on Tuesday 2 December 2025 in the Autun Room, Daneshill House, Stevenage Borough Council** and continue on the following days:

    Tues-Thurs 2-4 December 2025,
    Tues-Weds 9-10 December 2025, with Thurs 11 in reserve,

20. Each hearing day will start at 0930 and will aim to finish no later than 1730, with sessions normally starting at 0930 and 1400 each day. All those who wish to speak (participate) at the hearing sessions should confirm this in writing with the Programme Officer by **1700 on Friday 31 October 2025**. The deadline for receipt of written statements for ALL Matters to be considered at the Hearing sessions is **1700 on Friday 21 November 2025**.

21. Discussion at the hearing will be based on my matters, issues and questions which have been issued alongside this guidance note. A draft/provisional hearing programme has also been issued alongside these notes. Updates to the hearing programme, if required, will be available on the examination webpage. It is the responsibility of individual participants to check the latest timetable and to ensure that they are present at the correct time.

The scope of my examination, and omission sites

22. For the avoidance of any doubt, I am examining the partial update to the adopted Plan. Sections of the adopted Plan which would be unchanged by the partial update are outside of the scope of my examination. The partial update does not propose any changes to the adopted Plan which would allocate new sites for development. It is not part of my role to examine the soundness of sites that are not allocated in the Plan or proposed to be allocated as part of the partial update. Consequently, I do not propose to hold a hearing session dealing specifically with sites that have not been allocated in the Plan, or to discuss the merits of any omission sites at any hearing sessions.

Attending the hearing

23. Anyone may attend the hearing as an observer, but only those who have made representation(s) seeking to change the partial to update to the adopted Plan have a right to appear before, and be heard by, the Inspector.

24. Written representations carry the same weight as those made orally at a hearing session. Participation at the hearing is therefore only likely to be beneficial if you have specific points to contribute on the published matters, issues and questions. Normally you may only take part in the hearing session(s) that are relevant to your original representation(s).

25. If you have a right to be heard and you wish to exercise that right, you should contact the PO by **1700 on Friday 31 October 2025** indicating which

session(s) in the published hearing programme you wish to participate in. You must do this regardless of what you may have indicated in your original representation(s). Please note that if you do not contact the PO by that date, it will be assumed that you do not wish to appear and be heard, and you will not be listed as a participant.

26. Representors who are not seeking changes to the partial update to the adopted Plan, including those who have made representations supporting it, do not have a right to take part in the hearing. However, I may invite additional participants to take part in the hearing if I consider that their participation would assist me in determining the soundness and legal compliance of the partial update to the adopted Plan.

27. To ensure that there is sufficient space, organisations participating in the hearing sessions will normally be allocated one seat at the table, with members of their team “hot-seating” as necessary. Similarly, the Council should limit the number of its representatives at the table to those needed to deal with the topic under discussion.

28. Where several representors or organisations who have similar points to make wish to attend the hearing, it would assist us if they would arrange to be represented by one or two spokesperson(s). Please let the PO know as soon as possible if you have any specific needs or requirements to enable your attendance at and/or participation in the hearing session(s).

Hearing statements

29. The Council should produce a statement for each hearing session responding to all the identified matters, issues and questions.

30. Representors should only submit hearing statements if they have points to make on the identified matters, issues and questions and the changes proposed in the partial update to the adopted Plan as referenced in CD3. Statements should be concise and focussed, and in any event must contain no more than 3,000 words for each matter. If you wish to submit a statement covering more than one matter a separate statement for each matter covered should be submitted. Statements should:

    a. clearly identify (by reference number/letter) which specific matters, issues and questions are being answered;
    b. only answer the specific matters, issues and questions which are of direct relevance to your original representation(s)
    c. not introduce new evidence or arguments.

31. Please refrain from commenting on matters which go beyond the scope of my questions or the partial update.

32. Appendices should only be included if they are directly relevant and necessary and should not be used as a means of increasing the word-count. In this regard, do not submit further statements in the guise of appendices. If you need to refer to a large document that is not on the examination webpage,

please contact the PO as it may be more efficient for it to be added to the webpage rather than attached to a statement.

33. The Council statements should also be focussed and succinct. However, because the Council has to answer every issue and question, it may be necessary to go over the limit of 3,000 words per matter.

34. It is intended that all examination documents will be electronic versions. Please email electronic versions of your statement(s) and any appendices to the PO in Word or PDF format by **1700 Friday 21 November 2025.**

35. If you are unable to email your statement, please contact the PO so that alternative arrangements can be made.

36. Hearing statements will be posted on the examination webpage after the above deadline, so that they are available to all participants and anyone else who wishes to read them. Because they will be available in this way, they will not be circulated directly to participants. Anyone who is unable to access them on the webpage should contact the PO.

37. Once the date for submitting hearing statements has passed, no other written evidence will be accepted, unless I specifically request it. In fairness to other participants the hearing sessions should not be used to introduce additional or new evidence.

Statements of Common Ground

38. If any further Statement of Common Ground are to be prepared or finalised, then they should, wherever possible, be completed by **1700 on the 14 November 2025** and published as examination documents so that other representors are aware of their contents before submitting their hearing statements. This should not preclude the Council from continuing to engage on outstanding issues with other bodies as necessary.

Conduct of the hearing sessions

39. The hearing sessions will be based on the identified matters, issues and questions. Each hearing session will deal with these by way of a structured discussion which I will lead, taking an inquisitorial approach. There will be no formal presentation of cases or cross-examination. Participants may, if they wish, bring professional experts with them. although this is not essential. Where written evidence provides me with the information we need on a particular issue, I will explain that and may not consider that issue further at the hearing session.

40. Discussion at the hearing sessions will focus on the issues that I need to hear further discussion about, in order to reach conclusions on the soundness and legal compliance of the partial update to the adopted Plan, and on any potential need for main modifications. I will make brief introductory comments on the issues to be covered and then invite individuals to respond to specific questions. I will have read all the relevant representations and statements beforehand and will expect other participants to have done so as well. The

hearing sessions are not an opportunity to repeat a case already set out in written representations.

Site Visits

41. I will carry out site visits before, during, or after the hearing as necessary to inform my assessment of the soundness of the partial update to the adopted Plan. All site visits will be unaccompanied, unless it is necessary to go onto private land, in which case I will make the necessary arrangements via the PO.

Close of the examination

42. The examination will close when my report is submitted to the Council. However, unless I specifically request them, no further representations or evidence will be accepted after the hearing sessions have finished. Late or unsolicited material may be returned.

Summary of Key Dates

- Matters, issues and questions, draft hearing programme and Inspector's guidance note published - 30 September 2025
- Deadline to confirm with the PO whether you wish to exercise your right to appear at an examination hearing session – **1700 on the 31 October 2025**
- Deadline for submission of SoCG – **1700 on the 14 November 2025**
- Deadline for submission of hearing statements – **1700 on 21 November 2025**
- Hearing sessions start – **0930 on 2 December 2025**

Further Information

Further information about the preparation and examination of Local Plans is available as follows:

- Relevant guidance – available from https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-plans
- Procedure Guide for Local Plan Examinations https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/examining-local-plans-procedural-practice
- Short guide to taking part in local plan examinations https://www.gov.uk/guidance/taking-part-in-local-plan-examinations
- National Planning Policy Framework https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2
- Planning Practice Guidance https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/planning-practice-guidance

- including the section on Plan-making https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-making

- Relevant legislation – available at http://www.legislation.gov.uk/

- Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended), The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 (as amended)

43. If you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact the PO.

L Fleming

INSPECTOR