

Malling Rural Area and Isles Quarry West

Is Borough Green the right location to meet the affordable housing needs of the Malling Rural Area?

- 6.7 The Housing and Market Needs Assessment identifies a general need for affordable housing in the rural areas. The CS recognises that some rural housing needs will be met in the nearby urban areas, or on strategic development sites. Policy CP20 allows for sites to be developed to meet identified local affordable housing needs, as exceptions to the usual policies of restraint. In general, this approach provides an appropriate framework for the delivery of affordable housing to meet needs arising in rural areas, and will be subject to monitoring.
- 6.8 About a quarter of the affordable housing need in the Borough derives from the Malling rural area. The CS identifies that allocating a large number of greenfield sites adjacent to villages would lead to a dispersed pattern of development in areas with relatively poor access to services and facilities. The CS therefore proposes to meet some of these needs through the allocation of a site at Borough Green, a rural service centre with a good range of services and facilities. I have had regard to those representations which express the view that Borough Green is not an appropriate location for new housing development. However, I am satisfied that there is a pressing need for affordable housing and that development at Borough Green is likely to lead to a more sustainable pattern of development than could be achieved elsewhere. I have seen no evidence to convince me that, if necessary, local services and infrastructure cannot be upgraded to meet the needs of new development on the scale proposed.

Is Isles Quarry West the most appropriate location in the Borough Green area, or are other sites clearly preferable? Is the proposed alteration to the Green Belt boundary justified by exceptional circumstances?

- 6.9 The CS identifies Isles Quarry West as a strategic housing allocation. The site is a former quarry and latterly a landfill site. It lies within the Green Belt and the AONB. There are two areas which benefit from certificates of lawful use or development for industrial and related activities. From the evidence before me, and what I was able to see on my site visit, there would appear to be potential for some intensification of existing uses which would not require planning permission. The Employment Land Review (RD7.4) concludes that this site performs poorly in qualitative terms, and classified it as an ‘other local’ site with potential for release. The loss of the employment potential of the site would not, therefore, have an unacceptable impact on the strategy for employment land.
- 6.10 Vehicular access to the area can currently be gained either via Quarry Hill Road, a predominantly residential road, or along a private road, known as the haul road. Whether or not the owners of the haul road would continue to maintain it in the future is a matter of conjecture. However, given the length of the road compared to the amount of industrial land available, I can understand the concerns expressed over the viability of retaining it in the long term. Without it, vehicular traffic to Isles Quarry, including heavy goods vehicles, would use Quarry Hill Road. The nature of the uses, and their lawful status, would make it very difficult to control this activity, either through planning or highways legislation. Development of the site for housing would significantly reduce the number of heavy goods vehicles visiting the site. It would also offer the opportunity for a comprehensive approach to the management of the highway network in the vicinity, so as to minimise the impact of traffic generated by the housing development.
- 6.11 It is to be expected that a site such as this would have some ground contamination. There is nothing before me to suggest that the site could not be remediated in accordance with current good practice. Other constraints, such as any ecological value of the site are matters that will need to be taken into consideration as more detailed plans are developed. I do not consider the site to be poorly related to the centre of Borough Green. I found the walk between the site and the village centre, via Quarry Hill Road to be a pleasant route. As its name suggests the road is on a gradient, but I do not consider it would be unduly daunting for most people. It would be expected that measures to promote sustainability, such as cycle routes and enhanced bus services, would form part of a package of development proposals.
- 6.12 In between the industrial sites, the land has been restored, although the standard of restoration would not be regarded as an example of current best practice. Even if further restoration could be achieved, the presence of the industrial uses would limit the overall effectiveness of such measures. Therefore, whilst the non-industrial parts of the site fall outside the definition of previously-developed land (Annex C PPS3), I consider the description of the site as derelict and despoiled (CS paragraph 6.3.34) to be an accurate reflection of the visual quality of the site as a whole. The

topography of the surrounding area means that the site is well screened in views from the surrounding countryside. Bearing in mind the generally poor landscape quality of the site, I consider that the proposed development would have a broadly neutral impact on the natural beauty of the AONB.

- 6.13 The Council considers the site is capable of producing about 200 houses, 40% of which would be required to be affordable, under the terms of Policy CP18. This would provide a relatively small proportion of the total requirement for affordable housing in the Malling rural area identified in the HMNA. However, I consider it would make a meaningful contribution.
- 6.14 Borough Green is encircled by the Green Belt, and there is no evidence to suggest that sites of a substantial size within the village confines are likely to come forward for development during the Plan period. Therefore, any sites which could make more than a minimal contribution to affordable housing will almost inevitably be located in the Green Belt. However, as I indicate above, the site is well screened from the surrounding countryside, which would help to minimise the visual impact of the loss of openness. I do not consider that the gap between Borough Green and Ightham would be unacceptably compromised.
- 6.15 It is the demonstrated need for affordable housing in the Malling rural area which has led to the formulation of Policy CP19. The CS indicates that cross subsidy with market housing is necessary to make the overall development viable, and there has been criticism that the evidence base does not fully justify this assertion. I have some sympathy with this view, as there is no development appraisal or similar information before me which would enable me to reach a reasoned view on this point. However, I am mindful of the Government’s policy objective to create a mix of housing, both market and affordable (paragraph 10 PPS3). The development of sites of any substantial size for affordable housing alone is likely to lead to a concentration of such housing², which would not fulfil that policy objective.
- 6.16 In this context, I consider that the details of the development economics of the site, which can change over time, are less important than an indication that the provision of a proportion of affordable housing, in accordance with the Council’s general aspirations, will be achieved. The site owners have indicated to the Council that this is the case, and there has been some scrutiny of this by the Council’s valuers. On balance, I am not persuaded that the lack of a detailed justification on the cross subsidy point renders the CS unsound.
- 6.17 The provision of affordable housing is an important factor, but I consider that it is the range of benefits that would be achieved, arising from the particular circumstances of this site, which together constitute the exceptional circumstances necessary to justify the alteration of the Green Belt boundary. The proposed revised boundary of the Green Belt, as shown on the Proposals Map, does not at present follow any clear features.

² A clear indication of the Secretary of State approach to this matter can be found in a recent appeal decision which forms RD7.27

However, the development of the site would offer scope to create a clear boundary.

- 6.18 The general location of the site is shown in diagrammatic fashion on the key diagram which forms part of the CS. Revised Borough Green village confines are also identified in an Annex to the CS and the site is shown on the Proposals Map. Paragraphs 2.9 – 2.14 of PPS12 give guidance on the content of a CS, and further guidance on key diagrams is given in Annex A of that document. Whilst paragraph 2.12 states that core strategies should not identify individual sites, paragraph 2.13 and Annex A give examples of where CS policies and proposals will need to be identified on an Ordnance Survey base Proposals Map.
- 6.19 Bearing in mind the national importance attached to the Green Belt, I consider that proposals to alter the boundary can be appropriately included in the CS. In circumstances such as Isles Quarry West, the altered Green Belt boundary has the effect of identifying a site for development. Furthermore, the CS should not leave difficult decisions to later DPDs. The delivery of affordable housing is an important element of the CS and in the context of the Malling rural area, this site can reasonably be regarded as a strategic allocation. In all the circumstances, I do not consider that the approach taken to the identification of the Isles Quarry Site in the CS is inconsistent with the advice in PPS12.
- 6.20 Some criticism of the Isles Quarry West proposal comes from those promoting sites which they consider to be preferable. In some cases, these sites may be closer to some facilities, may be developable more quickly, or may be subject to fewer planning policy restraints, although all those near Borough Green are within the Green Belt. None, in my view, would offer the package of benefits that could result from the Isles Quarry development, as outlined above. I have carefully considered the points made, but there is no site (or sites) so clearly preferable in overall terms to the Isles Quarry West proposal, such as to convince me that the CS is unsound. In particular, I am not persuaded that harm to the purposes of the Green Belt would necessarily be minimised by developing a smaller site for affordable housing only. The level of harm that would arise depends not solely on the size of the area. For example, the loss of a relatively small area of land where the Green Belt is narrow could be more harmful than the loss of a larger site in other circumstances.
- 6.21 I have considered the points raised by local residents and others who oppose the development of this site. However, for the reasons I have given, I find the CS to be sound.

Conclusions

- 6.22 In summary, I find the CS to be sound in relation to the general strategy for the provision of affordable housing and the identification of a site at Isles Quarry West to assist in meeting the needs of the Malling Rural Area. I consider that the tests of soundness are met, having particular regard to tests 4, 7, 8 and 9.