



Draft Employment Allocations Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) Consultation

A response from CPRE Northamptonshire

1. Introduction

1.1 CPRE is encouraged that West Northamptonshire Council (WNC) has acknowledged the need for planning guidance for the future allocation and specification of 'Employment Allocation' sites in South Northants, but is concerned about the impartiality of the consultant used to oversee the document, Barton Willmore. Their clients include DHL, who have an application for site AL1 and IM Properties, who have a permission for site AL3 as well as an application for site AL4. Barton Willmore consider themselves experts in achieving planning permission for the logistics industry. CPRE sees this as a conflict of interest.

1.2 The South Northamptonshire Local Plan Part 2, which was adopted in July 2020, made provision for employment sites, known as AL1, AL 2, AL3 and AL4, for small to medium sized units. These sites were designed to *"meet the demand for small and medium sized units by suitable land allocation."* The sites were part of a strategy to *"contribute to reducing the level of out commute"* and ultimately to keep skilled workers in the district. The Local Plan also highlighted a need to *"provide the ability to strengthen local supply chains"* and *"... to strengthen the rural economy"* as per 13.1.5, pages 121 and 122 of the Local Plan Part 2 (LP2). AL5 was later added to the allocated sites list.

2. Comments and recommendations

2.1 The emphasis on *"small and medium sized business units"* is repeated throughout the Local Plan Part 2, to include business units whose uses are ancillary or complementary to existing or proposed B Class uses. There is no provision for large scale units on any sites within LP2.

2.2 The applications for sites AL1, AL3 and AL4 have shown that the applicants have seen fit to flout and misinterpret the wording of the LP2 when making their applications, to include mega warehouse developments similar in scale and size to those at Northampton Gateway, a strategic development adjacent to junction 15 on the M1. This interpretation conflicts with LP2. Any deviation or re-interpretation of the original LP2 is not permitted under the 2012 Town & Country Planning Regulations, which states that Supplementary Planning Documents cannot introduce new policy. This is acknowledged in paragraph 2.2 of the draft

SPD. Despite this 'own goal', the SPD intends to introduce the potential for large scale and therefore inappropriate sized units to the sites. Paragraph 3.3 shows that the wording 'large units' has been inserted into the document. As there is no mention of 'large units' within LP2, this must constitute a new policy, and cannot be legally inserted into a supplementary planning document and therefore all references to 'large units' must be removed.

2.3 The comparative definitions used in the Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), i.e. mega logistics units at Swan Valley by junction 15a of the M1, do not relate to the size and scale of units specified in the LP2, i.e. small and medium units. The size of units should therefore, in order to comply with the Local Plan, be re-defined as follows: A maximum height criterion for buildings should be that no new building should be taller than any existing nearby building. AL1, AL2 and AL3 buildings should be no more than 10m in ridge height. AL4 buildings should be no more than 7m in ridge height, due to the site position being on the crest of a hill, Whittlewood Ridge, and visible for a considerable distance around the area.

2.4 Paragraph 3.2 on page 24 of the SPD incorrectly states that the role of the employment sites is *"in part to meet the demand for small and medium size units."* There is no such statement in LP2 stating that the sites are only catering 'in part'. CPRE re-iterates that LP2 strives to meet the demand for small and medium-sized units. This erroneous statement must be removed.

2.5 Although the SPD has attempted to make a definition of what constitutes a small, medium or large unit, the definition of large – *"8,000m² or larger"* (with no upper limit) it must be more clearly defined in the SPD as to what a maximum height of a building can be before it becomes non-compliant with LP2. As has already been established in 2.3, the height of buildings should be capped at 10m and that wording should be added to the SPD to demonstrate that the largest permissible building footprint on any site in the area covered by LP2, if it is to comply with the non-strategic aims of the LP2, should be no more than 5,000 m², i.e. medium-sized. This would also enable planning officers to clearly demonstrate a defined size limit to a developer and that large and very large units, such as the ones in the DHL (AL3) and IM Properties (AL4) applications, are not compliant with LP2 and therefore not permissible. Paragraph 3.21 of the SPD again alludes to 'large units'. These comments should be deleted.

2.6 CPRE does not accept that site AL3 should be omitted from any SPD discussion, just because it has outline planning permission, due to the danger that if full permission is granted without LP2 compliance being part of that permission, a precedent for the other sites will be set, which could seriously compromise any future supplementary planning guidance.

2.7 Apart from the size and mass of buildings being put forward by logistics companies, huge potential problems associated with these large scale developments and cumulative impact of traffic on the area is a major problem that has not been addressed. The SPD does not offer guidance on traffic impact from any of the sites and needs to give an overall assessment of the traffic impact on the area and not just on individual sites. This is a major omission and needs to be addressed.

2.8 The wording of the Overarching Design principles for determining the appearance of the buildings needs to be defined and specific. It is currently too vague and open to interpretation by developers to create buildings that are not appropriate for rural locations. In paragraph 6.25, weak wording such as *"Small and medium sized building will be acceptable where there is no significant visual impact, likely rising to approximately 16m in height"* is unacceptable and should be deleted as it is effectively sanctioning large buildings, which are not compliant with LP2. Again, the wording *"large units... will only be considered in exceptional circumstances if acceptable mitigation is provided."* must be deleted in order to avoid opportunities on the part of a developer, or their barrister at appeal, to obtain permission by mitigation that is clearly not LP2 compliant. The SPD also needs to ensure that a restriction is placed on small and medium sized units when planning is granted, to ensure that they cannot be joined up at a later date to create larger units.

2.9 It is important that all proposed buildings on all sites are placed within the allocation site area. This is particularly relevant to AL4, where the developer has already attempted to increase the development site area by 28% by placing drainage ponds outside of the allocated land area.

Conclusion

3.1 In its current form, the Barton Willmore version of the SPD is an exercise in corporate 'greenwashing', is skewed towards developers interests, with vague and inconclusive statements and enough loopholes to give logistics developers carte blanche (this means to allow them to do what they want) to place inappropriate buildings in a semi-rural setting which is not suited, and was never meant for, large scale development of a strategic nature. The South Northants Local Plan Part 2 was created as a blueprint non-strategic document to serve the SME high -tech, professional sector employment needs of the South Northamptonshire community, not the corporate needs of remote logistics businesses.

3.2 As the original statistics for LP2 employment area locations were derived from SNC's own employment development team at the time, it is unacceptable that any potential shortfall in SME take up should be replaced by large B8 warehousing. The presence of such development in South Northants will in fact stifle potential SME take up.

3.3 The Supplementary Planning Document needs to show that future development must be compliant with the SNC Local Plan 2, with clear, unambiguous instruction that cannot be mis-interpreted by developers, and while it is understood that West Northamptonshire Council had inherited the Local Plan 2, it should be noted that the officers who authored the document deserve to not have the plan undermined. West Northamptonshire Council have a duty of care to uphold the contents of that plan and all of its adopted content.

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