Runnymede Local Plan Examination

Update from the Inspector, 27 March 2020

The draft proposed main modifications have been subject to consultation for 6 weeks during January and February 2020 and I am currently considering the representations and their implications for the soundness and legal compliance of the plan. However, it appears that clarification may be helpful at this stage in relation to some matters raised in the representations about the main modifications process and its role in proceeding towards the conclusion of the examination.

It is necessary, first, to set out some of the background context. The examination hearings took place in 3 stages, with the first in November 2018, the second in February 2019 and the third in November 2019. I adopted this staged approach to test strategic issues that appeared to be critical for the soundness of the plan, so that any fundamental weaknesses could be identified as early as possible and appropriate action could be taken to address them, if necessary.

Following the Stage 2 hearings, the examination was paused while additional evidence was prepared, and joint working continued between the Council, Surrey County Council and Highways England on critical highways matters affecting the A320 and M25. My updates on the examination website provided more detailed information about the progress of the on-going work during this period, and new evidence was uploaded when available.

Two of my update notes are particularly relevant to the matters raised in some of the representations about the main modifications process. On 12 July 2019 I confirmed that I had asked the Council to draw up a draft schedule of potential main modifications on a `without prejudice’ basis. This followed on from my brief remarks at the close of the Stage 2 hearings that matters had been discussed to date that appeared to require main modifications, and that it would make good use of time to commence work on a draft schedule of main modifications. And in my 1 August update, I confirmed that, by then, I had not identified any need to make interim findings on the soundness of the plan.

At the close of the Stage 3 hearing on 14 November I explained that when I had considered all the evidence before me, I would arrange for an update to be published as early as possible about the next steps in the examination. I confirmed that, if it seemed that the plan could be made sound by main modifications, I would ask the Council to prepare a draft schedule of modifications under my guidance and that it would be subject to public consultation. I made clear that if, in the alternative, I were to conclude that more fundamental work would be required to achieve a sound plan, I would set this out as soon as possible.
In due course, having reached a preliminary view that the plan could be made sound by main modifications, I requested the Council to update and amend the draft schedule to take account of the potential modifications for soundness that were discussed and considered throughout the examination and the related updating, clarification and corrections that appeared to be necessary in this light.

This was an iterative process, carried out in the normal manner by e-mail communication through the Programme Officer. It enabled the detailed text of the draft main modifications to be drawn up in the most efficient way, and they were made subject to sustainability appraisal and Habitats Regulations assessment, reflecting the process outlined in the Planning Inspectorate’s Procedure Guide for local plan examinations. Apart from a few draft main modifications of a mainly factual nature that did not require detailed consideration during the examination, all the draft main modifications relate to matters that were explored through the hearings part of the examination.

During this period, I also sought to ensure that the examination website was updated since I had identified some ‘loose ends’ where uploading of documents had not occurred, and where necessary, I gave interested parties the opportunity to comment on documents that had recently been uploaded on the website.

The above process was completed during December and on 16 December the Council formally requested under Section 20 (7C) of the Act that I should recommend any main modifications that are necessary to make the plan sound and legally compliant.

In this light I provided an update on the examination website on 17 December about the next steps that would be taken. This confirmed that the draft schedule was likely to be considered formally by the Council’s Planning Committee in January and that it would be subject to public consultation for 6 weeks. It also made clear that the draft schedule was comprised of main modifications that appeared (my underlining) to be necessary for the soundness of the plan; this is because, as part of the process, I am taking all the consultation responses into account before completing my report to the Council and recommending any main modifications that I consider are necessary for a sound plan.

In accordance with good practice, the draft schedule that was published for consultation included a brief justification for each of the proposed main modifications. As the Planning Inspectorate’s Procedure Guide makes clear, my final recommendations, and the reasons for them, will be set out in my report at the conclusion of the examination. For avoidance of doubt, based on all the information before me, I do not envisage a need for further hearing sessions in order to complete the examination.

Mary Travers
Inspector