

Proposed Changes to NFDC Local Plan – Development of Site F (North of Milford on Sea)

The NFDC Local Plan Review 2016-2036 has earmarked a preferred site north of Milford on Sea that could be developed to provide new housing in line with Government requirements. The Green Belt Study commissioned by NFDC as part of the review shows the methodology and process as to why sites have been chosen for consideration but this study is basically flawed as it overlooks some key requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) guidance in relation to the Green Belt. The study's methodology of assessing how much each site may contribute to the five aims of green belt land, thus providing a measure of 'lesser Green Belt land', cannot overrule the fundamental principles that are laid down in the framework document. The Government makes no such sub-division of Green Belt land.

On 6 October 2014 the government published guidance on the protection of the green belt under the National Planning Policy Framework. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) provided planning guidance that included the statements:

- Councils must protect our precious green belt land
- DCLG suggest that once they have been established, green belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional cases, and that this should be done through the preparation or review of the Local Plan. Housing need does not justify harm to the green belt
- Green belt is a very specific planning policy designation, not a general policy applicable to the countryside at large and gives a greater degree of protection from inappropriate development in those areas
- The government's policy position is broadly that the green belt be protected almost at all costs, but consequently that development needs (in particular for new housing) will have to be accommodated in sustainable locations in other areas (including open countryside) outside the specific designations where planning policy imposes specific constraints
- This concept of permanence (of the Green Belt) appears to be behind the clarification of the guidance and reiterates the principle that there is effectively a presumption against changing the extent of green belt in the preparation of a local plan simply to accommodate an objectively identified housing need

It is clear from Government policy guidelines that adopting the proposal to build new housing on the NFDC preferred site F (North of Milford village) would be in breach of those same guidelines and thus also in breach of planning policy. The policy is clear; the perceived requirement to build new homes does not outweigh the requirement to protect the Green Belt.

DCLG go on to say the implication is that local planning authorities with large areas of designated green belt may not be expected to provide the full quantum of their objectively assessed housing need within their area if this would erode the green belt. The inference of that is then, that any unmet need may have to be accommodated in less constrained neighbouring authorities and most likely facilitated through the mechanism of the 'duty to cooperate' at the plan preparation stage.

In the NFDC document Local Plan Review 2016-2036 Part 1: Planning Strategy Initial proposals for public consultation (July 2016), Paragraph 5.25 states that *“Government ministers have made it clear that it is for local councils to decide whether or not there are exceptional circumstances that justify a review of Green Belt boundaries in their Local Plans, and whether any such circumstances justify releasing land from the Green Belt for development. Planning inspectors and the courts have accepted that significant housing needs that cannot be met elsewhere may provide exceptional circumstances and that the scale of unmet need is a relevant consideration”*. This statement is clearly opposite to Government policy which states that **the guidance is specific in that unmet housing need (including for traveller sites) is unlikely to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and other harm to constitute the “very special circumstances” justifying inappropriate development on a site within the Green Belt.**

A further government document has been published since 2014. This is the House of Commons Briefing Paper Number 00934, 5 January 2016 - Green Belt. This document provides an overview of previous guidance and policy but the fundamentals quoted in this paper remain valid and extant, there is nothing in the briefing paper that gives any justification for placing unmet housing need above protection for the Green Belt.

In July 2016, new government ministers have reinforced the Government’s commitment to protecting the Green Belt. Evidence of this includes:

- During Sajid Javid’s first DCLG questions in parliament on 18th July, he was asked if he would “guarantee” during his tenure as communities secretary “there will be no dilution whatever to the vital protections of the green belt”. The new communities’ secretary replied **the green belt is “absolutely sacrosanct”**. He added: “It was in the Conservative Party manifesto and that will not change. The green belt remains special. Unless there are very exceptional circumstances, **we should not be carrying out any development on it.**”
- Gavin Barwell, the new housing and planning minister, said **most development on the green belt is “inappropriate”**. He said: “The government is committed to the strong protection and enhancement of green belt land. **Within the green belt, most new building is inappropriate and should be refused planning permission** except in very special circumstances.”

So with up to date information the situation has not changed with a reorganisation within the Government and the appointment of new ministers. A spokesman for the DCLG said it was not relaxing protections against “inappropriate development” on the green belt. “Ministers have repeatedly been clear that **demand for housing alone will not justify changing green belt boundaries**”.

It is clear from stated Government policy on the Green Belt that the NFDC preferred site for development **Site F (North of Milford on Sea)** contravenes published guidelines and up to date policy statements from Ministers and should be removed from the list of sites to be considered in this review.