Examination of the South Worcestershire Development Plan 2006-2030
Stage 2c of the Examination Hearings
Matter S: Droitwich Spa Sites (SWDP 48, 49 & PM 155-157)

Main Issue: Whether or not the site allocations at Droitwich Spa are soundly based and deliverable.

Inspectors Question 1) Are the site allocation and the amount of development proposed to each site justified, having regard to the likely impacts of the development and the provision of necessary infrastructure?

Response

1. RPS considers that Droitwich Spa (Droitwich) is a highly sustainable location for development, capable of delivering significant development over the Plan period of the South Worcestershire Development Plan (SWDP).

2. By virtue of the recent planning approvals, the precedent of development on sites at Yew Tree Hill and Copcut Lane has already been set. Weight could therefore be afforded to these sites as committed development although the supply from these sites less so.

3. RPS is concerned that the ‘planning by appeal’ process has led to significant development in Droitwich which may have overlooked strategic requirements such as physical and social infrastructure in the town. The Councils should be confident that the latest Infrastructure Delivery Plan [EX/612] offers certainty that planned growth in the SWDP can meet the identified components of social and physical infrastructure.

Inspectors Question 2) Are the specific requirements of the policy justified and consistent with national policy?

Response

Requirement for Enduring Green Belt

4. As part of the last sentence of Proposed Modification 155 [EX/601] the Councils propose an additional clause which proposes a landscaping strategy for the southern edge of the allocation of Yew Tree Hill. The Council state that the intention of this modification is to minimise the impact of the development on the countryside and the designated Green Belt.

5. What this clause effectively does is which prevents any additional development coming forward in Droitwich, south of the proposed allocation. RPS strongly disagrees with the Councils decision to include this clause, which is contrary to paragraph 83 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework).
6. This clause of the Framework requires that as part of the Local Plan process, Local Authorities consider the permanence of the Green Belt boundaries, ensuring that they are capable of **enduring beyond the plan period**.

7. It is with this aspect in particular that RPS finds fault with and considers that the allocation policy for Droitwich is unsound. Should allocations in the SWDP fail to come forward, or the Councils struggle to maintain a deliverable supply of housing land, the SWDP needs to be flexible to respond to changing conditions and ensure that the objectively assessed need for housing is met in full.

8. The Council’s cannot state, unequivocally, that future development will not be needed in this location either within this Plan period or the next. The proposed changes to SWDP49 are therefore unsound and this sentence should be removed from the Proposed Modifications.

9. The same issue is raised in relation to reasoned justification of policy SWDP48. This states that given the constraints in the town, only development to the north or south would be feasible, however these areas are noted within the Green Belt and could be delivered without affecting the Green Belt. RPS disagrees with this claim.

10. The Council’s latest Green Belt Review was undertaken in July 2010, prior to the publication of the Framework in 2012. Importantly, the Framework provided a revised set of policies to assess development in the Green Belt against and creates a presumption in favour of sustainable development in order for Authorities to meet the full objectively assessed need. The Green Belt Review from 2010 will not have accounted for these factors when considering potentially suitable sites to release from the Green Belt. Through the JCS the Council should commit to a review of the Green Belt, consistent with the Framework.

11. In addition to committing to a revised Green Belt review, RPS proposes that the second sentence of the reasoned justification for SWDP48 is removed which relates to the 2010 Green Belt Review. This should be replaced by text which can create flexibility for Droitwich to meet additional need should allocations in the Plan fail to come forward.

**Locations to Meet Newly Arising Need**

12. In terms of potential locations for additional development RPS shares the same view as the Inspector for the appeals at Yew Tree Hill who, at paragraph 8.119 considered the potential capacity for development in each of the Districts in the SWDP area. The Inspector highlighted that there was overwhelming evidence to demonstrate that Wychavon is the least constrained Authority. As part of this assessment, the impact of the AONB in Malvern Hills was noted as a significant constraint to development. In addition Worcester City was noted as an area with limited capacity to grow, due to the lack of previously developed land and tightly contained City boundary. On this
basis, the Inspector considered Wychavon to be the least constrained location for future development and the “natural destination for the lion’s share of additional housing” (paragraph 8.119) bearing in mind duty to cooperate.

13. Turning to the issue of settlements within Wychavon, the Inspector reflected on the locations for growth in Wychavon as part of paragraph 8.120. He noted that:

“From the evidence that is before me the best location within Wychavon is clearly Droitwich Spa when compared against Evesham or Pershore. Growth in Droitwich Spa, between 2006 and 2013, was the smallest of all 3 towns, with a population increase of only 5.6% in this period. Some 750 homes would represent an increase from 5.6 to 8.9%. With Copcut Lane, that increases to 12%, still less than the % increases seen in Pershore or Evesham”

14. This comparative analysis undertaken by the Inspector demonstrates that of the settlements in Wychavon, Droitwich has under-delivered against the other towns of Pershore and Evesham and can accept additional development without exceeding rates of growth seen in the neighbouring towns.

15. In addition, it should be recognised that of the main towns in Wychavon, Droitwich is the least constrained in terms of environmental issues which is acknowledged in the Council's Examination Statement for Matter B [B/1].

16. Paragraphs 1.32 and 1.32 of this Matter outline the Councils justification for determining reasonable alternative options for development. This justification took a step by step approach of considering locations for additional growth, first at Worcester then followed by the market towns in Malvern Hills and Wychavon, the potential of a new settlement and the rural areas.

17. The assessment determined that additional Growth at Worcester was unrealistic, as future development would be detached from the city or require additional significant infrastructure. In Malvern Hills, the Council recognised that significant constraints in the District would prevent development from coming forward. In Wychavon Droitwich was discounted due to the Green Belt designation and Evesham/Pershore were discounted due to flood zone constraints.

18. For reasons of physical capacity the Councils have ruled out development in allocations in the South Worcestershire area apart from Droitwich, which was ruled out due to the Green Belt designation. This process identifies that, Green Belt aside, Droitwich is the only option for additional growth, which should be reflected in the Plan. The Councils have erroneously made a ‘policy on’ determination when considering reasonable locations for additional growth through the Matter B statement.

19. RPS contest this methodology, which should in the first instance be a ‘policy off’ appraisal as part of a two stage approach. The first stage of the('policy off') appraisal
should be exclusive of national and local policy restrictions, such as the AONB and Green Belt, instead determining the capacity of settlements based on physical obstacles to development. The second stage (‘policy on’) should then consider local and national policy restrictions in the determination of capacity. The SWDP Councils should follow this sequential approach to identify locations which may need to meet additional development within the Plan period of the SWDP.

20. As part of the allocations policy (SWDP49) for Droitwich, reference should be made to town’s ability to accept additional growth, which should be presented as reserve sites in the Plan.

Pulley Farm, Droitwich

21. RPS agrees with the Inspector for Yew Tree Hill in his determination of suitable locations for growth in the SWDP area. Clearly, Droitwich is one of the least constrained locations for growth and this fact needs to be given greater emphasis in the Plan.

22. In terms of locations for growth in Droitwich, the Council provide a steer on the issue. Paragraph 4 of the reasoned justification for draft Policy SWDP48 acknowledges that Droitwich is constrained to the east and west, which is true. The M5 follows the eastern boundary of the town and represents a firm physical barrier which cannot be easily bridged, leaving any development isolated from the town. The great pool and the River Salwarpe to the west of the town create different obstacles to development, which may lead to fragmented development and delivery concerns. Paragraph 4 of the reasoned justification notes that given these constraints, significant growth has to be located to the north or south.

23. The south of Droitwich has seen a number of approved developments, owing to the sustainability of the sites and the contribution towards meeting the housing need of the JCS. As part of these developments, local centres to both Yew Tree Hill and Copcut Lane are proposed, in addition to employment premises on the latter site. Within the medium term, it can therefore be expected that the south of Droitwich will grow to include a range of services and facilities which in turn will be able to support additional development to the south of the town.

24. RPS has repeatedly promoted Land at Pulley Farm, Droitwich as a sustainable location for housing on the southern boundary of the town. Pulley Farm was included in the list of sites rejected by the Councils following the Inspectors determination of Objectively Assessed Need as part of the Stage 1 examination hearings [EX/505]. This document [EX/607] identified Land at Pulley Farm on page 18 of the document, however it was considered unsuitable as the site is in the Green Belt and the Council determined that the allocations already exceeded the Objectively Assessed Need for Wychavon.
25. Other than the Green Belt, the Council has not identified any other reasons which would prevent Land at Pulley Farm from being delivered. In July 2014 RPS submitted a promotional document to the Council highlighting the suitability, availability and achievability of Pulley Farm, however the Council has not incorporated the findings of this report into the decision making process. When considered in conjunction with the recently approved sites at Yew Tree Farm and Copcut Lane, the sustainability of Land at Pulley Farm increases.

26. As a Green Belt site, Land at Pulley Farm would be best suited as a longer term strategic option for Droitwich, which can be removed from the Green Belt in the later stages of the SWDP or if a number of strategic allocations have failed to deliver.

27. Should circumstances dictate that additional sites are required, RPS considers that Pulley Farm should be included as a reserve site for housing, which will be removed from the Green Belt as part of a later review.

Suggested Alterations

- RPS strongly disagrees with the last sentence of PM155. This is inconsistent with national policy and should be removed.

- The Plan as currently drafted is inflexible and need to be updated to acknowledge Droitwich as the only location suitable in South Worcestershire for additional growth.

- A new paragraph should be added to SWDP48 which recognises the suitability of Droitwich as an area for expansion, which will be reviewed should key strategic allocations in the SWDP fail to come forward. This should also refer to an update of the Green Belt review to establish a revised Green Belt boundary that is able to endure beyond the Plan period of the SWDP.

- The second sentence of paragraph 4 of the reasoned justification to SWDP48 should be removed.

Inspectors Question 3) Is the housing development that is proposed for each site deliverable in the timescales envisioned in the Council's delivery trajectories?

Response

28. In principle, RPS considers the inclusion of urban extensions at Copcut Lane and Yew Tree Hill to be sound. Both of these sites now benefit from planning approvals for the amounts specified in draft Policy SWDP 49.

29. The Councils expect that these sites will be delivered in full over the plan period and it is this issue RPS finds contentious. RPS is concerned however that the Councils have not given sufficient consideration to known issues on the site which may affect
the capability of proposals to deliver the full quantum of housing, particularly the urban extension at Yew Tree Hill.

30. As an appeal, Yew Tree Hill was recovered by the Secretary of State and approved in July 2014. As part of the Appeal proceedings the Inspector expressed significant concern over the identification of the local brine run crossing the Zone A of the site, which may affect the overall deliverability of Yew Tree Hill.

31. According to the developers own geotechnical evidence, the brine run presents risk of subsidence on the site in areas identified in the report. Ultimately, the Inspector determined that the subsidence timeframe would be “slow” and “consistent” at a rate of millimetres a year. On this basis, the Inspector determined that it was too early to draw conclusions from the surrounding development and ground stability issues were disregarded.

32. It is clear from the Inspectors assessment that ground stability issues remain on the site and certainty cannot be given that this will not become a larger issue at a later stage. Monitoring of the brine run in Zone A began in March 2014 and is expected to function for an additional two years, ending no earlier than March 2016. On this basis, there is no way the development can be expected to deliver units in 2015/16.

33. On this basis, RPS considers the housing trajectory for Yew Tree Hill [EX/620d] to be inflexible to respond to potential constraints to deliverability on the site. The trajectory considers that from 2015/16 Yew Tree Hill will be delivering at a constant rate until 2026/27. The trajectory has not accounted for any potential ground stability issues that may arise through the construction period. Greater flexibility needs to be added to the trajectory for Wychavon to account for any slippages from the Yew Tree Hill site.

34. Unless the Council can provide a firm commitment of completion dates from the developer, it is therefore recommended that the trajectory for Yew Tree Farm is phased to a later part of the plan period, which will also allow for any potential subsidence issues to be resolved.