

Over Hulton Neighbourhood Plan Examination

on behalf of Bolton Council



Examiner's clarifying questions to Over Hulton Neighbourhood Forum and Bolton Council

Examiner's response to EQ2 replies

I have been told that the Neighbourhood Forum and Bolton Council have met informally to consider their responses to my letter of 12 June. My letter had concluded by inviting the parties to consider whether, in the light of my concerns about the relationship between the submitted OHNP and the radically changed wider planning context, they would

- wish me to proceed with my examination; or
- favour suspending the examination to allow modifications to be made which would take into account the new circumstances; or
- decide to withdraw the Plan in its present form.

Both parties support the second of these options, and I welcome the fact that they have been able to come to an agreement, at least in principle, about the way forward. As previously discussed, I would be prepared to hold an informal meeting to discuss the implications further if that is thought necessary. However, it is important that there should be no misunderstanding about what it is realistic to expect from such a discussion, especially given the request by the Council that I provide a "clear steer" on a number of significant issues.

Firstly, as to the scale of modifications which I consider necessary (including how they might affect specific areas of the Plan), it should be understood that I have not attempted to examine the Plan's provisions in any detail, given my fundamental concerns about its failure to respond to the radically changed wider planning context - whatever the explanation for that might be. This means that it would not be appropriate for me to give any meaningful guidance about the scale or scope of desirable changes to the Plan as it stands, including the way that the strategic planning context should actually be dealt with. Such an intervention would involve going well beyond my brief as an examiner.

As far as the consequences for re-consultation are concerned, I appreciate that this would be a significant issue (and one with resource implications for the Forum). But beyond noting the obvious point that the relevant statutory requirements would still need to be met, I do not think it appropriate for me to give any detailed advice at this point. There would clearly be implications for the related documents such as the basic conditions statement: all of these would need to be revisited and amended or updated as appropriate.

As for the Council's question about what timescales I envisage for the process, the short answer is that I have none in mind, since this would clearly be a product of the Forum's own actions in the light of my comments.

I do not want these responses to appear unhelpful. But the fact of the matter is that an examiner's approach is expected to be a "light touch" one, and in the present case my concerns about the failure to deal adequately with the realities of the strategic planning picture are bound to require a radical reconsideration of the basic approach. The extent to which this will mean "going back to

the drawing board” would be a matter for the Forum itself (no doubt with the advice of its planning consultants and the Council) to come to a view on.

It might be that, having considered what I have said, the parties conclude that an informal discussion is not likely to yield much more of practical value. However, I remain content to arrange a meeting locally, but only if it is clear that it would be likely to serve a useful purpose.

Should such a discussion be held, I would prepare an agenda for circulation in advance. It would make clear that the purpose would be to enable any necessary clarification of my approach to the issues raised; and that it would not involve consideration of any substantive matters which would be within the scope of an examination itself. Participation would be limited to representatives of the Forum (including their planning advisers if they wish) and the Council, and the meeting would be held in public. Detailed arrangements would be settled in due course, but I would hold an evening meeting, if it would be helpful. I would not be in favour of an online event, for practical and other reasons. The time and place should be advertised via the parties’ websites in the usual way, and a note of proceedings would need to be added subsequently.

I look forward to hearing from the Neighbourhood Forum and the Council.

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Independent Examiner

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