

Examination of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan (2011-2031)

Examination hearing sessions

Statement of North Hertfordshire District Council

Matter 5 – The housing strategy: the spatial distribution of new housing (Policies SP2 and SP8)

Policy SP2 aims to focus the majority of the District's development within or adjoining the Towns, and also allows 'general development' within Category A Villages and infilling development in Category B Villages. However, neither Policy SP2 nor Policy SP8 quantifies the spatial distribution of new housing.

a) What is the overall distribution of new housing proposed through the Plan? Should it be clearer in this regard? Would the inclusion of a Key Diagram or some kind of illustration assist?

1. The Plan directs the majority of new development towards the towns. As per the Council's Matter 2 statement, the broad distribution of housing development anticipated in each tier of the hierarchy is set out below¹:
 - Within and adjoining towns: 75%, of which:
 - Baldock: 19%
 - Hitchin: 10%
 - Letchworth Garden City: 13%
 - Royston: 10%
 - Stevenage (including Great Ashby): 11%
 - Luton: 12%
 - Category A villages: 15%;
 - Category B villages: <1%;
 - Category C settlements: <1%;
 - Currently unspecified (windfalls and other non-spatial allowances): 9%
2. For effectiveness, an amendment to the supporting text of Policy SP2 is suggested in response to Matter 2 to clarify that the substantial majority of new housing over the plan period will be distributed towards the main settlements.
3. Policy SP8 sets out the broad distribution of the new homes.
4. Firstly this is expressed by splitting the target in terms of the housing market areas identified in HOU2 and shown in Figure 3 of the Plan (LP1, p.17). This is detailed in criteria (a) and (b) of Policy SP8 (LP1, p.47).

¹ This is based on the information provided in the submitted Plan and, in particular, Chapter 13 for the avoidance of confusion. A detailed table is contained in Appendix 1 of the Council's Matter 2 statement. More up to date monitoring information has been submitted to the examination (ED3) and will form the basis of the consideration of matters relating to five-year land supply etc. (particularly Matter 4).

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5. Secondly, SP8 details the distribution by broad source in criterion c. This includes spatial identification of the six Strategic Housing Sites. The supporting text contains further information on these sites (LP1, paragraph 4.90 to 4.93, p.49) and identifies that these account for just under half of all new homes over the plan period.
6. The supporting text at paragraph 4.95 further 'subdivides' the 4,860 homes identified in Policy SP8(c)(iii) into:
 - Development within pre-existing settlement limits;
 - Non-strategic sites to be released from the Green Belt;
 - Development around the edge of Royston; and
 - A review of settlement boundaries in the Rural Areas Beyond the Green Belt.
7. Between them, these measures provide a broad spatial articulation of the Plan's approach to the distribution of housing development.
8. The Communities Chapter (LP1, pp.133-215) clearly sets out the levels of completed, proposed and allocated development on a settlement-by-settlement basis. A summary of this information is included as an appendix to the Council's Matter 2 statement.
9. The Council considers that the spatial distribution of housing in the Plan is sufficiently clear and does not require further amendment beyond the modification cited in paragraph 2 above.
10. A key diagram was omitted in error from the Proposed Submission draft of the Local Plan (LP1). Although the schedule of proposed changes seeks to remedy this (LP3, p.1), the version of this document submitted to the Planning Inspectorate also omitted the actual diagram in error. A revised proposed Key Diagram is appended to this statement.
11. The key diagram spatially identifies, in broad terms:
 - the towns and Category A villages of the district which will be the focus of planned growth over the period to 2031;
 - the locations and directions of strategic growth from the towns (including from towns adjoining the District) for housing and employment;
 - the main Town Centres of the retail hierarchy;
 - the safeguarded land to the west of Stevenage;
 - the Green Belt and Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt; and
 - key transport corridors.

b) What level of new housing is directed towards each of the Towns and the Category A and B Villages?

12. See Paragraph 8 above and Appendix 1 to the Council's Matter 2 statement.

c) How has this distribution been arrived at and what is the justification for it?

13. The distribution has been arrived at having regard to a number of factors including:

- Opportunities for development identified within the SHLAA;
- The existing and proposed status of individual settlements within the Plan;
- The case for *exceptional circumstances* in relation to the proposed review of Green Belt boundaries;
- The objectively assessed housing need of authorities in shared housing markets areas, their capacity to meet their own OAHN and any prospects of redistributing housing requirements under the Duty to Co-operate;
- Infrastructure capacity and constraints;
- The existence of other potential constraints as identified within the evidence base;
- The sustainability appraisal; and
- A balanced planning judgement having regard to all of the above.

14. These factors are explored in a number of other statements (to be) submitted to this examination, including those on Matters 1, 2, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11. It is anticipated that the sessions on these Matters will consider the relevant evidence and factors in further detail.

15. The Council's response to Matter 1 identifies (housing) issues arising under the Duty to Co-operate and the assessment, in broad terms, of reasonable alternatives for the plan's housing strategy.

16. The Council's response to Matter 2 addresses issues relating to the settlement hierarchy and the identification of individual towns and villages within it.

17. The Council's response to Matter 6 examines infrastructure and delivery issues.

18. The Council's response to Matter 7 sets out the case of *exceptional circumstances* required to support the release of land from the Green Belt for housing and other uses.

19. The Council's response to Matter 9 provides further detail on the overall approach to site selection and housing allocations.

20. The Council's responses to Matters 10 and 11 will provide justification for the proposed housing allocations on a settlement-by settlement and site-by-site basis.

21. In relation to this statement and the factors above, a number of broad observations are therefore made.

22. The key point is that there is no significant surplus of genuinely deliverable or developable sites to arrive at a substantially different spatial strategy or distribution of development to that presented in the plan if it is accepted that the Council should seek to meet OAN in full.

23. The SHLAA is a robust evidential base from which to identify the sites and strategy in the plan. The changing planning environment, and the associated length of time it has taken to bring this plan to examination, mean that the Council has effectively held a decade-long open / rolling 'call for sites'. In this context, landowners have had ample opportunity to bring available sites to the attention of the Council.
24. The SHLAA also assesses a number of additional brownfield opportunities within the main towns that the Council, acting proactively, had identified.
25. The SHLAA identified a total of 15,548 potential homes on specific sites meeting the relevant tests (HOU9, Table 5, p.17). In moving forward to the site selection process this estimate was refined down to 14,420 potential homes to take account of infrastructure and other requirements (HOU1, paragraphs 3.10 to 3.28 and Tables 2 & 3, pp.7-10).
26. A total of 12,560 homes are allocated on specific sites in the plan for development over the period to 2031. This is 1,860 homes lower than the full potential identified in HOU1. The Council can identify and robustly defend the reasons for this, as shown in Table A below. A site-by-site justification for the (non-)allocation of sites is included in Appendix 2 of HOU1 (pp.53 to 62).

Table A: Reasons for not using sites / homes identified in the evidence base

	No. of homes (no. of sites) in or adjoining		
	Towns	Villages	Total
Sites identified in plan			
Site allocated but housing number subject to further refinement	34 (5)	92 (4)	126 (9)
Site allocated but some development anticipated beyond plan period	300 (1)	-	300 (1)
Land safeguarded for the period after 2026 pending future review of the Plan	500 (1)	-	500 (1)
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>834 (7)</i>	<i>92 (4)</i>	<i>926 (11)</i>
Sites not identified in the plan			
In area of flood risk and sequential / exception test not required	345 (2)	94 (1)	439(3)
Site within proposed settlement boundary, potential windfall opportunity	-	47 (4)	47(4)
Other sites allocated within same settlement and further development considered inappropriate	81 (1)	167 (6)	248 (7)
Lies beyond defensible, new Green Belt boundary	-	70 (3)	70 (3)
No replacement facility for existing use identified	44 (1)	-	44 (1)
Other reason	-	86 (4)	86 (4)
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>470 (4)</i>	<i>464 (18)</i>	<i>934 (22)</i>
Total	1,304 (11)	556 (22)	1,860 (33)

27. It has been ensured that the overall distribution of development is consistent with the proposed settlement hierarchy. This is expanded upon in answer to Issue 5(d) below.
28. The National Planning Policy Framework (paragraph 52) identifies that the supply of new homes can sometimes be best achieved through planning for larger scale development, including extensions to existing villages and towns. Due to the relative lack of supply within existing settlement limits, this approach has been pursued.
29. The proposed Strategic Housing Site to the east of Luton is predominantly to help meet the unmet housing needs of Luton Borough as identified and quantified through the recent examination of their own plan (ED4, *particularly* paragraph 138, p.28).
30. The part of North Hertfordshire that lies within the shared Luton Housing Market Area is relatively small. The Council has sought to maximise its reasonable contribution to Luton's unmet needs in close proximity to where that need arises. It is accepted by all other authorities in the shared housing market area that the proposed allocation is the reasonable maximum that can be achieved (MOU8, paragraph 5.13, p.4; ED6, paragraph 4.5, p2; ED18, paragraph 4.9, p.4).
31. The extent of housing need and the constraints on non-Green Belt supply is present across a large area (HOU1, paragraphs 4.26 to 4.36, pp15-16). In this context, the Council has concluded that *exceptional circumstances* for Green Belt review do exist and that there are no realistic prospects of other authorities in the shared Housing Market Areas being able to assist if North Hertfordshire fell short of its housing requirements.
32. The housing strategy is therefore predicated upon the principle that the Council should seek to reasonably maximise the provision of new homes within the District (HOU1, paragraph 5.34, pp.29 - 30).
33. In considering the detailed allocation of sites, regard has been had to the cumulative impacts on infrastructure. Where relevant this has had a bearing on the distribution of development:
- Within Hitchin, the absence of a bypass means a number of A-road through routes pass through the town. The Council's evidence identifies that much of this through traffic is outside of the Council's control (ED14, paragraph 5.6, p.49) and a number of highway schemes would be required even without the plan (TI4, Table 4.1 / Figure 4.3, pp.9-10);
 - At a settlement-level, the plan seeks to ensure that development operates either within the capacity of existing infrastructure or provides sufficient 'critical mass' of new development to support its expansion or improvement; while
 - Opportunities have been taken to attempt to resolve known issues within individual settlements or areas and / or improve the way they might function as a place in the future.

34. In overall terms, the Council has recognised throughout the process that the release of certain sites will result in some harm. However, it is considered that these are:

- below the thresholds at which the NPPF advises an outright restriction on development or at which a planning inspector might support a policy of restraint;
- capable of appropriate mitigation where relevant and necessary; and
- outweighed in the planning balance by the pressing need for additional homes (and the onus placed upon this in other relevant examinations) and the lack of likely plausible alternatives should the Council determine not to meet its housing requirements (ORD1, paragraph 8.96, p.18²).

d) Is the distribution consistent with the settlement hierarchy set out in Policy SP2?

35. Yes, the majority of future development is directed to the towns.

36. The four main towns located wholly within the District will each accommodate between 10% and 19% of planned development over the period to 2031, having regard to the opportunities and constraints in individual settlements.

37. 11% and 12% of planned future development in the District is directed to Stevenage and Luton respectively. This is in addition to development proposed in those authorities' own plans. This reflects (in part) their role as higher order settlements with existing populations that are substantially in excess of any of North Hertfordshire's own towns.

38. The distribution of development to the Category A villages – both in terms of overall quantum and on a settlement-by-settlement basis – is similarly justified. Expecting (up to an anticipated maximum of) 1 in 5 new homes in the plan period to be delivered within or adjoining the District's villages represents a reasonable and proportionate contribution to overall needs.

39. No Category A village is taking more development than a town. No Category A village is being grown to the extent where it would be comparable to any of the identified towns in terms of scale or facilities.

40. Within this category, the District's two largest villages of Knebworth and Codicote are taking the largest amounts of planned development. Many individual Category A villages will receive less than 1% of the District's overall housing requirements over the plan period.

41. This is shown in Table B below.

² Page references within ORD1 correspond to the "NHDC Page Number" printed at the top left of each page.

Table B: Distribution of development to Category A villages

Village	Planned development	As % of 14,000 homes	Village	Planned development	As % of 14,000 homes
Knebworth	663	4.7%	Whitwell	41	0.3%
Codicote	364	2.6%	Preston	38	0.3%
Little Wymondley	316	2.3%	Reed	34	0.2%
Ickleford	209	1.5%	Therfield	22	0.2%
Barkway	204	1.5%	Breachwood Green	16	0.1%
Lower Stondon	124	0.9%	Graveley	16	0.1%
Ashwell	95	0.7%	Sandon	13	0.1%
Pirton	94	0.7%	Cockernhoe	5	0.0%
St Ippolyts	86	0.6%	Barley	4	0.0%
Offley	73	0.5%	Hexton	1	0.0%
Weston	47	0.3%	Oaklands	0	0.0%
Kimpton	45	0.3%			

e) Is the distribution of housing supported by the Sustainability Appraisal, and will it lead to the most sustainable pattern of housing growth?

42. As noted in the Council's response to Matter 2.1(c), the Sustainability Appraisal (SA) (LP4) considered five broad alternative options for housing locations:

- a. Continue current policy of focusing development on the four towns and fourteen villages, which may include limited development of greenfield sites;
- b. Focus development on previously developed land (PDL) within existing urban areas;
- c. Urban extensions on greenfield land adjoining existing towns;
- d. Build a new settlement; and
- e. Use smaller greenfield sites in the villages.

43. The details of the SA assessment of these strategic options can be seen in Appendix 3 of LP4 (pp.248, 275-280 & 369-379³).

44. In summary the Council has chosen a combination of options a), b), c) and e) as part of the solution to providing additional housing to meet the District's need. The development is spread across the district combining a number of the spatial options.

³ Page references within LP4 correspond to the "NHDC Page Number" printed at the top left of each page.

45. The SA also gives further consideration to the policy options for rural areas and settlement pattern policy options (LP4, Table 24, pp.63-65). The details of the SA assessment of these strategic options can be seen in Appendix 3 (LP4, pp.253-254, 270-275 & 350-368).
46. Sites have been assessed against planning issues and those performing well in terms of constraints as well as being located closer to services and facilities have been chosen. However, the quantum of development is such that all options have been considered where deliverable sites are identified. There is also more development in the villages based on the number of sites that have been submitted in these locations and the site's suitability based on the services that already exist.
47. The preferred combination of options is included in the Local Plan as policy SP2. As noted in response to Matter 2.1(c), this policy was appraised in the SA process. The appraisal noted:
- The policy seeks to focus new development within or adjoining existing settlements, which will have a range of positive effects. Potential negative effects mainly stem from:
 - The interaction with existing residential areas, e.g. noise impacts and increasing distance to green space.
 - The fact that much development adjoining existing settlements will be on greenfield sites which may have agricultural, ecological or amenity value.
48. It will be possible to mitigate many of these impacts, particularly through design and layout considerations. No specific recommendations are made for changes to this policy as the issues will be best addressed through other plan policies.
49. The detailed assessment matrix can be seen in Appendix 10 of LP4 (pp.1004-1011).
50. Policy SP8 has been subject to SA. This recognises that mitigation of the negative environmental effects needs to be addressed in other policies of the plan (LP4, p.47).
51. All individual sites within the plan have been subject to SA. This is discussed further in the Council's responses on Matters 10 and 11.

f) Has the Green Belt, and any other constraints, influenced the distribution of housing and, if so, how?

52. Sites which were considered unsuitable for development were ruled out from further consideration as part of the SHLAA process. Appendix 1 of the SHLAA provides site-by-site reasoning for those sites not taken forwards.
53. Beyond this, Green Belt and other constraints have influenced consideration of the distribution of housing. However, for the reasons set out above and in other statements, it has not in itself had a substantial bearing on the final distribution of

housing in the plan as the significant majority of opportunities that have been identified are utilised in order to meet housing needs in full and make a positive contribution towards unmet housing needs from Luton.

54. It is not possible, for example, to 'redirect' development to locations beyond the Green Belt within North Hertfordshire and still meet objectively assessed housing needs.
55. Similarly, there is an insufficient surplus of potential sites (when measured against the OAN) to be able to consider directing development to any particular settlement(s) or categories of site on an 'either / or' basis (e.g. directing development to Hitchin vs. to Baldock or urban vs. rural sites).
56. Although attempts have been made to use less constrained areas first, it is necessary to make some use of sites in more constrained areas and mitigate any adverse impacts to the fullest possible extent through the use of site-specific criteria.
57. In addition to Green Belt, the Housing and Green Belt Background Paper gives consideration to the extent to which development needs might be met when considered against a range of potential constraints⁴, including:
- River and surface water flood risk (HOU1, paragraphs 4.61 to 4.69, pp.19-21);
 - Higher grade agricultural land (HOU1, paragraphs 4.70 to 4.73, p.21);
 - Heritage impacts (HOU1, paragraphs 4.74 to 4.82, pp.21-22);
 - Sites of Special Scientific Interest (HOU1, paragraphs 4.83 to 4.91, pp.22-24);
 - Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (HOU1, paragraph 4.92, p.24).
58. The analysis concludes that, if the Council were to impose blanket restrictions on development on many (combinations) of these grounds it would face severe challenges in meeting the identified needs for housing (HOU1, paragraph 4.94, p.24).

5.2 No housing allocations are proposed in the Category B Villages or Category C Settlements. What is the reason for this, and is this approach justified?

59. As per the Council's Matter 2 statement, the Category B villages and Category C settlements are, by definition, less sustainable locations. They are less likely to have access to key facilities.
60. No opportunities for 'transformational change' of any of these locations – such as to support for example, the provision of a school, shops or public transport enhancements – making it more sustainable have been identified through the plan or evidence base⁵. No specific sites have been identified for potential development in or adjoining Category B villages or Category C settlements through the SHLAA process.

⁴ Including constraints identified in Footnote 9 to Paragraph 14 of the NPPF

⁵ In such a scenario, it is likely that the affected settlement would have been identified as a Category A village in any case to reflect its planned status once any such development had been implemented.

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61. Notwithstanding these points, the policy framework of the plan allows for windfall development opportunities through changes of use and infilling (Category B villages) and / or 'exceptions' development (Category B villages and Category C settlements). This latter point is explored further in the Council's Matter 15 statement.

62. The issue of 'village cores' and / or infilling boundaries are matters which any relevant Neighbourhood Plans may explore if they so wish.

63. Overall, this approach is justified.

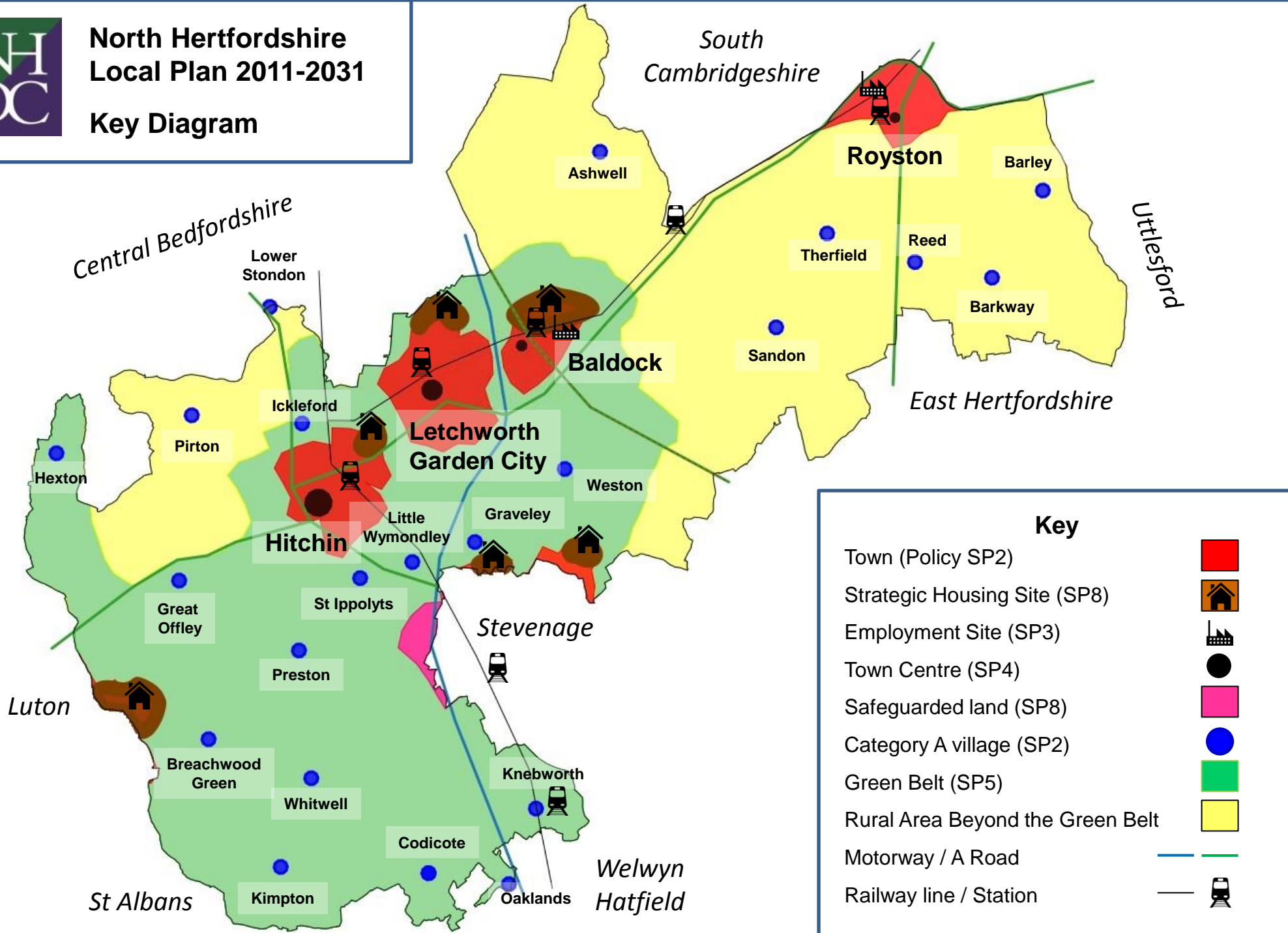
5.3 Overall, is the spatial distribution of housing justified?

64. Yes, for the reasons given above and also in the Council's responses to other relevant Matters.



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Key Diagram



Key

- Town (Policy SP2)
- Strategic Housing Site (SP8)
- Employment Site (SP3)
- Town Centre (SP4)
- Safeguarded land (SP8)
- Category A village (SP2)
- Green Belt (SP5)
- Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt
- Motorway / A Road
- Railway line / Station