

Examination of the Horsham District Local Plan

Statement on behalf of Highwood Group

Representation Number(s): 1194363, 1194366, 1194369

Matter 5a – The Spatial Strategy and Site Selection Process

September 2026

Turley

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Client
Highwood Group

Our reference
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1. Introduction

1.1 This statement is submitted on behalf of Highwood Group, who have interests in the assessed reasonable alternative growth option west of Billinghamurst (See Regulation 19. Representations: [Document F](#)).

1.2 The statement responds to the Inspectors' Issues and Questions for Matter 5a – The Spatial Strategy and Site Selection Process.

1.3 Section 20(2) of the PCPA states that the LPA must not submit their Local Plan unless they think it is ready for independent examination. Paragraph 1.2 of the [Procedure Guide for Local Plan Examinations](#) elaborates, stating:

'Having considered the Regulation 19 consultation responses, the LPA should only submit a plan if they consider it to be sound Before submission, the LPA must do all it can to resolve any substantive concerns about the soundness or legal compliance of the plan, including any raised by statutory undertakers and government agencies. (our emphasis).

1.4 Paragraph 1.4-1.5 of the same document set out the procedure to follow if the LPA wished to make changes to remedy issues of soundness prior to formal submission of the Regulation 19 Plan in 2024. Our client submitted representations to the Regulation 19 consultation stage at that time, detailing significant issues pertaining to the plan's soundness, and respectfully invited Horsham District Council to remedy such issues prior to formal submission.

1.5 The Council opted not to pursue this option, and proceeded to examination late in 2024. However, before such matters of soundness could be examined, the Inspector presiding over the Examination of the plan called a halt to proceedings, recommending the withdrawal of the plan on grounds the DtC had not been met. In addition, the Inspector highlighted that whilst sessions regarding matters of soundness would not therefore proceed, he felt compelled to assert at paragraph 91 of his [interim findings](#), that he nevertheless had:

'significant soundness concerns in relation to the Plan's housing requirements and spatial strategy based on the discussions held at the hearing sessions and all the evidence before the Examination at this time.'

1.6 As set out in our client's [representations](#) to the latest modifications consultation, the concerns raised at [Regulation 19 stage](#), on issues pertaining to the plan's soundness, have not in their view been overcome through the latest modifications to the plan and its evidence base. Our client asserts the SA and site selection evidence base the Council seek to rely upon to justify the plan's strategy is an appropriate one, continues to be flawed.

1.7 As we set out at length in our representations at Regulation 19 and Modifications consultation stages, and seek to highlight in this Statement, rather than an objective assessment of reasonable alternatives, there is clear evidence to suggest a pre-determined outcome was in mind in drafting the SA from the outset.

- 1.8 Our client continues to assert the reliance in such a flawed evidence base, contrary to national guidance, does not satisfy the 'justified' test of soundness in the version of the Framework relevant to this legacy plan.
- 1.9 Our client also highlights valid deliverability concerns with two particular policy outcomes selected in light of this SA process, specifically in relation to policy sites HA4 and HA(NP1), which calls into question whether such policies meet the Effective test of soundness set out in the Framework.
- 1.10 HDC have acknowledged the current plan at examination is a legacy plan that is not meeting the actual need for homes, particularly affordable homes, as calculated using the current standard method in the Framework (Aug 2026). Whilst HDC are seeking to remedy this through an immediate and parallel review of the plan, this could take some years to adopt. There are also continued uncertainties around LGR, and one cannot rule out the risk of potential further planning reforms if a new government were to be elected in 2029.
- 1.11 A great deal of weight appears to be placed on the certainty that the Local Plan review is underway and will address matters the current legacy plan ran out of time to address. However, as highlighted, given the aforementioned context, it is imperative the plan is rendered sound prior to adoption, and makes every effort to allocate suitable and deliverable sites to help meet as much of the unmet need as possible during this transition period.
- 1.12 Our client continues to request a fair and objective reassessment be undertaken of the reasonable alternatives capable of assisting HDC in this pursuit, and for this to be consulted upon, and used to inform a final democratic decision on a preferred, justified and effective spatial strategy for the emerging Local Plan. HDC have instead arguably sought to prioritise speed over precision, with the outcome that the resultant plan remains unsound. Our client requests the evidence base be updated following an objective reassessment of reasonable alternatives, and a further round of modifications consulted upon to remedy such concerns prior to adoption.
- 1.13 Accordingly, we have examined the Inspector's questions for Matter 5a and provide responses to those we wish to contribute to debate on. We have also respectfully requested the opportunity to participate in the forthcoming hearing sessions to assist the Inspector further on such matters.

2. Response to Issues and Questions for Matter 5a – The Spatial Strategy and Site Selection Process

Session for site promoters / developers / agents

Question 1. Spatial distribution

- 2.1 As set out in stage one of the examination, the spatial strategy is based on distributing an interim stepped housing requirement as opposed to the housing need identified. The latter is acknowledged to be significantly higher under the current standard method, and accounting for any upward adjustments to address acute affordable needs and unmet needs in adjoining LPAs. This highlights the importance of ensuring the current plan is not only sound, but includes a sufficiently high stepped requirement in the first five years of the plan period. One that is sufficient to address as much of the unmet need for housing as possible during this transition period between legacy and review Local Plans.
- 2.2 As set out in our representations at both Regulation 19 and Modifications stages, we do not consider HDC have done this, as there are suitable and deliverable sites that have been excluded from this plan for speed of production purposes, as opposed to genuine concerns regarding suitability. Sites that are readily capable of delivering homes in suitable and sustainable locations to help meet some of these unmet needs, during a particularly uncertain period of time between adoption of this interim legacy plan, and review and adoption of the next.
- 2.3 As set out in our [representations to MM147](#), the inclusion of such suitable sites would have assisted HDC setting a higher stepped requirement in the critical first five-year period post adoption of this legacy plan. However, as set out in our representations to MM147, the current approach advocated in the plan seeks to set housing requirements to an unjustifiably lower level than need, enabling HDC to numerically attain a five-year supply against such requirements from point of adoption.
- 2.4 In addition, the requirement for years prior to adoption are also retrospectively adjusted to match completions. Completions will therefore be assessed against completions for purposes of next year's HDT update, as opposed to requirement under the HDT. This will enable a numerical case to be made that HDT is 100% for such years, removing the currently engaged presumption that has and continues to serve HDC well in delivering sustainable development during this transition period. We note the Inspector has acknowledged such representations and will address his conclusions in his report, and in light is not seeking further submissions or debate at the forthcoming examination on such matters. We are content to rely on our submissions to MM147 in light.
- 2.5 The above is highlighted specifically to demonstrate the importance of ensuring suitable and deliverable sites, particularly those capable of delivering much needed homes in the five-year period post adoption of this transition plan, are not unreasonably discounted for speed. As this would run contrary to the 'positively prepared' test of soundness in the framework.
- 2.6 We commend HDC for addressing the shortcomings of the submitted plan, through a modification's consultation, including the review of additional sites to make up evident

shortfalls in housing land supply. However, as outlined above, we do not consider HDC has gone far enough in assessing and identifying suitable sites that can deliver additional supply in the early part of the plan, sufficient to satisfy the positively prepared test of soundness.

- 2.7 The Council has undertaken an exercise to identify additional allocations and sources of supply to meet the increased housing requirement, following the approach set out in the Inspector's Post-Hearing Letter of May 2026. This states:

"The Council will critically reassess known sites using an appropriate methodology (likely based on the methodology recently developed by Mid Sussex) and will identify a range of sites of different sizes, some of which will be capable of delivering in the shorter term to help ramp up delivery, whilst others will deliver longer term" [our emphasis].

- 2.8 As such, sites that can deliver early in the plan period (such as Land West of Billingshurst) should have been considered favourably and included wherever possible. Our client is in the advanced stages of pre-application engagement with HDC on the submission of a hybrid planning application for the comprehensive development of this site later this year.
- 2.9 Full planning permission is sought for the first phase as part of this, which includes access, 481 homes, sports and leisure facilities (inc. indoor tennis courts, a MUGA, padel courts, indoor cricket/netball provision, new pitches, new clubhouse with gym, kitchen and ancillary facilities, and the upgrading of an existing pitch and its ancillary facilities), along with allotments, a country park, and associated infrastructure, open spaces, landscaping and ecological enhancements. The remainder of the application is in outline, comprising a further 570 homes, a 2FE primary school, retail space, care home, community centre, traveller site, substantial new landscaping and woodland planting, and public open space. These proposals are deliverable, and the Highwood Group have a track record of delivering such sites. They have committed significant resources to the drafting and submission of a comprehensive planning application this site, which will be submitted around the end of this year. Highwood are committed to delivering homes early in the plan period, to meet clear and evidenced needs, whilst the review local plan takes shape to address wider shortfalls.
- 2.10 Conversely, Adversane (HA(NP1), and to an extent the expansion of East Billingshurst (HA4) both have unresolved deliverability constraints – specifically in relation to the delivery of bridges over network rail land. As we elaborate on in our Statements for Matters 6c and 6d of the Examination, the suitability, phasing, legal and viability implications of these for deliverability are far from clear.
- 2.11 As is the justification to omit West Billingshurst in light of the evidence base tabled by HDC. The Sustainability Appraisal Addendum (HDC, July 2026) and the Site Assessment Update Report (HDC, June 2026) forms a key part of HDC's justification that the submitted strategy is an appropriate and sound one.
- 2.12 Paragraph: 018 Reference ID: 11-018-201403306 of the Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) confirms an SA needs to assess the likely effects of the plan when judged against reasonable alternatives. In doing so, the LPA should:

‘outline the reasons the alternatives were selected, and identify, describe and evaluate their likely significant effects on environmental, economic and social factors using the evidence base (employing the same level of detail for each alternative option)....

‘Any assumptions used in assessing the significance of the effects of the plan will need to be documented. Reasonable alternatives are the different realistic options considered by the plan-maker in developing the policies in the plan. They need to be sufficiently distinct to highlight the different sustainability implications of each so that meaningful comparisons can be made.’ (our emphasis).

- 2.13 However, and contrary to such national guidance, it is clear from our examination of the aforementioned HDC assessments that suitable and deliverable sites have been excluded from this plan for speed of production purposes, as opposed to genuine concerns regarding suitability. Evidence we have consistently identified as being flawed [at Regulation 19 stage](#) in 2024 has been carried forward without update, highlighting a clear pattern of supporting a pre-determined outcome, as opposed to objective and meaningful comparisons.

- 2.14 As a means to highlight such flaws, we draw the Inspector’s attention to a noteworthy SA example - **Education**. If one turns to page 35 of the Site Assessment Report Update (June 2026) – Part B ([HDCJB14b](#)), and examines the last sentence of the first paragraph for the East Billingham option (land north of the railway) it confirms:

‘It is known that the Weald Secondary school is reaching capacity, something which WSCC are reviewing the options for the best resolution.’;

and the third paragraph states:

*‘Greater assurances over the contribution and also the delivery of the primary school within the site and access to secondary places would need to be obtained before securing any housing development on the site. **However, it is considered these matters can be resolved and a favourable impact is therefore concluded.***’ (our emphasis).

- 2.15 There is acknowledgement here of uncertainties over on-site provision of a primary school, and need for an off-site contribution to mitigate secondary school provision. Both of which are considered resolvable, and a **green / favourable** outcome is concluded in the assessment.

- 2.16 If one now turns to page 73 of the same document, and the assessment of the West Billingham reasonable alternative, the Council conclude a **red/very unfavourable** outcome, stating:

‘The site would not provide new land for a secondary school. The Weald secondary school in Billingham is reaching capacity and it is therefore unclear as to how the educational needs of the additional children on this site could be met, without children having to travel potentially very significant distances to reach secondary education. WSCC have indicated to meet the increased housing targets placed on the Council, an additional secondary school (in addition to that at Southwater and West of Ifield) would be required. If this site is allocated as a further strategic allocation in addition to existing allocations within the submitted local plan, it is unclear at this stage as to how educational needs arising from the scheme could be met’ (our emphasis).

- 2.17 As set out in the submitted EIA scoping opinion request to HDC in January 2026, and which has been known for some years by HDC, the West Billingshurst option is not only providing land for a 2FE school (including SEND provision and pre-school), but also a financial contribution to the pro-rata share of the build cost. This has been agreed with the Education Authority as acceptable, both in terms of location, but also size and specification. There is greater certainty here therefore than the HA4 alternative.
- 2.18 A financial contribution to secondary provision is also provided for in the scheme viability, in the same way as East of Billingshurst. There are therefore greater uncertainties over such provisions for the HA4 draft allocation versus the western option. Yet despite this, HDC cite the lack of land for a secondary school as the main reason for scoring west ‘very unfavourable’; yet no such request is made of east, where there are evident greater uncertainties in education provision overall.
- 2.19 Contrary to Paragraph: 018 Reference ID: 11-018-201403306 of the Planning Practice Guidance, the assumptions and weightings made are not consistently and objectively applied or based on the same level of detail. The outcome of the process precludes ‘*meaningful comparisons*’ being made between the HA4 site and reasonable alternatives, and only serve to support a pre-determined outcome to support the submitted Policy HA4 site and omit reasonable alternatives.
- 2.20 It is evident the assessment is not based on the same level of detail, lacks objectivity and results in a flawed outcome. In the education example stated, the West of Billingshurst option should objectively have been scored equal to the East Billingshurst option (i.e., ‘favourable’), arguably higher owing to the certainty of delivery of primary provision, which is supported by WSCC. In any event, and by any reasonable assessment it cannot surely be worse. **When combined with many other examples (see [representations to MM147](#), it demonstrates a consistent pattern, one that suggests the SA assessment had a predetermined outcome in mind.**
- 2.21 Our client set out in some detail the specific and significant flaws with the SA process at Regulation 19 stage, and again in representations to MM147. The above serves as a single example to illustrate compelling evidence of factual errors and inconsistencies in the site assessment process that underpinned the SA assessment of reasonable alternatives to Policy HA4. However, as set out in our client’s [response to Q5 of the Modifications Consultation Form for MM147](#), there are many more that lead one to conclude a consistent pattern in support of a pre-determined outcome.
- 2.22 To avoid duplication and in the interests of brevity, we refer the Inspector to our client’s [representations to MM147](#) on both the SA and Site Selection process (See Response to Q5 and specifically SA Critique table), which identifies many more examples contributing to this conclusion, both in the assessment of reasonable alternatives to the expansion of HA4 and allocation of HA(NP1) at Adversane. This includes clear discrepancies, beyond the above example, where there is compelling evidence a predetermined outcome was in mind in drafting. This includes comparative assessments of landscape, biodiversity, flooding/drainage, housing and transport to list a few, where assessed impacts should objectively have scored no worse than HA4, and in some instances arguably better.
- 2.23 The spatial strategy decision to opt for a free-standing settlement at Adversane before making best use of more sustainable extensions to existing upper tier settlements is not

justified by the evidence base in our client's opinion. As we will elaborate on under Matter 6d, nor is this likely to be effective given the uncertainties surrounding this site's viability and deliverability. The new settlement is not of sufficient scale to be self-contained and will rely on trips to Billingshurst for key services and facilities for many years. It is also contingent on a new rail crossing, which is yet to be secured and funded. Whilst this site may well be a reasonable strategic option to explore through the review Local Plan, the evidence base does not support its inclusion in the current plan at the expense of more sustainable reasonable alternatives (West of Billingshurst comprising one such example).

- 2.24 Equally, we question whether the expansion of the HA4 East Billingshurst site is justified versus reasonable alternatives, and similarly question whether such a policy will be effective given the deliverability concerns we elaborate on in our representations to MM147 and in our Statement to Matter 6c.
- 2.25 The SA and Site Assessment evidence base should be updated, and a meaningful comparison undertaken of reasonable alternatives to Policy HA4 and HA (NP1) in light of this objective assessment process, and the views of the community via a further round of consultation, should then inform the preferred site (s) for inclusion in the plan.
- 2.26 It is our client's assertion and indeed that of the Parish Council and other community organisations, that the outcome will favour Land West of Billingshurst being selected as an alternative or additional site allocation. All our client is calling for in the interim, is for a fair and objective assessment to be undertaken of reasonable alternatives, for this to be consulted upon, and for this to inform a final democratic decision on a preferred, justified and effective spatial strategy distribution for the emerging Local Plan.
- 2.27 The identification of such additional supply would help increase the stepped requirement in the first five years of the plan period, helping to meet more acute needs as soon as possible. Rather than putting this off to a future review Local Plan, it is justified being allocated in this plan. Given the strategic context of even greater needs to face into, and uncertainties over the timescales facing the review Local Plan, such an allocation would help make a real difference to those waiting for much needed homes and facilities over the next five years.

Question 2. Constraints

- 2.28 No. See response to Question 1, specifically in relation to assessed constraints under the SA. For brevity, **see response to Q5 (summary table) in [our client's representations to MM147](#)**, which sets out further clear examples of flawed comparative assessments of landscape, transport, heritage, biodiversity and other constraints. The weightings applied to constraints for preferred allocations versus reasonable alternatives are significantly flawed and in respect of HA(NP1), contradict conclusions HDC previously made to omit Adversane from the submitted Regulation 19 plan in 2021 and 2024.
- 2.29 We urge the Inspector to review the table set out in our client's representations at Q5 of the representation form for MM147 (link provided at paragraph 2.28 above), pertaining to the SA comparative assessment of such constraints. Compelling evidence is presented here of fundamental omissions, errors and flaws in this assessment process. Indeed, some of these constraints are yet to be confirmed for preferred allocations, such as in relation to the landscape and heritage impact of an underpass or bridge over the rail line to deliver safe

and appropriate pedestrian accessibility for the HA4 site. This undermines the justification for the sites selected, and raises additional concerns over how effective such policies will actually be if confirmed. We elaborate on the latter under Matters 6c and 6d.

Question 3. Housing Delivery

- 2.30 See response to Question 1. Without prejudice to the assertions made under this question to the quantum of housing in the requirement, we question the deliverability of particular sites allocated. Namely HA4 and HA (NP1), and their reliance on rail bridges yet to be evidenced as secured and funded. See our client's representations to MM147 (Q5), and Statements to Matters 6c and 6d for brevity.