

ST ALBANS LOCAL PLAN EXAMINATION IN PUBLIC

STAGE 2 HEARINGS

Response to Matter 7: Residential Site Allocations

Written Statement on behalf of Catesby Estates

September 2025

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Question 1 - Based on the discussions at the Stage 1 hearing sessions (where it was agreed that the 'Broad Locations' are specific site allocations), is Policy LG1 necessary, justified and effective?

Policy LG1 sets out requirements that allocated Broad Locations (250+ dwellings) must comply with to be acceptable. It is our view that these criteria either repeat requirements from other parts of the Local Plan, primarily its other policies, or the detailed development requirements set out in Part B, or they reiterate national policy.

An example of a criterion which repeats the requirements of another policy within the Plan includes k), which requires Broad Locations to provide the housing size, type and mix as set out in Local Plan Policy. This is a repetition of Policy HOU1 – Housing Mix, which requires all new residential development proposals to provide a mix of dwelling types and sizes to meet the need of current and future households. Similarly, the requirement to deliver 40% affordable housing is set out in Policy HOU2- Affordable Housing and does not need to be repeated. Where a requirement is covered by another policy within the Plan it should be removed from Policy LG1 as the Plan must be read as a whole.

There is also the proposed requirement for all Broad Locations to have due regard to any relevant Neighbourhood Plans(s). This is a requirement of national policy and does not need to be included within the policy criteria as it is covered by paragraph 11 c) of the National Planning Policy Framework. This requirement should also be removed as it is covered by national policy.

In addition to the above, paragraph 3.28 of the Plan specifies that there are 12 identified Broad Locations, however Part B of the Plan only lists 8 locations. To ensure consistency the Plan should be reviewed to consistently reference the east of Hemel Hempstead HGC sites, as either Broad Locations or make them the subject of their own stand-alone site category.

B1 – North St Albans

Question 2 - What is the justification for the proposed alteration to the Green Belt boundary? Is the proposed boundary alteration consistent with paragraph 148 e) and f) of the Framework, which state that Plans should be able to demonstrate that boundaries will not need to be altered at the end of the Plan period, and define boundaries clearly, using physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent?

The Green Belt Review Annex Proforma Report (2023) [GB 02.03] assesses sub-areas SA-62, SA-63a, SA-63c, SA-66 and SA-69, which make up the North St Albans allocation, against the five National Planning Policy Framework (2023) purposes of the Green Belt. Within the assessment it is suggested for sub-areas SA-63a and SA-63c, which would form the new Green Belt boundary, that should the sub-area be released the boundaries would not necessarily be permanent and would not meet the NPPF definition, so the new boundaries would require strengthening. For this reason, we suggest the site is not suitable for release for development, when you consider alternative sites that have been put forward for consideration.

The policy does not reference the need to create a new Green Belt boundary by strengthening the northern and western boundary of the site using physical features that are readily recognisable. It is not necessary to try and make this site more acceptable by strengthening the mature hedgerow which runs east to west along the northern boundary of sub-areas SA-62 and SA-69 to restrict the view of urban sprawl or retain specific features within sub-area SA-63c such as the unbroken hedgerow on the western boundary and the dense woodland along the southern boundary that are identified in the Green Belt Review Annex Report (2023) [GB 02.03]. It would be a more sensitive approach to select an alternative site where more advantage can be taken of existing landscape features without the need to create a new Green Belt boundary to satisfy policy and landscape requirements.

Because there is no recognition that there are key features that should be retained or enhanced to form a new Green Belt boundary the proposed release of the N St Albans site is inconsistent with the criteria set out within paragraph 143 of the NPPF (2023).

Thus, in our view, the North St Albans draft allocation, whilst it appears that there are relatively few environmental constraints (as is also the case with Windridge Farm Site / sub-area SA-56), there is a less durable outer Green Belt boundary available in comparison to the Windridge Farm Site. The North St Albans northern Green Belt boundary comprises relatively low hedgerow planting, whereas the Windridge Farm Site benefits from the extremely strong elements in the landscape of the A414 North Orbital Road and associated planting to the south. The North St Albans draft allocation is also less potentially well connected to local transport and community facilities in comparison to Windridge Farm which benefits from relative proximity to Verulamium Park, railway stations and the proposed HERT corridor.

Release of Land at Windridge Farm from the Green Belt would have no material effect on the separation of St Albans and Hemel Hempstead, with a large gap maintained, including the physical barrier created by the M1. There would be a minor reduction in the gap to the south between St Albans and Chiswell Green, however, the A414 would provide a physical barrier, preventing coalescence, and the scheme would include a green 'buffer' along the southern edge of the Site. This green buffer would deliver significant public open space, which currently is inaccessible, privately owned farmland.

In relation to the setting St Albans and Gorhambury Estate, these receptors are already influenced by the suburban development that wraps around Verulamium Park. The proposed development would be consistent with the settlement pattern of St Albans, which already extends up to the A414 in places to the south and could be contained by the A4147 / Prae Wood to the north-west

Question 5 - How have flood risk and ecology been taken in account as part of the site's allocation?

The Council has assessed flood risk and ecology through the site selection process, and the assessment of North St Albans is set out in the Green Belt Sites Recommended Broad Location Proformas (2024) [LPSS 02.04]. The Site is considered to perform strongly in flood risk terms as it is not in the functional floodplain, when accounting for climate change, however it is not clear how surface water flooding has been taken into account through the assessment.

In addition to this, the site is determined to perform relatively weakly against ecological criteria as it contains Ancient Woodland, Local or Regional Nature Conservation Site, Priority Habitat, Existing Woodland, Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs), Areas of non-designated biodiversity and poor access to Green Infrastructure Corridors. It is unclear how this weak performance has been considered in the allocation process, and we suggest that inadequate weight has been attached to it. In comparison, Windridge Farm is judged to perform more strongly in relation to ecological designations, with better links to Green Infrastructure Corridors. It has however not been recommended to progress. The assessment is contained within the Green Belt Buffer Sites Not Recommended to Progress Part 1 Proformas (2024) [LPSS 02.10].

Policy M3 – Bedmond Lane

Question 3 - How has the scale and quantum of development been determined, having particular regard to archaeological and ecological constraints?

The site has been assessed, within the Green Belt Sites Recommended Medium & Small Sites Proformas (2024) [LPSS 02.06], to be in an area of archaeological significance, with existing woodland that is protected by Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) and Areas of non-designated biodiversity. During the Regulation 19 consultation when the site was first proposed for allocation, an objection was raised by the Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) due to its biodiversity value as an un-designated woodland and wildlife meadow.

In addition to the ecological value of the site, it has also been expressed by the Chairman of the Verulam Residents Association, that the site is of archaeological significance and this is recognised in the site selection proformas. The Heritage Impact Assessment Appendix 6 High-Level HIAs by Place Services (2024) [EDH 04.07] recommends that further work would be required should the site progress to assess the impacts on the Redbourn Conservation Area to the west as the “potential Allocation could result in a significant change to the eastern setting of the Conservation Area, altering and/or removing the remaining rural character in this location”.

This is another case where the archaeological and ecological evidence does not seem to have been taken into account when determining whether the site is appropriate for development, and we believe that the criteria in the site selection process have not been consistently applied as a site such as this one has been allocated within the Plan, despite clear constraints.

It is thus unclear how obvious constraints have failed to influence the site selection process. On the contrary, Windridge Farm is relatively unconstrained ecologically and is located in an area subject to archaeological recording conditions, and it is made clear in Policy HE6 – Archaeological Sites Subject to a Recording Condition that the Council will not normally refuse planning applications in this area on archaeological grounds.

Question 4 - Is Policy M3 justified, effective and consistent with national planning policy? If not, what modifications are required to make the Plan sound?

Taking into account our response to Question 3 above, allocating a site such as Bedmond Lane with its high ecological value is inconsistent with paragraph 174 of the NPPF (2023)

which states that planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by “protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan)”. They should also seek to “minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures”.

The allocation of N St Albans is inconsistent with national policy and should be removed from the Plan and replaced with an alternative site allocation, with fewer ecological constraints.