
**Examination of the Submitted St Albans
City & District Local Plan**

STATEMENT FOR STAGE 1 HEARINGS:

MATTER 3 – THE GREEN BELT

WRITTEN STATEMENT

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On behalf of:

Linden Wates (Bricket Wood) Limited

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Executive Summary

Linden Wates (Bricket Wood) Limited have a controlling interest in a sustainably located and deliverable brownfield site at the former HSBC Training Centre, Smug Oak Lane, Brickett Wood. The site is available to contribute towards meeting the identified housing need during the early plan period.

Although the site has planning permission for residential development which is being delivered, the confirmed previously developed status of the wider site means that it is suitable for further residential development, especially given the significant housing needs in the district. The approach of the Submitted Plan failed to fully consider scope of all previously developed sites in the Green Belt which within the NPPF (December 2023) are amongst the primary source of locations where there is a housing need (paragraph 147). As detailed in the representations Linden Wates (Bricket Wood) Limited (now Vistry Group) have concerns with the Plan as prepared in its failure ensure sufficient housing growth (in terms of the overall housing target in PolicySP1) and consequently does not include sufficient land to meet its needs. Accordingly, additional site allocations should be identified.

Linden Wates (Bricket Wood) Limited's objections may be summarised as follows:

- The Plan is **not positively prepared** in so far as the proposed strategy for growth will fail to deliver the identified housing need. It should plan for the at least 887 dwellings annually over a minimum 18 year plan period from April 2024 until March 2042; &*
- The Plan is **not consistent with national policy** having regard to the obligation to provide a strategy for at least 15 years post adoption.*

The failure to provide sufficient deliverable site allocations will serve to frustrate attempts to address key factors affecting worsening affordability and denying people the opportunity to own their own home, contrary to Government policy under paragraph 60 of the NPPF which is seeking to significantly boost the supply of housing to address the current housing crisis.

The land at the former HSBC Training Centre should be included as an allocation in policies LG4 & LG8 for around 60 dwellings.

The above changes are necessary to ensure the Local Plan satisfies the tests of soundness at paragraph 35 of the NPPF (December 2023)¹.

¹ Paragraphs 234 and 235 of the 'current' NPPF (Dec 2024) states that Local Plans submitted for examination before 12th March 2025 will be examined under the relevant previous version of the NPPF. Paragraph 230 of the preceding NPPF (December 2023) indicates where a plan was submitted after 19th March 2024, they will be examined under that version of the NPPF.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

- 1.1. This Statement has been prepared by Woolf Bond Planning Ltd on behalf of Linden Wates (Bricket Wood) Limited and addresses several questions posed for Matter 3 of the Stage 1 Hearing Sessions as set out in the Inspector's Schedule of Matters, Issues and Question ("MIQs") (SADC/ED69).
- 1.2. In setting out our response, we continue to rely upon the content of our detailed Regulation 19 representations ("our Representations") submitted on behalf of Linden Wates (Bricket Wood) Limited in response to the Regulation 19 consultation on the Draft Local Plan on 7th November 2024.
- 1.3 As set out at footnote 1 on page 2 above, the Local Plan is being examined for consistency against the December 2023 version of the NPPF. Accordingly, all references to the NPPF in this Statement relate to that version (unless otherwise stated).
- 1.4. Our answers to the questions should be read in the context of our position that insufficient deliverable and developable land has been identified in the submitted Local Plan in order to contribute towards addressing unmet needs of neighbouring authorities (NPPF paragraph 61) together with ensuring the strategy extends for at least 15 years after its adoption (NPPF paragraph 22).
- 1.5. The Plan would not be sound without modifications to include:
- Amending the Plan period so that it covers full monitoring years and extends under March 2042. Since full information on sources of supply relate to the position at 1st April 2024 is now available (SADCED71A and HOU01.01), the plan period would be April 2024 to March 2042;
 - Additional site allocations to ensure that the minimum housing requirement (887dpa) is achieved over the extended plan period; &
 - Small and medium sites are allocated in particular to avoid the need for a stepped housing trajectory.

- 1.6. This Statement amplifies our Representations and references are made to that

document where relevant.

MATTER 3: THE GREEN BELT

Issue 1: Principle of Green Belt Release

Paragraph 146 of the NPPF states that, before concluding that exceptional circumstances exist to justify changes to the Green Belt, the strategic policy-making authority should be able to demonstrate that it has examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting housing need. This includes making as much use as possible of suitable brownfield sites and underutilised land, optimising the density of development and liaising with neighbouring authorities to determine whether they could accommodate some of the identified need for development.

Question 1: Has the Council examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting housing needs as required by the Framework?

- 2.1. It is agreed that there is an inevitable need to, and sufficient justification for, Green Belt release in order to significantly boost housing supply.

Paragraph 147 of the NPPF then states that when reviewing GB boundaries, the need to promote sustainable patterns of development should be taken into account. Where it has been concluded that GB alterations are necessary “plans should give first consideration to land which has been previously developed and / or is well served by public transport.”

Question 2: In response to the Inspector’s Initial Questions, the Council refers to the application of buffers around settlements to help determine which sites to allocate? Is this approach justified, effective and consistent with national planning policy?

- 2.2. No, it is not justified, nor is it consistent with national policy, in particular the requirement to first consider PDL and / or land that is well served by public transport (paragraph 147) or the aim to significantly boost housing delivery (paragraph 60).
- 2.3. The Council has failed to robustly assess potential Green Belt site options beyond the arbitrary buffers. The 250m / 400m buffers are not an appropriate proxy for sustainability. A site is capable of being sustainably located despite being situated more than 250m from a settlement. 250m represents a 3 to 5

minute walking time.

- 2.4. Our client's site (Former HSBC Training Centre, Smug Oak, now known as 'Hanstead Park') is an example of where this arbitrary application of a buffer has resulted in an ineffective, unjustified and inconsistent site selection process.
- 2.5. The 20.5ha site was identified as PDL by the Secretary of State who granted permission on appeal for 138 dwellings).
- 2.6. It is also sustainably located, as set out in our representations at Regulation 19 stage (see Section 6 of those representations). At paragraph 6.36 of our representations we highlighted that the site lies under 800m (by road, with pedestrian footpath) from Bricket Wood railway station (which provides an 8 minute journey time to Watford Junction). This is an accepted 10 minute walk. In addition, the completed development is served by a regular bus service which connects to Bricket Wood train station, Borehamwood and St Albans. Bricket Wood itself is a second tier settlement. As such it is clear that the site is in an inherently sustainable location. Indeed, the site is closer by foot to the railway station than other residential dwellings in the western part of Bricket Wood itself.
- 2.7. In accordance with paragraph 147 NPPF, the Council should first have given consideration to sites which are PDL and / or those which are well served by public transport. Yet this site was excluded at the initial HELAA stage (2021) based on an error. It is further excluded by virtue of the Council's approach to focus upon sites only within the 250 or 400 metre buffer of identified Green Belt settlements and its failure to consider large developments that have occurred since 1994 in its settlement hierarchy study Part 1 (LPCD13.01) (as detailed in our Matter 2 statement). In summary, the Council concluded that the site was not available as it already had planning permission – despite our site promotion materials having made clear that it had capacity beyond the 138 dwelling consented scheme due to the large 20.54ha site having potential further development potential. The Council's combined approach to looking only at the 250 / 400 metre buffers, alongside an insufficient settlement hierarchy review

have resulted in a failure to comply with paragraph 147. A comprehensive further review of sites such as our client's at Hanstead Park would assist the plan in being found sound by enabling earlier housing delivery from smaller sites and therefore achieving a plan that is more justified, effective and consistent with national policy.

Question 3 – Having determined, at a strategic level, that alterations to the Green Belt boundary would be necessary, how did the Council determine the location of Green Belt releases? How does this correlate to the settlement hierarchy and spatial strategy?

- 2.8. It is unclear how the Council concluded that three particular Green Belt sites should be allocated (those listed in LPSS02.07). For example, the Smallford Works site (C-027, HELAA Ref CH-30-21) was not recommended for further consideration in the Stage 2 Green Belt review; only 2% of the site (a very small corner of landscaping) is within the 400m buffer around St Albans. Yet the Council recommended that it should progress (as a PDL site). Similarly, the Friends Meeting House site (C-168, HELAA Ref SM-01-18) was not recommended for further consideration in the Stage 2 Green Belt review. 1% of the site area fell within the buffer around Hemel Hempstead and the Council recommended that it should progress. In both of these cases the sites were, in essence, *adjacent* to the buffer (as opposed to within) - with only a very marginal portion of the site boundary within the buffer. Decisions around precise delineation of the site boundary have therefore heavily impacted the conclusion that those sites are 'partially within the buffer'. For example, it would have been more rational to exclude the 2% landscaped area from the Smallford Works boundary given that the site primarily encompasses the PDL/ developed land. These sites were recommended for allocation because they are PDL and were in proximity to a Tier 1 settlement (see proformas in LPSS02.07). We do not object to the referenced sites but consider the focus on Tier 1 settlements alone in this regard was overly limited, given the need to give first consideration to PDL and / or land which is well served by public transport when reviewing Green Belt boundaries. As referenced in our matter 2 statement, an assessment of whether a site is well related to public transport does not simply turn upon whether it is within a 250 or 400 metre buffer of a specific settlement. That approach has no regard at all to the location / availability of public

transport.

- 2.9. Our client's site at Smug Oak is in proximity to Bricket Wood, which is lower down the settlement hierarchy. As such it would not have been subject to the same assessment / review process which was applied to the three PDL Green Belt sites which are proposed for allocation (had it not already been erroneously excluded from the process previously). As noted in the Settlement Hierarchy Part 1 report (LPCD13.01 paragraphs 4.9-4.10) Bricket Wood has a population of approximately 3,962 residents and lies around 4.2 miles south of St Albans. The Train Station (800m by road from the site, with footpath available) is served by the Abbey Line local railway line, with direct services to Watford Junction and St Albans Abbey and the M1 is easily accessible via the North Orbital Road.
- 2.10. The limited focus on PDL site options near higher order settlements has failed to identify or review sites which are in sustainable locations and which could quickly deliver housing in the early plan period. The approach taken is not robust as it fails to robustly consider all credible options that could be brought forward in consistency with NPPF paragraph 147.

Question 4 : In deciding to review the Green Belt boundary, how did the Council consider the provision of safeguarded land? Is the plan consistent with paragraph 148(c) of the Framework which sets out that, where necessary, areas of safeguarded land between the urban area and the Green Belt should be identified to meet longer-term development needs?

For the Council.

Issue 2: Green Belt Review

Question 1: How does the methodology in the 2023 Stage 2 Green Belt Review differ from the earlier studies in 2013 and 2014?

- 2.11. The previous Local Plan Inspector concluded that the Council had put forward inadequate evidence to support the Council's case for alteration of Green Belt boundaries. In particular, the Inspector took issue with the 2013 Green Belt study's focus on strategic sites, to the expense of small sites. The Council now asserts (at LPCD07.01) that the new Arup Green Belt Review Stage 2 resolves

these concerns as it includes small sites and because first consideration has been given to PDL that is well served by public transport.

- 2.12. As set out above (in relation to Issue 1) we disagree that first consideration has been given to PDL and / or land that is well served by public transport.
- 2.13. The Stage 2 Green Belt Review still fails to actively consider all options for bringing forward PDL and / or land that is well served by public transport. The use of arbitrary buffers (and failure to assess site options beyond those buffers) is inadequate. The study wholly fails to assess our client's site, having not included it within any sub-area for assessment. Paragraph 4.2.1 of the study states that "sites that were not adjacent to existing urban areas (or the buffers) were thus excluded for the assessment on the basis that their release would (a) not contribute to a sustainable pattern of development; and (b) undermine the integrity of the Green Belt by creating hole(s) within its fabric." The Green Belt Study 2023 is therefore not a complete assessment of the function of all parcels of Green Belt land within the District.
- 2.14. Page 21 of the 2023 Green Belt study suggests that all sites promoted in the call for sites during 2016 to 2021 were considered. Yet the sub-area map (figure 4.7 for the report) shows that our client's site at the HSBC Training Centre was not included in any sub-area for assessment. Parcel SA-120 is the nearest sub-area which was assessed; this parcel of land lies to the north of the former HSBC Training Centre site but does not include it.

Question 2: How were the areas selected for assessment in the Stage 2 GB Review and what are they based on? How do the areas differ from previous assessments of the GB?

- 2.15. This question is primarily for the Council. We note that our client's site was not included in any sub-area for assessment. It is not clear why, specifically, the Former HSBC Site was excluded from the sub-areas for assessment despite being an existing development site within the Green Belt and having been actively promoted for additional development.

Question 3: Is the methodology by which sites have been assessed in the Stage 2 GB Review sufficiently robust and transparent to support the proposed boundary revisions? If not, what approach should have been used and why?

2.16. No – as detailed above, our client's site has not been assessed in the Stage 2 Green Belt review and the reasons for not being included in any sub-area are not entirely clear. This may have arisen from the Council's exclusion of the site in the 2021 HELAA based on errors as to availability and capacity.

2.17. A complete assessment of the Green Belt function of all PDL and / or sites benefiting from good public transport links should have been undertaken so as to satisfy the requirements of paragraph 147 NPPF. Had this occurred, our client's site would have performed favourably:

- Purpose 1: to check unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas: the site is not at the edge of a large built up area, so it plays no role against this purpose.
- Purpose 2: to prevent neighbouring towns from merging: the sub-area to the immediate north (SA-120) was said to be a less essential part of the gap between Bricket Wood and How Wood and between Bricket Wood and Radlett; and the gap is of sufficient scale that removal of SA-120 (the sub-area north of our client's site) would not result in merging. A similar conclusion is warranted in respect of our client's site.
- Purpose 3: to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. At the 2016 appeal, the Secretary of State concluded that there would be no encroachment into the countryside via redevelopment of this site, as it is a campus with parkland setting which is wholly PDL. Development would be encompassed within the extent of the campus such that no countryside land would be developed.
- Purpose 4: preserve the setting and special character of historic towns: the GB study concluded that SA-120 provided no role in this regard so a similar conclusion is warranted.

2.18. Further, the identification of our client's site would reflect the 138 dwellings now constructed at Hanstead Park and consistent with the detail shown in the site image (provided underneath paragraph 6.59 of the Regulation 19

representations) would create a Green Belt boundary that uses the physical features of Drop Lane in a way that would ensure a future Green Belt boundary that would be permanent and predicated upon a physical feature, consistent with NPPF paragraph 148, part (f).

- 2.19. Therefore, the site plays no strong Green Belt purpose, is PDL, and is sustainably located with good public transport access. It should have been given **first consideration**.

Question 4: How did the evidence in the Stage 2 GB Review inform decisions about which sites to allocate?

For the Council.

Question 5: Where the evidence recommended that areas were not taken forward for further consideration, how did the Council consider this in the plan-making process?

- 2.20. For the Council. It is clear from the evidence put forward in the matter 2 and 3 statements this the approach followed has not resulted in compliance with NPPF paragraph 147.

Question 6: How was the potential for mitigation considered in the Stage 2 GB Review? Was this considered on a consistent basis for all sites?

No comment.

Question 7: Does the evidence consider ways in which the impact of removing land from the GB can be offset through compensatory improvements to the environmental quality and accessibility of the remaining GB land, as required by NPPF para 147?

No comment.

Question 8: Has the Council considered 'washed over' settlements within the Green Belt? Are any changes proposed and/or necessary based on the evidence presented?

- 2.21. The assessment of Washed Over Villages (GB02.04) is limited to the existing

defined settlements. As detailed in relation to Matter 2 (Settlement Hierarchy), the former HSBC Training Centre site (Hanstead Park) should have been reviewed and included as a Green Belt village as part of the Settlement Hierarchy review. This developed site is washed over but has permission for 138 homes with further capacity to accommodate additional development (circa 60 dwellings as detailed in our response to the Call for Sites exercise and our Regulation 19 representations on behalf of Linden Wates (Bricket Wood) Limited).

2.22. The methodology in the Washed Over Villages review (GB02.04) is to consider the Green Belt function of each settlement and degree of openness/visual containment. Based on that approach, had our client's site been reviewed, it would have been found to serve little Green Belt function and have a reduced degree of openness. When granting permission to redevelop the site, the full extent of 'headroom' (in terms of volume or floorspace of built form) was not re-provided. When granting permission for redevelopment in 2016, the Secretary of State concluded that the 20.54ha site, in its entirety, comprises previously developed land. Further, it was concluded that redevelopment would involve no encroachment into the countryside, as the former training centre campus and parkland grounds did not have the character or function of countryside. The site serves no strong Green Belt function. There is a degree of visual containment, particularly to the west, which would limit views of the part of the site which is promoted for an additional 60 dwellings. The site should be inset from the Green Belt but the Council has given no consideration to the possibility or merits of this approach.

2.23. As a further contextual example, section 4.11 of the Council's Green Belt Review Report (02.02) identifies that washed over villages should be inset from the Green Belt where a village either has an open character but does not make an important contribution to openness or does not have an open character at all. Logically, any village of a reasonable density and close knit in character will comprise a built/developed context and therefore not make an important contribution to openness. The Green Belt review: Washed Over Villages Report (02.04) identifies 10 settlements and concludes that 9 of these make an important contribution towards the openness of the Green Belt and should

therefore be retained as washed over. One settlement (Radlett Road & Frogmore) isn't identified to do so and is recommended to be inset from the Green Belt. However, even that settlement is not inset from the Green Belt on the submitted Policies Map. As illustrated at paragraphs 6.60 to 6.61 of our Regulation 19 representations, there are numerous examples of areas within the Green Belt of a similar or lower population / size to that at Hanstead Park that **are** identified as washed over Green Belt settlements using a vertical black line notation on the Policies maps. There is good logic in these areas actually being inset from the Green Belt, as we question the logic of identifying these settlements as playing an important contribution towards Green Belt openness. Further, there would be strong logic in inseting the Hanstead Park site from the Green Belt with an adjusted boundary consistent with the image underneath paragraph 6.59 of the Regulation 19 representations. Such an approach would be far more effective in clearly identifying areas within the District that do or not form a true Green Belt purpose.

- 2.24. As shown on the Policies Map, the Council proposes removal from the Green Belt of recently redeveloped land at Barnes Wallis Way, to the south-west of Bricket Wood. This does not appear to be a settlement and was not assessed as part of the Washed Over Villages Study (Arup, 2023) (GB02.04). Nor was it identified within any sub-area in the Stage 2 Green Belt Assessment report (GB02.03). Whilst its removal appears logical, it is unclear on what basis that area is proposed for removal from the Green Belt. It is unclear why it has been treated differently to our client's site, to the other side of Bricket Wood.

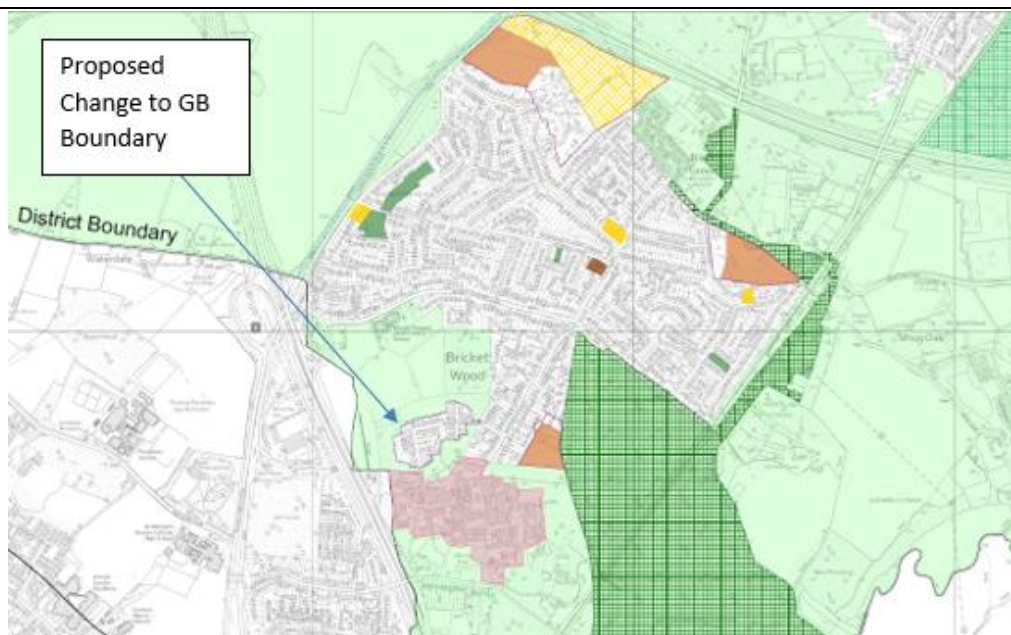


Figure 1 Extract of Policies Map 3 of 4



Figure 2 Google Street View image of residential development to be removed from Green Belt, to south-west of Bricket Wood

- 2.25. It is useful at this juncture to consider the approach to washed over villages / inseting elsewhere. The issue has recently been examined in connection with the City of York in preparing Local Plan (adopted 27 Feb 2025). In that case the Council undertook a comprehensive review of the Green Belt, both in terms of the boundaries of the same but also considering the existing developed areas and whether these should be inset having regard to the wider context.
- 2.26. The broad principles for Green Belt around the City of York are established in the retained policy of the Yorkshire & Humberside Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). This indicates that Green Belt should extend around 6 miles from the city. The City of York Council prepared a topic paper detailing the extent that

the requirements retained in the RSS applied to the administrative area of the city. The majority of Green Belt around York lies within the City's boundaries. The now adopted Local Plan defined an inner Green Belt area alongside locations where existing development is inset from the Green Belt designation. The decision around inseting was the result of comprehensive analysis of the density of existing built form, accessibility to services and facilities (using an 800m straight line distance). The result of this analysis is that a number of the locations inset from York's Green Belt are small villages or industrial sites, including Earswick, Fordlands Road, Rufforth, Northminster Business Park and Towthorpe Lines.

- 2.27. The examining Inspector confirmed that the approach was appropriate. The general principles of inseting pockets of land within the wider Green Belt is detailed in paragraphs 209 to 220 of the Inspector's Report. In particular we note the following:

216. Moreover, it is apparent that the 2012 Framework allows for 'holes' in or 'bites out of' the Green Belt when establishing Green Belt boundaries, including when so doing for the first time as is the case here. It says that Green Belt boundaries should be drawn so as to set the framework for Green Belt and settlement policy (paragraph 83); take account of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development (paragraph 84); ensure consistency with the Local Plan strategy for meeting identified requirements for sustainable development (paragraph 85); and include villages in, or exclude them from, the Green Belt as necessary (paragraph 86).

217. It seems to us reasonable to suppose that any exercise of drawing up Green Belt boundaries to achieve these aims is likely to mean excluding from the Green Belt land which might otherwise be included within it. It is a possible outcome and, as such, it is one which the Framework permits, or at the very least, does not prevent.

218. Achieving these aims is precisely what the Council has sought to do. It has drawn up Green Belt boundaries having regard to what it considers

to be a sustainable pattern of development in order to set the framework for Green Belt and settlement policy, and to ‘inset’ villages in line with paragraph 86 of the Framework. These and other such ‘insets’ are dealt with in detail below but, in our view, the approach taken by the Council is consistent with the Framework in principle and, critical to the question here, does not lead to the alteration of any Green Belt boundaries.

- 2.28. Therefore, we endorse the approach taken by the City of York to the inseting of developed areas within the Green Belt and consider a similarly comprehensive exercise should have been undertaken by St Albans District Council.

Question 9: Aside from sites proposed for development, are any other alterations proposed and/or considered necessary to the existing GB boundary?

- 2.29. As set out in response to question 8, the former HSBC Training Centre site at Smug Oak (referred to as Hanstead Park) should be inset from the Green Belt.

Issue 3: Exceptional Circumstances

Question 1: Do exceptional circumstances exist to alter the Green Belt boundary in St Albans and has this been fully evidenced and justified as part of the plan-making process?

- 2.30. Yes, exceptional circumstances exist to alter the Green Belt boundary in St Albans. As set out above, further work is required to fully evidence and ensure that the most appropriate options for development in the Green Belt are brought forward.

Changes sought to the Local Plan

- 2.31. The following are necessary for the Local Plan to satisfy the tests of soundness at paragraph 35 of the NPPF:

- A further Green Belt study should be carried out to assess site options beyond the 250m / 400m buffers, in particular sites that are brownfield and / or are well served by public transport options. This should include an assessment of the Green Belt function of our client’s site at the

former HSBC Training Centre, which has capacity to delivery circa 60 dwellings on PDL in a sustainable location which is well served by public transport (800m to train station and a bus service available from the site).

- The wider 20.5ha campus at the Former HSBC Training Centre (now 'Hanstead Park') should be inset from the Green Belt to better allow for windfall housing to come forward on this site in a sustainable location.
- The Council should more transparently demonstrate why three Green Belt sites beyond the buffers have been recommended for allocation whereas others (such as our client's) were not subject to any Green Belt review and were discounted from the process as early as 2021 based on errors and assumptions as to capacity and availability. A more comprehensive review to consider opportunities beyond the buffers would assist the plan in being more effective and justified in meeting defined short term housing needs.

TRBTGR/WBP/9030
