

## Matter 1 – Legal Compliance

### Issue 3 – Sustainability Appraisal

**Q1 The SA tests a range of housing growth options in Table A, from 300 dwellings per annum to 1,200 dwellings per annum. What are the figures based on and do they represent an appropriate range of reasonable alternatives to the submitted Plan? How does the SA consider the potential for wider unmet housing needs?**

The SA tests a range of housing growth options in Table A, from 300 dwellings per annum to 1,200 dwellings per annum. What are the figures based on and do they represent an appropriate range of reasonable alternatives to the submitted Plan?

- 1.1 Yes, the range of housing growth options (300, 600, 900 and 1,200 dpa) at Table A are considered to represent an appropriate range of growth quanta alternatives. This is discussed further below. However, it is important to note that the assessment in Table A is contained within Appendix III (Growth quanta) and signposted from Section 5 paragraph 5.2.34, which deals with the process undertaken to define reasonable alternatives (RAs). It follows that the growth quanta alternatives appraised are not presented as the RAs, but rather a discrete piece of work undertaken as part of the process to define RAs. This is explained at paragraph 5.2.34 and in the introductory text at the start of Appendix III, as follows:

*5.2.34 ...Appendix III presents a high level appraisal of four alternative growth quanta figures, essentially looking to supplement the discussion within this section. The appraisal is inherently limited, because it is undertaken with no assumptions regarding spatial strategy, let alone specific supply components. This is a point we would wish to emphasise, in light of comments received from the Home Builders Federation (HBF) in respect of the equivalent work presented in Appendix III of the ISA Report (2023). The HBF suggest that the automatic response to the limitation is to undertake work to assign spatial assumptions to each of the quanta figures appraised (in particular, the HBF have an interest in the highest figure appraised, which is a housing requirement set at ~1,200 dpa). However, that is not the case, recalling that high level work reported here, within Section 5.2, is a means to an end (Section 5.5)...*

#### *Appendix III: Growth quanta*

##### *Introduction*

*The aim of this appendix is to supplement the discussion presented in Section 5.2, which introduces 'top down' / strategic factors with a bearing on work to define reasonable alternative growth scenarios. Specifically, this appendix presents an appraisal of four housing requirement (or 'growth quanta') alternatives:*

- 300 dpa (the approximate figure that could be provided for without greenfield Green Belt release)*
- 600 dpa (a low growth scenario that might be considered in order to reflect Green Belt constraint)*
- 900 dpa (a figure suitably close to standard method LHN)*
- 1,200 dpa (a reasonable high growth 'bookend' for testing)*

*It is important to be clear that this is a high level appraisal of alternative 'numbers' with no / minimal assumptions made regarding broad spatial strategy or specific site allocations. It is undertaken as an early step in the process of defining reasonable alternatives (in the form of 'growth scenarios') for formal appraisal and consultation. Specifically, it is an early step in the process set out in Section 5 of this report.*

- 1.2 It should also be noted that the same growth quanta figures were appraised in Appendix IV of the Interim SA Report published for consultation at the Regulation 18 Draft Local Plan stage.
- 1.3 This piece of work served a purpose as a step in the process to define RAs. The RAs ultimately arrived at in Section 5.5 comprise 'growth scenarios' involving total *supply* ranging from local housing need (LHN) -3% to LHN +12%, which demonstrates that the range of growth quanta figures appraised was sufficiently wide.

How does the SA consider the potential for wider unmet housing needs?

- 1.4 Wider unmet housing needs are introduced as a potential issue in Section 2 of the report, before there is more detailed consideration within Section 5, which works through a process (as introduced in Section 5.1) to define RA growth scenarios.
- 1.5 In particular, potential unmet need / the risk of unmet need is a focus of discussion in Section 5.2 (Strategic factors) which explores high-level / top down inputs to the process of defining RA growth scenarios. The conclusion is that potential unmet need within the wider sub-region (also emanating from London) is a factor with bearing on subsequent work to consider supply options (Section 5.3 and 5.4) and ultimately the definition of RA growth scenarios (Section 5.5).
- 1.6 Specifically, potential unmet need / the risk of unmet need was one (important) factor suggesting that growth scenarios involving a housing requirement set below LHN should be ruled out as unreasonable (paragraphs 5.2.15 and 5.2.30) and that detailed consideration should be given to growth scenarios involving a housing requirement set above LHN (paragraphs 5.2.24/25 and 5.2.31).
- 1.7 Ultimately, the RA growth scenarios arrived at in Section 5.5 (subsequent to detailed consideration of supply options in Sections 5.3 and 5.4) involved total *supply* ranging from LHN -3% to LHN +12% and, as explained in the final row of Table 5.2 'The RA growth scenarios (with Green Belt supply broken down by sub-area)', the highest growth scenarios could potentially enable some flexibility to make modest provision for unmet need from elsewhere. This is also explained at paragraph 5.5.11 (final sentence) as follows:

*The lowest growth scenarios would generate unmet need, whilst the highest growth scenarios would allow for: A) a generous 'supply buffer' as a contingency for delivery issues; and/or B) flexibility to consider a housing requirement modestly above LHN.*

- 1.8 The total growth quanta reflected across the RA growth scenarios was then taken into account through the appraisal in Section 6. For example, within the conclusion

(Section 6.15) at paragraphs 6.15.4, 6.15.6 and 6.15.10 ('homes' bullet point) as below:

*6.15.4 Maintaining a focus on Scenario 1, its poor performance partly reflects the absence of East St Albans (although there are some tensions/challenges in respect of comprehensive planning for the sector of land to the east of St Albans) but also the fact that this is a lower growth scenario (relative to the emerging preferred approach, which is Scenario 3). One of the assumptions underpinning the appraisal is that lower growth could create challenges in respect of progressing the Local Plan (with knock-on implications for sustainability objectives, as it would likely mean ongoing planning by appeal) and/or would risk unmet housing need being generated that then has to be provided for elsewhere within a constrained sub-region.*

*6.15.6 A clear drawback to Scenario 2 is the risk or likelihood of generating unmet housing need, and there is a case for suggesting that it should be ranked lower under some topic headings on this basis; for example under the 'Biodiversity' heading, because St Albans does not stand out as biodiversity-constrained in the sub-regional context. However, in practice there would be the potential to adjust Scenario 2 by allocating certain of the better performing variable sites.*

*6.15.10...• Homes – there is a need to factor-in not only total growth quantum, but also the mix of sites, particularly with a focus on minimising the need for a stepped requirement. Ensuring a good supply of smaller sites is very important from a housing perspective, and there is also a case to be made for the higher growth scenarios that could potentially (subject to consideration of an appropriate supply buffer) allow for the housing requirement to be set modestly above LHN as a response to levels of affordable housing need locally and/or in order to make modest provision for unmet need from elsewhere.*

- 1.9 Finally, with regards to Section 7, which presents SADC Officers' response to the appraisal (which was undertaken by AECOM); whilst there is no specific reference to unmet needs, the response refers to the importance of striking a balance between competing objectives, concluding as follows:

*In conclusion, Scenario 3 is considered to be justified, in that it is an appropriate strategy, taking into account the reasonable alternatives, and based on proportionate evidence (NPPF paragraph 35). It is noted that Scenario 3 gives rise to a degree of tension with certain sustainability objectives, as is inevitable in the context of a local plan, and it is recognised that there are certain arguments in favour of supporting an alternative approach, but Scenario 3 is judged to represent sustainable development on balance.*

**Q2 Do any of the spatial options test a scale of housing growth that would enable affordable housing needs to be met in full? If not, what are the reasons why?**

- 2.1 No, however affordable housing needs are discussed in Section 5.2 as a key strategic / top-down factor influencing the defining of RA growth scenarios.
- 2.2 Specifically, within Section 5.2 affordable housing needs are discussed at paragraph 5.2.15 and across paragraphs 5.2.20 to 5.2.22. Also, there are several other references to affordable housing across Section 5, and then affordable housing is a focus of the appraisal in Section 6, most notably within Section 6.10 (which appraises the RA growth scenarios under the 'homes' topic heading).
- 2.3 Within the appraisal under the 'homes' topic heading (Section 6.1) the highest growth scenario is regarded positively, including on the basis of providing more fully for affordable housing needs (also see discussion of support for higher growth at Wheathampstead specifically, regardless of total growth quantum). The highest growth scenario would involve supply totalling LHN plus 12%.
- 2.4 Whilst there could be a case for defining, appraising and consulting upon a growth scenario that would enable affordable housing needs to be met in full (Section 5.2), any such scenario was judged to be unreasonable (Section 5.5 in light of preceding sections 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4) and therefore was not appraised (Section 6).
- 2.5 By way of context, it can be noted that meeting affordable housing needs in full would require delivery of c.2,000dpa, as set out in the Local Housing Needs Assessment 2024 (LHNA) (HOU 02.01 and HOU 02.02) Table 54. This is in the context of long-term historical average build of c.360-400dpa in the District.

### **Q3 How does the SA consider different spatial options for housing and employment growth over the plan period and test reasonable alternative strategies?**

- 3.1 A key focus of the SA Report is exploring RAs and Section 4 of the report explains that the focus, more specifically, is on RA 'growth scenarios'. It should also be noted that this approach was taken at the Regulation 18 stage and was generally well-received, as stated at paragraphs 4.1.5 and 4.1.6 as follows:

*4.1.5 Also, note that spatial strategy alternatives can be described as “growth scenarios” as a shorthand, and can also helpfully be described in summary as comprising alternative key diagrams.*

*4.1.6 This approach was taken in the ISA Report (2023) and was generally well received...*

- 3.2 Section 4 (paragraph 4.1.8) also explains that the process of defining RA growth scenarios was “*somewhat housing led*” (as it was at the Regulation 18 stage) but that employment land also factors-in, with a particular focus on employment land at the end of the process (Section 5.5).
- 3.3 Section 5 then works through a detailed / involved process to define RA growth scenarios, and it should be noted that this was a process over time, in that Regulation 18 work and consultation fed-in strongly.
- 3.4 As part of the process there is extensive consideration given to different spatial options for housing growth at a range of scales, and then the RA growth scenarios ultimately arrived at (for appraisal and consultation) in Section 5.5 are considered to be reasonable.
- 3.5 With regards to employment land, this is firstly a focus of discussion in Section 5.2 (Strategic factors) at paragraph 5.2.34 and across paragraphs 5.2.68 to 5.2.70; relevant parts of these paragraphs are as follows:

*5.2.34... With regards to employment land need, there is a readily apparent approach to providing for both locally arising need and an element of unmet need arising from elsewhere, namely a strategic expansion of the Maylands Estate; however, this is a matter for ongoing consideration*

*Employment land*

*5.2.68 The approach taken in 2023 was informed by a needs assessment for SW Herts dating from 2019, which has now been updated, accounting for a changed picture nationally and regionally, particularly in respect of increased demand for industrial floorspace, and particularly for logistics and warehousing.*

*5.2.69 The effect of the updated needs assessment, which is discussed further below, is to significantly bolster what was already very strong support for a strategic expansion of the Maylands Estate, at the eastern edge of Hemel Hempstead / adjacent to M11 J8, as a central component of a wider strategy for Herts IQ.*

*5.2.70 Two further implications are: A) a need to remain open to wider options for new industrial land, although such arguments are limited, recalling what will also be delivered at the committed SRFI; and B) a need to ensure suitable protection for existing industrial estates / business parks from conversion to residential, e.g. at London Colney. In this regard, there is a need to ensure a precautionary long term perspective.*

- 3.6 Employment land is then discussed numerous times across Section 5.4, most notably under the 'Edge of Hemel Hempstead' sub-heading.
- 3.7 Section 5.5 (paragraph 5.5.12) explains that employment land is held constant across the RA growth scenarios, but that "informal" discussion of options is presented in Section 6.
- 3.8 Finally, Section 6.8 (which presents an appraisal of the RA growth scenarios under the 'economy and employment' topic heading) explains at paragraph 6.8.2:

*Taking a step back from the eight defined growth scenarios, it is very difficult to envisage a reasonable higher employment land scenario, because the emerging proposed strategy involves over-provision / provision for unmet needs from elsewhere, as discussed further in Section 9. Numerous locations well linked to an M25 or A414 junction in the south of the District could feasibly be considered for industrial / logistics uses, but there is no clear strategic case at the current time. There is also a need to recall the influence that the Government permitted SRFI will have on this part of the District; and, at a settlement level, whilst the far southeast of the District around London Colney is more distant from the SRFI, there is existing committed growth and ongoing pressure for housing growth, plus there is a case for considering any strategic employment growth in collaboration with neighbouring Welwyn Hatfield District.*

**Q4 What is the justification for treating the Hemel Garden Communities ('HGC') "as a constant" in paragraph 5.4.23 of the SA? What alternatives to the HGC have been considered as part of the plan-making process?**

What is the justification for treating the Hemel Garden Communities ('HGC') "as a constant" in paragraph 5.4.23 of the SA?

- 4.1 By way of context, it is important to note that paragraph 5.4.23 sits within Section 5.4, which is the penultimate section within Section 5, which deals with defining RA growth scenarios. Specifically, Section 5.4 deals with exploring 'sub-area growth scenarios' and is informed by Section 5.2 (Strategic factors; which includes a subsection on HGC) and Section 5.5 (Site options). Paragraph 5.4.23 should be read in this context.
- 4.2 Furthermore, paragraph 5.4.23 should be read in the context of the sub-section of Section 5.4 within which it sits and read as a whole, namely the sub-section dealing with 'Edge of Hemel Hempstead'. Ultimately, it is held constant because it is very strongly supported on the basis of the discussion in the relevant part of Section 5.4 read in the context of preceding Sections 5.2 and 5.3.
- 4.3 On a specific point, it can be noted that Natural England support holding HGC constant within their Regulation 19 representation (Representation 359), where they state:

*Having reviewed the Sustainability Appraisal that supports the Regulation 19 consultaion of the St Albans new Local Plan, Natural England is satisfied that there are no reasonable alternatives to the one growth scenario proposed in the SA regarding Hemel Garden Communities (HGC), as the alternatives discussed in the SA would not meet local and district objectives.*

- 4.4 Whilst it was treated as a variable within the RA growth scenarios that were a focus of appraisal and consultation at the Regulation 18 consultation stage in 2023, paragraph 5.2.52 of the SA Report explains: "...the two scenarios without HGC were shown to have significant drawbacks through the appraisal."
- 4.5 By Regulation 19 stage in 2024 the 'no HGC' scenario was judged to be unreasonable in light of the latest evidence.

What alternatives to the HGC have been considered as part of the plan-making process?

- 4.6 At the Regulation 18 stage (2023) the assumption was that if HGC were to be removed from the plan then there would be a need to either: A) set the housing requirement below LHN; or B) allocate three additional strategic urban extensions to deliver circa 3,500 homes in total.

- 4.7 With regards to (B), by 2024 there was reduced confidence regarding the potential to allocate these three sites to deliver this quantum of homes, which was one factor amongst many that fed into a decision to hold HGC constant.



**Q5 How does the SA take into account deliverability, especially around larger, strategic sites when assessing the submitted Plan against reasonable alternatives?**

5.1 Deliverability fed in strongly as part of work to define RA growth scenarios, i.e. the process reported across Section 5 of the SA Report, for example:

- 5.2.41 – discusses deliverability issues in respect of brownfield sites, where it notes:

*There is a clear need to maximise supply from brownfield (or previously developed land, PDL). However, there is also a need to ensure that sites are developable (NPPF paragraph 69), in that there is reasonable confidence that they will come forward in the plan period, accounting for complex challenges such as multiple land-ownership and existing uses. This is key context to work undertaken to identify sites beyond those actively being promoted. Another consideration is that some brownfield sites outside of urban areas are associated with suitability challenges, e.g. in terms of the ability to walk or cycle to key destinations.*

- 5.4.26 – states the following regarding HGC:  
*Finally, it is recognised that there is a separate question regarding delivery timescales, including the number of homes in the plan period – see Section 5.5.*
- 5.4.42 – discusses access and transport challenges at a strategic omission site that is ultimately taken forward to the RA growth scenarios, with delivery challenges then discussed further as part of the appraisal of RA growth scenarios (Section 6).
- 5.4.64 to 5.4.66 – discuss challenges at NE Harpenden; relating to the site being promoted as separate sites, access, and traffic respectively.
- 5.4.85 to 5.4.87 – discuss a strategic urban extension option that featured in the RA growth scenarios in 2023 but by 2024 was ruled out including on deliverability grounds.
- 5.4.101 – explains deliverability (of a primary school) as a reason why there is a need to ensure a suitably comprehensive approach to growth at West Redbourn.
- Section 5.5 – concludes that there are five ‘reasonable’ growth scenarios that would involve a boost to supply relative to the Submission Plan and explains that this boost to supply could enable a larger ‘supply buffer’ as a contingency for delivery issues. At 5.5.8 there is a discussion of why the specific nature of the higher growth scenarios defined is appropriate given the inherent delivery risk associated with HGC (specifically, it is appropriate for the higher growth scenarios to involve allocation of one or two omission sites in the form of strategic urban extensions to St Albans).

**Q6 How were reasonable alternative site options defined and considered as part of the SA process? Does the SA adequately test a suitable range of reasonable alternatives to the sites allocated in the Plan, including for housing and employment sites?**

How were reasonable alternative site options defined and considered as part of the SA process?

6.1 Paragraph 4.1.7 explains:

*Whilst individual site options generate a high degree of interest, they are not RAs in the context of most local plans. Were a local plan setting out to allocate one site, then site options would be RAs, but that is rarely the case, and is not the case for the St Albans Local Plan. Rather, the objective is to allocate a package of sites to meet needs and wider objectives, hence RAs must be in the form of alternative packages of sites, in so far as possible. Nonetheless, consideration is naturally given to the merits of site options as part of the process of establishing reasonable growth scenarios – see Sections 5.3 and 5.4.*

Does the SA adequately test a suitable range of reasonable alternatives to the sites allocated in the Plan, including for housing and employment sites?

- 6.2 Section 4 of the SA Report explains that the focus was on reasonable alternative (RA) 'growth scenarios' which "*can... helpfully be described in summary as comprising alternative key diagrams.*"
- 6.3 Section 5 then goes through a comprehensive process to define RA growth scenarios, as part of which detailed consideration is given to site options and also alternative approaches to growth that might be taken at certain sites.
- 6.4 The RA growth scenarios ultimately defined for appraisal and consultation (Section 5.5) then vary in respect of a range of site options, with other proposed allocations held constant (with constants and variables differentiated across the maps of RA growth scenarios).
- 6.5 Ultimately 13 site options are a variable across the RA growth scenarios and so are a focus of the appraisal in Section 6 (although constant allocations are taken into account when reaching conclusions on significant effects). These comprise 11 proposed allocations (East St Albans and all sites at lower tier settlements) and two omission sites (expanded North St Albans and SE St Albans). Within Section 6 each of the appraisal discussions (one per SA topic) systematically considers these sites.