

Matter 3 – The Green Belt

Issue 1 – Principle of Green Belt Release

24. Paragraph 146 of the Framework 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.

Q1 Has the Council examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting housing needs as required by the Framework?

- 1.1 Yes, the Council has fully examined all other reasonable options for meeting housing needs as required by paragraph 146 the Framework.
- 1.2 As stated in the draft Local Plan 2041 (Examination document LPCD 02.01) at paragraph 3.4:

Developing brownfield sites – previously developed land – is the preferred approach of national policy. The NPPF sets out that Plans should contain policies to optimise the use of land in their area and to seek an uplift in density in locations well served by public transport.

- 1.3 The Plan goes on to state in paragraph 3.5:

Where there is an insufficient supply of brownfield sites it may be necessary to meet the need by considering other available land; in St Albans District this includes looking at Green Belt land and its boundaries. National policy is clear that before concluding that exceptional circumstances exist to justify changes to Green Belt boundaries, it must be demonstrated that all other reasonable options for meeting its identified need for development have been fully examined.

- 1.4 The Green Belt and Exceptional Circumstances - Evidence Paper (GB 01.01) sets out in paragraph 3.3 that:

The Local Plan seeks to make the most efficient use of land in the District and has undertaken an extensive and rigorous search for Previously Developed Land (PDL) (also known as 'Brownfield land' in national policy) within existing built-up areas (urban land). The approach has been underlain by the concept of 'leaving no stone unturned' in the search for appropriate sites on brownfield land. This extensive search has also included potential PDL opportunities in the Green Belt. An allowance is also made for 'windfall' sites, i.e. sites that are not specifically identified in the development plan, based upon historic rates of windfall homes. Windfall sites are only considered to arise on PDL. Overall, however, there is an insufficient supply of

Previously Developed Land to meet the housing need, which led to the Council undertaking a search process for sites in the Green Belt

- 1.5 Initial Question 8 (SADC/ED32) considered this issue with regard to Paragraph 146 of the Framework and sets out the following response:

As set out in the Local Plan Site Selection - Proforma Methodology Paper (2024) (LPSS 02.02), the Council carried out a study for the identification of potential sites on brownfield land through an Urban Capacity Study. The sites were identified through a desktop review of maps, aerial photographs and online street photography and in some cases site visits. Sources of sites included under-utilised sites such as garage blocks and car parks, vacant and derelict land and buildings, and public sector land. The Council proactively contacted relevant landowners in 2022, 2023 and 2024 to enquire as to the landowner's interest in bringing their site forward for development. This led to the allocation of 54 sites in the Plan, delivering 860 residential units. An example of this is site UC2 - Civic Close Car Park Bricket Road, St Albans, with a proposed indicative capacity of 57 residential units.

A further category of sites on Previously Developed Land were those put forward through the Call for Sites that were within the urban areas of the District. This led to the allocation of 3 sites in the Plan, delivering 43 residential units. These included non-Green Belt greenfield sites. An example of this is site U2 - Land South West of London Colney Allotments, with a proposed indicative capacity of 26 residential units.

There were also sites identified for assessment on Previously Developed Land in the Green Belt. This led to the allocation of 3 sites in the Plan, delivering 137 residential units. An example of this is site P2 – Land at North Orbital Road, with a proposed indicative capacity of 64 residential units. The Council proactively contacted the landowners to enquire as to the landowners interest in bringing their site forward for development.

A level of housing from sites not specifically identified in the Plan, i.e. windfall sites, has also been assumed from brownfield sites, based upon strong, robust and reliable evidence of recent completions. The Council's approach to calculating the annual windfall allowance has been updated as the plan-making process has progressed. An updated annual windfall allowance figure was calculated for the Regulation 19 Publication Local Plan housing trajectory, published in September 2024 (HOU 01.02 - SADC Housing Land Supply, Windfall & Capacity Evidence Paper). This research examined residential completions during a 10 year period from 2013/14 to 2022/23, using the most recently available data. It concluded that the annual windfall allowance for the Regulation 19 Publication Local Plan housing trajectory should be 145 net dwellings per annum. This figure is lower than the annual windfall allowance of 180 net dwellings per annum in the Regulation 18 draft Local Plan, as it takes account of decreasing residential completions from large sites formerly in use as offices in recent years. It should be noted that the windfall allowance excludes Green Belt greenfield sites...

- 1.6 Making the best use of land through optimising density is addressed through Policy DES3 – Efficient Use of Land Density which provides a minimum density for development and seeks to optimise capacity as follows:
- *Development proposals should make efficient use of land. Development should:*
 - a. *Where additional residential units are proposed, achieve at least the density of the existing site context or 40 net dwellings per hectare, whichever is higher; and*
 - b. *Optimise site capacity within city and town centres and other locations that are well served by public transport. This requires development to be of the most appropriate form and land use for the site, having regard to site context and constraints.*
- 1.7 Density is also addressed through policy LG1 – Broad Locations which states that proposals must ‘Make efficient and effective use of the site, with a minimum overall net density of 40 dwellings per hectare; utilising a range of densities that take account of adjacent character, uses and identity’, along with density requirements in policy LG3 - Hemel Garden Communities Growth Areas Place Principles and policy LG4 – Large, Medium and Small Sites
- 1.8 The Council has been proactive and rigorous in liaising with neighbouring authorities to determine whether they could accommodate some of the identified need for development since the start of the Plan’s development and throughout has requested neighbouring authorities through the Duty to Cooperate process for the potential of their areas to meet SADCs needs. No local authorities have been able to do so.

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

Q2 In response to the Inspectors' 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?

- 2.1 Yes, the approach to using buffers around settlements to help determine which sites to allocate is justified, effective and consistent with national planning policy.
- 2.2 The approach is justified as set out in Green Belt Review Stage 2 (GB 02.02) Section 4.2.1 which states that:

The initial area of search was defined by applying a buffer around each settlement inset from the green belt, which would assist in encouraging sustainable pattern of development accessible to existing settlements and maintain the integrity of the Green Belt. ... This approach ensured a proportionate and focussed study.

- 2.3 This approach of identifying buffers around settlements has been used previously in other local authority Green Belt studies, with Appendix A3.2 of the Stage 2 GBR providing examples of experience elsewhere. Districts and Boroughs set out in that table where the Arup approach to Green Belt buffers has been accepted by the Inspectors (and indeed commended) and resulted in adopted Local Plans includes Runnymede and Spelthorne.
- 2.4 The report makes clear the basis on which the buffers are being used:
There is no specific guidance regarding the appropriate buffers to adopt, therefore regard was given to approaches in neighbouring authorities and authorities with similar characteristics and adjusting the approach to account for the local context. Given that there is no formal guidance or methodology, an element of professional judgement was therefore used to develop an approach appropriate to the district context.
- 2.5 The approach of using buffers has been effective in identifying parcels of land for proposed sites allocations. This can be seen in the allocation of sites in the draft Local Plan Part B (LPCD 02.02) with many sites being a result of the Stage 2 GBR recommended for further consideration. Those sites recommended for further consideration can be seen in the Stage 2 GBR on Figure 5.17 and 5.18.
- 2.6 The approach used has been applied consistently and this is set out in the site Proformas (LPSS 02.02 - Local Plan Site Selection Proforma Methodology Paper (2024 and LPSS 02.03 to LPSS 02.17). The site selection method undertook site assessment in terms of the sustainable development potential and establishes whether the site is located in a Green Belt Settlement Buffer (either 400 metres or

250 metres). The buffers are the most sustainable locations spatially in a broad sense as they are adjacent to the larger settlements which offer best access to a range of jobs, schools, community facilities etc.

Q3 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?

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?

- 3.1 As set out in detail in answer to M3 I1 Q1, the Council has fully examined all other reasonable options for meeting housing needs as required by paragraph 146 the Framework.
- 3.2 The initial identification of sites was carried out through the Stage 2 Green Belt Review (GB 02.02) that recommended sub-areas for further consideration which are set out in Figures 5.17 and 5.18 of the report.
- 3.3 Not all sites recommended for further consideration by the Stage 2 GBR were taken forward, and Local Plan Site Selection Proforma Methodology Paper (LPSS 02.02) sets out in paragraph 1.30 that:

Some Green Belt sites that were recommended for further consideration by the Green Belt Stage 2 were not recommended to progress by the proformas due to the following reasons:

- *The site being too small to accommodate 5 or more home once the site restrictions (e.g. flooding, protected trees) were taken into consideration;*
- *Where it is considered that a suitable access and transport solution does not have a reasonable prospect of being provided within the Plan period;*
- *The site having been already developed to the extent that 5 or more homes could not be accommodated;*
- *The requirement to retain the existing use (eg children's play area);*
- *The site having characteristics that met the criteria for an extension to the Chilterns National Landscape into St Albans City & District where technical work is being undertaken by Natural England.*

- 3.4 Some Green Belt sites that were not recommended for further consideration in the GBR Stage 2 were recommended to progress for other reasons, as is set out in the Local Plan Site Selection Proforma Methodology Paper (LPSS 02.02) paragraphs 1.31:

Some Green Belt sites that were not recommended for further consideration by the Green Belt Stage 2 were recommended to progress by the proformas due to the location of the site next to a Tier 1 or 2 settlement and the potential of the site to deliver a wide range of significant Economic, Environmental and Social benefits including housing, affordable housing, schools, and a significant scale of sustainable transport improvements and jobs.

- 3.5 Paragraph 1.32 of the paper goes on to describe the inclusion of sites within the Hemel Garden Communities area:

Those sites within the Hemel Garden Communities (HGC) area will also support a comprehensive approach to the delivery of HGC including joint work with Dacorum BC to deliver Duty to Cooperate outcomes. As part of the overall HGC programme there are considerable further benefits including supporting delivery of schools, sports and health facilities and around 10,000 jobs across HGC and the Hertfordshire Innovation Quarter.

- 3.6 The areas removed from the Green Belt are set out in a table in response to Initial Question 12 (SADC/ED33). The table provides the area of reduction in Green Belt in hectares, a description to justify the exceptional circumstances, and a map showing the extent of the Green Belt boundary alteration.
- 3.7 As well as Green Belt boundary changes due to sites being proposed for development in the draft Local Plan, there are four proposed alterations to the Green Belt boundary that do not form part of sites proposed for development. Three of these are areas where there has been significant built form completed since the Green Belt boundary was last altered through the adoption of the District Local Plan Review, and one area is where the surrounding area has changed such that it now forms part of the urban area. These are set out in detail in the response to Matter 3, Issue 2, Question 9.

How does this correlate to the settlement hierarchy and spatial strategy?

- 3.8 Both the Green Belt Review and the Site Selection process prioritised sites that were in higher tiers in the Settlement Hierarchy as these were considered to be the most sustainable due to access to more sustainable transport options and wider access to greater range of facilities and services. This accords with the overall Spatial Strategy as set out in the Draft Local Plan (LPCD 02.01) and explained at paragraph 1.33:

The Spatial Strategy has been shaped by the need to address the Climate Emergency and new development will generally be concentrated on the basis of the Settlement Hierarchy This approach gives priority to the larger urban centres which can provide a greater range of services and facilities, supports the re-use of land within the urban areas, and can reduce the need to travel. These larger urban centres also offer greater accessibility by walking, cycling and public transport.

- 3.9 This is further set out in policy SP1:

The Settlement Hierarchy ... provides the basis for allocation and location of growth, locating most growth generally within and adjacent to the larger and most sustainable urban centres that are Tier 1 - St Albans and Hemel Hempstead; Tier 2 – Harpenden, and Tier 3 - London Colney.

Q4 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?

4.1 The Council considered whether or not it was necessary to identify areas of safeguarded land between the urban area and the Green Belt, as set out in the NPPF at paragraph 148 c). The Council considered that it was not necessary as sufficient land has been taken out of the Green Belt in this Plan to meet identified needs up to 2041 and beyond. This includes taking land out of the Green Belt for 1,200 homes capacity beyond 2041 as part of HGC. Where this land has been taken out of the Green Belt at HGC, the proposed new Green Belt boundaries form the natural long term extent for HGC within the District. There are very clear and defensible long term Green Belt boundaries consisting of features including the M1, the proposed new Country Park separating Hemel from Redbourn and the significant new Publically Accessible Green Area within the south east part of HGC.

4.2 As set out in the NPPF at paragraph 33:

Policies in local plans and spatial development strategies should be reviewed to assess whether they need updating at least once every five years, and should then be updated as necessary¹⁸. Reviews should be completed no later than five years from the adoption date of a plan, and should take into account changing circumstances affecting the area, or any relevant changes in national policy.

4.3 The intention has always been to review this Plan in line with the NPPF requirement to review Plans at least every 5 years. As set out at paragraph 19.4 in answer to Initial Question 19 (SADC/ED35):

Given the NPPF 2024 approach, the Council will commit to an immediate review of the Local Plan upon its adoption, ensuring alignment with the latest National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and any relevant planning reforms.

4.4 SADC has therefore already committed to an immediate review of this Plan once it has been adopted, which will include looking again at Green Belt boundaries.

4.5 Considering the above the Council concluded that it was not necessary to identify areas of safeguarded land.