

Matter 3 – The Green Belt

Issue 3 – Exceptional Circumstances

Q1 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?

- 1.1 Yes, exceptional circumstances do 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.
- 1.2 The Draft Local Plan (LPCD 02.01) sets out at paragraph 3.19.

National policy sets out that before concluding that ‘exceptional circumstances’ exist to justify changes to Green Belt boundaries, the Council should demonstrate that it has examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting its identified need for development. This means that the Council’s strategy must (and the Council has):

- a) Make as much use as possible of suitable PDL sites and underutilised land;*
- b) Optimise the density of development in line with national policy, including whether policies promote a significant uplift in minimum density standards in town and city centres and other locations well served by public transport; and*
- c) Has been informed by discussions with neighbouring authorities about whether they could accommodate some of the identified need for development, as demonstrated through the statement of common ground.*

- 1.3 The Green Belt and Exceptional Circumstances - Evidence Paper (GB 01.01) states in paragraph 7.2 that:

The local context in which conclusions have been reached regarding the ‘Exceptional Circumstances’ necessary to require release of Green Belt land involves a variety of factors, including:

- The acuteness/intensity of the housing need.*
- The inherent constraints on supply/availability of non-Green Belt land.*
- The difficulties of delivering sustainable development without impinging on the Green Belt.*
- The nature and extent of the harm to the Green Belt that would arise if the boundaries were to be altered as proposed.*
- The extent to which the consequent impacts on the purposes of the Green Belt may be ameliorated or reduced to the lowest reasonable practicable extent.*

- 1.4 The evidence paper goes on to say in paragraph 7.3 that:

The Council has concluded that ‘Exceptional Circumstances’ do exist and it is necessary to amend Green Belt boundaries as set out in the draft Local Plan and its Policies Map. This includes amendments to facilitate both primarily residential and

primarily employment land. Further there are existing areas of significant built development created since the last Local Plan was adopted in 1994, identified in the Green Belt Review stage 2, where the Council has concluded that the necessary 'Exceptional Circumstances' exist to amend the green belt boundaries

- 1.5 The areas removed from the GB are set out in a table in response to Initial Question 12 (SADC/ED33) which 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.
- 1.6 Further, with regard to the methodology for the setting of the new Green Belt boundaries for identified allocations in the Plan, the Stage 2 Green Belt Review (GB 02.02) set out the approach to defining sub-area boundaries in section 4.3:

Given the requirement through paragraph 143 of the NPPF for Green Belt boundaries to be defined 'clearly, using physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent', it therefore follows that sub-areas should be defined, to reflect these principles from the outset.

The Stage 2 sub-areas boundaries were defined in line with the general principles used to identify the Strategic Land Parcels in the Stage 1 GBR. However, as Stage 2 sub-areas are smaller than Stage 1 Parcels, a wider range of boundary features had to be used to delineate the sub-areas. In locations where readily recognisable and permanent boundary features were absent, sub-area boundaries had to be drawn along features which were readily recognisable, but not necessarily permanent. In some locations readily recognisable and permanent boundary features were present but a policy constraint such as a flood zone was closer to the settlement edge and was therefore adopted as the boundary, as development could not take place in the area between the policy constraint and prominent boundary feature.

Permanent and readily recognisable boundary features (both man-made and natural) are listed in the first column of Table 4.2. The additional readily recognisable boundary features which are not necessarily permanent are listed in the second column of Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Boundary Features for Identifying Sub-areas

Permanent Man-made and Natural Features	Additional Boundary Feature
Motorways	Unclassified public and private roads
A and B Roads	Smaller water features, including streams and other watercourses
Railway lines	Prominent physical/topographical features, e.g. embankments
Canals	Existing development with strongly established, regular or consistent boundaries
Rivers and waterbodies	Well-established woodland edges, tree belts and hedgerows
Natural 'buffer' features such as ridgelines	

- 1.7 Section 4.3 of the Stage 2 GBR goes on to state that:

Sub-area boundaries were initially defined through desk-based assessments of publicly available data, including aerial photography, Ordnance Survey maps 'birds eye' views and Google Earth. Boundaries were adjusted as necessary, based on on-site observations during the site visits, to reflect the site characteristics as accurately as possible. This process of refinement accounted for the local context of the sub-area and involved an element of professional judgement. Each sub-area was assigned a unique reference number

- 1.8 The Stage 2 Green Belt Review (GB 02.02) in section 4.5.3 addresses the consideration of boundaries as part of the assessment process:

This section of the pro forma was for information only. For each sub-area, if it were to be released from the Green Belt, commentary was provided on the resulting impact on the strength of its inner and outer Green Belt boundaries.

The strength of inner and outer sub-area boundaries were classified under one of three categories:

- Readily recognisable and likely to be permanent;*
- Readily recognisable but not necessarily permanent; or*
- Not readily recognisable or necessarily permanent.*

This categorisation is guided by the NPPF paragraph 143(f) definition. Boundary features which qualify as 'readily recognisable and likely to be permanent' are detailed at section 4.3.

It also flagged where it might be necessary to secure mitigation to strengthen currently weak boundaries or to provide new boundaries if the sub-area was to be released.

While the requirement for mitigation is noted in the 'Categorisation and Recommendations' proforma section (step 7), the decision on whether to strengthen existing boundaries, or create new boundaries will be for the Council to make, including how such mitigation might be secured.

- 1.9 For the avoidance of doubt, the Council is happy to go through how the methodology was applied to individual sites as needed in the Examination, in due course.