

MATTER 4:

GREEN BELT

St Albans Local Plan Examination in Public Hearings

SUBMITTED ON BEHALF OF STACKBOURNE LIMITED

December 2019

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This statement has been prepared on behalf of Stackbourne Ltd, the freeholder and promoter for land at Smallford Works, Smallford.
- 1.2 This Statement is made in response to the published 'Matters, Issues and Questions'. This Statement covers those questions posed within The Metropolitan Green Belt (Policy S3).
- 1.3 Stackbourne Ltd has submitted an outline application (Ref: 5/2019/3022) for up to 100 dwellings for land at Smallford Works, demonstrating that there are no technical constraints to the delivery of the site, the principle of residential development for up to 100 dwellings can be considered acceptable when assessed against the policies of the NPPF, and there are significant benefits that would result from its redevelopment, including:
- Environmental enhancements from the clean-up of intensive industrial uses to that of residential, including a significant increase in green infrastructure;
 - Fewer overall trips at peak AM, PM and throughout the day compared to the existing use, including the removal of a significant number of HGV trips throughout the day; and
 - The provision of much needed market and affordable housing in an area of historic significant shortfall in housing delivery and some of the worst affordability for local residents in the country.
- 1.4 This Hearing Statement raises concerns with the assessment process the Council has taken in relation to its Green Belt, namely:
- The objectivity and conclusions reached in the Green Belt Review; and
 - Abject failure to fairly (or at all) assess the Smallford Works site as part of site selection process, snubbing a suitable, deliverable previously developed site in the Green Belt.

2 THE GREEN BELT

Q1. What is the basis of the Green Belt Review? What methodology has been applied and is it soundly based? Is the Council's approach to the Green Belt set out in its response to the Inspector's Initial Question 16 and letter of the 2 July 2019 (Green Belt topic paper) robust and in line with national guidance?

- 2.1 As we detail in our Matter 3 Hearing Statement it appears that, the decision of the Council to undertake a review of its Green Belt in 2013 was to justify decisions that had already been made in regard to the Local Plan at that time, rather than informing these decisions. This is evident from a review of matters that preceded the GB Review and the Plan that followed.
- 2.2 Stackbourne Ltd supports the need for a Green Belt Review as necessary in the production of the Local Plan. However, unless it is undertaken objectively, it is incapable of carrying any weight as evidence. It cannot be used as an avenue to simply support sites already selected for allocation.
- 2.3 Paragraph 1.6 of the Green Belt Topic Paper (ED25C) states that Step 1 of the staged approach to demonstrating exceptional circumstances was informed by the 'Call for Sites' (2018) (Doc SHLAA003), Authorities Monitoring Report (2018) (\Doc AMR001) and Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (Doc SHLAA002) (2018 update) processes. This set a baseline that included *"updated assumptions about urban capacity, Green Belt PDL, windfall etc. [our emphasis]"* However, despite the inclusion of Smallford Works within the SHLAA (Ref: SHLAA-GB-SM-86), including the submission of a Vision Document that outlined the development potential of the site, the Council failed to include it within this baseline assumption.
- 2.4 Smallford Works was not included within this baseline, but should have been. Thereafter it should have been granted a fair and objective assessment within the "Stage 2" assessment of sites to determine *"which sites would best meet the identified need having regard to Green Belt harm and other relevant considerations including whether they are suitably located and developable."* We believe that it is highly performing in the context of NPPF137a).
- 2.5 Smallford Works falls within Parcel 35 of the SKM Stage 1 Study. This assessment confirmed the parcel:
- Performs "Limited to No Contribution" to the contribution towards checking urban sprawl (Purpose 1);
 - Performs a "Significant Contribution" towards preventing merging of settlements (Purpose 2), though it is noted that Smallford Works and the majority of Parcel 35 solely falls within "local gaps" rather than strategic between neighbouring towns in which Purpose 2 of the Green Belt refers;

- Provides a “Limited to No Contribution” towards safeguarding the countryside (Purpose 3), with the parcel containing one of the highest proportions of built development in the District of which Smallford Works comprises a significant portion; and
- Performs a “Partial Contribution” towards preserving the setting and special character of historic towns (Purpose 4), though it is unclear how this parcel differs in its relationship to either St Albans or Hatfield from the parcels to the north and south that are considered to perform “Limited to No Contribution” to this purpose.

- 2.6 Overall, the parcel is one of the worst performing parcels (best for allocation in NPPF137a)) within the study area. However, the review does not recognise this and, in fact, fails to provide a comprehensive summary of the parcel assessments.
- 2.7 Instead, the assessment jumps straight to identifying a series of sub-parcels, with examples (SA-S5 and SA-S6) that lie within a strategic parcel that contributes significantly towards 4 of the 5 Green Belt purposes, and conclusions in regard to sub-parcels of questionable objectivity.
- 2.8 An example of this is the conclusion reached at 8.2.7 of the 2013 Assessment, which states in justifying SA-S6 as a sub-parcel *“Assessed in isolation the sub-area makes a limited or no contribution towards checking sprawl, preventing merging, preserving setting and maintaining local gaps.”* However, when this site is assessed within the 2014 Part 2 Study, Table 9.1 concludes that it performs a significant role in the Green Belt.
- 2.9 Compare this to Smallford Works that was located within a parcel that was assessed as not contributing significantly against just one of the purposes of the Green Belt, and includes one of the highest proportions of built form of any parcel in St Albans, of which Smallford Works is a significant part of that. The site comprises PDL, has limited characteristics of openness, and whose redevelopment would not harm openness or the purposes of the Green Belt.
- 2.10 The Green Belt Reviews take no account of PDL sites in assessments, with the sole references recognising that the role of the Green Belt is to direct developments to PDL, whilst preserving the quality of the countryside and supporting the purposes of the Green Belt. It patently fails to achieve this and is therefore contrary to NPPF137a).
- 2.11 Accordingly, the Stage 1 (of the Step 2) assessment was based on a flawed and impartial Green Belt Review.

Q2. How have the conclusions of the Green Belt Review informed the Local Plan? Do decisions on Green Belt releases reflect the need to promote sustainable patterns of development, and prioritise sites

which are previously developed and/or well served by public transport? Where is this evident?

- 2.12 As is detailed in our response to Question 1, the Green Belt Review is flawed and should play no role in the first stage of the Strategic Site Assessment Selection Process.
- 2.13 It remains unclear why Smallford Works was excluded from the Site Assessment Selection Process. The Council has failed to utilise a brownfield site that has been continually available and promoted for redevelopment to residential purposes.
- 2.14 The site would form a sustainable pattern of development, reducing the volume of vehicle trips, providing environmental enhancements, whilst delivering much needed housing on a brownfield site. This in turn would result in greater protection for areas of valued countryside and that perform a significant role to purposes of the Green Belt.
- 2.15 The treatment of the site by the Council is unfathomable, contrary to NPPF137a) and unjustified. Were the Council to apply its own evidence from the Part 1 Green Belt Review, the site would have been identified for detailed consideration within both the Part 2 Green Belt Review, the Strategic Site Selection Process, and as an allocation within the Local Plan.

Q7. Do the exceptional circumstances, as required by paragraph 136 of the Framework, exist to justify the plan's proposed removal of land from the Green Belt?

- 2.16 As we detail in our response to Question 1, we do believe that there are exceptional circumstances to justify the allocation of Green Belt land to meet local development needs.
- 2.17 At a strategic level, the Council has demonstrated that there is insufficient land within existing built-up areas to get close to meeting the identified development needs of the District, unless unreasonable measures were taken in increasing densities to a level that are either undeliverable or would significantly impact the setting and character of St Albans and its historic assets.
- 2.18 There is still a need to consider specific justification for the release of particular land including:
- a. the need to promote of sustainable patterns of development;
 - b. following an approach which gives preference to
 - i. previously developed land; and
 - ii. sites best-served by public transport.
- 2.19 The Council has failed to give priority to a previously developed site that would help deliver a sustainable pattern of development. In this context, it could be argued that there has been a failure

of the Council at a site specific level, to justify the chosen site allocations as demonstrating 'exceptional circumstances' in advance of Smallford Works.