

Green Belt Review Technical Note

North Hemel Hempstead

December 2019

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Introduction

Bradley Murphy Design Ltd. (BMD) has been appointed by Pigeon Investment Management Ltd, on behalf of Pigeon (Hemel Hempstead) Ltd, to undertake a Green Belt Review to inform the iterative design process and form part of the evidence base, to support the allocation of the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location (hereafter referred to as ‘the Site’ as illustrated on **Figure 001**) as part of the St Albans Local Plan Examination for a proposed mixed use urban extension to Hemel Hempstead.

The North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location is identified under Policy S6 iv of the St Albans Local Plan Publication Draft, for the provision of a major urban extension of Hemel Hempstead comprising the delivery of a minimum of 1,500 dwellings and associated infrastructure. Pigeon Hemel Hempstead Ltd are the landowners of the southern part of the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location Site and are working with neighbouring landowners to bring forward the development of the Site.

In November 2013, Sinclair Knight Merz (SKM) undertook the ‘Part 1 Study: Green Belt Review Purposes Assessment’ on behalf of Dacorum Borough Council, St Albans City and District Council, and Welwyn Hatfield Borough Councils, to inform the future planning strategies for each authority. The Green Belt was sub-divided into strategic land parcels for assessment against the Green Belt purposes identified within the NPPF. The North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location Site lies within strategic land parcel GB16B - Land to North of Hemel Hempstead as illustrated on **Figure 001**.

The Part 1 study identified eight strategic sub-areas of land within St Albans District, which were considered to provide the least contribution to the Green Belt purposes; strategic land parcel GB16B, including the Site, was not included. In February 2014, SKM were commissioned to undertake the ‘Green Belt Review Sites and Boundaries Study’ of the eight strategic sub-areas to identify potential ‘Broad Location’ sites for release from the Green Belt for future development.

In 2018, St Albans City and District Council determined that, in addition to the eight Broad Locations already identified, further land would need to be released from the Green Belt as part of the new Local Plan to meet the District’s housing needs for the period 2020-2036. As a result, two of the three strategic land parcels given an Amber rating within the SKM Part 1 Study, including the North Hemel Hempstead site within parcel GB16B, were identified for release from the Green Belt.

Subsequently, in March 2019, St Albans City and District Council in collaboration with Dacorum Borough Council and other partners were successful in their bid as part of the Government’s Garden Communities programme for ‘Hemel Garden Communities’, a proposed major urban

extension providing 10,000 new homes to the east and north of Hemel Hempstead, encompassing strategic land parcel GB16B and the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location Site.

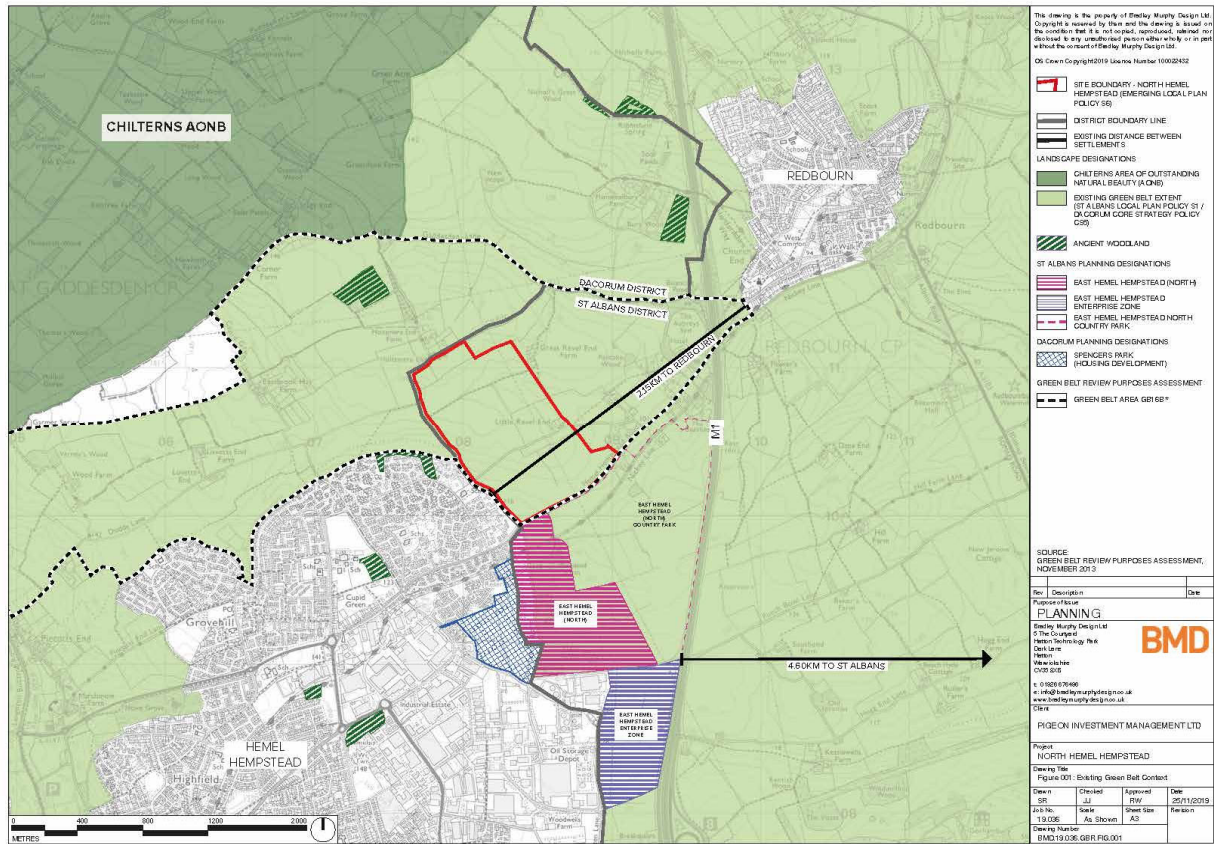
This Green Belt Review provides a more fine-grained assessment of the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location Site against the Green Belt purposes and consideration of the potential capacity to accommodate development, as the SKM Part 1 study does not fully represent the North Hemel Hempstead Site, as it forms less than 15% of the total wider strategic GB16B area.

Sites Contribution to Green Belt Purposes

This Green Belt Review should be read in conjunction with the BMD.19.036.RP.001 Landscape and Visual Appraisal. A summary of this review can be found in **Section 5: Green Belt** of the LVA.

As part of the evidence base supporting the emerging St Albans Local Plan, St Albans District Council commissioned a Green Belt Review Purposes Assessment (November 2013) to assess the contribution that strategic land parcels have on the five Green Belt Purposes (as defined by the NPPF). The Site is 87.84ha in size and sits wholly within strategic land parcel GB16B (see drawing **BMD.19.036.GBR.FIG.001** below), which totals 656ha of Green Belt land in its entirety. The North Hemel Hempstead Site forms less than 15% of the total wider strategic GB16B area, with 67.40ha of the allocated Site proposed to be released from the Green Belt for development. Therefore, the findings of the wider GB16B area do not fully represent the contribution the Site makes to the purposes of the Green Belt.

The Green Belt Purpose Assessment for the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location Site, outlined in this Green Belt Review, is considered alongside the findings for Land North of Hemel Hempstead – GB16B.



The NPPF (February 2019) sets out the five key purposes for including land in the Green Belt. Removal of 67.40ha of Green Belt land from the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location total area of 87.84ha as proposed in the Local Plan Policies Map and as shown on **BMD.19.036.GBR.FIG.002** - for allocation as the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location for development - would have the following effects and implications on these five stated purposes:

Green Belt Purpose	
<i>Check unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas</i>	<p>BMD.19.036.GBR.FIG.001 illustrates the broad context of the Green Belt around the Site and the wider area to the north east of Hemel Hempstead. The existing eastern edge of Hemel Hempstead is undulating and visually well contained, disrupted by mature hedgerows and tree belts, and is sensitive due to its current Green Belt allocation but for no other reason. The existing Green Belt boundary (where it coincides with the Site) is defined by a rural lane (Holtsmere End Lane) and mature hedgerows and tree belts.</p> <p>As illustrated on BMD.19.036.GBR.FIG.002, the proposed revision to the Green Belt boundary would provide a clearly defined and defensible boundary to the Green Belt in this location. The existing on Site 400kv pylon line would provide a permanent, defensible and long-term Green Belt boundary that would be reinforced by the proposed Country Park and additional landscape mitigation along the Site's eastern edge. Along the southern boundary the adopted Site allocation for East Hemel Hempstead and the Country Park form a new green edge to the development site and a long-term buffer, bound additionally by the M1 Motorway to the east. The Site's north western boundary adjoins the wider strategic area for the extent of the proposed Hemel Garden Communities (as outlined in the Hemel Garden Communities Charter), which could also provide an alternative longer term defensible Green Belt boundary to the north and east of Hemel Hempstead.</p> <p>The St Albans Green Belt Review Purposes Assessment, concludes that area GB16B provides limited or no contribution to checking unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas as it is located away from large built up areas and does not form a connection with a wider network of parcels to restrict sprawl.</p>

Green Belt Purpose	
<p><i>Preventing neighbouring towns from merging into one another</i></p>	<p>The Site does not occupy a crucial position in the wider Green Belt context. Other parts of the Green Belt in the area surrounding Hemel Hempstead and in the wider context are more important in preventing the merging of settlements and the Site shares no visual connectivity with surrounding settlements.</p> <p>The existing distances between the Green Belt boundary surrounding the eastern edge of Hemel Hempstead and the nearest settlements to the east of Hemel Hempstead are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hemel Hempstead – Redbourn 2.15km • Hemel Hempstead – St Albans 4.60km <p>As illustrated on BMD.19.036.GBR.FIG.002 the proposed Green Belt boundary would reduce the width of Green Belt between Hemel Hempstead and Redbourn by approximately 520m. However, the open undulating landform, valley character, dense intervening vegetation and M1 motorway between these settlements increases the notion of separation and, furthermore, the setting of the Chilterns AONB designation to the north of Hemel Hempstead and west of Redbourn has been influential in preventing / managing urban sprawl from occurring around these settlements.</p> <p>BMD.19.036.GBR.FIG.002 also demonstrates how the revision to the Green Belt boundary would not reduce the minimum width of Green Belt between Hemel Hempstead and St Albans. Again, there is no visual connection between the Site and St Albans and the existing undulating landform, vegetation and the M1 motorway provide a robust separation between the settlements.</p> <p>Whilst development would extend Hemel Hempstead's urban edge slightly eastwards towards Redbourn, the separate identity of these respective settlements would not be affected. The removal of the Site from the Green Belt would not prejudice this Green Belt purpose as the Site is not fundamentally important in maintaining separation between the existing settlements.</p>

Green Belt Purpose	
	<p>The St Albans Green Belt Review Purposes Assessment concludes that area GB16B offers partial contribution to preventing neighbouring towns from merging into one another due to its association with GB18A and GB19 in preventing coalescence between Hemel Hempstead and Luton and Dunstable. However, with regards to the Site, removal from the Green Belt would not reduce the identified 10km gap between these large settlements.</p> <p>The assessment also concludes that GB16B as a whole offers a significant contribution to maintaining the existing settlement pattern, but acknowledges that any reduction in the gap between Hemel Hempstead and Redbourn would be unlikely to compromise the separation of settlements in physical or visual terms. In any event, the North Hemel Hempstead site forms less than 15% of the GB16B land parcel. As a result, the Site plays a far more limited role in maintaining the existing settlement pattern and could be released from the Green Belt for development without compromising this objective.</p>
<p><i>To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment</i></p>	<p>The landscape and visual analysis within the accompanying LVA demonstrates that the Site is visually separated from the prevailing countryside to the north and to a large extent, the east due to existing vegetation, landform and visually detracting features such as the 400kv overhead pylons and M1 motorway. The Site proposed for removal from the Green Belt at North Hemel Hempstead has been influenced by its visual containment from the wider countryside and in response to the proposals for the East Hemel Hempstead Broad Location to the south of the Site - which would itself push the Green Belt boundary eastwards, south of Hemel Hempstead / Redbourn Road.</p> <p>The removal of the Site from the Green Belt would lead to a limited and negligible perception of encroachment into the countryside because of the Site's high degree of visual containment and existing nearby large scale motorway and energy infrastructure.</p> <p>The St Albans Green Belt Review Purposes Assessment concludes that parcel GB16B as a whole offers a significant</p>

Green Belt Purpose	
	<p>contribution to assisting in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment due to limited evidence of urban influences and high levels of visual openness. However, with regards to the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location Site, it comprises only a small proportion of this parcel. Furthermore, it is visually well contained and visual openness is limited due to the cumulative effect of the undulating landform and intervening vegetation around the Site's boundaries and within the surrounding immediate landscape. Therefore, it is determined that the North Hemel Hempstead Site contributes little to this Green Belt purpose.</p>
<p><i>To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns</i></p>	<p>The settlement of Hemel Hempstead dates back to 1086 and has developed as an agricultural market town, continuing to expand post the Second World War following its 'New Town' designation with other smaller settlements enveloping the town on all sides. Two Conservation Areas exist at the centre of Hemel Hempstead and one exists within Redbourn. Removal of the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location Site from the Green Belt would not significantly impact upon the existing setting and character of these Conservation Areas, due to the appreciable distance, intervening motorway, energy infrastructure and extent of intervening built form and vegetation.</p> <p>There are four listed buildings within the immediate vicinity of the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location Site. The proposed Framework Masterplan shows how the impact on these will be negligible, with proposed offsetting from development and enhanced vegetated screening along sensitive boundaries to avoid any harm to their setting. There are no on site environmental designations.</p> <p>The St Albans Green Belt Review Purposes Assessment states that area GB16B offers limited or no contribution to preserving the setting and special character of historic towns as the nature of the landscape represents an open rural setting with views into and from the open countryside to the north and west.</p>

<p><i>To assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict land and other urban land</i></p>	<p>There is relatively little derelict or other previously developed land available in Hemel Hempstead or St Albans to allow regeneration and few opportunities for infilling. The Metropolitan Green Belt designation currently covers the entirety of the rural part of the St Albans District and the Council has concluded that the District's housing requirement cannot be met by using land already within the settlement boundaries and outside of the Green Belt since there is insufficient capacity.</p> <p>With this in mind, urban development should be channelled towards the most sustainable locations adjoining urban areas including around Hemel Hempstead and should be concentrated in line with the Hemel Garden Communities Charter vision area as a sustainable pattern of development, in accordance with paragraph 138 of the NPPF.</p>
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Conclusion

This Green Belt Review provides a more fine-grained assessment of the North Hemel Hempstead Site against the Green Belt purposes and consideration of the potential capacity to accommodate development without unduly compromising the purposes of the Green Belt, as the Green Belt studies commissioned by St Albans City and District Council did not fully represent the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location Site, as the Site formed less than 15% of the total wider strategic land area assessed under parcel GB16B.

With reference to the landscape and visual appraisal (BMD.19.036.RP.001) undertaken in combination with the Green Belt Review, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- the Site is not constrained by any environmental designations;
- the Site is visually enclosed and contained in views from the north, west and south and to a lesser extent from the east by undulating topography, intervening vegetation and the M1 motorway infrastructure;
- views towards the Site from the Chiltern's AONB and Redbourn Conservation Area are screened by intervening mature vegetation and landform;
- the Site contains mature hedgerows and trees field boundaries affording the site an enclosed character that is distinct in scale and enclosure from the prevailing open agricultural land use.

The Council's assessments have determined that the St Albans City and District Council housing requirement cannot be met through the recycling of derelict land or other land within the urban areas and outside of the Green Belt. As a result, there are exceptional circumstances that justify the release of the land from the Green Belt in order to fulfil future housing requirements for the District.

St Albans City and District Council has therefore identified a need to release sites from the Green Belt for development and in terms of candidate sites, the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location Site makes a limited contribution overall towards all Green Belt purposes. The proposed Green Belt Boundary has been informed through the promotion of sustainable patterns of development around Hemel Hempstead, demonstrating how the release of the North Hemel Hempstead Broad Location Site from the Green Belt would not compromise the purposes and effectiveness of the Green Belt.

The proposed Green Belt boundary and the associated new Country Park would create a permanent landscape buffer, featuring green infrastructure in the form of new woodland planting, improvements to biodiversity, habitat connectivity, new and enhanced walking and cycling routes and improved access to the countryside (see **Figure 003 Landscape Mitigation Plan**), in accordance with paragraphs 137 – 138 of the NPPF, 2019.

There is the potential to provide a clear defensible and permanent new Green Belt boundary along the Site's eastern edge as illustrated in **Figure 003**, formed by the existing 400kv pylons that run on a north west to south east axis across the Site, which can be reinforced with additional landscape mitigation.

