

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET PLANNING AND PARKING PANEL – 6 SEPTEMBER 2018
REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR (PUBLIC PROTECTION, PLANNING AND GOVERNANCE)

GREEN BELT STUDY STAGE 3 AND NEXT STEPS

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan has been submitted and is currently undergoing public examination by an independent inspector. The inspector has indicated that the plan is not currently 'sound' as it does not meet the objectively assessed need for housing. The submitted plan contained sites for 12,000 homes but the housing need is acknowledged to be about 16,000 homes to 2033. The inspector has therefore asked the Council to carry out a further Green Belt Study to seek to identify additional sites for housing.
- 1.2 This report considers the findings of that Green Belt Study and the implications for the Local Plan. It considers the next steps and different approaches the Local Plan could take in identifying sufficient land to meet the Objectively Assessed Need for Housing.
- 1.3 The Green Belt Study and its accompanying appendices has been published on the examination pages of the Council's website (reference EX88)
<http://www.welhat.gov.uk/article/6938/Examination-Documents>
- 1.4 Section 7 of this report identifies a number of risks associated with different development strategies and the risk of the inspector finding the plan unsound, defaulting to the NPPF standard methodology for calculating local housing need and/or the Council having its plan-making powers removed.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Panel comments on the conclusion of the Green Belt Study.
- 2.2 That the Panel comments on the two development scenarios set out in Paragraph 4.28. Scenario One is the loss of some employment land and the release of some land from the Green Belt. Scenario Two is the retention of proposed employment land designations and the release of more land from the Green Belt than the option above.
- 2.3 That the Panel comments on the merits and risks of the three approaches set out in Paragraphs 4.32-4.43 and seeks to identify a preferred approach. Approach One is to carry out a call-for-new-sites exercise and consult on new site modifications prior to the village hearing sessions. Approach Two is a development strategy based on allocated sites and sites that have already been promoted to the Council in the first

ten years of the plan period and to identify 'Broad Locations' or 'Areas of Search' for the remaining five years. Approach Three is a development strategy based on allocated sites, extra capacity on some existing allocations and the selection of sites that have already been promoted to the Council and analysed by officers.

- 2.4 That the Panel agrees that the Head of Planning in consultation with the Leader of the Council will write to the Inspector setting out the Council's views on the three approaches and the implications for the examination programme.

3. Background

What is the Green Belt?

- 3.1 The Green Belt is a policy designation; the main aim of which is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. The main characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence. It is immaterial whether or not land in the Green Belt is attractive or of ecological value. It can include both previously developed land and open countryside.
- 3.2 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2018) sets out the five purposes of the Green Belt as:
- to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas;
 - to prevent neighbouring towns from merging;
 - to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
 - to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns: and
 - to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.
- 3.3 National policy strictly controls the type of development that can take place in the green belt without having to justify 'very special circumstances'. It asserts that the boundaries of the Green Belt can only be altered in 'exceptional circumstances' but where they are altered regard should be had to their intended permanence and that they should last beyond the plan period.
- 3.4 Whilst the new NPPF (July 2018) now includes a set of steps that councils should go through before releasing land from the Green Belt, in order to demonstrate that exceptional circumstances exist, these do not apply to submitted plans, which is the case for Welwyn Hatfield. Instead the release of individual sites or groups of sites will be considered against what is known as the 'Calverton Test'. This relates to the case of Calverton Parish Council Vs Nottingham City Council in which the judgement considered the matter of exceptional circumstances. The implications of this case were reported to Cabinet Housing and Planning Panel in July 2016.
- 3.5 The judgement concluded that decision makers when considering whether or not exceptional circumstances exist must have regard to the following:
- The acuteness of the Objectively Assessed Need,

- The constraints on supply and availability of land for sustainable development,
- The consequent difficulties in achieving sustainable development without imposing on the Green Belt,
- The nature and extent of the harm to the Green Belt if boundaries are reviewed; and
- The extent to which the consequent impacts on the purposes of the Green Belt maybe ameliorated or reduced to the lowest reasonable extent.

Inspector's thoughts on the Green Belt

- 3.6 Our Inspector has already stated that the acuteness of the need for housing in the borough is sufficient to justify exceptional circumstances to release land from the Green Belt, but it should be noted that this will still need to be demonstrated for each site or group of sites. This means that the benefits of meeting the housing need and other sustainability considerations will need to be balanced against the harm to the Green Belt.
- 3.7 Currently 79% of the borough lies within the Green Belt, with no land beyond the Green Belt. As a consequence the larger villages and towns are 'inset' within it whilst the smaller villages lie within the Green Belt and are known as 'washed-over' villages. In order to protect its permanence the 1993 Welwyn Hatfield District Plan identified areas of safeguarded land at Hatfield Aerodrome (now developed) and at Panshanger Aerodrome.
- 3.8 The NPPF makes it clear (paragraph 140) that only where the open character of a village makes an important contribution to the openness of the Green Belt should the village be included in the Green Belt.
- 3.9 In preparing and submitting the Local Plan, this Council considered that whilst there were exceptional circumstance to release land from the Green Belt, the full housing need could not be met because of infrastructure concerns and impact on the Green Belt. During the course of the examination, the Inspector has considered that the infrastructure constraints could be overcome and that further evidence is required in terms of the harm to the Green Belt and to consider what is essential to retain. He has therefore indicated that the plan is unsound in its current form but is capable of being made sound if additional sites are identified.
- 3.10 At the end of the Stage 2 Examination Hearing Sessions in October 2017 the Inspector clarified that the further work should:
- Consider what parts of the Green Belt it is essential to retain. The study should provide a comprehensive assessment of land around the towns and villages
 - Consider if the 'washed-over' villages should be inset (i.e. released from the Green Belt)
 - Consider opportunities further afield for a new settlement if there are insufficient opportunities to meet the housing need through other options

- Further demographic work on unattributable population change, student housing and migration between East Herts and Welwyn Hatfield
- An analysis of housing land supply in the defined Housing Market Area
- An analysis of the necessary supporting infrastructure associated with 16,000 dwellings

3.11 At the end of the Stage 4 Examination Hearing Sessions in June 2018 the Inspector additionally asked the Council to come forward with a set of modifications for additional sites and a work programme to establish when the Hearing Sessions on the villages and new sites could take place.

4. Explanation

4.1 The Council commissioned Land Use Consultants (LUC) to carry out an independent Green Belt Study as requested by the Examination Inspector.

4.2 The Green Belt Study builds on two previous green belt studies, by providing more comprehensive coverage of the land around the inset towns and villages. It also considers the harm to the Green Belt of releasing land and identifies which parts of the Green Belt are most essential to retain. It carries out a detailed assessment of parcels of land around the towns and larger villages, considers whether or not any of the washed-over villages should be released from the Green Belt and the potential harm to the Green Belt from new settlement locations.

4.3 The main report comprises 74 pages and is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 1** introduces the report
- **Chapter 2** summarises the policy context
- **Chapter 3** describes the assessment methodology
- **Chapter 4** provides a strategic assessment of the role of Green Belt in the borough
- **Chapter 5** sets out the findings of the assessment of washed over settlements
- **Chapter 6** summarises the assessment of the contribution land makes to the Green Belt purposes (as defined in the NPPF)
- **Chapter 7** summarises the findings of the assessment of harm of releasing Green Belt land
- **Chapter 8** addresses the key Green Belt issues in relation to the development of new settlement locations
- **Chapter 9** considers which areas constitute the ‘most essential’ Green Belt within the Borough
- **Chapter 10** provides conclusions and sets out recommendations and next steps

4.4 The report is accompanied by four appendices which contain the following:

- **Appendix 1.1:** Inspector’s comments on Green Belt issues as raised at the end of the Stage 2 Hearings of the Local Plan Examination

- **Appendix 5.1:** Assessment of Washed over Settlements
- **Appendix 5.2** Development Scenarios for Washed over Settlements
- **Appendix 6.1:** Detailed Assessment Findings of Green Belt Contribution and Harm

Conclusions on washed-over villages

- 4.5 The assessment considered the levels of openness of the sixteen washed-over villages in the borough, two of which straddle the boundary with adjoining authorities. This involved consideration of the amount, form and character of development and open spaces within the settlement and its relationship with the surrounding Green Belt.
- 4.6 Nine villages have been recommended for retention as a washed-over village, either because of the important contribution their levels of openness make to the Green Belt or because they straddle the boundary with an adjoining boundary and any release would need to be brought forward jointly through a future plan.
- 4.7 The remaining seven villages were subject to further assessment to consider different development scenarios including parcels around the core built up area. The detail of the assessments is set out in the Appendices whilst the summary of the findings is set out in Table 5.1 of the main report.
- 4.8 The consultants consider that the following settlements have the potential for inseting with varying degrees of harm to the Green Belt if the core built up area were to be released: Lemsford, Stanborough, Essendon, Newgate Street, Northaw, Bell Bar and Swanley Bar.
- 4.9 In terms of harm to the Green Belt there is some limited scope for development in and around these villages. The greatest potential lies within Stanborough and Bell Bar. The remaining settlements offer lesser scope because of the impact on the Green Belt in association with other constraints such as the historic environment.

Parcel Assessment

- 4.10 The consultants divided land around towns, inset villages and washed-over villages with potential for inseting into 95 parcels, defined by sensible boundaries such as roads and field edges, and then carried out a detailed assessment of each of them. This comprised an assessment of the extent to which a parcel performs a Green Belt function. As with the previous two green belt studies, parcels were categorised against each of the five NPPF purposes and the local purpose as follows:

'limited or no role'	'partial role'	'significant role'
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- 4.11 The results of this assessment are summarised in Table 6.1 of the study report and described in detail in Appendix 6.1.
- 4.12 A separate harm assessment was then carried out which considered the degree of harm that would result if the parcel, a site or sites within that parcel, or a combination of parcels, were to be released. These are described in the report as development scenarios.

4.13 Six categories of harm have been identified as follows:

very high	high	moderate-high	moderate	moderate-low	low
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- 4.14 The detailed results of the harm assessment are discussed in Appendix 6.1, where it considers each scenario and a combination of scenarios for each parcel.
- 4.15 Figure 7.1 illustrates on a map the results of the lowest levels of harm which result from the release of individual parcels or sub-parcels of land. However in order to ensure that the cumulative impact is taken into account of combinations of sites, it is important to read the map in conjunction with the more detailed assessments set out in Appendix 6.1. A summary of the harm assessment is set out in Table 7.1.
- 4.16 Much of the land in the 'low', 'moderate-to-low' and 'moderate' categories is either in uses that the Council would wish to retain or is already developed, and as a consequence there is insufficient land in these categories to meet the housing shortfall.
- 4.17 At first sight there would appear to be more land than needed in the 'moderate-to-high' category but not all of these areas have been promoted for development and therefore further work would need to take place to consider if there are sufficient sites which would be made available and are suitable for development.
- 4.18 The Inspector asked the Council to identify those areas which are essential to retain. The Green Belt Study concludes that it is the areas where there would be 'very high' harm which are considered to be most essential.
- 4.19 It should also be noted that some existing allocations in the submitted plan are in 'high' harm areas. Paragraph 138 of the NPPF sets out that sustainable patterns of development should be taken into account when deciding which land to release. Paragraph 7.8 of the Green Belt Study report makes it clear that just because a parcel would result in high harm does not mean it should not be released for development. Planning judgement will need to weigh up sustainability and environmental considerations as well as harm to the Green Belt. In each case exceptional circumstance have to be justified and the Council will need to consider whether the overall benefits outweigh the harm.
- 4.20 It should also be noted that some parcels no longer perform a Green Belt function and might be therefore appropriate for release, even if they are not to be allocated for development.

New Settlement

- 4.21 The study considers the harm that would result from the release of land for a new settlement. This required an assessment of the land beyond the more detailed parcel assessment which focuses on land adjoining the existing towns and villages.
- 4.22 A purposes assessment concluded that there was little differentiation between the majority of the purposes. The Study concludes that it is NPPF Purpose 2 which relates to the merging of towns which was the most significant indicator of where new settlements could potentially result in less harm to the Green Belt.

4.23 In essence the study concludes that large parts of the borough have equal scope for a new settlement.

Housing Land Supply

4.24 A review is currently underway of the different sources of housing land supply. Evidence to the examination and last year's Annual Monitoring Report set out that as a consequence of recent permissions and prior notifications housing land supply has increased from 12,000 set out in the Submission Local Plan to 12,400. This leaves a figure of 3,600 dwellings to find in order to build 16,000 homes by 2033.

4.25 As well as looking at opportunities to add in additional sites, officers are currently reviewing whether or not there are opportunities to increase capacity on sites currently already proposed for allocation in the Submitted Local Plan. Some sites have already come forward with planning applications for higher numbers whilst other sites now have permission for a reduced capacity. Initial estimates indicate that there may be potential to increase capacity in the region of 700 - 1,000 homes, although the infrastructure implications of this need to be tested.

4.26 The Inspector has indicated that he wishes to consider releasing some employment land to help meet the shortfall for housing. This would reduce the impact on the Green Belt but will result in the borough having insufficient land to meet the forecast need for employment land and potentially move from a position of having slightly more jobs than workers to one where there are not enough jobs for the anticipated growth in the economically active population. Furthermore there is insufficient land in employment use being promoted to meet the entire housing shortfall.

4.27 In order to reach 16,000 dwellings it will therefore be necessary to review opportunities within the Green Belt. A number of sites considered as part of the process for preparing the Local Plan, but not included in the Submitted Local Plan, have submitted further evidence to address the issues identified by the Council as a reason for not allocating them and since the Local Plan was submitted new sites have continued to be promoted.

Next steps

4.28 As set out in paragraph 3.8 above the Inspector has asked the Council to consider the infrastructure implications associated with a plan target for 16,000 dwellings.

4.29 In order to address this it will be necessary to test different development scenarios in order to understand the cumulative impact of different options. It is proposed that two scenarios be tested.

- Scenario One: extra capacity on some existing allocations, the loss of some employment land and the release of some land from the Green Belt
- Scenario Two: extra capacity on some existing allocations, the retention of employment land and the release of more land from the Green Belt than the option above

4.30 There will also be a need to update the evidence in the Housing and Employment Land Availability Assessment (HELAA), the Sustainability Appraisal and potentially the Strategic Flood Risk Assessment.

- 4.31 As part of the examination process where changes are required to a plan, there is what is known as 'modifications consultation'. This follows after the formal hearing sessions and allows the Inspector to consider representations on the proposed changes before he writes his report on the soundness of the plan. Any additional sites added into the Plan will therefore be subject to public consultation.

Approach One

- 4.32 The inspector has offered the Council the opportunity to consult on the introduction of new site into the plan, prior to the village hearing sessions. In order to select sites that result in the least harm to the Green Belt, officers anticipate that this would necessitate a new call-for-sites process, analysis of the newly promoted sites, further debate with members and public consultation. This is because some sites that have already been promoted and analysed but not included in the plan are in areas of high harm.
- 4.33 This would not remove the requirement to consult on all of the modifications to the plan after the hearing sessions however and would therefore probably delay the adoption of the plan by up to one year.
- 4.34 If the Council chose to consult on new site modifications at this stage it is anticipated that the next hearing sessions would take place in autumn 2019, based on a timetable of call-for-new-sites in autumn 2018, analysis by officers in winter 2018, debate with Members in spring 2019 and consultation in summer 2019.
- 4.35 This would also have an impact on housing delivery as the five year housing land supply is dependent on a number of Green Belt sites in the plan being released, gaining planning permission and coming forward for development. If these sites cannot come forward because the Plan remains at examination stage, it might lead to an increase in undesirable speculative planning applications, which might need to be approved or could be won at appeal, because the Council would have a record of poor housing deliverability under the Housing Delivery Test, which has been introduced in the new NPPF and comes into place in November 2018.

Approach Two

- 4.36 As a result an alternative approach would be to devise a development strategy based on allocating sites for the first ten years of the plan period following adoption, with the remaining five years of housing to come forward in areas identified as 'Broad Locations for Growth' or 'Areas of Search'. Both the 2012 and 2018 versions of the NPPF only require the identification of sites in years 11-15 **where possible**.
- 4.37 The first ten years of the plan could include sites that have already been promoted to the Council and been analysed by officers, but were rejected at an earlier stage in the preparation process. It is considered that these sites could be proposed to the Inspector without the need for further consultation as they are already in the public domain.
- 4.38 The timetable would be infrastructure testing and sustainability appraisal work to late 2018, debate with Members about which sites to allocate and Broad Locations or Areas of Search to select in early 2019, hearing sessions in spring 2019 and modifications consultation in summer 2019. This would result in minimum delay to the Local Plan timetable.

- 4.39 Specific sites within Broad Locations or Areas of Search would then be brought forward via a review of the plan, which would need to be completed within five years of the adoption of this plan. This approach would enable sites which have not previously been promoted or considered by Members as part of the Local Plan preparation process to date to be debated as part of the review process.
- 4.40 It is worth noting however that the Council could not rely on all of its already allocated sites in the first ten years however, as they cannot be entirely built out within that time period. Around 2,870 dwellings of the current housing target are identified for delivery within the last five years of the plan period.
- 4.41 The Inspector has previously indicated that he is not in favour of deferring the difficult decisions for a review of the Plan, but there has now been a change to the legislation which requires councils to have completed a review of their plan within five years of adoption. If this approach were selected then this plan would set the strategic direction for growth for the last five years.
- 4.42 The inspector has advised that it is a matter for the Council to consider how it wants to proceed. It is therefore recommended that the Council writes to the inspector, setting out its preferred approach and the timetable implications of both approaches. This will give the inspector the opportunity to advise the Council on the acceptability of its preferred approach if he has any concerns.

Approach Three

- 4.43 Officers consider that it may be possible to allocate sufficient sites to achieve close to 16,000 homes solely from existing allocations, extra capacity on some existing allocations and the selection of sites that have already been promoted to the Council and analysed by officers.
- 4.44 The negatives of this approach is that some of the sites that have already been promoted to the Council and analysed by officers are in high harm areas of the Green Belt and should therefore probably only be considered if the Council is willing to accept the loss of some of employment land, as per Scenario One in Paragraph 4.28. There are also uncertainties about the individual and cumulative deliverability of some of these sites that would need to be resolved.

5. Legal Implications

- 5.1. The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 as amended do not cover the modifications process of a Local Plan examination. The Statement of Community Involvement does also not refer to consultation at this stage. There are therefore no regulatory requirements with regards to consultation at this stage. The Inspectorate's Procedural Practice in the Examination of Local Plans refers to Main Modifications consultation which should be for a minimum of six weeks, but the scope and length of the consultation should reflect that for the Regulation 19 consultation of the Local Plan. Consultation at this stage should only be on the Main Modifications. The Inspector's Practice Note does not refer to pre-modifications consultation and Counsel's advice is that there is no requirement to carry one out, but should the Council decide to carry out consultation it should reflect the arrangements that have applied for other Local Plan consultations.

6. Financial Implications

- 6.1. There are no specific financial implications arising from this report. There are costs associated with the length of the Local Plan Examination.

7 Risk Management Implications

- 7.1 There is a risk that the inspector may find Approach One unsound because it would delay the process of selecting site modifications. This would mean that the Council must default to the NPPF standard methodology for calculating local housing need.
- 7.2 There is a risk that the Inspector may find Approach Two of identifying Broad Locations or Areas of Search unsound.
- 7.3 There is a risk that the Council will start to receive undesirable speculative planning applications and that it might have to approve some of these or accept that they may be won on appeal if we cannot demonstrate a five year supply of housing land.
- 7.4 Should the Council put forward a strategy which is found to be unsound there is a risk that plan making powers will be removed from this Council and conferred to either another authority or consultants. The Government has already intervened and removed plan making powers from a number of authorities. Earlier this year the Government wrote to St Albans City and District Council threatening this action.

8 Security and Terrorism Implications

- 8.1 There are no security and terrorism implications arising as a result of this report.

8 Procurement Implications

- 8.1 There are no procurement implications arising directly as a result of this report.

9 Climate Change Implications

- 9.1 No climate change implications have been identified resulting from this report.

10 Policy Implications

- 10.1 The policy implications arising for Welwyn Hatfield as a result of this report are discussed in section 4 and relate to differing approach the Local Plan could take to planning for growth.

11 Link to Corporate Priorities

- 11.1 The Council's Business Plan 2015-2018 contains corporate priorities to meet the borough's housing need, help build a strong local economy, protect and enhance the environment and maintain a safe and healthy community.

12 Equality and Diversity

- 12.1 I confirm that an Equalities Impact Assessment has not been carried out.

Sue Tiley
Planning Policy and Implementation Manager
28th August 2018