



Examination of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan 2013-32: Stage 5

COMMENTS ON THE STAGE 3 GREEN BELT REVIEW SUBMITTED ON BEHALF OF TARMAC TRADING LTD

18th September 2018

1. Background

- 1.1 Tarmac Trading Ltd. (Tarmac) is the promoter of Birchall Garden Suburb (BGS), which is proposed to be allocated for development under Policy SP 19 of the Plan, as well as under Policy EWEL 1 of the East Herts District Plan.
- 1.2 This statement follows our Publication stage (Regulation 19) representations on the Plan and should be read in conjunction with the statements we submitted for the Joint Examination hearing on the BGS proposal (Policy SP 19) on 30th January 2018 and for the hearing on Strategic Green Infrastructure (Policy SP 12) on 22nd February 2018.
- 1.3 Our comments respond to the Inspector's notification to all Regulation 19 representors on the Draft Local Plan Proposed Submission document August 2016 who raised the issue of Green Belt boundaries in their Regulation 19 representations to submit their comments on the Stage 3 Green Belt Review by 18th September 2018.

2. Context

- 2.1 Local Plan Policy SP 3 Settlement Strategy and Green Belt boundaries sets out the Local Plan's Settlement Strategy for the Borough and the approach to Green Belt boundaries following the Green Belt Reviews undertaken by both WHBC and EHDC. Tarmac's Regulation 19 representation supports this draft policy, whereby the primary focus for new development will be in and around the two towns of Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield, where access to strategic transport networks, public transport, local employment and services is excellent.
- 2.2 However, the Local Plan Examination Stage 2 hearings highlighted that the quantum of development required in the Borough couldn't be met adjacent to urban areas and that the provision made for new housing was insufficient to meet the Borough's assessed housing needs; the Council was therefore asked by the Inspector to undertake further work in relation to the Green Belt.
- 2.3 Tarmac welcomes the publication of the Stage 3 Study, which has expanded the coverage of the Stage 2 Green Belt assessment and has provided a robust analysis of the contribution of the assessed land parcels to Green Belt purposes and the harm rating for various release scenarios. We set out below our comments on the assessment of parcels and scenarios forming the whole or part of the BGS site within Welwyn Hatfield Borough.

3.0 Interpretation of the Stage 3 Green Belt Review

- 3.1 We consider that the Stage 3 Green Belt review provides strong justification for the removal of the entire BGS site in Welwyn Hatfield (together with the adjoining land in East Herts) from the Green Belt by identifying those areas within the Green Belt in Welwyn Hatfield Borough which are viewed as critical or essential to retain, as outlined in our comments below. The proposed BGS strategic site allocation is a fundamental part of the development strategy for both Plans. Supporting evidence documents (including the updated assessment of Welwyn Hatfield's OAHN in May 2018)



demonstrate that the “exceptional circumstances” required to enable the site’s removal from the Green Belt are clearly present for the whole of the proposed BGS site allocation.

3.2 The Stage 3 Review considered 95 land parcels and 179 development scenarios, adopting a finer grained approach to the assessment than the preceding studies. Parcels P24 and P25 together correspond to WGC5 in the Stage 2 Review and include the land being promoted by Tarmac Trading Ltd on behalf of Birchall Gardens LLP for the BGS development within the administrative area of Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, (together with an adjoining employment site).

3.3 The Review considers the following matters which have a bearing on the BGS site:

- Absolute constraints;
- The strategic role of the Green Belt around Welwyn Garden City with reference to GB purposes, with particular regard to “fragile gaps between towns” and “open land forming a distinctive urban edge;”
- Contribution of the land parcels to Green Belt purposes;
- Potential harm to Green Belt purposes of the development scenarios;
- Potential mitigation measures which might be implemented to reduce harm to the Green Belt and whether this could help to minimise the potential effects of release;
- Identification of areas which constitute the most essential Green Belt within the Borough.

4. Absolute Constraints

4.1 Absolute constraints within the BGS site are limited to Holwell Park Wood Local Wildlife Site and Ancient Woodland (mainly within East Herts District). The Commons Local Nature Reserve (LNR) is located just outside the BGS site on the southern edge of Welwyn Garden City.

4.2 The BGS Master Plan incorporates suitable buffers between these constraints and the proposed development areas. Ancient woodland within the site will be connected by four “wildlife links” as shown on Figure 11 of the BGS Green Infrastructure Strategy (October 2016), submitted as Appendix 1 to Tarmac’s Regulation 19 representation. These constraints do not therefore limit or prevent the removal of the site from the Green Belt.

5. Strategic Role of the Green Belt

5.1 The strategic role of the Green Belt in Welwyn Hatfield Borough is focussed on areas adjoining the urban edge of Welwyn Garden City to the west, north and south, with no strategic role being identified for the Green Belt to the east of the town. The south western edge of the BGS site is close to an area shown as open land forming a “distinctive urban edge” and to the east of the “fragile gap” between Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City (see LUC Study Figure 4.1).

5.2 The LUC Study highlights that removing the whole of the BGS site from the Green Belt would have no implications for the strategic role of the Green Belt in this area, a finding which is consistent with the Local Plan’s Settlement Strategy.

6. Contribution to Green Belt Purposes

6.1 The LUC Final Report (chapter 6) summarises the assessment of the contribution made by the BGS site to the five purposes of the Green Belt, as defined in the NPPF.



The assessment rates the contribution to Green Belt purposes which each of the assessed sites make as “significant”, “partial”, or “limited or no contribution”.

- 6.2 The detailed parcel assessments (see LUC Study Figures 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3) for the BGS land parcels are summarised below. The assessment did not identify any areas which make a strong contribution locally to preventing sprawl from large built up areas (Purpose 1); we agree with this finding. For Purpose 5 (assisting in urban regeneration) we note that no detailed assessment has been undertaken; this is consistent with the methodology adopted in most Green Belt reviews. The approach adopted by LUC has rated all parcels as making an equal and “significant” contribution to Purpose 5.
- 6.3 The BGS site is regarded as making a “significant contribution” to Purpose 3, that of safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.

Summary of contribution assessment for BGS

	Green Belt Purpose (NPPF)	BGS Site (Parcels P24 & P25)
1.	To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas	limited or no contribution (applies across all parcels)
2.	To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another	partial
3.	To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment	significant
4.	To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns	partial
5.	To assist in urban regeneration	Significant (applies across all parcels)

- 6.4 In interpreting this assessment, it is notable that most of the land parcels around the urban edge of the two main towns and inset villages are assessed as making a “significant” contribution to Purpose 3, for the reason noted in Paragraph 10.6 of LUC’s Final Report:

“For the most part land within the Borough outside of inset settlements is open and rural, and therefore contributes to this purpose.”

- 6.5 The few exceptions include parcels at Moneyhole Lane Park (P23) and Stanborough Park (P29), which function as sports pitches and parkland respectively. These areas are assessed as making a “partial” contribution to Purpose 3, reflecting the presence of floodlights and hard-standings (P23) and small buildings with nearby roads (P29).
- 6.6 The BGS site is assessed as making a “partial” contribution to Purposes 2 and 4. For Purpose 2, the same rating applies to Parcels P11, P12, P21, P22, P31 and P32, all of which immediately adjoin the urban edge of Welwyn Garden City. Similarly, for Purpose 4, these same parcels are assessed as making a “partial” contribution, the exception being Parcel P31, which is considered to make a “significant” contribution to this purpose, having been identified as rural land in the original City Masterplan.
- 6.7 A separate rating is given for the contribution made to the local purpose of the Green Belt (to maintain the existing settlement pattern); this finds that the BGS site makes



“limited or no contribution” to this purpose (LUC Study Figure 6.5). We agree with this finding.

6.8 Looking at the relative impact of releasing each parcel from the Green Belt with reference to the five purposes overall, the Study assessment finds that:

- The contribution made by the BGS site is “significant” only for purpose 3;
- This rating for Purpose 3 applies to most of parcels assessed in the Study;
- Only six of the 95 parcels are assessed as making “limited or no contribution” to Purpose 3.

7. Potential harm to Green Belt

7.1 The study has assessed the degree of harm to the Green Belt that might result from the proposed release of land for development from “low” to “very high” from the various release scenarios considered. The great majority of parcels / release scenarios fall into the categories of “moderate-high”, “high” and “very high”. Sites falling into lower categories are few and scattered and include Moneyhole Lane Park (rated “low” in terms of harm).

7.2 The “harm rating” assessments are summarised in Table 7.1 in the LUC Final Report. For the BGS parcels, the degree of harm arising from release Scenario 24 (comprising the whole of Parcel 24, part of site WGC5 / allocations SDS2 and EA 11) and release Scenario 25 (comprising the whole of Parcel 25, or the Stage 2 site WGC5 or Local Plan allocation SDS2) is assessed as “moderate to high”. This assessment indicates that the harm to Green Belt purposes arising from the release of the whole of the BGS allocation is no greater than that which would arise from the release of a smaller part of the allocation.

7.3 For release Scenario P25, it is also noted that the additional impact on the Green Belt is reduced in the context of the proposed East Herts EWEL1 allocation, “with the A414 forming the boundary to the development as a whole”. Significantly, the assessment recognises that:

“The introduction of landscaping works to create a strong buffer to the north of the A414 could potentially reduce the harm to a limited extent”.

7.5 The potential to form a robust new Green Belt boundary along the A414 is discussed below.

8. Potential mitigation measures to reduce harm

8.1 The concept of mitigation to reduce any harm to the remaining Green Belt is addressed in section 10 of the Stage 3 Final Report. Paragraph 10.20 includes the following statement:

“Measures which increase the contribution that land is judged to make to Green Belt purposes, offsetting to some degree the predicted reduction in contribution, could help to minimise the potential effects of releasing Green Belt land, although any release will still require ‘exceptional circumstances’ to be demonstrated.”

8.2 The potential to reduce harm to the remaining Green Belt by implementing measures which will change the relationship between Green Belt land and urban areas is relevant to BGS. Table 10.1 summarises the potential measures which might help to mitigate



harm to the Green Belt; measures discussed include landscaping and defining the Green Belt edge by using a strong, natural element which forms a visual barrier – e.g. a woodland belt. This can be beneficial in “maintaining a sense of separation between urban and open land.”

- 8.4 The creation of a generous planted open space “buffer” along the northern edge of the A414 forms an integral part of the BGS Master Plan. The BGS Concept Statement (Appendix 3 to our Regulation 19 submission on the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan) referenced Stages 1 and 2 of the Green Belt review which indicated that potentially strong boundaries exist which could redefine the edge of the town, utilising the A414 and Panshanger Lane (the latter being adjacent to the part of BGS within East Herts District). Further details relating to the design of this aspect of the proposed BGS development are contained in the BGS Green Infrastructure Strategy (October 2016), which formed Appendix 1 to our Regulation 19 Representations, and Appendix 1 to our statement for the Joint BGS Examination Hearing on 30th January 2018.
- 8.5 Paragraph 10.27 of the LUC Final Report also recognises the potential to enhance the use of land “that (by adding to its value) will strengthen the case for that land’s future protection regardless of whether it is classified as Green Belt”. The extensive area of public open space which forms a key part of the BGS Master Plan and which will connect the site allocations within Welwyn Hatfield and East Herts will deliver visual and biodiversity enhancements which do not depend on the area remaining within the Green Belt.

9. Most Essential Green Belt within the Borough

- 9.1 The assessment of the “Areas of Most Essential Green Belt” (Appendices, Figure 9.1) confirms the overall findings against the 5 Green Belt purposes, which is that the BGS site’s contribution to these purposes is “partial” or “limited or no contribution”, the exception being Purpose 3 (as discussed above). The BGS site is not therefore identified as “most essential” in terms of its contribution to Green Belt purposes. Those areas relate to the “fragile gaps” between towns and intervening inset settlements within the Borough, notably between Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield and between Hatfield and St. Albans. The proposed release of the BGS site to contribute towards meeting the Council’s OAN is therefore supported by this aspect of the assessment.

10. Summary and Conclusions

- 10.1 The conclusions of the Stage 3 Review relating to the BGS site provide further justification for the release of the whole of the allocation from the Green Belt, for the reasons set out in this statement. The Study has confirmed that the BGS site is not amongst those areas within the Borough which are “most essential” to the Green Belt.
- 10.2 The Study also lends further support to the Local Plan’s settlement strategy, the rationale for which is set out at paragraph 5.7 of the draft Plan. This states that:

“achieving sustainable development within the borough without impinging on the Green Belt has been unavoidable and Green Belt boundaries have been amended, where exceptional circumstances existed, in order to achieve sustainable development in the borough”.

- 10.3 The Objectively Assessed Housing Need (OAHN), updated by the Council in May 2018, is for circa 16,000 dwellings to be delivered by 2033. The Borough’s estimated land supply is between 12,000 and 12,400 dwellings, taking account of permissions since 2016. There is therefore a compelling case for releasing the full BGS site allocation from the Green Belt, as set out in our Regulation 19 representations (October 2016).



The “exceptional circumstances” required by the NPPF have been demonstrated for the BGS site as relating to the level of housing need in the Borough and the lack of suitable and available alternative sites to accommodate that need.

- 10.4 The arc of the A414 is a recognisable physical feature which contains the BGS site to its north and west, both within Welwyn Hatfield and East Herts, providing a strong and defensible replacement Green Belt boundary to the development as a whole. This will be further strengthened by the extensive buffer planting along the line of the A414 which is proposed as part of the BGS Master Plan. As the planting matures, this feature will screen views to adjacent housing from the A414 and ensure that the new Green Belt boundary is robust in the longer term and that any potential harm is limited.
- 10.5 Planting to the north of the A414 will form part of the wider BGS green infrastructure network, accommodating elements of the site’s sustainable urban drainage system (SuDs) and forming part of a wildlife corridor within the development. The BGS Green Infrastructure Strategy therefore has the potential to enhance the contribution which the area will make to strategic green infrastructure. Proposals for the area to the north of the A414 corridor and screening measures within the site are set out in Appendix 1 to our statement submitted for the Joint BGS Examination Hearing on 30th January 2018.