

**WELWYN HATFIELD LOCAL PLAN
EXAMINATION**

GREEN BELT STUDY STAGE 3

Comments by Jed Griffiths MA DipTP FRTPI

On Behalf of

Woolmer Green Parish Council and

Knebworth Parish Council

September 2018

Introduction

1. This report has been prepared by Jed Griffiths MA DipTP FRTPI, Principal of Griffiths Environmental Planning, Hertford, on behalf of Woolmer Green Parish Council and Knebworth Parish Council. It is made in response to the Welwyn Hatfield Green Belt Study Stage 3, prepared by Land Use Consultants for the Borough Council and published in August 2018.
2. It is understood that Hearings to discuss the findings of the Study have been arranged for the 6th and 7th November. Stage 6 of the Hearings, to address the proposed developments in and around villages, is programmed provisionally for the week commencing 10th December. The comments contained in this report are concerned specifically with the Green Belt Study, and the Parish Councils will elaborate on these points during the November sessions. Wider planning issues concerning the village policies will be addressed at Stage 6.

Background and Context

3. The Parish Councils note the background to the Study, as set out in Chapter 1, and the scope of the additional work required by the Inspector. The aims and objectives of the Study clearly address the issues raised by the Inspector. As such, the Study represents an independent professional review of the Green Belt in Welwyn Hatfield. The Parish Councils endorse the statement in paragraph 1.12 that “it is not the purposeto identify potential sites of suitability for housing development.”
4. In Chapter 2, there is a description of the evolution of the Metropolitan Green Belt in Hertfordshire. This is largely correct, but there are some omissions to the story. No mention, for example, is made of MHLG Circular 50/57, which gave the direction to local authorities to determine Green Belt boundaries within their areas of administration.
5. Reference is made in paragraph 2.11 to the role of the Greater London Development Plan in influencing the full extent of the London Metropolitan Green Belt. It is true that the former London County Council, and that document, had an influence. The more definitive regional context, however, was provided by the Strategic Plan for the South East (SPSE), published by the London and South East Regional Planning Conference in 1970. Approved in principle by the Government in 1971, SPSE set the context for the preparation of the Hertfordshire County Structure Plan in the 1970s. The basic philosophy for planning of the county was to contain the growth spiral generated by London, whilst protecting the countryside.

6. The evolution of the Green Belt in Hertfordshire and in Welwyn Hatfield is described in the Study at paragraphs 2.13 – 2.16. As noted, the approved County Structure Plan in 1979 established in principle the designation of the Green Belt at about 12 – 15 miles deep, with limited extensions along the main route corridors. Prior to the preparation of the Structure Plan, as noted in paragraph 2.14, the extent of the Green Belt had been established in the First Review of the Hertfordshire County Development Plan, formally approved on 11th May 1971. This document was itself subject to a review in a non-statutory document, Hertfordshire 1981, which set out comprehensive planning policies and proposals for the period prior to the formal approval of the Structure Plan in 1979.
7. It is interesting to reflect that the Minister in 1971, in approving the First Review of the Development Plan, proposed that the whole of rural Hertfordshire should be treated as though it were Metropolitan Green Belt, pending the submission of the Structure Plan. This policy was also absorbed in Hertfordshire 1981 and was applied by the County Council and the ten newly-formed District Councils until the approval of the Structure Plan in 1979.
8. In the initial draft of the County Structure Plan, submitted to the Government in 1976, the County Council proposed that the blanket Green Belt policy should be formalized. This, however, was rejected by Ministers, who directed that the Green Belt should be 12 – 15 miles from the edge of Greater London. In the revised Structure Plan, the outward extent of the Green Belt was established as such, but with the limited “fingers” along the main route corridors. The Study does not make it clear, but the detailed outer and inner boundaries of the Green Belt were established in the District Plans adopted by all ten of the Hertfordshire District Councils by 1982.
9. As noted in the Study, Green Belt policy in Hertfordshire was applied consistently for two decades, as shown by the reference to the most recent County Structure Plan, adopted in 1998. Regrettably, there is no reference to the role of regional policy in providing the overall context for local policies. The revival of regional planning in the 1980s led to the publication in September 1990 of “A New Strategy for the South East” by the Regional Conference for London and the South East (SERPLAN). This document, in an amended form, was subsequently adopted by the Government in 1993. Later, in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, a formal system of regional planning was established, leading to the preparation of the East of England Plan. An essential element of this plan and of the London Plan was the continued maintenance of the Green Belt around London.

10. The Study provides useful summaries of national policy, recently updated in the revised National Planning Policy Framework, of Green Belt work in neighbouring authorities, and of case law. There is brief reference to the role of Neighbourhood Plans, but only one area has been designated in the Borough. The Parish Councils believe that the Borough Council should give more encouragement to local communities to prepare Neighbourhood Plans. This practice has been adopted by many local authorities, including East Hertfordshire District Council, and enables communities to determine the extent of housing development for local needs. In Knebworth, the Parish Council has commenced work on the preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan.

Methodology

11. The Parish Councils note the methodology for the Study, as set out in Chapter 3. The seven tasks seem logical, and fulfil the Inspector's requirements for the scope of the exercise. Identification of the absolute environmental constraints is an essential first step, but some allowance should be made for the indirect impact of potential development on environmental and heritage assets, e.g. within one kilometre of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).
12. Task 2 was an important stage, where the consultants attempted to gain an understanding of the strategic role of the Green Belt in the Borough. There is a good discussion on the concept of "openness", which is recognized as a key characteristic of Green Belt. It is disappointing, therefore, that a stand-alone assessment of openness has not been carried out as part of the Study.
13. The focus of the work is on a detailed assessment of the Green Belt in Welwyn Hatfield against the five stated purposes, now set out in paragraph 134 of the NPPF. This approach is similar to the methodology used in Stage 2 of the Green Belt Review, and has been used many times by local authorities in areas of Green Belt. Promoted by the Planning Advisory Service (PAS), it leads to an extremely rigorous and detailed examination of the performance of the Green Belt, but perhaps at the expense of the strategic overview.
14. There is a detailed discussion of each of the five purposes in paragraphs 3.17 – 3.53 of the Study, focusing on the definitions of the terms used in the NPPF. In the view of the Parish Councils, this is overly elaborate, and leads to an unnecessary degree of detail and confusion in the body of the assessment.

15. In paragraph 3.20, there is an attempt to define what is meant by a “large built-up area”. The consultants’ view is that the primary reason for the designation of the Metropolitan Green Belt was to “control the sprawl from London, Luton, Cheshunt, and Stevenage.” In fact, the singular reason for the designation of the Metropolitan Green was to control the outward spread of Greater London. This purpose is common to all the areas of Green Belt in Welwyn Hatfield, so therefore the assessment against Purpose 1 should have been omitted.
16. In the view of the Parish Councils, the two key purposes of the Green Belt are Nos. 2 and 3. Although the former clearly refers to towns, it is apparent from practice that this purpose does seek to prevent the merger of settlements as well as towns. In terms of Purpose 3, it is clear that the Green Belt has prevented the encroachment of urban development on the Hertfordshire countryside. More locally, it has obviously protected the gap between Woolmer Green and Knebworth.
17. It is debatable whether the fourth purpose should have been included in the assessment. As the PAS guidance has stated, this relates to very few settlements in practice. The purpose was originally included in Circular 42/55 to protect the special character of the classic English towns and cities, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Chester, and York. Each of these towns has its own Green Belt. In Hertfordshire, only St. Albans has this national status, but the city is enclosed by the Metropolitan Green Belt. In Chapter 4, it is considered that Welwyn Garden City should be termed an historic town for the purposes of the Study. In the view of the Parish Councils, this should be rejected, especially as the original core of the 1920 Garden City has been enveloped by post-war development. There is no need to include this purpose as part of the assessment.
18. Common sense has prevailed to some extent in the assumption that all Green Belt in the Borough makes a significant contribution to Purpose 5. The logical step would have been to omit this from the assessment. Instead, it is included in all the tables, which is unnecessary and is somewhat confusing to the reader.
19. Woolmer Green Parish Council has supported the local purpose of the Green Belt to maintain the existing settlement pattern in Welwyn Hatfield. As explained by the consultants, the assessment of this purpose was applied to the settlements already inset into the Green Belt, including Woolmer Green. This highlights the contribution to the integrity of the Green Belt of the gap between Woolmer Green and Knebworth.

20. In summary, it is apparent that the detailed consideration of each of the five national purposes, plus the local purpose, has led to an unnecessarily complex assessment process. Three of the national purposes should have been omitted from the process. The focus should have been on Purposes 2 and 3, together with the Local Purpose. As pointed out elsewhere in this report, consideration of the Local Purpose could have been combined with Purpose 2.
21. The third task, to assess the “washed over” settlements was included at the behest of the Inspector. The Parish Councils have no comments to make on this aspect of the Study.
22. The methodology for Task 4, with the ratings of Green Belt Contributions, is a well-trodden approach. As argued above, the assessment would have been far less complex had it omitted consideration of Purposes 1, 4 and 5 and focused on Purposes 2 (combined with the Local Purpose) and 3. With a large number of assessment parcels, there are bound to be questions about the choice of boundaries and the consistency of analysis between the parcels. The Parish Councils make some detailed comments on the individual parcels below in response to Chapter 6, but mainly on Green Belt grounds. More comprehensive views on the Local Plan’s proposed development allocations will be made at Stage 6 of the Examination.
23. Task 5 assesses the potential harm to the Green Belt from the release of land adjacent to the inset settlements. Ultimately, as stated in paragraph 3.83, this analysis depends on the professional judgement applied by the consultants. The Parish Councils accept this and the caveats applied to Task 5. There is another set of judgements to be made, however – particularly by local residents, and by the Parish Councils, as well as the Borough Council.
24. The final two tasks complete the Study and deliver the outputs required by the Inspector. Detailed comments on these aspects are set out below in response to Chapters 8 and 9 of the Study.

Strategic Assessment

25. The strategic assessment of the Green Belt role is contained in Chapter 4 of the Study. The discussion of the relationships between settlements and the countryside and of the essential characteristics is somewhat generalized and could have been more incisive.

26. The bulk of the strategic assessment is against the five purposes of the Green Belt as set out in the NPPF. As discussed above, the analysis against Purposes 1, 4, and 5 is largely unnecessary. The Study acknowledges in paragraph 4.15 that its underlying purpose is to prevent the spread of London. In Welwyn Hatfield, all parts of the Green Belt serve that purpose. References to Stevenage and Cheshunt are superfluous against Purpose 1 – these relationships are picked up in Purpose 2.
27. Under Purpose 2, there is a more comprehensive consideration of the gaps between neighbouring towns, including the gap between Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City. The importance of the gaps between intervening inset settlements is acknowledged and welcomed by the Parish Councils, particularly where reference is made to the gap between Woolmer Green and Knebworth. The Parish Councils recognize the depiction of the fragile gaps which are shown on Figure 4.1 of the Study.

Contribution Assessment Findings

28. The Parish Councils have studied in detail the assessment findings set out in Appendix 6.1 and summarized in Table 6.1 and Figures 6.1 – 6.5. Just five of the 95 parcels (P1 – P5) affect the village of Woolmer Green. From a Green Belt perspective, the Parish Councils have some comments to make on the individual parcels at this stage, but reserve their rights to make representations on specific sites at Stage 6 of the Hearings.
29. One general point needs to be lodged, however. In paragraph 1.12, the report states that it is “not the purpose of this study of this study to identify potential sites for housing development.” Yet, the assessment of many of the parcels is broken down into an analysis of the Stage 2 housing allocations and other Local Plan proposals contained within those areas. This criticism applies to the analysis of parcel P3 at Woolmer Green. In the Parish Councils’ view, this exceeds the consultants’ brief and is contrary to the purpose described above.
30. At the earlier Hearings, Woolmer Green Parish Council pointed out that in Woolmer Green the Borough Council proposed to release Green Belt land for housing whilst retaining a redundant factory site for housing. The owners of the site have made two planning applications for 72 dwellings, which have been refused by the Borough Council. One of the applications has gone to appeal’ which is due to be determined by a Planning Inspector following a Hearing scheduled for 18th September 2018.

31. The proposed Green Belt land is considered in the Green Belt Study as part of parcel P3. Its inclusion for housing is contrary to the NPPF paragraph 137 (which is referenced at paragraph 2.20 of the Study). This states clearly that “the strategic plan-making authority should be able to demonstrate that it has examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting its identified need for development” before concluding that the exceptional circumstances exist, specifically whether the strategy “*makes as much use as possible of suitable brownfield sites and underutilised land.*”

Harm Assessment Findings

32. In view of the sensitivity of the Green Belt in and around Woolmer Green, it is not surprising that the assessments of harm for the five parcels are rated at as high or very high. All of the parcels make a significant contribution to the Purpose 3 and contain large areas of open countryside. In particular parcels P2 and P3 protect the important gap between Woolmer Green and Knebworth, the retention of which is critical.

New Settlement Release

33. The Parish Councils note the conclusions on the possible release of land for a new settlement. In overall terms, it is clear that there is little or no scope for the development of a new settlement in the Borough, given the sensitivity of the Green Belt as a whole.

“Most Essential” Green Belt

34. The Parish Councils note the conclusions of the Study in Table 9.1 and shown on Figure 9.1. In particular, the identification of the gap between Woolmer Green and Knebworth is strongly supported by both Parish Councils. At the recent Examination into the submitted North Hertfordshire Local Plan, Knebworth Parish Council highlighted the importance of this strategic gap and its contribution to the maintenance of the Green Belt in the A1 Corridor.

Conclusions

35. The conclusions of the study in Chapter 10 confirm the view of the Parish Councils, namely that the critical functions of the Green Belt in Welwyn Hatfield relate to Purposes 2 and 3 of the NPPF. The principal purpose of the Green Belt is to prevent the outward spread of London and arguably all parts of it fulfil that function. Neither the fourth nor the fifth purposes have any relevance for the Borough.

36. The Parish Councils welcome the identification of the gap between Woolmer Green and Knebworth as “most essential” Green Belt. The importance of the swathes of open countryside surrounding the village of Woolmer Green clearly emerges from the Study.

37. The commentaries on the potential measures to mitigate harm and the beneficial uses of Green Belt are noted, but at the same time it is clear from paragraph 10.13 that there could be substantial harm to the Green Belt. Only 12.4% of the parcels assessed are in the moderate, moderate-low, or low categories. In these circumstances, it is questionable as to whether “exceptional circumstances” do exist to justify the release of Green Belt sufficient to provide for the objectively-assessed housing needs of the Borough.

38. The Parish Councils welcome the opportunity to comment on the Study, and will elaborate on its response at the Hearings in November. More detailed views on individual allocations and sites, particularly on parcel P1, will be tendered at the Stage 6 Hearings.

Jed Griffiths MA DipTP FRTPI

Hertford

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