

Examination of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan

Council's Statement - Stage 8 Hearing session

Southern Settlements

Settlement: Brookmans Park

Policy Number: SADM31

Site Reference: HS22 (BrP4)

Matter number: 4

Issue: Green Belt

Question Numbers: Q101-112



Brookmans Park

Policy SADM31, Site HS22 (BrP4), Land west of Brookman's Park Railway Station

Most of the following sites are within the Green Belt and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) says at paragraph 136 that once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered where exceptional circumstances are fully evidenced and justified, through the preparation of plans. It is not appropriate to remove land from the Green Belt unless there are very sound reasons for doing so. In addition to the Borough's development needs, the justification should include considerations such as development constraints, as well as the removal's impact on the Green Belt's openness and purposes. As well as addressing the matters raised by representors and although not exclusively, the following questions are in part designed to establish what exceptional circumstances, beyond the Council's inability to identify sufficient land outside of the Green Belt in order to meet its Objectively Assessed Housing Need, exist to justify the release of these sites, in the context of the local and site circumstances.

Matter 4 Green Belt

The National Planning Policy Framework stresses that the government attaches great importance to Green Belts and says that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances.

The Council carried out a stage 3 Green Belt Review in 2018/19 in order to ascertain the contribution that a finer grain of sites, than were previously examined, around the urban fringes within the district, made to the different purposes of the Green Belt. In this assessment the overall harm at this site is considered to be high but the parcel is not identified as an area of most essential Green Belt. In this context:

101) Is the overall assessment of high harm a sound interpretation of the contribution that this site makes to the purposes of the Green Belt?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) Yes, the Council considers that the overall assessment of High harm is a sound interpretation of the contribution that this site makes to the purposes of the Green Belt.
- b) The Council's assessment of the development parcel that includes the proposed allocation SADM 32 (HS22 – BrP4) is set out in the Green Belt Study Stage 3 (March 2019 – EX99C). The entirety of the proposal falls within parcel P65, which is a larger parcel extending northwards towards Welham Green. The proposal site in question is more closely aligned to sub-parcel P65a.
- c) The 2019 study identified different 'scenarios' in order to consider variations in harm within a parcel and within proposed site allocations. Where sub-parcels were identified that would lead to differing levels of harm these are set out in the report, for example parcel P65 is sub-divided into one further sub-parcel (sub-parcel 'a').
- d) It is important to consider the contrast in the assessment of harm between the whole of parcel P65, vs the sub-parcel that relates to the site in question, P65a. The Green Belt Study Stage 3 makes it clear that release of the whole parcel P65 would lead to 'Very High' harm to the Green Belt and 'would significantly harm settlement separation'.
- e) However, Parcel P65a is a smaller area, that if released, would have a lesser impact than releasing the whole parcel as open land to the north of Bradmore Lane would 'reduce harm to settlement separation' and 'Brick Kiln Wood forms a clear western boundary to the site'.

102) Can this level of harm be appropriately applied to the entire site?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) Yes, the Council considers that the level of harm identified for Parcel P65a can be applied to the whole site.
- b) As explained in the Council's Response to Question 101, the methodology for the Green Belt Study Stage 3, was to identify 'scenarios' in order to consider variations in harm within a parcel and within proposed site allocations. Parcel P65 is sub-divided into one further sub-parcel (sub-parcel 'a').
- c) However, the Council's approach is in accordance with national policy and guidance and for example, gives consideration for the Calverton Test. This includes giving consideration, on a site-by-site basis, for how consequent impacts can be reduced to their lowest reasonable practical extent. In the case of HS22, the area proposed for allocation is smaller than the wider parcel. It is considered that by limiting development to south of Bradmore Lane, thus retaining the area north of Bradmore Lane open, reduces any harm to settlement separation. Furthermore, that Brick Kiln Wood provides a clear western boundary to the site and where opportunities for mitigation exist (discussed further in later questions).

103) In that context, is the allocation of this site justified, effective and consistent with national planning policy?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) Yes, the Council is confident the proposed allocation at Brookmans Park (SADM32 (HS22 – BrP4)) is justified, effective and consistent with national policy in accordance with NPPF (2012) paragraph 182. In particular:

***Justified** – the plan should be the most appropriate strategy, when considered against alternatives, based on proportionate evidence*

- b) The plan has been informed by a comprehensive suite of evidence and a detailed and iterative plan making process that has considered reasonable alternatives through the Council's Sustainability Appraisal process.

***Effective** – the plan should be deliverable over its period and based on effective joint working on cross boundary strategic priorities*

- c) As referenced in the Council's response to Question 113, the Council considers that the site is deliverable within the first ten years of the plan period following plan adoption, in accordance with a cautious but realistic timetable

***Consistent with national policy** – the plan should enable the delivery of sustainable development in accordance with the policies in the Framework*

- d) The proposal will make a valuable contribution to the borough's housing need at one of the borough's most sustainable settlements (Tier 3 – Large Excluded Village) in accordance with the Settlement Hierarchy (**Policy SP3 – Settlement Strategy and Green Belt Boundaries**), which is a secondary focus for new development, following only the main towns, where compatible with the scale and character of the village and maintenance of Green Belt boundaries

104) Do exceptional circumstances exist to release this site from the Green Belt and if so, (other than Welwyn/Hatfield's housing need), what are they?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) Yes, the Council considers that exceptional circumstances exist to release the site from the Green Belt¹.
- b) This matter is addressed, in part, by the Council's Site Selection Background Paper (2016 – **HOU20**), which considered exceptional circumstances on a site-by-site and borough wide basis².
- c) The Council's exceptional circumstance case, as set out in the Site Selection Background Paper, included consideration of the matters addressed by the Calverton Case.
 - 1. Acuteness of the OAN
 - 2. Constraints on supply and land availability
 - 3. The consequent difficulties in achieving sustainable development without imposing on the Green Belt
 - 4. The nature and extent of the harm to the Green Belt if boundaries are reviewed
- d) The Council's updated Site Selection Background Paper (2019) updates and complements the Council's exceptional circumstances case and included consideration for the fifth matter addressed by Calverton.
 - 5. The extent to which the consequent impacts on the purposes of the Green Belt may be ameliorated or reduced to the lowest reasonable extent
- e) This matter has been considered on a site-by-site basis, as set out in the Site Templates (Appendix A of the Site Selection Background Paper 2019 – **HOU20a**) that takes into account the nature and extent of harm to the Green Belt.
- f) By limiting development to the south of Bradmore Lane, any impact on settlement separation can be reduced. The gap between Brookmans Park and Welham Green will still be greater to the west of the railway line as the existing separation to the east. Brick Kiln Wood provides a clear western boundary. Furthermore, it is proposed that areas of Flood Zone 2 and 3 in the southern portion of the site are retained within the Green Belt to reduce the scale of impact and where master-plan led new planting can be used to create robust and defensible boundaries, similar in strength to other settlement Green Belt edge elsewhere in the borough.

¹ The Council note that the plan is being examined under the 2012 Framework and that paragraph 83 of the 2012 Framework is relevant in this case rather than paragraph 136 from the 2019 Framework, as referred to in the Inspector's preamble. The Council note the distinctions between these two versions of the Framework.

² It is noted that additional evidence has been prepared during the examination phase of preparing the plan, which was not available at the time of submission. An example includes the Stage 3 Green Belt Study that identified this site as leading to 'high' harm to the Green Belt. The loss of 'high' harm sites from the plan would lead to a further shortfall in housing supply of around 500 dwellings (assuming the 'high' harm part of SDS5 (HAT1 would be retained).

- g) The Council's Updated Site Selection Background Paper (2019) also provides a summary of the consequences of not imposing on the Green Belt in Welwyn Hatfield Borough that contribute to the exceptional circumstances case for the plan as a whole, and that apply equally on a site-by-site basis. Whilst the proposal at the site in question is below the 'strategic' threshold, it would still make a significant contribution to meeting the borough's housing need. The consequences of not imposing on the Green Belt would mean the plan would fail to:
- “boost significantly the supply of housing for existing and future generations, for which an acute need exists,
 - Plan for or meet the full OAN or the identified requirement for employment provision,
 - Plan positively for economic growth, allowing for changes in the economy and businesses to remain, grow and locate in the borough,
 - Ensure there is a balance between housing and employment planned for in order to deliver sustainable development,
 - Adequately plan for and coordinate the delivery of infrastructure alongside growth (noting that larger allocations still make a valuable and proportional contribution to local infrastructure and where this site provides an opportunity to deliver a new primary school and improved access to Brookmans Park from the west),
 - Support a sustainable pattern of development, consistent with the Spatial Strategy and Settlement Hierarchy (as advocated by the NPPF at Paragraph 84) where the Council's proposed approach does:
 - Channel development first towards the urban areas, particularly at the main town of Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield, and
 - Towards towns and villages inset within the Green Belt, particularly the larger and most sustainable villages such as Welwyn and Welham Green”.

105) Does the site impinge upon the existing gap in built development between Brookman's Park and Welham Green?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) As discussed in the Council's response to Question 101, the release of the entire parcel (P65) would lead to encroachment of the separation between Brookmans Park and Welham Green. However, by limiting development to the south of Bradmore Lane (P65a), any impact on separation is reduced. The separation between Welham Green and existing development in Brookmans Park to the east of the railway line is already less than the gap should development take place at HS22. Bradmore Lane would provide a clear and robust Green Belt boundary, similar in strength to many other settlement edge locations across the borough.
- b) As discussed in the Council's response to Question 104, the Council considers that exceptional circumstances exist to justify the sites release from the Green Belt. It is necessary to weigh the impact on the Green Belt, which is reduced to its lowest reasonable extent with the contribution made to meeting the borough's housing need in one of the most sustainable settlements in the borough following the two towns in accordance with the Settlement Hierarchy and where an opportunity exists to deliver important infrastructure, including a primary school and improved access to Brookmans Park from the west.

106) If so what, if any, remedial measures are proposed to mitigate the resulting harm?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) The Council's response to Question 104 explains how impact can be reduced to the lowest reasonable extent by restricting the extent of the site to not extend any further north than Bradmore Lane. Brick Kiln Wood provides a clear western boundary and opportunities exist for mitigating impact and ensuring that boundaries are robust and defensible. For example, areas of Flood Zones 2 and 3 in the southern part of the site could be retained in the Green Belt, thus limiting the area of release and the use of master-planning to inform new planting along the southern boundary of the site can ensure the Green Belt boundary is robust and defensible.
- b) To be consistent with SADM 27, a Modification could be made to add wording to the policy requirements (Table 16) to ensure new planting/ master-planning ensures the new Green Belt boundary is a strong/ effective as possible should this be considered helpful. If required, example wording of such a **Modification** could include:
"A master-plan led approach to new planting along the northern and southern boundaries of the site should ensure the creation of robust and defensible Green Belt boundaries, incorporating existing tree belt/ hedgerows where possible. Areas of Flood Zone 2 and 3 should be retained in the Green Belt in the southern portion of the site thus informing the creation of the new boundary".

107) Does the site impinge upon the existing gap in built development between Brookman's Park and Potters Bar?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) No. The proposed development will not extend as far south as the existing development at Brookman's Park, i.e. to the east of the railway line, and thus the existing separation between Brookman's Park and Potters Bar will not be reduced. As discussed in the Council's response to Question 106, mitigation is proposed to reduce Green Belt impact in relation to the southern boundary of the site and the creation of a robust and defensible boundary.
- b) The exclusion of the triangle area of land between the proposed allocation and the railway line to the east helps to ensure the gap between Brookman's Park and Potters Bar is maintained to its fullest reasonable extent. The exclusion of this triangle area of land also helps to maintain separation between Brookmans Park and the Royal Veterinary College, which also contributes to the existing sense of separation.

108) If so what, if any, remedial measures are proposed to mitigate the resulting harm?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) Please refer to the Council's response to Questions 106 and 107. The extent of development is proposed to be reduced to exclude areas of Flood Zone 2 and 3 in the southern portion of the site and to ensure that master-plan led new planting creates a robust and defensible boundary similar in strength to many settlement edge Green Belt boundaries across the borough.

109) Is the proposed new boundary to urban development as robust as the existing one, in the context of visually preventing urban sprawl and maintaining openness?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) The proposed new Green Belt boundaries will be similar in strength to many existing settlement edge Green Belt boundaries across the borough and will be robust and defensible. A Modification could be made, if considered helpful, to ensure a consistent approach across all site allocations, as discussed in the Council's response to Question 106. This would ensure that master-plan led new planting creates strong Green Belt boundaries incorporating existing tree belts/ hedgerows

wherever possible. The northern boundary of the site will be formed of Bradmore Lane, and enhanced with masterplan led planting to strengthen existing tree/ hedgerow planting. Brick Kiln Lane Wood provides a clear and robust boundary to the west, albeit Table 15 makes clear provision for at least a 15m buffer to the woodland to protect ecology and create a softer edge to the development.

- b) As discussed in the Council's response to Question 104, the Council considers that exceptional circumstances exist to justify the release of the site to make a significant contribution to the boroughs housing need and ensure that any Green Belt impacts are reduced to their lowest reasonable extent.

110) If the boundary is to be moved, is the current proposal the most appropriate location for a new Green Belt boundary.

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) Yes. The Council considers the proposed Green Belt release provides the most appropriate location for a new Green Belt boundary.

111). If not are there other more defensible boundaries that could be chosen?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) No. The Council does not consider there are any alternative boundary proposals that could be chosen for the reasons explained in the proceeding responses. The Council's response to Question 109 explains why release of the triangle area of land between the proposed development and the railway line to the east is not supported.

112) Is there scope to improve the permanence of any new boundary through the introduction of woodland planting to create enhanced physical features?

Welwyn Hatfield Response

- a) Yes. The Council's response to the proceeding questions and Question 106 in particular, outlines how a possible Modification could ensure that master-plan led new planting, incorporating existing tree belts/ hedgerows wherever possible, can

help to ensure the boundaries are robust and defensible. It is envisaged that the new planting would include some native tree species and woodland planting.