

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

DISTRICT PLANNING EXECUTIVE PANEL – 10 SEPTEMBER 2015

REPORT BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

EAST HERTS GREEN BELT REVIEW AUGUST 2015

WARD(S) AFFECTED: ALL

**Purpose/Summary of Report**

- This report presents the findings of the Green Belt Review 2015
- The report seeks agreement to use the Green Belt Review as part of the evidence base to inform and support preparation of the District Plan.

**RECOMMENDATION FOR DISTRICT PLANNING EXECUTIVE**

**PANEL: That Council, via the Executive, be advised that:**

<b>(A)</b>	<b>the Green Belt Review 2015 be approved as part of the evidence base to inform and support preparation of the East Herts District Plan.</b>
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1.0 Background

1.1 Government policy on Green Belt is set out in chapter 9 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Paragraph 80 sets out that Green Belt serves five purposes:

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas;
- To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns;
- To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

1.2 Although it is intended that Green Belt land has a degree of permanence, it is possible for a local planning authority to conduct

a review of Green Belt land and consider redefining boundaries in order to meet local planning requirements. Paragraph 83 of the NPPF sets this out:

*'Local planning authorities with Green Belts in their area should establish Green Belt boundaries in their Local Plans which set the framework for Green Belt and settlement policy. Once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances, through the preparation of review of the Local Plan...'*

- 1.3 In order to determine whether or not the Green Belt in East Herts continues to fulfil the purposes for including land within it, the Council carried out a Green Belt Review in 2013. Undertaken by officers, the Review consisted of Part 1 which provided a District-wide review of broad parcels, and Part 2 which provided a detailed site assessment and boundary review of selected parcels. The findings of this Review were used to inform the preparation of the Preferred Options District Plan consultation.
  - 1.4 Following the Preferred Options consultation the Council sought a critical friend appraisal of the internally conducted Green Belt Review. The key issue raised in the appraisal was that some of the parcels identified in Part 1 were quite large and the contribution towards Green Belt purposes may be different in one part of the parcel compared to another. It was important that all parcels were subjected to the same rigorous assessment across the District rather than discounting some parcels before the detailed assessment stage.
  - 1.5 Peter Brett Associates (PBA) were subsequently commissioned to undertake a further Green Belt Review of the District. This report presents their work. PBA will be in attendance at the Panel meeting and will be presenting the findings of the Green Belt Review.
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- 2.0 Report
  - 2.1 The Green Belt Review (contained in full at **Essential Reference Paper 'B'**) consists of 4 chapters. Chapter 1: Introduction sets out the purpose of the Green Belt Review, including the approach and details of previous Green Belt work.

- 2.2 Chapter 2: Method explains that the Green Belt Review has been carried out in a number of stages:
1. Identifying the study area and excluding areas subject to absolute constraints;
  2. Identifying land parcels for the assessment;
  3. Consideration of boundaries;
  4. Assessing the parcels against the purposes for including land in the Green Belt;
  5. Identifying the suitability of parcels as areas of search for development, according to Green Belt policy.
- 2.3 The methodology was shared with neighbouring authorities, town and parish councils, as well as with the local development industry and a number of comments were received. The report identifies the key issues raised and consequent changes to the methodology.
- 2.4 Chapter 3: Findings sets out how four of the five purposes of including land in the Green Belt (see paragraph 1.1 above) have been used in assessing the land parcels. The fifth purpose: to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land, has not been included in the assessment. This is because the Green Belt as a whole has a restrictive nature that limits the supply of developable land thereby encouraging the re-use of urban land or the location of development beyond the Green Belt. It is therefore impossible to judge how any given parcel of land would contribute towards this purpose more than another. The Review therefore assumes that all Green Belt land in East Herts performs this function equally.
- 2.5 The Review then carries out a detailed parcel-by-parcel, purpose-by-purpose assessment of the Green Belt in the district. Overall 71 parcels and six sub-parcels were assessed.
- 2.6 Chapter 4 concludes the Review and identifies the following locations as having least importance to the fulfilment of Green Belt purposes, and as such are identified as 'Potential Areas of Search' for development locations:
- a. Parcel 31a – west of Hertford
  - b. Parcel 59 – north of Sawbridgeworth
  - c. Parcel 59a – north of Sawbridgeworth
  - d. Parcels 66-70 – south/west of Bishop's Stortford

- 2.7 Two further parcels are identified as having moderate suitability and are identified as 'Potential longer-term Areas of Search' for development locations:
- a. Parcel 24 – south east of Hertford
  - b. Parcel 37a – west of Ware
- 2.8 There are several key recommendations within the Review which warrant further explanation. Firstly, it should be noted that the conclusions are recommendations only and need to be considered on balance alongside all other technical evidence presented through the Plan-making process. Therefore, for example, whilst the green wedges in Bishop's Stortford are identified as having limited contribution in purely Green Belt terms, the decision to remove the designation is one for the development strategy. The NPPF facilitates such changes if there are other policy designations that can provide an alternative level of protection, such as a Local Green Space designation.
- 2.9 It should also be noted that the aggregation of the assessment of the purposes has assumed that all the purposes are of equal importance, and there is no basis in Green Belt policy (or guidance) for taking any different approach. However, it is likely to be informative to look at how different areas perform in relation to different purposes. For example, a parcel may have limited or no contribution in terms of checking sprawl, however, the same parcel may have a significant contribution in terms of safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.
- 2.10 This is considered likely in the case of East Herts settlements where there is very little land that has the characteristics of 'urban fringe', where unpopular uses are located on the edge of settlements in fragmented and uncared for conditions. Nor are there many large recreation uses which are often found on the outer edges of towns, being appropriate uses within the Green Belt. Instead, in most cases the transition between the built up area and the countryside occurs almost immediately, such as where agricultural uses abut urban areas. This is why most of the Green Belt on the periphery of each settlement is considered to perform an important contribution to the purpose of safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.
- 2.11 Finally it should be noted that for purposes one and two (checking unrestricted sprawl and preventing towns from merging), the assessment considers only the potential effects of *strategic scale*

development. This is an important distinction to make. The Review does not look at individual sites. This is where another level of assessment is necessary such as that provided by the Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA) and the settlement-wide assessments underpinning the emerging development strategy. These are areas of work currently being undertaken.

### Conclusion

- 2.12 The Review is an important piece of evidence for the plan-making process. However, it is only one part of the complicated and conflicting aspects of plan-making, and the recommendations of the Review will need to be taken into account alongside other evidence to create a robust and sound development strategy.
- 2.13 Whilst the Green Belt Review identifies parcels that have more contribution in Green Belt terms, it does not suggest any areas where development would cause significant harm to the integrity of the Green Belt as a whole. The Review instead makes clear recommendations where development could be acceptable even in parcels which have low suitability as an area of search, if properly planned, in a manner which respects the landscape and creates reinforced boundaries.
- 2.14 This report demonstrates that there has been a full and proper examination of how the Green Belt in East Herts performs. Ultimately how Green Belt is considered within the mix of different planning considerations leading to the development strategy is a matter for the local planning authority to decide. A reasonable interpretation of the NPPF might be that development should take place in locations that promote more sustainable patterns of development (NPPF, Paragraph 84) i.e. those where infrastructure, services and facilities are available to support new communities, and that other locations should only prevail if there would be significant harm to the integrity of the Green Belt as a whole or to the role it is there to perform.

### 3.0 Implications/Consultations

- 3.1 Information on any corporate issues and consultation associated with this report can be found within **Essential Reference Paper 'A'**.

## Background Papers

- National Planning Policy Framework (March 2012)
- East Herts Green Belt Review (August 2015)  
<http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/greenbeltreview2015>

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