

Welwyn Hatfield Green Belt Review:

Stage 2

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Introduction

Nearly 80% of Welwyn Hatfield comprises land in the Green Belt (approximately 10,200ha). The remaining 20% consists of the existing built-up areas of the borough's towns and villages. Although there is some capacity to accommodate a limited number of new dwellings on previously-developed land within the urban areas, it is very likely that some land will need to be released from the Green Belt to accommodate housing requirements to 2031 and beyond if the need for housing is to be met.

The Green Belt Review forms an important part of the evidence base for the Council's Local Plan. If it is decided that exceptional circumstances apply necessitating changes to the Green Belt boundary around settlements already excluded from the Green Belt, it will be necessary to take the findings of this review into account alongside a number of other considerations including the findings of the council's Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment and the Sustainability Appraisal, as well as wider strategic considerations to do with the distribution of new development throughout the borough.

The review has been undertaken in two parts:

- Part 1: Strategic Purposes Assessment
- Part 2: Welwyn Hatfield Purposes Assessment.

A description of the approach taken to each is provided below, followed by a summary of the findings of the Part 2 study.

Part 1: Strategic Assessment

The Part 1 study comprised a Green Belt purposes assessment of 66 land parcels across three planning authorities, Dacorum Borough Council, St Albans City and District Council and Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council. This work was undertaken at the strategic level and ultimately identified the roles and functions of the Green Belt parcels and highlighted areas of land that contributes least towards the five Green Belt purposes assessed. The latter were classified as either a 'strategic sub-area' or a 'small scale sub-area'. Those areas identified in Welwyn Hatfield were:

- WH-S1 – land at Hatfield Garden Village enclosed by north Hatfield, Coopers Green Lane (to the west) and the A1(M)
- WH-S2 – land south east of Welwyn Garden City enclosed the A414
- WH-SS1 – land west of Hatfield to the south of Wilkin's Green Lane
- WH-SS2 land south of Welwyn Garden City, to the south of Golden Dell

The study concluded that on the basis of the assessment undertaken it is considered that some reduction in the size of individual parcels in which sub-areas have been identified would not significantly compromise the primary function of the Green Belt

or compromise the separation of existing settlements. It was also stated that, given the non-strategic nature of the small scale sub-areas identified those identified may not be exhaustive. It is therefore possible that additional potential small scale boundary changes, that would not compromise the overall function of the Green Belt, might be identified through more detailed assessment work.

The study also identified a detailed boundary change in Welwyn Hatfield (to the west of Oaklands village) to reflect development which has taken place subsequent to Green Belt designation.

Part 2: Local Assessment

The Part 2 Study assesses a range of Green Belt sites identified by the WHBC Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA), and the Gypsy and Traveller Land Availability Assessment (GTLAA) call for sites with the potential to contribute to a sustainable pattern of development. The Part 2 Study includes areas of the Green Belt recommended for further assessment in the Part 1 study. This includes strategic sub-areas and small scale sub-areas.

Jacobs (formerly Sinclair Knight Merz (SKM)) were commissioned to prepare the methodology (included in Appendix A) by which the assessment would be undertaken. The key output from this work was a site assessment proforma. This was completed for each site through a combination of desk study and fieldwork undertaken by council officers in collaboration with consultants from Jacobs, each completed proforma was peer reviewed for accuracy and consistency with the Part 1 Study. Council officers undertook a final review of the complete profomas.

The Part 2 Study comprised a purposes assessment of 67 sites in total to explain the extent to which each site contributes to the following four purposes set out within the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), together with a local purpose which is a Welwyn Hatfield specific version of that employed in the Part 1 study:

- NPPF Purpose 1: To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- NPPF Purpose 2: To prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another
- NPPF Purpose 3: To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- NPPF Purpose 4: To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and,
- Local Purpose: To maintain the existing settlement pattern.

The fifth NPPF purpose is to assist in regeneration. This has been discounted from the Purposes Assessment, neither was it considered in the Part 1 study. In the Part 1 study it was concluded that, as the local policy review demonstrated there was a limited supply of available or unallocated brownfield sites in the districts, the Green Belt as a whole had fulfilled this purpose. Therefore it would not be a differentiating factor between sites.

The assessment of each site recorded the following information:

- Site Context – this included a document review of the key findings from the Part 1 Study, any relevant designations and landscape features;
- Site and Landscape Appraisal – included a document review of WHBC Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study and on-site appraisal to assess land use, topography, land cover, boundary review, levels of enclosure and levels of openness;
- Green Belt Purposes Assessment – considered the contribution each site makes towards each of the Green Belt purposes identified above;
- Other considerations - identified the potential for cumulative impacts (as a result of site grouping), potential for adjustments to the boundary and identification of the possibility for cross-boundary issues; and
- Summary – an overview of key assessment findings.

The classification of the contribution of each site makes to the Green Belt purposes assessed follows a similar approach adopted in the Part 1 Study. Levels of contribution have been classified as either 'significant', 'partial' or 'limited or no'. Sites designated as Green Belt are not required to meet all 5 purposes as set out in NPPF. It is possible that a piece of land meeting only one of the purposes may be suitable for Green Belt designation. Sites that make only a limited or no contribution to most or all of the purposes may still make a valuable contribution, but the key factor that limits the contribution may be the size of the site. Sites that are surrounded by Green Belt may not be appropriate for release unless they form part of a larger release i.e. the release of a small isolated site in the Green Belt may be illogical.

What the Green Belt Review does not seek to do is balance Green Belt purposes with sustainability objectives and therefore reach conclusions on whether there should be amendments to the Green Belt boundaries. This is the role for Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council to perform taking account of other evidence base work including the Sustainability Appraisal.

Relationship between Part 1 and Part 2 studies

The Part 1 Study recommended two strategic sub-areas in Welwyn Hatfield for further consideration because they were considered to contribute least to the purposes of the Green Belt – these were land at Hatfield Garden Village (WH-S1) and land south east of Welwyn Garden City (WH-S2). Note that while the extent of Hat1 is closely aligned WH-S1, the area of WH-S2 overlaps with, but is not the same as, WGC5. The full extent of Hat1 contributed significantly to preventing towns from merging and maintaining the existing settlement pattern but smaller areas of WH-S1 make a less significant contribution towards Green Belt purposes. It also showed that WGC5 contributed significantly to preventing encroachment into the countryside and maintaining the existing settlement pattern. It should be noted that this assessment considered the Hat1 and WGC5 sites in their entirety and no further analysis of subdivided areas was undertaken.

The Part 1 Study also identified two strategic sub-areas contributing least to Green Belt Purposes – land at Wilkin’s Green Lane, Hatfield (WH-SS1 - similar in extent to Hat4) and land south of Welwyn Garden City (WH-SS2 – similar in extent to WGC1). Hat4 contributes significantly to preventing towns from merging and maintaining the existing settlement pattern. WGC1 contributes significantly only to the local purpose of maintaining the existing settlement pattern.

The Part 1 Study recommended that a boundary adjustment be made in the borough for land currently in the Green Belt in west of the A1(M) in Oaklands and Mardley Heath because it no longer contributes to the four national Green Belt purposes or the local one. None of the sites assessed in the Part 2 Study presented the opportunity for a stronger Green Belt boundary in the area than that currently provided by the A1(M). Accordingly, it would be difficult to justify moving the boundary from its current position.

The relationships between key strategic and local gaps, the parcels in the Part 1 study and the sites in the Part 2 study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Strategic Gap / Local Gap	Part 1 parcel	Part 2 site
Welwyn Garden City - Stevenage	56, 57, 58, 59, 60 (part)	Dig4, GTLAA04, OMH3, OMH4, OMH5, OMH6 North, OMH6 South, OMH7, WGC2, WGC8, WGr1, WGr2, WGr3, WGr4, WGr5
Welwyn Garden City - Hertford	46, 55	Dig1, GTLAA06, WGC3, WGC5 (part), WGC7, WGC8
Hatfield – Welwyn Garden City	43B, 44, 46	Hat1, WGC1,
Hatfield – St Albans	35, 36	Hat2, Hat3, Hat4, Hat5, Hat12,
Hatfield – Potters Bar	45, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52	BrP1, BrP4, BrP5, BrP6, BrP7, BrP9, BrP10, BrP12, BrP13, BrP14, Cuf4, Cuf5, Cuf7, GTLAA01, GTLAA02, GTLAA03, GTLAA07, Hat11, LHe1, WeG1, WeG2, WeG3, WeG4a, WeG4b, WeG6, WeG10,
Potters Bar - Cheshunt	52, 53	Cuf4, Cuf5, Cuf6, Cuf7

Welwyn Garden City / Digswell - Tewin	55	Dig1, GTLAA06, WGC7, WGC8
Cuffley - Enfield	53	Cuf1, Cuf3, Cuf6
Welwyn Garden City - Welwyn	41 (part), 57	Wel4 (part), WGC6 (part)
Welwyn - Codicote	41 (part), 60 (part)	Wel1, Wel2, Wel6, Wel11
Welwyn Garden City - Wheathampstead	42	WGC6 (part)
Not in a strategic or local gap	41 (part), 47, 54	BrP2, BrPTS, Cuf2, Wel3, Wel5,

Findings of Part 2

For the first national purpose – preventing the sprawl of London, Stevenage or Luton and Dunstable – the methodology for this review acknowledges that because this is a very strategic purpose of the Green Belt, and the sites being considered are typically relatively small, no single site is likely to make a significant contribution to this purpose. However, eight sites make a partial contribution because they abut or are close to the boundaries of Greater London or Stevenage. These sites make up only 4.8% of the land in strategic parcels that was identified in the Part 1 Review as making a significant contribution to this national purpose.

The second national purpose, preventing towns from merging, has proved to be the most important in this assessment. In the part 1 study 37.9% of all the Green Belt land in Welwyn Hatfield was found to make a significant contribution to this purpose. Sites in the Part 2 study that rate as significant make up 18.5% of the land in strategic parcels that was identified in the Part 1 Review as making a significant contribution to this purpose. There are a further two sites within strategic parcels making a significant contribution to this purpose that make a partial contribution to this purpose (a further 8.7% of that land). Within parcels that make a partial contribution to this purpose, 29 sites make a partial contribution. A further seven sites make a partial contribution elsewhere.

Nearly half of all the sites assessed also make a significant contribution to the third national Green Belt purpose of protecting the countryside from encroachment. This is a probable reflection of the fact that, when they were originally defined, Green Belt boundaries were chosen carefully and that, since their definition, the local planning authority has been rigorous in preventing inappropriate development in the Green Belt.

However, sites that rate as being significant in terms of their contribution to the third national purpose only make up 4.2% of the land in strategic parcels that was identified in the Part 1 Review as making a significant contribution to this national purpose. This is a consequence of the small scale of the sites in relation the

relatively large parcels such that, in general, their development would not result in significant encroachment.

Only two sites make a significant contribution to the fourth national purpose - to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns, with a further seven making a partial contribution. It is notable that the two significant sites both fall with the same parcel that scores significant for this purpose. A further six parcels in the Part 1 study scored significantly for this purpose, but contain no sites that score significantly in the Part 2 study. So it is clear that this purpose is not the most important consideration for Welwyn Hatfield.

Thirty-two of the 67 sites assessed make a significant contribution to the local purpose of helping to maintain the settlement pattern. A further 24 make a partial contribution. This is to be expected given that the towns and villages in the borough are relatively close together - some local gaps are relatively fragile.

Seven sites made a limited or no contribution to all of the Green Belt purposes – see table 2.

Table 2

Site reference	Location
Cuf2	38-44 The Ridgeway, Cuffley
GTLAA03	The Willows, Marshmoor Lane, Welham Green
LHe1	Land north of Hawkshead Road, Little Heath
OMH3	Land behind Worth House, Danesbury Park Road, Oaklands
OMH7	Land at 22 The Avenue, Oaklands
WeG1	Welham Manor House, Welham Green
WeG2	South of Welham Manor, Welham Green

A further eleven sites did not contribute significantly to any of the national purposes but made a significant contribution to the local purpose.

Table 2A

Site reference	Location
Dig4	Junction of Digswell Land and Bessemer Road
GTLAA01	Fox's Lane, Welham Green
GTLAA04	Four Oaks, Great North Road, Oaklands and Mardley Heath
GTLAA07	Thunderbridge Yard
OMH4	Land at 9 The Avenue, Oaklands and Mardley Heath
OMH5	Land rear of 2-12 Great North Road, Oaklands and Mardley Heath
Wel3	School Lane, Welwyn

Wel4	Sandyhurst, The Bypass, Welwyn
WGC2	Digswell Pumping Station, Off Bessemer Road, Welwyn Garden City
WGr4	Twin Foxes / Heath Road, Woolmer Green
WGr5	Twin Foxes / Heath Road, Woolmer Green

A further fifteen sites did not significantly contribute to any of the Green Belt purposes – see Table 2.

Table 3

Site reference	Location
BrP2	Land NE of Great North Road, Brookmans Park
BrP13	West of Golf Club Road, Brookmans Park
BrP14	East of Golf Club Road, Brookmans Park
BrPTS	Brookmans Park Transmitting Station
Cuf7	Wells Farm, Cuffley
GT02	High Dene, Great North Road, Welham Green
GT04	Four Oaks, Great North Road, Oaklands
OMH4	Land at 9 The Avenue, Oaklands
OMH5	Land rear of 2-12 Great North Road, Oaklands
WeG4a	Land at Marshmoor
WeG10	Dixons Hill Road, Welham Green
Wel3	School Lane, Welwyn
Wel4	Sandyhurst, Welwyn By-Pass Road, Welwyn
Wel5	Reserve School Site, Tudor Road, Welwyn
Wel6	Gravel pit site, Kimpton Road, Welwyn

A further six sites did not contribute significantly to any of the national purposes but made a significant contribution to the local purpose.

Table 3A

Site reference	Location
BrP1	Upper Bell Lane Farm, Bell Bar
BrP5	Land west of Brookmans Park, north of Bradmore Lane
Wel11	Vineyards, 15 Codicote Road, Welwyn
WGC1	Creswick, south west of Welwyn Garden City

WGC3	The Holdings, Cole Green Lane, Welwyn Garden City
WGr3	Land adjacent to 52 London Road, Woolmer Green

Fourteen sites were identified that offered the potential to be subdivided by having potentially strong or moderate boundaries within them. These are identified in Table 4. No detailed analysis has been undertaken for sub-divided areas.

Table 4

Site reference	Location
BrPTS	Brookmans Park Transmitting Station
GT02	High Dene, Great North Road, Welham Green
WGC1	Creswick, Welwyn Garden City
WGC5	Land south east of Welwyn Garden City
WGC6	East of Digswell Hill, west of Welwyn Garden City
WGC8	South of Hertford Road, Welwyn Garden City
GT06	North west of Panshanger Airfield, Welwyn Garden City
Hat1	Stanboroughbury Farm, north and west of Hatfield
Hat2	West of Hatfield
Hat3	West of Ellenbrook, Hatfield
Hat4	South and west of Ellenbrook
Hat5	West of junction 3 of the A1(M), Hatfield
Hat11	South of Hatfield
Hat12	Nast Hyde Farm, Ellenbrook, Hatfield

Five sites were identified where a stronger Green Belt boundary existed just beyond their boundaries – see Table 5.

Table 5 – sites where stronger Green Belt boundaries existed just beyond their boundaries

Site reference	Location
Wel4	Sandyhurst, Welwyn By-Pass Road, Welwyn
Wel5	Reserve School Site, Tudor Road, Welwyn
GT03	The Willows, Marshmoor Lane, Welham Green
WeG4a	Land at Marshmoor, off Great North Road
WeG4b	Land at Marshmoor, off Great North Road

Conclusions and next steps

The findings of this Part 2 Review generally accord with the overall conclusions of the Part 1 Review. It is clear that the Green Belt in Welwyn Hatfield continues to play an important role against four national purposes and the local purpose.

The council will have to take a number of steps in determining which, if any, areas of land would be best to release from the Green Belt. In this context, it needs to be borne in mind that, of the 10,200ha of Green Belt land in Welwyn Hatfield, Part 2 only considers 800ha, which is about 8% of the total. By focusing on sites that are much smaller than the strategic parcels assessed in the Part 1 Review, this Part 2 Review has resulted in assessments that have a much wider range of results than the Part 1 Review.

Boundaries

Paragraph 85 of the NPPF indicates the need to retain strong Green Belt boundaries, assisting in defining a permanent and appropriate boundary between the developed area and the countryside beyond. Should exceptional circumstances exist for land to be released from the Green Belt further consideration will need to be given to defining clear strong boundaries wherever possible using physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent.

Strong boundaries are those that are expected to remain permanent over the long term, foreseeable future and are extremely difficult to alter or destroy by physical means or by planning decision, for instance by planning consent or planning decision at appeal. Examples of strong boundaries include motorways or railways. Weaker boundaries are those that are visible but can more easily be altered or destroyed by physical means.

An assessment will therefore need to be made whether a new boundary resulting from the release of a site from the Green Belt will be as good as the existing one or better. The following should be considered:

1. How penetrable the boundary is by development.
2. Does the boundary feature type indicate whether it is strong or weak?
3. Establish consistency of boundary.
4. Make an assessment between the two to assess if new boundary is stronger.
5. How long term is the boundary, can it be maintained beyond the plan period?