

Matter 6: Green Belt and Safeguarded Land

Representor A0137



SHROPSHIRE LOCAL PLAN EXAMINATION

Stage 1 Hearing Statement

Representor unique Part A Ref *	A0137
Matter	6 – Green Belt and Safeguarded Land
Relevant question nos	1,3,5,6,7

1. Q1. What is the basis of the Green Belt Review? What methodology has been applied and is it soundly based? Is the Council's approach to the Green Belt assessment robust and in line with national guidance?

- 1.1.1. The review of green belt has been a two stage process, of Green Belt Assessment (2017) followed by Green Belt Review (2018). The Council's assessment of the exceptional circumstances to justify the green belt release it proposes are set out in a separate Exceptional Circumstances Statement (2020).
- 1.1.2. The Assessment and Review provide a comparative appraisal of 'broad areas' and 'parcels' in terms of their contribution to 4 of the 5 purposes of green belt. The Assessment and Review give no consideration to the purpose for which land might be required to be removed from the green belt and how that might bear upon the performance against the purposes of green belt. This is relevant for the fifth purpose (NPPF 138e), as green belt can only assist urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land, if there is urban land that is otherwise suitable for the development in question. E.g. a development which requires a strategic site in a location with access to the motorway cannot be located within the urban area of any town located away from the motorway and is unlikely to be able to be accommodated within the urban area of any town. In such circumstances the existence of the green belt does not steer such development to urban areas outside greenbelt, it simply prevents that development from taking place unless there are very special circumstances.
- 1.1.3. Both the Assessment and Review adopt a simplistic approach of excluding green belt purpose e) from the assessment. This has the effect of manipulating the results such that all broad areas and parcels effectively score equally on measure e). That is however not an accurate assessment. A development requirement of say 10 houses that could be disaggregated and dispersed around multiple small sites across a broad geographic area, has far greater potential to be able to be located on derelict or other urban land than a strategic employment led site as above, which has a requirement for a much larger singular site area, a restricted geographic location and requirement for convenient accessibility to the M54.
- 1.1.4. For some development requirements green belt purpose e) will help protect the green belt without preventing development to meet needs, as development will be able to locate elsewhere. However, for other types of development with strategic scale and locational needs that have no choice of location other than green belt, the value of the land to the purposes of green belt is different. With reference to the example, sites in the green belt which could accommodate up to 10 houses would have a value for purpose e), whereas sites suitable for the strategic need may not have a value under purpose e) if that need could not be met elsewhere.
- 1.1.5. When the purpose for which green belt land is being considered is taken into account, it becomes apparent that all sites do not score equally on purpose e).

Matter 6: Green Belt and Safeguarded Land

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- 1.1.6. The Council's Assessment acknowledges that purpose e) should be afforded equal weight with the four other purposes, but patently, by not providing any assessment of purpose e), the assessment does not assess purpose e) with equal weighting to the other four purposes.
- 1.1.7. The Review was a second stage exercise to investigate in greater detail 29 specific 'opportunity areas' to accommodate the growth being considered by the Council. This included land around M54 J3 and J4, which indicates that the purpose for which land was being assessed for potential removal was known, and was likely to have been different for different 'opportunity areas'. However, the Review methodology followed that of the Assessment in making no assessment of purpose e) and effectively scoring all 'opportunity areas' equal in that regard. Accordingly, the Review also presents an incomplete and potentially skewed assessment.
- 1.1.8. In relation to J3, the Review appraised three 'opportunity areas', none of which corresponds to the site which has been promoted by BRE.
- 1.1.9. Opportunity Area J3-1 includes land in the southern section of the BRE site, but includes substantial Broad Areas and Parcels east of the A41 taking in land comprising part of Weston Park, the village of Tong and large areas of open land to the east of Tong, plus land between the M54 and Cosford.
- 1.1.10. Opportunity Area J3-1a comprises three parcels primarily comprising Cosford airfield and museum, the RAF Cosford base and associated RAF housing.
- 1.1.11. Opportunity Area J3-1b comprises a truncation of J3 -1a excluding land around the edges which is outside the RAF holding.
- 1.1.12. The Review provides a comparative assessment of the Opportunity Areas but does not provide a comprehensive basis from which to assess the merits of strategic site proposals which comprise only part of the Opportunity Areas considered and straddle land outside those areas.
- 1.1.13. This illustrates the objection raised to SP11 at Regulation 19, that SP11 does not respond to the strategic priorities. The area of land proposed for strategic development has not been appropriately assessed. For these reasons we consider that the Assessment and Review do not provide a sound basis upon which to base assessment of the merits of the contribution of land to the green belt, and in particular the Assessment and Review do not afford opportunity for the BRE site to be properly assessed.
- 1.1.14. The Assessment states in its referencing of advice from the Planning Advisory Service, that green belt studies should be considered in the context of the strategic role of the green belt, and should therefore be comprehensive across LPA boundaries and not limited to individual LPA. This Advice is echoed by the specific advice of the West Midlands Land Commission which in its final report recommended that the WMCA undertake a strategic review of the green belt across the WMCA area to identify land that performs poorly against the 5 purposes, and identify green belt sites suitable for use as strategic investment locations. This is relevant as the Council is a non-constituent member of the WMCA and the evidence of the SEGS is that the Council is supposed to be focusing on key areas of collaboration with WMCA to accelerate economic growth to focus on priority actions, including specifically the Land Commission and Growth Company . The Council should therefore have embraced the recommendations of the Land Commission in respect of the green belt assessment.

Matter 6: Green Belt and Safeguarded Land

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- 1.1.15. If the green belt assessment and review had been undertaken alongside the similar exercise for the BCA and South Staffordshire, it would have enabled the Council to better assess the relative green belt impacts of releasing a strategic site in the M54 strategic corridor. The Council would then be better informed about the availability or otherwise of alternatives to the BRE site at J3. That awareness should have been a factor in weighing up where the need should be met having first established that exceptional circumstances exist to justify the release of land from the green belt.

2. Q3. Have opportunities to maximise capacity on non-Green Belt sites been taken (including increasing densities)?

- 2.1.1. We do not comment upon the wider exercise of assessing the availability of land for Shropshire's needs, other than to say that the strategic priorities should focus the area of search to meet the need for attraction of population and close relationship with WMCA to the eastern part of the County.
- 2.1.2. The assessment of land to meet BCA needs for employment and housing should take account of the specific requirements of that need and be focused in locations which are with the travel to work zone for both local plan areas, and are in a suitable location for businesses that would otherwise wish to locate in the BCA areas. As set out in our responses to Matters 2, 3, and 4, that will focus the area of search for meeting the BCA need into the M54 Strategic Corridor between J2 and J4.

3. Q5. How have the conclusions of the Green Belt Review informed the Local Plan? Do decisions on Green Belt releases reflect the need to promote sustainable patterns of development, and prioritise sites which are previously developed and/or well served by public transport? Where is this evidenced?
- 3.1.1. The SA should have considered alternative options for delivering each of the needs for the Plan. That process ought to have determined whether there were exceptional circumstances justifying release of land from green belt. It is not the purpose of the Green Belt Review to make that assessment. The purpose of the Green Belt Review should be that having concluded there are exceptional circumstances, to identify which areas of green belt are best suited to meet the need.
- 3.1.2. There is no clear evidence of how the merits of individual sites have been weighed up and how alternatives have been considered. Neither the Green Belt Assessment and Green Belt Review nor the SA include any analysis of a weighing process and the merits of one potential option over another. The Assessment and Review and SA simply provide a comparison of relative merits of land parcels and sites against certain criteria.
- 3.1.3. We have set out in Matter 1 the failings of the SA process to consider socio or economic effects. It is not clear therefore how objective assessment was made of the existence of exceptional circumstances to justify green belt release.
- 3.1.4. We have set out in Matter 6 Q1 the shortcomings of the failure of the Green Belt Review to consider purpose e). It is not clear therefore how the ability of sites or land parcels to meet needs has been assessed, or how the value to the green belt as assessed, has been taken into account in determining which areas of green belt to release.
- 3.1.5. The Green Belt Release Exceptional Circumstances Statement (ECS) provides some explanation of the merits of the selection of land for release from the green belt but does not provide a comprehensive or entirely cohesive justification. The ECS starts from the position that the need for green belt release has been established, and then seeks to justify the decision to release the specific areas chosen. It does not provide an assessment or selection process by which to weigh one location for green belt release against another.
- 3.1.6. It appears therefore that the decision over whether there are exceptional circumstances to justify release of green belt was made outside of the SA, the Green Belt Review and the ECS. It is not clear where decisions were made about which needs justify green belt release and which do not. Having determined that exceptional circumstances do exist for some needs, it is not then clear how the green belt land to be released was selected.

Matter 6: Green Belt and Safeguarded Land

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- 3.1.7. The exceptional circumstances for release at Shifnal are stated to include the needs of the BCA. The ECS states however that the Plan makes no specific land allocations for development to meet the need. Yet the ECS goes on to justify release at Shifnal because the needs of the BCA are most likely to be met in the M54/A5 Strategic Corridor, with proximity to the Black Country likely to promote Shifnal within the migrants key areas of search. Accessibility and green belt setting are additional factors cited in support of release at Shifnal for BCA needs .
- 3.1.8. The ECS continues with reference to the EGS and the need to maximise economic growth and to utilise special environmental and high quality assets and the specific link with the Black Country afforded by the motorway network. The location within the M54 / A5 Strategic Corridor with proximity to motorway junctions and access by rail are identified as the key factors to attract new business . The improving provision for employment factors identified at 8.118 apply equally or more so to other locations within the M54 Strategic Corridor which have equal or better access to the M54.
- 3.1.9. Having identified the exceptional circumstances to justify release of green belt at Shifnal are based upon meeting BCA needs through proximity to BCA areas, and accessibility to the M54 / A5 Strategic Corridor, it is inconsistent that the proposed allocations for Shifnal will not meet those BCA needs. Just 230 additional dwellings are allocated compared to the requirement to make provision for an 'accepted' need of 1,500. Just 15.6ha of employment land is allocated compared to the requirement to make provision for 'accepted' need of 30ha. As we have set out in Matter 2, the needs which should be being provided for are substantially greater.
- 3.1.10. The exceptional circumstances as concluded by the Council support the provision of significantly greater amounts of housing and employment development in the M54 Strategic Corridor than are currently proposed at Shifnal. If the exceptional circumstances analysis had been applied with regard to the full extent of the EGS and the specific needs of the BCA, then the analysis would support the release of a strategic site within the M54 Strategic Corridor.

4. Q6. Has meeting some of the housing and employment needs of the Black Country led to the need to release or safeguard more land from the Green Belt?

- 4.1.1. Please refer to BRE responses to Matter 2 Q9, Q13 and Q14 which evidence that no change has been made to the Plan as a consequence of the Council 'accepting' 1,500 dwelling and 30ha of employment land need for the BCA. No land has been allocated for BCA needs beyond that which was already proposed to be allocated for Shropshire's needs.
- 4.1.2. The evidence of the July 2020 and December 2020 Cabinet reports and the evolution of the plan with no increase in housing or employment land provision after BCA needs were accepted (see BRE response to Matter 2 Q13) therefore suggests that the influence of accepting the BCA is even less than stated in the Green Belt Topic Paper at 8.28 which states:
- 4.1.3. "the decision to seek to accommodate a proportion of the unmet housing and employment needs forecast to arise within the Black Country was not the principal factor in concluding that exceptional circumstances existed to justify the release of land from the GB"
- 4.1.4. BRE's response to Matter 6 Q5 highlights the inconsistency between the use of BCA needs as part of the justification for green belt release in Shifnal, and the lack of site allocations specifically for BCA needs anywhere, and the significant under provision that the Shifnal green belt release will make towards meeting the BCA needs that have been 'accepted'.
- 4.1.5. The acceptance of BCA housing and employment need has not thus far resulted in release or safeguarding of land from the green belt. However, in our opinion it should have done so.
- 4.1.6. In order to meet the needs that have been accepted, and in order to meet the greater amount of need which remains to be provided for, the qualitative requirements of the BCA need are such that it should be met from a strategic site in the M54 corridor. That would necessarily require release of land from the green belt. As set out in BRE's Regulation 19 representations and in our responses to Matters 1, 2, 3, and 4 the socio economic benefits of a strategic allocation to meet BCA needs and the priorities of the Shropshire Economic Strategy have not been taken into account in the assessment of whether exceptional circumstances exist to justify release of land. That is a failing in the methodology which also reflects a failure to consider alternatives and failure to consider how much of the BCA need should be accepted. SP11 and SP2 are not therefore an appropriate strategy, are not justified and not effective.

5. Q7. Is the extent of safeguarded land sufficient to meet longer term needs beyond the plan period and are they justified?

- 5.1.1. Land proposed to be safeguarded does not have regard to the purpose for which it is being safeguarded.
- 5.1.2. The SOCG with ABCA, sets out the Council's deferral of accommodating BCA's known about further needs until a plan review. As green belt boundaries should be set to endure beyond the plan period, at least part of the land proposed to be safeguarded needs to be land which is suitable in locational terms and capacity terms to meet needs arising from BCA. As we have set out in Matters 2 and 3, there is no specific land identified to accommodate the notional 1,500 dwellings or 30ha of employment land which is 'accepted' for BCA needs. As such there has been no regard to the spatial or other qualitative requirements of that provision which is required to genuinely meet the need. The approach to the assessment of land for safeguarding has followed the same approach. It is focused around a strategic approach which appears to ignore the strategic priorities of the evidence base and the needs of the BCA for which provision is purported to be being made.

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