

Green Belt Review of Solihull

Introduction

Two-thirds of the Borough is designated as Green Belt, as part of the West Midlands Green Belt separating the Birmingham conurbation from surrounding urban areas, including the city of Coventry. The boundaries of the Green Belt in Solihull are defined on the Solihull Unitary Development Plan 2006 Proposals Map.

Guidance in the National Planning Policy Framework advises that Green Belt boundaries already defined should be altered in exceptional circumstances only, through the preparation or review of a local plan. Such circumstances may include the need to allocate land for development, where suitable land is not available outside the Green Belt.

In Solihull, there has been constant pressure on the Green Belt since it was first proposed in 1960. Green Belt land has been considered for development and as a consequence under scrutiny in successive development plans, with many sites featuring repeatedly despite being rejected by Inspectors following local inquiries. Green Belt considerations have formed part of the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment, undertaken for the many sites submitted for consideration during the preparation of the local plan. For these reasons, a comprehensive Green Belt review of the whole of the Borough is not considered necessary to inform consideration of Green Belt sites in the local plan.

However, in North Solihull, regeneration needs mean that significant development may have to take place in two areas of the Green Belt, the Cole Valley and the land south and west of Chelmsley Wood. These areas have not received the same attention from prospective developers over the years, so a more comprehensive review of the Green Belt in North Solihull only is considered appropriate.

This review of the Green Belt in North Solihull assesses the contribution of the Green Belt, in the context of the purposes of including land in Green Belts set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. It also identifies other constraints, which would limit the potential for development. The Green Belt Review does not seek to identify land that is suitable for development, a process which is being undertaken as part of the Solihull Local Development Framework.

Context:

National

National Green Belt Policy in the National Planning Policy Framework sets out five purposes of including land in Green Belts:

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas.
- To prevent neighbouring towns from 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.

The National Planning Policy Framework indicates that the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence. For this reason, once Green Belt boundaries are established, they should be altered in exceptional circumstances only.

Alterations to Green Belt boundaries should be undertaken through the preparation or review of the development plan, in Solihull in the Local Plan.

Regional

The West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) 2008 is part of the development plan for the Borough, although it is to be abolished in 2012 in accordance with the Localism Act. The RSS 2008 included an objective to retain the Green Belt, but allows adjustments to boundaries where necessary to support urban regeneration. It also identified the North Solihull Regeneration Zone as an area where investment should be focused.

The RSS 2008 had been undergoing a phased revision. The RSS Phase 2 Revision 2007 recognised that regeneration of North Solihull is critical to achieving local growth ambitions and urban renaissance objectives. The Panel Report on the Phase 2 Revision 2009 noted that Green Belt review is required for the area of North Solihull, north of the A45 as realigned to accommodate the runway extension at Birmingham International Airport, and west of the M42/M6 Motorways. The Council made submissions to the RSS Phase 2 including the Examination in Public, based on delivering local policy objectives, including the regeneration of North Solihull.

Local

One Borough: An equal chance for all, Solihull's Sustainable Community Strategy 2008-2018 recognises that closing the inequality gap between north and south Solihull is a priority for the community. A 15 year regeneration programme is underway to transform the three wards in the North Solihull Regeneration Zone by creating jobs and improving housing, shops, schools, health and community facilities, transport and the environment.

The Solihull UDP 2006 is the current adopted plan for the Borough, and the Green Belt policies have been saved pending the adoption of replacement policies in the Local Development Framework Local Plan for Solihull. A key element of the LDF is the Solihull Local Plan, formerly Core Strategy, for which a consultation on policy directions was undertaken during autumn 2010. Challenges and Choices, 2008 set out three options for growth in the Borough, but made clear that supporting the North Solihull Regeneration programme is a priority for all the options. The emerging strategy for North Solihull, set out in the Draft Local Plan published in January 2012, recognises that urban extensions into the Green Belt are necessary to help deliver regeneration.

The North Solihull Strategic Framework 2005 has been adopted as supplementary planning guidance. It recognises the importance of the Green Belt and that any development within the Green Belt will have to be justified by the need to fulfil essential regeneration objectives. The framework identifies development opportunities presented by the special landscape quality of North Solihull, including the area around the River Cole and Meriden Park, and the need for new employment in accessible locations. No changes were proposed to this approach in the 2009 Addendum.

Purpose

This review of the Green Belt in North Solihull has been undertaken to inform the Solihull Local Development Framework, and particularly the process of identifying locations and sites suitable for development. It provides a means of identifying where development is likely to have the least impact on the integrity of the Green Belt. However, it does not try to identify land for development, which is a matter for the Local Development Framework.

Methodology

The review includes all of the Green Belt to the north of the A45 and west of the M42 and M6. The Green Belt comprises two areas:

- The Green Belt corridor around the river Cole, which separates the northern and southern parts of the North Solihull Regeneration Zone; and
- The Green Belt separating Chelmsley Wood and Fordbridge from Marston Green and Birmingham Business Park, the NEC and Birmingham International Park.

The methodology involves assessing how far the Green Belt in North Solihull contributes to the purposes of including land in Green Belt, and assessing the constraints that affect the land. To accomplish this, the review was undertaken in three parts; splitting the Green Belt into manageable sites, or parcels, assessing the parcels against the Green Belt purposes in PPG2, and assessing against the level of constraints that exist.

The review area was broken down into areas with similar characteristics, using ordnance survey maps and aerial photographs. This produced a total of 37 parcels, as shown on Map 1.

The first stage was to assess each of these parcels against the five purposes of including land within the Green Belt set out in the national context above, again using ordnance survey maps and aerial photographs. Each parcel was given a score for each of the purposes, with two for a significant contribution, one for contribution which was not considered to be significant, and nil for no contribution. Parcels that achieved a score of six or more were considered to be important to the integrity of the Green Belt, whilst parcels achieving five or less were considered to be less important.

The parcels were then assessed against a series of planning constraints to see how viable they might be for development. The constraints were broken down into two lists; hard constraints and soft constraints, based on the categories used for the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment for Solihull. Hard constraints are those where development would be unacceptable or contrary to the purpose to which the site was being put, and comprised Local Nature Reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Scheduled Monuments, Registered Parks and Gardens, Ancient Woodlands, Tree Preservation Orders, Woodland and Listed Buildings. Soft constraints may not prevent development, although they may restrict it, and cover Hedgerows, Local Wildlife Sites, Flood Zone 2 and 3, Public Open Space, Country Parks, Parks and Gardens, Green Spaces, Local Geological Sites and Buildings on the Local List.

Again, each parcel was given a score against each constraint, with two for a significant constraint, one for a partial constraint, and nil where there is no constraint. Parcels that achieved a score of six or more were considered to be highly constrained, parcels achieving two to five constrained, parcels achieving one the least constrained and parcels with nil no constraints. This process was undertaken for both hard and soft constraints, with the findings weighted in favour of hard constraints by considering parcels, other than the least constrained as unsuitable for development, whereas for soft constraints only the highly constrained parcels were considered unsuitable.

The methodology results in a list of parcels that are less important to the integrity of the Green Belt and not considered to be unsuitable, in principle, for development due to constraints.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of the stage one assessment of the parcels against the purposes of including land in the Green Belt. Of the 37 parcels, 17 were assessed as having a score of six or greater out of ten, and considered to be important to the integrity of the Green Belt. The remaining 20 parcels were taken forward for further assessment. Only two parcels were

considered to make little or no contribution to the Green Belt, with a score of nil or one. A further eight parcels were assessed as contributing marginally, with a score of two or three. Three parcels came close to being excluded from further assessment, with a score of five out of ten.

Tables 2 and 3 show the results of the stage two assessment of the parcels against hard and soft constraints. For sake of completeness, this task was undertaken against all 37 parcels, although only 20 parcels were taken forward for further consideration after the assessment against the Green Belt purposes. The results of the assessment against hard and soft constraints are illustrated on Maps 2 and 3.

Out of the 20 parcels, 13 were assessed as having no hard constraints or as being least constrained, with a score of nil or one. One parcel was assessed as being highly constrained in respect of the hard constraints, with a score of nine. For the soft constraints, only two parcels have no or least constraints, although a further 15 were not highly constrained, with a score of between two and five.

In considering both hard and soft constraints, only two parcels had no or least constraints. However, recognising that the soft constraints are less likely to preclude development, those parcels assessed as being constrained for soft constraints only have also been included. This results in the identification of an additional 11 sites. If the parcels with hard constraints with a score of two to five are included, a further three parcels would be added.

Table 4 shows the results of both stages of the assessment. The 13 parcels identified are considered to be those which contribute least to the Green Belt and have the least constraints to development. However, it should be stressed that identifying parcels as being least constrained does not imply that any existing constraints are unimportant. Clearly, these constraints would have to be investigated in greater depth to ascertain whether development was acceptable or not.

Table 4 also shows the additional three parcels assessed as constrained with hard constraints. These sites could be looked at after the 13 parcels indicated above in a sequential approach, although the comments about the need to investigate the constraints apply with even greater force. The results are illustrated on Map 4, which indicates the parcels that are important to the integrity of the Green Belt, and those that contribute least and have least constraints.

Conclusions

Much of the Green Belt in North Solihull contributes significantly to the purposes of including land in the Green Belt, with 17 out of a total of 37 parcels. These parcels are important for retaining the integrity of the Green Belt in North Solihull and should continue to be protected.

Two small parcels make a negligible or no contribution to Green Belt purposes and could be removed from the Green Belt without harming its integrity.

A number of other parcels make only a marginal contribution to the Green Belt.

Most of the 20 parcels that do not contribute significantly have some existing constraints, although for 13 of the parcels, the constraints are solely or mainly soft constraints, which in principle it may be possible to overcome. These are the areas of the Green Belt which should be investigated first, if there is a need to develop land in the Green Belt.

Three additional parcels are not highly constrained and could be investigated after the initial list on a sequential basis, if there is insufficient land for development.

Where constraints have been identified, these will need to be investigated in greater depth, and these parcels may not be suitable for development. An in depth assessment is not part of this Green Belt Review.