



Wycombe Local Plan

Statement on Behalf of Richborough Estates Limited (Rep. No. 0954)

Matter 6 – Green Belt

Issue: Do the exceptional circumstances exist to justify the proposed revision of the Green Belt boundaries and can the need for housing and employment development be accommodated without releasing land from the Green Belt?

Question 1: Are the Green Belt Assessments (GB1 and GB2) soundly based, justified and consistent with national policy?

a) Can the need for housing and employment development be accommodated on deliverable sites within settlement without releasing land from the Green Belt?

b) Has the capacity of areas within settlement to accommodate growth been robustly assessed and what were the conclusions?

c) How were the removal sites identified and assessed?

d) Was an assessment undertaken of the contribution of each of the removal sites to the Green Belt purposes and what were the conclusions?

1. Richborough Estates agree with the Council that to meet the housing and other growth needs of the District, at least during the plan period, there is a need for Green Belt boundaries to be reviewed and land identified for development.
2. There is no definition of what amounts to exceptional circumstances in the current NPPF. The draft NPPF includes an approach towards demonstrating exceptional circumstances based upon accommodating development at non-Green Belt locations in the first instances. Criterion (iv) of Document GB2 would generally satisfy the draft NPPF. However, the approach adopted by the Council in Document GB2 then adds layers to defining exceptional circumstances. These additional layers are, in effect, site specific assessments rather necessarily amounting to exceptional circumstances.
3. If Green Belt land has to be released for development because of the exceptional circumstances associated with accommodating an unmet housing, employment or other requirement, then, as required by the NPPF, it is appropriate to look to review the Green Belt boundary in locations which promote sustainable development in the first instance. This is echoed criterion (i) in Document GB2. Such an approach would automatically direct growth to the Principal Settlements within the District, such as High Wycombe and Marlow, rather than rural villages. These Principal Settlements have the widest range of services and facilities (Strategic Objective 8) and should be a fundamental part of the Local Plan's Spatial and Settlement Strategies.



4. Once the growth has been directed to the Principal Settlement it is only then that the assessment process should consider the impact releasing particular sites would have on the purposes of the Green Belt and the consistency with the Local Plan's strategy for meeting the identified requirements for sustainable development (Bullet 1, NPPF paragraph 85). Criterion (ii) in Document GB2 only partially covers this point. Also, as part of the consideration should be defining clearly any Green Belt boundaries using features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent. When combined, this should then be the basis of which sites are identified and proposed for removal from the Green Belt at the sustainable locations.
5. The approach outlined above should, in the context of Question 8 for Matter 2 equally apply to the identification of safeguarded land. The concept of reserved sites is not new because some of the proposed housing in this Local Plan is intended to be delivered on such sites identified in the Core Strategy.
6. Where Richborough Estates depart from the Council's approach is to consider whether the detailed considerations of landscape and highway impacts amount to exceptional circumstances. The landscape and visual sensitivities identified in Document GB2 are not related to the functions of the Green Belt. Richborough Estates is of the opinion that the fact a site might be within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) should not be seen as blanket a reason for discounting an amendment to the Green Belt boundary if it is capable of satisfying the other aspects of meeting the identified requirements for sustainable development. The effect on the AONB should be an entirely separate matter.

Question 2: Is the approach to amending Green Belt boundaries to release sites for development soundly based and is it consistent with the conclusions of the review in respect of their contribution to Green Belt purposes?

7. In identifying where the Green belt boundary should be reviewed, greater weight should have been given to delivering growth at sustainable locations (see also Richborough Estates' Matter 2 Statement), including a higher level of housing at Marlow. Therefore, in responding to the question, Richborough Estates consider this not to be the case in respect of land to the north of Marlow.



8. In the draft Local Plan as site was proposed from release from the Green Belt for housing purposes at Oak Tree Road (Document GB 2 Sites SMA0085 and SMA0086). At that time, the Council's view was that:

MR7 Land North of Oak Tree Road, Marlow

- 5.2.7 As part of this consultation we are also seeking views on whether the fields either side of the north end of Oak Tree Road (see Fig 23) should be taken out of the Green Belt and developed for housing. These fields are currently designated Green Belt and are also in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The fields are on rising ground located between the edge of Marlow and the low density housing area at Seymour Plain which is within the Green Belt.

Figure 23 Land at the north end of Oak Tree Road



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- 5.2.8 The Council has undertaken an initial assessment of the sites in terms of the impact of development on the Green Belt and their developability including impact on the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Key issues are:

- How important the fields are in preventing Marlow merging with Marlow Bottom
- Whether by protecting them they prevent the unrestricted sprawl of Marlow
- Whether development of these two fields would constitute major development in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- Whether satisfactory vehicular access can be gained to the sites and what landscape impact would that access have.

9. It was appropriate at that time to consider an amendment to the Green Belt boundary but not for the submission version of the Local Plan. The site was not progressed because of being considered to be major development AONB. However, unlike other sites, it is curious to record that The Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Site Assessment Report (Document AONB 1) does not contain an assessment for the site at Oak Tree



Road. This might be because Document AONB1 states that 'The Green Belt Assessment process identified the following sites which were capable of removal from the Green Belt and which were otherwise suitable (setting aside specific AONB issues)' (paragraph 7.2). However, Document GB2 does include AONB considerations (page 220):

Assessment of whether 'major development' if in the AONB	The scale of the site in combination with the adverse landscape impacts identified means that allocation of this site would be likely to result in major development in the AONB.
Step 3: Does the site appear to be otherwise developable on the basis of the available evidence on suitability and deliverability? (If 'NO' – include short reasons)	No – due mainly to the AONB impacts both in terms of the major development issue and immediate impacts on the green lane.

10. This reinforces the point previously made that the Green belt and AONB/landscape assessments of any site should be separate exercises.
11. Consideration of the merits of the Green Belt and wider assessment undertaken by the Council of the Oak Tree Road site in Document GB2 are included as Appendix 1 to enable the Examination to understand the concerns of Richborough Estates about the assessment process. Contrary to the Green Belt Assessment Richborough Estate's site at Oak Tree Road could be removed from the Green Belt without detriment to the functions and purposes of the Green Belt. The reasons for the site not being progressed was AONB considerations which are addressed in the Statement concerning Matter 5 and the material submitted as part of Richborough Estates' representations to the Pre-submission version of the Local Plan, including landscape and AONB considerations.
12. The focus of the Assessment process should have been to promote growth and revisions of the Green Belt boundary where the widest range of facilities and services available and to promote sustainable patterns of development.

Question 3. Do the exceptional circumstances exist to justify the proposed revision of the Green Belt boundaries?

13. By reason of the need to accommodate housing and employment growth, the exceptional circumstances exist to justify amendments to Green Belt Boundaries.



14. As set out in the draft NPPF review (which reflects the Housing White Paper Fixing Our Broken Housing Market), the Council has considered the potential for the re-use of land within the urban area for redevelopment; allocated housing beyond the Green Belt and looked towards an Aylesbury Vale District as a non-Green Belt authority to accommodate some growth. After the adoption of this sequential approach, there remains a need for growth to occur within the District on land currently within the Green Belt.
15. Any growth should be directed at the Principal Settlements, in particular High Wycombe and Marlow being the 2 largest settlements with the widest range of services, facilities, job opportunities and public transport connections. Such an approach is consistent with the NPPF policy towards reviewing Green Belt boundaries where account should be taken of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development. This is echoed in Strategic Objective 8.
16. In summary the exceptional circumstances which apply to a revision of the Green Belt boundary at Marlow are:
 - Second largest settlement within Wycombe District with an estimated population of circa 14,300 people. Marlow has 8.3% of the District's housing stock but it is only proposed to provide 3.2% of the Local Plan's housing need.
 - Some 12,225 people are employed at Marlow which is 14% of the District's total.
 - There is already an imbalance between the resident population and jobs with only 23.9% of people living and working in Marlow. The remainder are in-commuters.
 - The housing affordability ratio has increased from 7.29 in 1997 to 17.31 in 2016.
 - Marlow has a wide range of retail uses, a good range of services and both bus and rail public transport connections. Additional housing would support these facilities.
 - The Settlement Hierarchy Study identifies Marlow (Documents SHS1 and 1.1) Study demonstrates that in terms of 'Key Services', 'Higher Order Services' and 'Public Transport' Marlow scores the same as High Wycombe (a Tier 1 Settlement).
17. As a separate point, the Local Plan fails to reflect the NPPF policy concerning the identification of safeguarded land to meet longer-term development need stretching beyond the plan period and to ensure that the boundaries do not need to be altered at the end of the plan period. The Local Plan should be having regard to the permanence of the Green Belt boundary in the long term. Such safeguarded land should equally take



into account the need to promote sustainable patterns of development by identifying such sites on the edge of the Principal Settlements, including at Marlow.

Question 4. What are the exceptional circumstances, as required by the NPPF paragraphs 79 – 86, that justify the Plan's proposed revision of the boundaries of the Green Belt?

18. This question is addressed in the response to the questions above

Question 5: Do Policies DM43 (Replacement or extensions of dwellings in the Green Belt), DM42 (Managing Development in the Green Belt) and DM45 (Conversion of existing buildings in the Green Belt and other rural areas) provide an appropriate mechanism for the managing the replacement, extension and conversion of buildings in the Green Belt?

19. Richborough Estates has no view about this question.

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Appendix 1 – Land at Oak Tree Road Green Belt Assessment

- 1 Although Richborough Estates has raised concerns about the assessment process which has been undertaken, the content of this appendix reflects the Council's approach for the sake of being comprehensive. The assumption is that the criterion (iv) exceptional circumstances have been demonstrated to require the Green Belt boundary to be reviewed and land identified for housing purposes and, in the submission of Richborough Estates, safeguarded land to enable any boundaries to endure beyond the plan period.
- 2 As a matter of principle, under criterion (i) Marlow is a sustainable location for growth as explained in Richborough Estates in the Matter 2 Statement. It is the second largest settlement and has a wide range of services, facilities, job opportunities and public transport connections. Paragraph 16 in the Statement identifies all the exceptional circumstances for amending the Green Belt boundary at Marlow.
- 3 Although Document GB2 refers to the site at Oak Tree Road contributing towards the separation of Marlow and Marlow Bottom. However, as is more evident on the ground rather than reviewing plans, the separation of Marlow and Marlow Bottom is secured through the change in the levels between the collection of dwellings which comprise Seymour Plain and the settlement of Marlow Bottom and is reinforced by the woodland. In terms of Green Belt functions identified in the NPPF, the release of the Oak Tree Road site for housing development would not cause towns to merge into one and other, assuming Marlow Bottom could be properly described as a town rather than a village. (emphasis added).
- 4 As with any Green Belt site there would be some encroachment of built development onto the open countryside albeit in a planned rather than unrestricted manner because of its allocation for housing in a Local Plan. However, in this case, the site is contained between Marlow and the collection of dwellings comprising Seymour Plain which are already urbanising influences. There is, housing to the north, south and west of the site. Accordingly, any new homes would relate to these existing residential developments rather than representing unrestricted sprawl of a large built-up area into the open countryside. Criterion (ii) of Document GB2 would be met.
- 5 If the site was excluded from the Green Belt, then obvious physical and clear boundaries would be established by the existing field boundaries and the rear gardens of dwellings



at Seymour Plain. The use of rear gardens to define a Green Belt boundary is common because such boundaries are recognisable physical features. Indeed, the Green Belt boundaries are, in this location, defined by rear gardens. The removal of the dwellings at Seymour Plain from the Green Belt would avoid any anomaly of the type suggested in Document GB2.

- 6 In principle, when assessed against the approach outlined by Richborough Estates the site would be capable of being removed from the Green Belt. However, for the sake of completeness to reflect the assessment undertaken in Document GB2, the other site-specific considerations have also been assessed.
- 7 A development of 100 dwellings would represent a 1.5% increase in the housing stock at Marlow and this scale of development cannot reasonably be regarded as being disproportionate to the size of the settlement. In the alternative, the exceptional circumstances and public interest exist for growth to occur at Marlow to meet the housing needs of the District at a sustainable location.
- 8 As recorded in Document GB2, a detailed landscape and visual impact assessment may demonstrate the site can accommodate more development if the landscape effects and visual impacts are low and can be mitigated effectively. This is exactly what a specialist Landscape Consultant input has done to assess the potential residential development of the site based upon detailed landscape and visual assessment.
- 9 The character of the site is influenced by the sloping topography, the hedgerow tree boundaries and the adjoining residential properties. Whilst the site is currently undeveloped, it is demonstrably a settled landscape within the Marlow urban area. The landscape assessment of the site contained in Document GB2 also recognises that the site has a rural character but with the urbanising influences of the Marlow urban area and, to a lesser extent, Seymour Plain to the north.
- 10 Document GB2 is lacking consideration of whether there are any views back to the site from the wider area and just comments that the site may be screened by intervening buildings, trees and woodland. However, Document GB2 again helpfully recognises that, despite being part of the AONB, the context of the residential development and its relative containment mean the site has a limited impact on the sensitivity of the AONB.



- 11 These matters have also been considered these wider views. The visual receptors are limited and localised. The site is apparent from a limited number of long distant views but is screened at close proximity. Within the longer distant views, the site is not prominent and is experienced within broad panoramas as a narrow parcel of grassland within a settled valley side. The existing residential development incorporates the site into Marlow's townscape as opposed to the wider rural fields beyond the settlement fringes. In summary, the views from the wider area are not significant and any new homes would be related to the context of the built forms of development with Marlow's townscape remaining largely unaffected. The conclusion concerning the limited contribution of the site to the wider AONB is supported by the work undertaken on behalf of Richborough Estates.
- 12 As with the Green Belt, the critical elements which contribute to the character of the AONB between Marlow and Marlow Bottom are the change in the ground levels and the woodland. These would not be impacted by the development of this site for housing purposes.
- 13 Although there are public rights of way within the site, any quiet enjoyment of these routes within the AONB is already compromised by the context of the surrounding residential properties and the traffic along Oak Tree Road. This is not a tranquil part of the AONB. Recreational opportunities to supplement the public rights of way can be created by greenspaces within the development which would be of benefit to the local community. Such opportunities would replace the informal use of these fields for dog walking.
- 14 There are no ecological considerations which would preclude development of the site and, as demonstrated by the illustrative layout plan below, the oak trees subject of a Tree Preservation Order would be retained. Indeed, built development would be set back from this road to maintain its character as a sylvan green lane which is one of the erroneous reasons identified in the Document GB2 for rejecting this site's removal from the Green Belt.
- 15 The Council's own assessment is that there would be no adverse impact on heritage assets if this site was released from the Green Belt and allocated for housing development.



- 16 The site would be within walking distance of local facilities and public transport to Marlow town centre. The level of traffic generated by around 100 dwellings would not result in severe cumulative transport impacts.
- 17 Based upon the work undertaken on behalf of Richborough Estates by specialist consultants, it is evident that any claimed detrimental effect on the environment, landscape and recreational opportunities identified in Document GB2 does not stand up to scrutiny and this is a site, at a sustainable location (criterion (i)), which, with appropriate mitigation, can be removed from the Green Belt without prejudicing its purposes (criterion (ii)) and possessing a clearly defined boundary notwithstanding being within the AONB.