



## **Policy JP Allocation 1.2, Simister and Bowlee**

### **Legality**

#### **Failure to comply with Statement of Community Involvement**

Bury Council have failed to comply with their Statement of Community Involvement Statement of Community Involvement (bury.gov.uk) at all stages of the creation of the plan. There was no notification to residents of the initial call for sites and the amount spent on making residents aware of the plan is disproportionately small (£100 as per the response to a Freedom of Information request) in comparison to the effect it will have upon them. There has been a deliberate campaign of misinformation and misleading statements to promote and “sell” the Plan to residents, rather than a presentation of the facts e.g., residents only being told of the plans for their specific ward, and not being informed of the bigger picture across the borough, thus giving the impression that the impact is less than it is. There has been an over reliance on residents finding things out for themselves on social media and websites and thus a failure to engage with various groups due to over reliance on the use of social media and technology. There has been no access to public internet, e.g., in libraries, during Covid. This has adversely and disproportionately affected older people and those from deprived backgrounds. This is against the SCI 2.4 & 4.17. Countrywide, Covid restrictions are now lifted but restrictions still remain in place in Bury’s Statement of Community Involvement (SCI para 1.7). Consultations have been inaccessible in terms of language and terminology used and have been a deterrent to becoming involved in the planning process as they have been wordy, long winded, and intrusive, thus producing an irrelevant response rate.

#### **National Planning Policy Framework greenbelt protection clauses**

The purpose of the NPPF greenbelt protection is to prevent urban sprawl. Developing on this green belt site will create an urban sprawl contrary to NPPF para 137 and para 138 a,b,c, and e.

This proposed allocation will result in the loss of approximately 74 hectares of Green Belt. This area of Green Belt currently performs strongly in relation to checking the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas and in preventing neighbouring towns from merging. The loss of this land from the Green Belt will therefore clearly result in harm which has not been justified. The case for exceptional circumstances to release this site for development has simply not been made given the lack of suitable assessment of reasonable alternatives.

To prove that exceptional circumstances to justify alteration to greenbelt boundaries exist, the NPPF requires evidence that all other reasonable options to meet identified need have been considered (NPPF para 141). This must include maximising use of brownfield and underutilised sites and maximising density.

## **Assessments**

There has been a failure to conduct thorough and independent ecological assessments. Assessments carried out have been done on behalf of developers and are therefore not independent. Site wildlife, flood risk and other surveys have been carried out by consultancies on behalf of and paid for by developers rather than entirely independent wildlife organisations or the Department of the Environment so must be considered potentially biased.

The Housing Need Assessment was carried out by Arc4, who were supposed to carry out a non-biased survey of housing need. However, they have a partnership with Greater Manchester Housing Partnership, an organisation of housing associations, including Six Town Housing in Bury. The assessment was therefore not impartial.

## **Climate change policy and carbon neutral policy**

Simister and Bowlee currently have illegal air quality readings due to the motorways (M60, M62 and M66) surrounding the site. Bury Council have confirmed by email that they are not responsible for the Strategic Road Networks (motorways) and this is Highways England. However, the local authority as a duty of care for all residents and should consider all intelligence particularly when it could jeopardise the health and wellbeing of local residents.

Highways England provided the readings through a freedom of information request and the readings on the Strategic Road Networks around Simister and Bowlee in 2015/2016 were:

- 75% at illegal limit
- 15% at legal limit
- 10% not full year readings

With the introduction of a 1.2 million square metres of industrial and 1550 homes this will undoubtedly increase already illegal levels of carbon emissions even further.

Point 17 Page 233 of the PfE states we will “incorporate appropriate noise and air quality mitigation measures and high-quality landscaping along the M60 motorway corridors and local road network if required within the allocation.”

Highways England have already tried this through the Barrier erecting study and it failed. The before and after results were provided and it was confirmed there was no reduction in pollution.

## Up to date information

The PfE indicates in Para 1.63 point 2 that the most up to date information be used in plan making, so being the most recent Bury's Housing Development Needs Assessment 2020 must be taken into consideration: <https://www.bury.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=15866>

## Soundness

### Site Selection

The site selection process for Bury has been especially opaque. Little information has been given about why other more apparently suitable sites were rejected, or what alternatives were considered. Bury Council admitted in a Freedom of Information response that site selection was decided at a series of informal meetings with no list of attendees or minutes available. This site choice cannot be justified as the most appropriate when no reasonable alternatives appear to have been examined. Alternative options were ruled out too early or were not considered despite other areas having similar if not more appropriate criteria.

The Simister and Bowlee allocation only meets 4 out of 10 of the broad objectives within Section 3 of the PfE plan:

- Objective 1 - Meet our housing need.
- Objective 3 Playing our part in ensuring a thriving and productive economy in all parts of Greater Manchester.
- Objective 5 - Reduce inequalities and improve prosperity.
- Objective 6 - Promote the sustainable movement of people, goods, and information.

These and other objectives could be satisfied by any number of sites in the area.

According to the Greater Manchester Green Belt assessment the Simister and Bowlee site makes a strong or weak to moderate contribution to the purpose of the greenbelt in each of the areas:

To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas - Strong

To prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another - Strong

To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment - Weak to moderate

Preserving the setting and special character of historic towns - Weak to moderate

However, it is believed the Simister and Bowlee site has been assessed incorrectly as all these contributions should be strong or strong to moderate. The definitions below have been taken from the GM Green Belt Assessment document:

- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment
  - Strong - The land parcel contains the characteristics of countryside, has no or very little urbanising development, and is open.
  - Moderate - The land parcel contains the characteristics of countryside, has limited urbanising development, and is relatively open.
- Preserving the setting and special character of historic towns
  - Strong - The parcel plays a major role in the setting and or special character of historic towns in terms of its physical extent and degree of visibility and/or its significant contribution to special character.
  - Moderate - The parcel plays a moderate role in the setting of historic towns in terms of its physical extent and degree of visibility and/or its contribution to special character.

Several character areas are included in this allocation, such as National Character Area (54), Manchester Pennine Fringe, Simister, Slattocks and Heald Green, as well as Fringe Settled Valley Pasture and Settled Farmlands. At paragraph 18.3, the Topic Paper describes the character of the area, including undulating pasture and rough grassland, mature trees, hedgerows, woodland blocks, and scattered farmsteads etc. These would all be destroyed if the development of this allocation were to proceed.

The site can be seen from a number of longer vantage points, as well as in the immediate neighborhood. However, due to the scale, form, and nature of the proposed development, visual amenity will be adversely affected. The landscape mitigation proposals will not address these fundamental concerns.

There are numerous key habitats on the site, including wetlands, woodland, grassland, etc., which will all be damaged and could be lost as a result of this scheme. Additionally, the scheme will negatively impact protected species, including great crested newts, as well as wider ecological networks, which have not been adequately considered in the plan. There is no consensus that biodiversity net gain can be achieved at this site, given the extent of loss of existing vegetation and greenspace.

According to the Topic Paper at paragraph 191.0, there will be an attempt to achieve a net gain, but there is no guarantee that it will be delivered. This is contrary to current national planning policy, which could jeopardize the allocation. In addition to the impact of the development itself, the proximity of the site area to major highways also raises concerns about air and noise pollution.

The lack of selection criteria met and the harm that will be caused by the release of the Simister and Bowlee greenbelt are evidence of the lack of justification for the selection of this site. In fact, an ex-Bury Council leader, David Jones, admitted in writing that sites had been selected due to their sheer size and the ease of implementation of infrastructure, saying,



“The proposed strategy within the GMSF is to release a small number of large strategic sites from the Green Belt as these will provide the scale and massing of development that is needed to enable the viable delivery of the essential major infrastructure to support the development.”

The majority of the site is located within flood zone 1 with existing watercourses within the allocation boundary and ponds which could pose a risk. Furthermore, given the anticipated scale of development and the large increase in hard surfacing, there is a serious risk that the site could result in flooding on adjacent sites as well as localised floods due to increased surface water runoff.

Paragraph 12.2 of the Topic Paper supports these concerns and draws attention to potential issues on groundwater flooding. Given the importance of ensuring that developments are proposed in the most appropriate and safe areas, greater consideration of flood risk should be given at this stage of the Plan process, prior to adoption, to ensure that the allocations are appropriate and deliverable. Leaving these issues to the design stage is simply inappropriate as they fall to the principle of development.

The viability of this site is noted to have been calculated with a 25% contribution towards affordable housing in Bury and at 7.5% of GDV in Rochdale. However, because the PfE Plan does not specify the conditions for delivering affordable housing throughout the Plan, it is uncertain whether these figures are based on correct and reasonable assumptions. The GMCA has determined that the site is viable, but there are a number of issues that must be addressed before the site can be considered deliverable.

### **Infrastructure**

The Topic Paper supporting this allocation states in paragraph 11.1 that extensive infrastructure investment, including a wide range of public transportation enhancements, is required to ensure its implementation. This aims to prove that the site is unsustainable in its current state and is not properly connected to an existing urban area or community. As a result, the site is deemed unsuitable for allocation.

In paragraph 11.2, it is confirmed that this development will have a major influence on both the strategic and local road networks, both in isolation and in combination with other neighbouring allocations. The impact on the Strategic Road Network (SRN) is expected to be focused at M60 Junction 19 and M62 Junction 19, while the impact on the Local Road Network (LRN) is projected to be concentrated at the intersections on the A6045 Heywood Old Road. To facilitate and deliver this site, it is evident that major investment and improvements to the highway network will be required.

These works are of such a scale as to potentially render the scheme unviable. Furthermore, the construction will have a major negative impact on current inhabitants, not just due to



traffic and roadworks during construction, but also due to traffic, increased idle vehicles, and longer travel times once the development is completed.

Investment in public transport is unlikely to be adequate to alleviate these legitimate concerns, especially when considering the cumulative consequences of all the anticipated growth in the surrounding area.

Any development within the proposed allocation site would need to assess the requirement for additional social infrastructure (education, healthcare etc). the impact of these contributions on the viability of the site also needs careful consideration to ensure that the allocation is in fact deliverable

To deliver this allocation there are requirements for investment in the transport network, public transport provision, school places, health, historic assets etc. All of which could well have a detrimental impact on the viability and delivery of the site

### **Housing delivery targets**

Bury Council have consistently failed to meet housing delivery targets and are now in presumption. To be effective a plan must actually be deliverable. The plan relies heavily on the cooperation of property developers. There is no indication of how they will be made to keep up with targets and what sanctions will apply if they don't. At a Council meeting held on 9/9/21 the Leader of Bury Council Eammon O' Brien confirmed that it was "unlikely" that the proposed building rates for all developments in Bury would be met as they were "unrealistic". So, the plan cannot be considered to be effective and fails the effectiveness test for Soundness.

### **Housing requirements**

Government guidance is clear that standard housing methodology is just a starting point and can be changed in exceptional circumstances – this has not been thoroughly explored. A lack of brownfield land in the area and in particular the economic shock caused by Brexit and Covid 19 have not been considered.

There is insufficient confidence in the accuracy of the predictions in the current uncertain economic climate to justify Green Belt loss at the start of the plan. Greenbelt loss should only occur once all brownfield has been exhausted. A review mechanism should be built in to only include greenbelt at a later stage if proven necessary. PfE para1.42 states: "The majority of development between 2021 and 2037 (the "plan period") will be on land within the urban area, most of which is brownfield land" PfE favours a brownfield first policy wherever possible as does National Policy. Bury Council have informed the public in Bury that they will implement a brownfield first policy. When questioned at a council meeting on 9/9/21 the Leader of the Councillor Eammon O' Brien clarified this statement by saying that for anything the council themselves build they would adopt a brownfield first policy but



claimed that the council have no control over the actions of private developers. In reality they do, as they could limit the release of green belt sites in accordance with National Policy NPPF 134 part e.

### **Changes to greenbelt boundaries**

As part of the overall plan Bury have modified green belt boundaries and allocations in such a way to make it appear that less Greenbelt is being sacrificed. The loss of the Simister and Bowlee site greenbelt has been partially offset by creating extensive but unusable greenbelt in other areas without justifying exceptional circumstances. This is not in accordance with National Policy.