

Planning Policy
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
The Council House
Priory Road
Dudley
DY1 1HF

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332 MR 160620 DMBC

By e-mail:

localplan@dudley.gov.uk

blackcountrycorestrategy@dudley.gov.uk

Dear Sir / Madam

**BLACK COUNTRY CORE STRATEGY REVIEW (THE BLACK COUNTRY PLAN):
BLACK COUNTRY LANDSCAPE SENSITIVITY ASSESSMENT & BLACK COUNTRY GREEN
BELT STUDY**

I write on behalf of my clients William Davis Ltd (WDL) who welcome the preparation of the Black Country Plan (BCP) and support the intention of the Black Country Local Authorities (BCLA) to positively plan for sustainable development and growth in the period to 2038. In light of this, WDL welcomes the publication of the Black Country Green Belt Study (BCGBS) and Black Country Landscape Sensitivity Assessment (BCLSA) that will inform that process, but would like to express some concerns relating to the methodologies of both studies and the conclusions reached as a result; as set out below.

BACKGROUND

The allocation of land for development to address the identified needs within the BCP will be directly informed through the preparation of its evidence base, that includes the BCGBS and BCLSA. That accords with paragraph 31 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) that states that *“the preparation and review of all policies should be underpinned by relevant and up-to-date evidence.”* Indeed, the reliance of the emerging BCP on releasing land from the Green Belt and allocating it for development emphasises the need for a transparent and robust evidence base that effectively and accurately identifies the most suitable development opportunities. Indeed, the findings of the BCGBS and BCLSA will play a significant part within the identification of development sites during the review of the Core Strategy; albeit they will not be the sole considerations.

Whilst the BCLAs have not invited comments on the evidence base that has been published, key decisions in relation to site allocations will be made on the basis of this evidence, and therefore it is of paramount importance that the BCGBS and BCLSA are robust and consistent in reaching their conclusions, with a transparent account of the evidence-based decision-making process that will inform the identification and allocation of land for housing within this process. In their current iterations, that is simply not the case.

Indeed, WDL are concerned about the methodology that underpins both the BCGBS and BCLSA and, as a consequence, are also concerned about the site-specific findings derived from this that are not accurate or justified in some cases. This is demonstrated by reference to the unsuitable conclusions that the BCGBS and BCLSA have reached in relation to Land at Bromwich Lane, Pedmore (Promoted

Site 103). You will be aware that this site has been promoted at previous stages of this Core Strategy Review, with a Vision Document (Ref. Pedmore Vision Document FINAL 231018 LR) submitted to the BCLAs that demonstrates the site's suitability, and highlights the specific merit of the site as an appropriate location for future growth. The assessments that underpinned that Vision Document included a specific Green Belt appraisal and a Landscape and Visual appraisal.

BLACK COUNTRY GREEN BELT STUDY: STAGE 1 METHODOLOGY

The BCGBS takes a two-stage approach to assessing the performance of the Green Belt. Within this, the Stage 1 assessment considers the contribution made by individual land parcels to specific Green Belt purposes as outlined by the NPPF. Following this, Stage 2 assesses the potential 'harm' of removing those land parcels from the Green Belt. Meanwhile, the BCLSA represents Stage 3 of this process, and sits alongside the BCGBS.

Stage 1 draws out strategic variations in the contribution of land parcels within the Green Belt to its purposes as defined by the NPPF. In considering this, the BCGBS provides a judgement on a parcel's contribution on a three point scale. This methodology is robust in principle, though its application shows significant inconsistencies that ultimately influence the conclusions derived from it.

Parcel Identification

It is understood that the findings of the BCGBS will be considered alongside other elements of the evidence base to directly inform the BCP's spatial strategy and the allocation of development sites. One would, therefore, expect the identification of assessment parcels to relate to the scale of growth possible at potential allocation sites that have been promoted within the preparation of the BCP.

Parcel Size

Indeed, careful consideration of the extent of the land parcels that are assessed is essential, as a change of parcel size can significantly affect the assessment conclusions. Fundamentally, the parcels need to be appropriately sized to allow their actual role in the Green Belt to be accurately assessed.

Green Belt parcels that are too large, or span geographical thresholds, usually have highly contrasting performance against Green Belt purposes across their extent. For example, a smaller assessment parcel may relate well to the existing urban form and score low on the urban sprawl and coalescence purposes of the Green Belt (purposes 1 and 2 respectively). However, a larger land parcel, within which it sits, may have a totally different relationship and impact. Therefore, the size of a parcel may directly distort the assessment conclusions, and could misinform the spatial strategy.

In light of that, a number of specific concerns have been identified in relation to the land parcels assessed within the BCGBS. In particular, the size of the land parcels assessed in Stage 1 varies significantly between 0.3 hectares and 1,768.3 hectares. The land at Bromwich Lane, Pedmore is a site of 4.2ha yet is assigned to Parcel B60 within this assessment, a parcel of 181.3 hectares in area; one of the larger parcels assessed.

In assessing the contribution of a parcel to the wider purpose of the Green Belt, it would be incorrect to suggest that there is a homogenous contribution across a parcel of this size. Indeed, assessing such a large parcel effectively removes any spatial nuances that exist across its area. Parcel B60 itself comprises of a vastly contrasting parcel of land that varies from urban fringe locations that are influenced largely by the adjacent urban environment, such as at the parcel's north-east, to overwhelmingly open, vast and rural elements of the countryside at the parcel's west.

This is particularly flawed given that there is no consistent physical, visual or functional relationship between many of the areas that comprise the assessment parcel. In particular, the north-east of the assessment parcel has no visual connectivity, shares very few common landscape features and has an entirely different role and purpose in the function of the wider Green Belt when compared to those more remote areas at the parcel's west.

Rather, there are a number of features within Parcel B60 that mark a clear functional threshold between areas of differing contribution to the Green Belt and landscape character and sensitivity, and would therefore represent more suitable boundaries for the assessment parcels. In particular, the railway line that runs north-to-south through Parcel B60 effectively partitions the Parcel and its role in the Green Belt and wider landscape. Clearly, land west of this is open and visually prominent, rising to a localised ridge towards Racecourse Lane. That is a marked contrast with land east of the line, which is more urbanised, and is clearly visually contained and, therefore, less sensitive in landscape terms. Indeed, the importance of these areas in Green Belt terms differs as a result, with the western extents of the Parcel clearly playing a significant role in avoiding sprawl into the countryside, whilst the east of the parcel, when taken as a whole, limits coalescence.

Indeed, an argument could be made for the sub-division of assessment parcels even below that level. Even in a much reduced area, there are clear differences in the Green Belt contribution east of the railway line. Clearly, sites that are contained by existing development, which would not extend beyond the settlement's current extent, such as promoted sites 50 and 103, contribute much less considerably than parcels in the perceived gap between Pedmore and Hagley.

Rather, if the Stage 1 assessment considered individual promoted sites within a smaller-scale assessment, it would account for the nuances present within the parcel's contribution to the Green Belt, thus producing a more accurate evidence base for the preparation of the BCP. Indeed, as outlined below, that activity may identify that individual sites make a much less significant contribution to the wider purposes of the Green Belt than this study, in its current iteration, would suggest.

BLACK COUNTRY GREEN BELT STUDY: STAGE 1 ASSESSMENT OF PARCEL CONTRIBUTION TO GREEN BELT

As discussed, the assessment of large, varied Green Belt Parcels can result in study's conclusions effectively being skewed. That is demonstrated below, with reference to Bromwich Lane, Pedmore (promoted site 103), and the conclusions made relating to parcel B60.

Purpose 1: Checking the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas

Strong Contribution – Land is adjacent or close to the West Midlands conurbation, contains no significant urban development, and has strong openness. It retains a strong relationship with the wider countryside.

This description is clearly not applicable to the site. Primarily, it is inaccurate to suggest that the Parcel's north-eastern area contains 'no significant urban development, and has strong openness.' Rather, the site is bordered by urban development on two of its three boundaries, with the main urban form of Stourbridge located to the site's immediate north, and infill development along the A491 located to the site's immediate east. This encloses the site, limiting its openness significantly, and contributes to the site's predominant relationship with the urban fringe, as opposed to the countryside.

The site therefore only makes a '**Moderate**' Contribution to Purpose 1 as defined by Table 4.2 in the BCGBS as "land adjacent or close to the large built-up area that contains some urban development and/or is to an extent contained by urban development, but retains openness and some relationship with the wider countryside."

Clearly, the BCGBS' comments are applicable only to land west of Worcester Lane. This land, by virtue of its lack of physical connection with the urban edge, has no significant urban development, is considerably open, and has a strong relationship with the wider countryside. This clearly demonstrates the impact had by defining the site within a large and varied Green Belt parcel.

Purpose 2: Preventing the merging of neighbouring towns

Moderate Contribution - Land lies between the towns of Stourbridge and Kidderminster, a gap which is reduced by urbanizing development at Hagley, West Hagley and Blakedown, but there is sufficient physical and visual separation for each town to retain its own distinct landscape setting.

The development of the site would have a minimal impact in terms of coalescence. Whilst the site forms part of the gap between Pedmore and Hagley, its development would not extend the urban form of Pedmore any further south than the established areas that immediately surround it. Therefore, the physical separation between the settlements, deemed 'sufficient for each town to retain its own distinct landscape setting' by the BCGBS, would remain the same despite the site's development.

Furthermore, whilst the eastern part of the site is visible from the B4187, the western part of the footpath that crosses the fields to the south of the site, and the public rights of way network on higher land to the west of the railway line, the proposed development would actually result in little contrast in existing views. Rather, the new dwellings would sit in front of and below the existing development, would be well screened by the landscape framework, and would appear further away than the existing built form, notably the prominent dwellings at the southernmost extent of Bromwich Lane.

Therefore, the site's contribution to Purpose 2 is **moderate**. Indeed, the site exhibits aspects of a Moderate contribution, namely it "*lies between towns which are near each other, but where there is sufficient physical or visual separation for each town to retain its own distinct setting.*" However, it also has characteristics of Weak / No Contribution, as it "*plays no role, or a very limited role in maintaining the separation between towns due to the presence of significant separating features*" such as the existing development surrounding the site.

Purpose 3: Safeguarding the countryside from encroachment

Strong Contribution – Land contains the characteristics of open countryside (i.e. an absence of built or otherwise urbanizing uses in Green Belt terms) and does not have a stronger relationship with the urban area than with the wider countryside."

This description is clearly not relevant to the site or its surrounds, and instead is more applicable to the west of the parcel. Indeed, two of the site's three boundaries are significantly urbanised by residential development at Stourbridge's southern edge. The site's location and surrounding uses are, therefore, predominantly urban and thus it is untrue that the land has an "absence of built or otherwise urbanising uses." Thus, the site's urban fringe location means that the site shares a closer physical and visual relationship with the urban form, notably having an open boundary to urban development at its east. The site shares just one boundary with the wider countryside, and the relationship between the site and the surrounding countryside is further limited by virtue of the site's robust southern boundary that effectively creates a barrier between the site and the countryside.

Therefore, the assessment that Parcel 60A makes a 'Strong' contribution to Green Belt Purpose 3 is inaccurate in relation to the site. Rather, the site's contribution to this purpose is at the **lower end of 'Moderate'**, as defined by the BCGBS as "*land that contains the characteristics of open countryside [...] and which has a stronger relationship with the urban area than with the wider countryside (i.e. it is contained in some way by urbanising and or other features).*"

Again, the BCGBS' conclusion is largely influenced by the western area of the wider parcel. That indeed does make a strong contribution to this purpose, given that it is characteristic of open countryside, is not contained by urbanising features, and thus has a very strong relationship with the wider countryside.

Conclusion

Therefore, the impact that the site's designation within an unsuitable Green Belt assessment parcel has had on the overall assessment is clear. In undertaking an assessment of the contribution of the site on a more appropriate (site) scale, the following conclusions can be derived:

Green Belt purpose	BCGBS assessment of Parcel B60A	BHL's assessment of Bromwich Lane, Pedmore
Purpose 1: Checking unrestricted sprawl	Strong contribution	(Lower end of) Moderate contribution
Purpose 2: Preventing the merging of neighbouring towns	Moderate contribution	(Lower end of) Moderate contribution
Purpose 3: Safeguarding the countryside from encroachment	Strong contribution	(Lower end of) Moderate contribution
Purpose 4: Preserve the setting and special character of historic towns	Weak / No contribution	Weak / No contribution
Purpose 5: Assist urban regeneration	Strong contribution	Strong contribution

**BLACK COUNTRY GREEN BELT STUDY:
STAGE 2 METHODOLOGY**

The implication of the approach taken is a critical matter throughout the remainder of the BCGBS. The findings of Stage 1 are inextricably linked to the Stage 2 conclusions, with BCGBS paragraph 6.8 stating that *“the Stage 1 analysis of variations in contribution to the Green Belt purposes is a key component of the stage 2 assessment.”* Indeed, step 1 of Stage 2 requires the assessor to consider the contribution ratings of Stage 1 in detail, specifically considering whether any of these purposes are particularly significant. However, the methodology does not suggest that the assessor should take a judgement as to whether the Stage 1 findings are applicable to individual ‘scenarios.’

Step 2 then considers the potential impact of the release scenario on the integrity of the remaining Green Belt, and step 3 requires a judgement in relation to the overall harm that the removal of the assessed parcel would have on the Green Belt. This assessment should be on a scale from very high to very low harm, and is a matter of professional judgement that combines considerations from Steps 1 and 2. Clearly, the findings from the Stage 1 assessment, that were clearly invalidated by inappropriate parcel sizes / configurations, influence this final judgement considerably.

It is not until Step 4 that alternative release ‘scenarios’ are assessed. That considers *“whether the release of a smaller part or parts of the area would result in less harm to Green Belt purposes.”* Many of these ‘scenario’ areas relate to promoted sites, effectively considering the harm that their development would cause. This finer grain analysis is supported in principle, as it enables the BCLAs to accurately consider the contribution that a site makes towards the Green Belt, and the harm that its removal would cause, but comes far too late in the process.

Stage 2 ‘Alternative Scenarios’ Assessment Parcels

Moreover, step 4 only takes that approach to *some* of the ‘promoted sites.’ Scenario B60As2 effectively considers the release of the northern parcel of promoted site 114; whilst B60As4 considers the release of promoted site 50. However, to provide a fair assessment of the suitability of each promoted site (to inform a transparent and robustly evidence-based decision-making process), this approach must be taken in relation to *all* promoted sites, rather than a select few. That is, a similar assessment of the potential harm that would result should promoted site 103 be released is required.

Instead, however, scenario B60As1 assessed the release of Bromwich Lane, Pedmore alongside “any uncontained land within the sub-parcel”; representing a 160.75 hectare ‘sub-parcel.’ In light of the above comments in relation to the unsuitability of large assessment areas, the conclusions in relation to release scenario B60As1 are clearly misleading when site 103 is specifically considered.

For example, the conclusions would suggest that the site is ‘uncontained.’ However, it is contained on two of its three boundaries by the existing urban development at the south of Stourbridge, as well as the strong tree-lined boundary at its southern boundary that comprises part of the site’s robust landscape framework. Therefore, the site is similarly contained to promoted site 50, which is bordered by Worcester Lane to its east, the railway line to its west and open countryside to its south; a site deemed sufficiently contained to be assessed. Furthermore, the site is much more contained than promoted site 114, as assessed under B60As2, which shares just one boundary with the built environment, with its remaining three boundaries adjoining the open countryside.

Currently, the BCGBS is overlooking more suitable sites, such as the land at Bromwich Lane, Pedmore, by failing to assess the actual harm that their release from the Green Belt would cause and how might accord with paragraph 139 of the NPPF. Consequently, in being informed by this study in its current iteration, the BCP will be inherently unsound as its spatial strategy will have failed to take into account “reasonable alternatives” as required by NPPF paragraph 35. Thus, all promoted sites should be assessed as stand-alone ‘release scenarios’ to ascertain their suitability for development in Green Belt terms, and to ensure the soundness of the emerging plan.

BLACK COUNTRY GREEN BELT STUDY: STAGE 2 ASSESSMENT OF HARM FROM RELEASE OF LAND WITHIN SUB-PARCEL

Given that the conclusions of the Stage 1 assessment are demonstrably inaccurate in respect of site 103, and taking into consideration the unsuitable definition of assessment parcel B60A / B60As1, the study’s Stage 2 findings are also not accurate, as demonstrated below.

B60As1 – Release of any uncontained land within the sub-parcel

Very High Harm – The sub-parcel makes a strong contribution to preventing sprawl of the West Midlands conurbation and preventing encroachment on the countryside, and a moderate contribution to maintaining the separation of the neighbouring towns of Stourbridge and Kidderminster (via intervening settlements). The land within the sub-parcel rises up to a ridge, creating a strong sense of separation between the urban edge and the open countryside. Any release of uncontained land in this sub-parcel would weaken the surrounding Green Belt land by containing areas of countryside between the urban edge and the inset settlement of West Hagley.

When considering the site’s characteristics and its contribution to the Green Belt, this description is demonstrably inaccurate; rather, this conclusion relates to B60As1’s more sensitive western areas. As evidenced above, the site does not make a “strong contribution” either to preventing urban sprawl (Purpose 1) or preventing encroachment on the countryside (Purpose 3) as stated; rather, it would be more accurate to suggest that the site makes a low – moderate contribution to both purposes.

Furthermore, whilst the land surrounding the site does rise gently, the land continues to gently rise beyond the site's eastern boundary, before rising more steeply to Wychbury Hill 800m east of site. Thus, the site does not represent the peak of a ridge, and it is therefore inaccurate to suggest that this would create a strong sense of separation between the urban edge and the open countryside. Rather, this element of the judgement relates specifically to the western area of B60As1, with a ridge present at its boundary with Parcel B61. Instead, the opposite is true; the site's development would create a more regular development edge that would represent a more distinct boundary between the settlement and the countryside without physically or visually obtruding into the countryside.

Therefore, the site's development would plainly not "*weaken the surrounding Green Belt*" and the conclusions made relating to Parcel B60As1 are thus inaccurate in relation the site.

Assessing of harm from release of the site (Bromwich Lane, Pedmore – Promoted Site 103)

Therefore, to fairly assess the suitability of *all* promoted sites, site 103 should be assessed on its own merit. **Step 1** requires an in-depth consideration of the Stage 1, an element of which was included in the above analysis. In considering this further, the following conclusions are relevant:

- Purpose 1: Checking unrestricted urban sprawl – **Low – Moderate Contribution**; The site is evidently strongly influenced by the adjacent residential development at two of its three boundaries, which limits the site's relationship with the wider countryside. Whilst there is some openness and relationship with the countryside, that too is limited by virtue of the site's robust southern boundary that largely screens inter-visibility between itself and the wider countryside.
- Purpose 2: Preventing the merging of neighbouring towns – **Low – Moderate Contribution**; Whilst the site is located in the land that lies between Pedmore and Hagley, the BCGBS finds that there is sufficient physical or visual separation for these towns to retain their own distinct setting. The site's development would not result in a physical extension into that gap beyond the existing development at Bromwich Lane. Furthermore, it would not be visually obtrusive, being seen instead below the existing development, and appearing further away than the properties of Bromwich Lane. Rather, the site's development would result in a stronger, more regular, and more defensible Green Belt boundary than that which exists currently.
- Purpose 3: Safeguarding the countryside from encroachment – **Low – Moderate Contribution**; due to the site's proximity to urbanising elements, with the existing settlement of Stourbridge adjacent to two of its three boundaries, the site is effectively contained by urbanising features and therefore has a stronger relationship with the urban area than the wider countryside.
- Purpose 4: Preserve the setting and special character of historic towns – **No Contribution**.
- Purpose 5: Assist urban regeneration – **Strong Contribution** (as per all other assessed sites).

Step 2 requires the assessor to consider the potential impact of the release on the integrity of the remaining Green Belt, recognising that "*if Green Belt release significantly weakens the contribution of the adjacent Green Belt to the Green Belt purposes, then the harm is likely to be greater than that identified in Step 1.*"

However, the site's removal from the Green Belt would actually *strengthen* the functionality of the adjacent parcel. Indeed, the site's development would provide a well-defined edge between the settlement and the countryside to the south, in a manner that would effectively 'round off' the existing built form whilst not extending further south than the established residential area. Thus, the new Green Belt boundary would be robust and defensible, and would exhibit the features of a strong

boundary; it would be distinct, would have little variation, and would mark a clear boundary between the urban area and the countryside, with the enhanced southern boundary representing a landscape buffer between the two. That nuance is overlooked by virtue of the size of the assessment parcel.

In assessing the overall Green Belt harm in **step 3**, the Stage 2 methodology states that the weight prescribed to each of these considerations should not be equal and that professional judgement should be used to reach an overall judgement. However, the methodology provides some guidance, with paragraph 6.23 stating that “*where land makes a relatively strong contribution to one of the Green Belt purposes, but where its release would create a simplified, more consistent boundary and would not weaken the adjacent Green Belt, harm is likely to be **low – moderate.***”

Indeed, that summary reflects site 103’s potential release, given that it makes a relatively strong contribution to purpose 5 but a less significant contribution to all other purposes, and that its development would strengthen the Green Belt. Clearly, therefore, in order for the BCGBS contribute to the preparation of a fair, robust and transparent evidence base, the assessment should be amended to consider the release of all sites site as a ‘scenario.’ That would establish that the release of this land for residential development would cause **low – moderate harm** to the Green Belt.

BLACK COUNTRY LANDSCAPE SENSITIVITY ASSESSMENT: METHODOLOGY

The Black Country Landscape Sensitivity Assessment (BCLSA) represents Stage 3 of the BCGBS and seeks to establish the extent to which the character and quality of the landscape abutting the West Midlands conurbation is susceptible to change.

The BCLSA states that the study seeks to carry out this exercise on a broad level, rather than providing a site level assessment as may be required for a planning application. Instead, the assessment considers those areas assessed at Stage 2 of the BCGBS. Thus, the site’s landscape sensitivity is appraised in Parcel BL15, a 223.83 hectare area. Therefore, comments made above in relation to assessment area size remain. Indeed, the landscape character and sensitivity of the parcel varies greatly from the more urbanised, contained land at the east of the study area to the open, uncontained, visually prominent countryside at its west. Such variations are not represented in the BCLSA’s findings, and must be taken into consideration when considering the merits of each promoted site for development.

The study goes on to consider the landscape sensitivity of a smaller area (20.42ha) that includes the site, under scenario BL15s2. Within this, the landscape sensitivity of the land east of Worcester Road is considered. Whilst this parcel is significantly smaller, the assessment area is comprised of the site, as well as land to its south. This land represents a considerable visual extension beyond the well-contained site into the open countryside. Therefore, the remainder of this parcel is more sensitive in landscape terms. Thus, the conclusions of the assessment will naturally be weighted in light of this.

Notwithstanding that, the findings from the BCLSA in relation to both parcels (BL15 and BL15s2) are analysed below to demonstrate the study’s shortcomings in terms of the conclusions drawn.

BLACK COUNTRY LANDSCAPE SENSITIVITY ASSESSMENT APPRAISAL OF LANDSCAPE SENSITIVITY

When appraising the parcel’s landscape sensitivity, the BCLSA considers the parcel’s sensitivity in relation to a number of characteristics. The parcel’s size clearly influences the study’s findings in relation to the following factors:

Landscape Pattern and Time Depth

The BCLSA concludes that the parcel has a higher sensitivity to development in relation to landscape pattern and time depth, providing the following justification:

Mix of amalgamated fields and field pattern of straight edged 19th century planned and earlier piecemeal enclosures. There are earthworks and cropmarks south of Racecourse Lane, and the A451 Kidderminster Road which runs along the western boundary is a characteristically straight Roman Road. Much of the south of the area contains geological deposits of glacial sand and gravel and is a potential historic landscape area AHHLV29 Norton Covert and Glacial Sand and Gravel.

This description is not considered to be relevant to the site or its immediate surrounds, which are largely made of smaller fields with a simple structure, with the site itself having no features to suggest that it would have been part of an amalgamation of fields, or that it is a straight edged, planned field, nor a piecemeal enclosure.

Furthermore, the site’s distance from the earthworks and cropmarks south of Racecourse Lane, as well the historic Roman A451 road, means that this consideration is not relevant to the site, given the lack of visual connectivity between the site and these features. Indeed, an Archaeological Desk-Based Assessment of the site suggests that there is no designated or recorded heritage assets within the site or in its immediate vicinity. That would suggest that there is no particularly sensitive historic origin present in the site’s proximity. Thus, the site has **Low** Sensitivity to Development in relation to this factor. Rather, the judgement given to Parcel BL15 is clearly weighted by the increased sensitivity at the parcel’s west, with those more valued landscape features spatially concentrated in this area.

‘Natural’ Character

The BCLSA concludes that parcel BL15 has moderate sensitivity in relation to its ‘natural’ character:

Small areas of valued natural habitat including priority habitat deciduous woodland at Outy John Wood (also designated as a SINC), and a small area of priority habitat orchard in the northeast. Valued natural features including mature hedgerow and in-field trees, including oaks which contribute to landscape character.

Again, this conclusion has limited relevance to the site or its immediate surrounds. The area surrounding the site has limited valued natural features. Indeed, whilst the small orchard is located in proximity to the site, it shares no physical, visual or functional connectivity with the site. The site is also located approximately 1km away from the Outy John Wood SINC. Furthermore, whilst the site does have a mature hedgerow at its southern boundary, this feature will be retained and enhanced through supplementary planting to ensure the site’s visual containment. Finally, the site does not have any in-field trees that contribute to the area’s landscape character.

Therefore, considering the criteria as set out in Table 3.1 of the BCLSA, the site is considered to have **Low / Moderate** Sensitivity to development. Indeed, the site has a “*lack of semi-natural habitat coverage or valued natural features*” (the criteria for low sensitivity) and whilst it has a robust hedgerow feature, this will be retained and enhanced as part of the scheme proposals.

Built Character

The BCLSA finds that the parcel has some characteristics of both low and medium sensitivity to development in terms of the built character. Regarding the area’s medium sensitivity to built development, the assessment notes that:

[The] *Settlement is characterised by isolated farmsteads.*

This is not applicable to the site, with the area's isolated farmsteads located at the parcel's west. The assessment notes the following characteristics as contributing to the area's 'lower' sensitivity:

Railway line runs north-south through the area, west of Worcester Lane. Low rise detached brick housing lies to the north-east and north west of the area and influences the adjacent rural landscape mainly due to the busier road network extending from the settlement.

The site and its surrounding area reflect many of the characteristics of this lower sensitivity area. Indeed, its landscape character is largely influenced by the built environment, as discussed throughout. Furthermore, the area's character is influenced by "the busier road network extending from the settlement" with A491 adjacent to the site's eastern boundary, and Worcester Lane located c.250m west of the site. Therefore, the site accords with the BCLSA's definition of **Low** Sensitivity, notably the "presence or adjacent to modern development or contemporary structures that detract from landscape character, e.g. utility, infrastructure or industrial elements."

Recreational Character

The BCLSA concludes that parcel BL15 has some characteristics of both 'moderate' and 'higher' sensitivity to development relating to recreational character. In relation to its higher sensitivity to built development, the assessment states that:

The southern boundary is marked by the promoted route Monarch's Way / North Worcestershire Path.

The inappropriateness of the assessment areas clearly influences these findings. When assessing both BL15 and BL15s2, the North Warwickshire Path is a critical consideration, with the footpath offering views into its adjacent land parcels (the southernmost parcels of BL15s2). However, when assessing the site in its own merit, the site's impact on and relationship with this public path, and therefore the recreational character, is much less significant. Indeed, whilst the site is visible from the Monarch's Way / North Warwickshire Path 800m south-west of the site, the site would be seen within the context of both Pedmore and Hagley. Furthermore, as the user travels east on the path, the site is screened by a belt of vegetation. Therefore, the site plays a limited role in the recreational experience of the North Warwickshire Path, and therefore does not exhibit characteristics of high sensitivity.

In relation to aspects of moderate sensitivity to development in the area, the assessment continues:

Good access via PROWs particularly in the south of the area

The site has no PROWs located within its boundaries, and the site and its immediate surrounds are not known to be areas of particular recreational value. There are two PROWs south of the site; travelling north and south-east from Worcester Lane to join Bromwich Lane and the North Worcestershire Path respectively, as well as one PROW east of the site, travelling south-east from the A491. Therefore, the site would be considered to have a **Moderate** sensitivity to development in respect to its recreational character, as there are "some public rights of way and footpaths."

Perceptual Aspects

The BCLSA concludes that Parcel BL15 has some characteristics of moderate and high sensitivity to built development. It states that the following characteristics are representative of high sensitivity:

A strongly rural landscape which reads as part of the wider landscape, as the surrounding residential development is largely set back from the area.

These characteristics do not apply to the site, which is considerably influenced by the adjoining built environment. Consequently, the character of the site is that of the urban fringe, and thus is not considered to be “*strongly rural*” as above.

The BCLSA states that the following characteristics result in a medium sensitivity:

Tranquility is disturbed locally by the A491, B4187 Worcester Lane and A451 Kidderminster Road in the west, and the experience of dark skies increases to the south west. The railway line is within a cutting and does not impact on the character of the landscape.

This description is clearly more appropriate to the site. The tranquility of the site is disturbed by virtue of the A491 that runs adjacent to the dwellings at the site’s eastern boundary. Furthermore, the presence of established residential uses in proximity to the site detracts from the experience of dark skies and the area’s overall tranquility. Therefore, the site is perhaps the least sensitive area within Parcels BL15 and BL15s2, and therefore its perceptual aspects are at the **low end of Moderate** in terms of their sensitivity to built development.

Settlement Setting

The BCLSA concludes that Parcel BL15 has some characteristics that would result in both a moderate and high sensitivity to built development. It states that the following aspects of the parcel result in a higher sensitivity:

Despite ribbon development along the A491, the east of the area plays an important role in the perception of a gap between Stourbridge and West Hagley.

Again, this conclusion emphasises the importance of assessing landscape sensitivity on a site-by-site basis. Whilst the site is located at the parcel’s east, and developing the entirety of BL15s2 would reduce the perception of a gap between Stourbridge and West Hagley, the site itself makes a limited contribution to the perception of this gap. Indeed, that has been discussed in detail in relation to the findings from the BCGBS above. In summary, the development of the site would not reduce the physical gap between Stourbridge and Hagley, given that the existing dwellings of Bromwich Lane extend further south than the site. Furthermore, the proposed development would be seen in the context of, and below, the existing development, and would not appear to be as obtrusive as those dwellings fronting Bromwich Lane. In any event, it is considered that coalescence should not be considered within this study, given that this has been considered as part of the BCGBS.

The BCLSA outlines the following characteristics of medium sensitivity to built development:

Provides some contribution as a rural backdrop to Stourbridge. Woodland belts along the settlement edge or woodland within the Stourbridge Golf Club provides a boundary feature along the urban edge.

This description is not relevant to the site. Rather, as discussed above, the development of the site represents an opportunity to create a more defensible and robust settlement boundary. Thus, following the site’s development, the settlement boundary would comprise of an enhanced robust tree-lined boundary, with the land to the north of this residential in nature, and the land to the south representing the area of separation between Pedmore and Hagley. Thus, the site has **low** sensitivity, given that it “*does not provide an attractive backdrop to adjacent settlement or play a separation role*” and that the “*development could provide the opportunity to improve an existing settlement edge.*”

Visual Prominence

The BCLSA concludes that the parcel has some characteristics that would result in a low sensitivity to built development, and others that would result in a high sensitivity. It outlines the following characteristics that contribute to that higher sensitivity:

An open rolling landscape with areas at higher elevation, often with ridge-top woodlands, visually prominent.

This conclusion is not applicable to the site. Indeed, the site is not open given the enclosure afforded to it by the adjacent residential uses, it does not have ridge-top woodlands, and it is not visually prominent. Rather, the existing built form is often more visually prominent than the development on site would be, by virtue of the site's robust landscape framework and the enhanced supplementary planting. Evidently, this conclusion is more suitable for the west of Parcel BL15.

The characteristics of the areas of the parcel that are of low sensitivity are as follows:

Semi-enclosed by roadside vegetation

That description is more accurate for the site. The site's north-western boundary is marked by the roadside vegetation adjacent to Bromwich Lane, which contributes significantly to its enclosure. Furthermore, whilst not *road-side* vegetation, the vegetation at the site's southern boundary encloses the site further. Therefore, the site has **low** sensitivity to built development in terms of its visual prominence. However, it is noted that any assessment of the site as part of Parcel BL15s2 would result in a far increased sensitivity, given that the land to the south of the site is less enclosed, and represents more open and visually prominent land.

Inter-visibility with Adjacent Designated Landscapes or Promoted Viewpoints

The BCLSA states that the following characteristics contribute to the parcel's medium sensitivity in relation to its inter-visibility with adjacent designated landscapes or promoted viewpoints:

Some inter-visibility with Wychbury Hill and obelisk within Hagley Hall Registered Park and Garden from Worcester Lane and with the promoted viewpoint at Clent Hills to the south east.

Whilst there are views of the western extent of Bromwich Lane from Wychbury Hill, the site itself is hidden by development along the A491 and intervening vegetation. Thus, whilst the rooftops of the proposed development may be visible amongst tree canopies, they would be seen in the context of the existing development. Similarly, the site would form only a small part of panoramic views from the Clent Hills, and would largely be screened by surrounding development and vegetation. Again, the rooftops of the development may be visible amongst tree canopies, but this would be seen in the context of the existing development. Therefore, the site has **low** sensitivity to built development, with the site according with the BCLSA's description of low sensitivity; "*little inter-visibility with adjacent sensitive landscapes or marked viewpoints.*"

Again, the site's consideration alongside the land to its south as part of Parcel BL15s2 is detrimental to the conclusions in this regard. Indeed, the land to the south of Parcel BL15s2, in particular, would have a much more significant visual relationship with Wychbury Hill, given the lack of vegetation and intervening development that would otherwise screen views.

Conclusions and Implications

Thus, it has been demonstrated that the site frequently represents the least sensitive location within both Parcels BL15 and BL15s2 in terms of its landscape sensitivity. Therefore, the conclusion that Parcel BL15s2 has a Moderate – High landscape sensitivity is not appropriate for site 103 specifically.

Moreover, it also concludes that “*the narrow stretch of open landscape between Stourbridge and West Hagley has a moderate-high sensitivity due to its additional role in providing a perceived gap between the settlement.*” The above analysis has demonstrated this to be inaccurate in relation to site 103 itself, given that its development would not reduce the gap physically, and that the development would appear further away than those existing dwellings on Bromwich Lane. Rather, the site’s development would sensitively ‘round-off’ the built form, providing a robust and defensible boundary to the settlement.

Therefore, a judgement must be made regarding the site’s landscape sensitivity when considered alone. Indeed, given the above analysis, and taking into consideration the characteristics of landscape sensitivity of Parcel BL15 as a whole, the following conclusions are derived:

Landscape Sensitivity characteristic / attribute	BCLSA assessment of Area BL15	BHL’s assessment of Bromwich Lane, Pedmore
Scale	Moderate sensitivity	Moderate sensitivity
Landform	Moderate sensitivity	Moderate sensitivity
Landscape pattern and time depth	Higher sensitivity	Lower sensitivity
Natural character	Moderate sensitivity	Low / Moderate sensitivity
Built character	Low / Moderate sensitivity	Low sensitivity
Recreational character	Moderate / Higher sensitivity	Moderate sensitivity
Perceptual aspects	Moderate / Higher sensitivity	Low / Moderate sensitivity
Settlement setting	Moderate / Higher sensitivity	Low sensitivity
Visual prominence	Low / Higher sensitivity	Low sensitivity
Inter-visibility with adjacent designated landscapes or promoted view points	Moderate sensitivity	Moderate sensitivity

Indeed, it can be demonstrated that the site is not highly sensitive to development in regard to any of these factors. Furthermore, whilst the BCLSA’s methodology outlines that each factor should not automatically be afforded equal weight, there are no factors that would cause significant harm to the landscape character, and no outstanding issues that must be considered when reaching an overall judgement. Therefore, the site has **overall Low – Moderate sensitivity to built development**.

The inaccuracy of the BCLSA’s findings extends beyond the site itself. It concludes that the west of BL15 (BL15s1) is *less sensitive* than the eastern area, with BL15s1 given a moderate sensitivity. That conclusion is somewhat confusing, not least as the justification for this states that “*the rural character is disrupted by the presence of busy trunk roads on the boundaries of the area.*” However, as outlined above the more sensitive elements of the Parcel BL15 relate to the western areas of the parcel, in particular those areas that have little relationship with the built form and are visually prominent.

CONCLUSIONS

As discussed above, the preparation of a robust, accurate and transparent evidence base is critical within plan-making and is required by NPPF paragraph 31. Indeed, the policies within Local Plans, including land allocation policies, must demonstrate that they have been informed by this evidence

base. In assessing the merits of each promoted site within this process, therefore, it is critical that the evidence utilised is accurate.

Clearly, however, the conclusions of the BCGBS and BCLSA are inconsistent and greatly influenced by a poor methodology that incorrectly utilises large assessment areas. Thus, those findings are not reliable in relation to specific sites and, as a consequence, will misinform key judgements made in relation to the spatial strategy and allocation of specific development sites. In that event, the Black Country Plan would not be 'sound', as required by NPPF paragraph 35, as the strategy would not have fully taken into account reasonable alternatives, and will not have been based on robust and proportionate evidence base.

The failure of these assessments has been highlighted by referring to the findings in relation to WDL's site at Bromwich Lane, Pedmore. Indeed, the conclusions made with relation to the site are clearly erroneous, by virtue of the assessments' unsuitable methodologies; specifically, the identification of unsuitably large, varying land parcels. That resulted in the area relating to the site being considered to have a moderate – high sensitivity to development in landscape terms (BL15s2), and make a sufficient contribution to the Green Belt that its release would cause Very High harm to it. However, when considering the site on its own merit, it has been demonstrated that the site has low – moderate sensitivity to built development in terms of its landscape setting, and that the site's release from the Green Belt would have low – moderate harm to the Green Belt.

The implications of the failings of these assessments is considerable, as it results in entirely appropriate sites such as Bromwich Lane, Pedmore, that would make an important contribution to a sustainable spatial strategy, being overlooked. Therefore, in order to fulfill the BCLA's duty to prepare a transparent and evidence-based BCP, these assessments must be revisited to address the concerns set out above, before critical decisions are taken.

I trust that these comments are clear and will be given due consideration moving forward. If, however, there are any queries arising from them I would of course be more than happy to address those.

Yours faithfully

Mark Rose
Director