

**Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire Local Plan Examination**  
**Matter 6B Green Belt Boundary Changes in Cambridge City Local Plan**  
**John Meed M6B/1956 (25267)**

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## Summary

The two questions for Matter 6B (Sites GB1 and 2, Policy 26) are:

- What would the impact of the proposed boundary changes be on the purposes of including land in the Green Belt?
- Are there any (other) reasons why development of these sites should be resisted or any overriding constraints to development?

In answer to the first question, my submission will show that development of GB1 and 2 would undermine a key purpose of the Green Belt: to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. In answer to the second question, my submission will show that development of these sites should be resisted on the grounds of damage to biodiversity.

## About the respondent

I am a researcher and writer living in south Cambridge. In my work as an educational author I have written extensively on countryside management and ecological issues. I also conduct regular ecological surveys on behalf of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

Since 2012 I have surveyed farmland birds on a square kilometre of green belt south of Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge (grid reference TL4654), to assess the levels of the biodiversity of an area close to the city. My work has shown important breeding and wintering populations of farmland birds, with a total of 74 species.

In 2013 I was asked to carry out a similar survey for the fields on either side of Wort's Causeway, designated as GB1 and 2 in the Cambridge City Council local plan.

## The research base

I surveyed breeding populations on GB1 and 2 in spring 2013 and 2014, using a combination of methods: the BTO Breeding Bird Survey methodology (walking a transect on two occasions in the breeding season); plus additional visits to form a more accurate picture of the number of breeding pairs (drawing on my experience as a surveyor for the RSPB Volunteer and Farmer Alliance). In addition I made a number of winter visits to the site. In total I have visited the site some 30 times.

Over the two years I have recorded 45 species. These include 10 **red list species** of high conservation concern and 9 **amber list species** of medium conservation concern as well as 14 of the 19 **farmland bird indicator species** for the UK Government Sustainable Development Strategy.

Additional surveys have been carried out by Applied Ecology Ltd (*Netherhall Farm bat survey 2010*) and Cambridge City Council (*Netherhall Farm meadow survey 2005*).

## Breeding populations

My surveys have shown breeding populations of threatened farmland birds. These include:

- red list skylark, yellowhammer, yellow wagtail, linnet, song thrush and probably grey partridge and starling
- amber list whitethroat, dunnock, reed bunting, bullfinch, green woodpecker
- regular visits from swifts, house martins and kestrel (also amber listed).

For birds of arable farmland which prefer more open habitats (notably the ground nesting skylark, grey partridge and yellow wagtail as well as hedgerow nesting yellowhammer) the area provides valuable habitat; the number of skylark in particular is good for an area adjacent to the city.

Close analysis of probable breeding sites shows that the red list farmland species present are found at a certain distance from the housing on Wort's Causeway. It would seem likely that any encroachment of further housing onto the green belt would push these birds further away, and probably out of these fields altogether.

In addition birds such as whitethroat and dunnock nest and feed in hedgerows and most records of both species were in the double hedgerow along the north side of the field designated as GB2 – this habitat has clearly been beneficial for them.

## Winter feeding

The fields are also used for winter feeding, notably by:

- birds of arable farmland including red list skylark, grey partridge, lapwing and amber list golden plover
- flocks of winter thrushes (including red list fieldfare and redwing), finches (including red list yellowhammer and linnet) and tits

Lack of breeding sites and winter feeding have been key factors in the decline of farmland bird populations. Grey partridge numbers fell by 90% between 1970 and 2007.

## Other species

Brown hare also use the fields. Along with skylark, this is one of the **priority species** identified in the City Council's local plan (Policy 70).

A survey by Applied Ecology Ltd in 2010 showed that Netherhall Farm, which adjoins GB1, provides a roost for Barbastelle and brown long-eared bats. The Barbastelle is an IUCN endangered species and is listed in both Annexes 2 and 4 of the Habitats Directive. The IUCN (12) describes 'disturbance and loss of roost sites in older buildings' as a major threat to this species.

A Cambridge City Wildlife Site survey of Netherhall Farm meadow, a county wildlife site which also adjoins GB1, also found an upright brome grassland community.

## A complex ecological web

It is clear from my surveys that development on the GB1 and 2 sites will damage the biodiversity of the fields themselves as a result both of disturbance and loss of habitat. This will reduce populations of red list birds, farmland bird indicator species and lead to a 'net loss of ... local populations of priority species' that Policy 70 of the City Council plan does not permit. It may well also threaten an IUCN endangered species. Furthermore, the City Council's mitigation proposed in Policy 26 of the Local Plan shows a complete misunderstanding of the needs of ground nesting birds which require open spaces rather than 'landscaped buffers' and 'edges'.

However the damage will go further than this. I have recorded significant interchange of birds between the GB1 and 2 sites and the area south of Addenbrookes – for example at least one covey of 13 grey partridge, as well as flocks of golden plover, redwing and fieldfare used both sites for winter feeding in 2014-15. It is probable that reed buntings which bred south of Addenbrookes in 2012 bred on GB2 in 2013.

Any development of GB1 and 2 will not just set a precedent for councillors and developers to consider releasing further areas of green belt; it will immediately have an impact on species living on land still nominally protected. And my longer-term survey of the land south of Addenbrookes shows that this larger area, with a wider range of habitats including the Nine Wells nature reserve, supports quite remarkable biodiversity.

Furthermore the double-hedgerow along the north side of GB2 continues to the Beech Woods nature reserve linking the GB1 / 2 habitat with the SSSI of the Gog Magog golf course. It is revealing that Policy 26 makes no reference of the Gog Magog Countryside Project outlined in the Green Infrastructure Strategy which proposes habitat improvement and enhanced public access in this area.

## Conclusion

Development of GB1 and 2 should be resisted in order to preserve biodiversity, both on the sites themselves and on adjoining Green Belt land; to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment; and to avoid setting a precedent for further Green Belt release. The local plan should instead take steps to implement the Gog Magog Countryside Project outlined in the Green Infrastructure Strategy.

*John Meed. Cambridge, January 2015*

*Cambridge City Council respondent ID: 1956; representation number: 25267*

## References

Full details of my surveys (all submitted to the local planning process) can be found in:

Meed, John (2014) Populations of farmland birds in the green belt either side of Wort's Causeway in 2014, [www.johnmeed.net](http://www.johnmeed.net)

Meed, John (2014) The value of the green belt south of Cambridge to populations of farmland birds: Report of a survey of grid square TL4654, [www.johnmeed.net](http://www.johnmeed.net)