Open Letter to Members of St Albans Planning Policy Committee, Marshalswick & Sandridge District Councillors:

19 March 2014

Planning Policy Committee
Councillor Julian Daly (Chair)
Councillor David Yates (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Chris Brazier
Councillor Janet Churchard
Councillor Maxine Crawley
Councillor Sue Featherstone
Councillor Salih Gaygusuz
Councillor Dreda Gordon
Councillor Martin Leach
Councillor Geoffrey Turner

Ward Councillors
Councillor Geoff Churchard
Councillor Heidi Allen
Councillor Salih Gaygusuz
Councillor Rod Perks
Councillor Frances Leonard
Councillor Beric Read
Councillor Tom Clegg
Councillor Janet Churchard

Dear Councillors

Green Belt Review Site Visits 25 and 28 March – Oaklands College Site SA 03

You will shortly be participating in visits to sites identified in the green belt review as least contributing to the five purposes of the green belt. In the case of Oaklands College the suggested boundary changes and housing development potential of **1650** cannot be considered separately from the current premature application for enabling development of 348 homes on Sandpit Lane. The latest amendment to the application, 6 March, indicates a reduction in the size of the College redevelopment proposals. The enabling residential development plans remain unchanged. Implementing the Green Belt Review recommendations on the Oaklands site would result in a four-fold expansion in the development potential for housing with no corresponding gain in education, infrastructure or community benefits.

A decision to take this site forward will effectively mean a new community bordering Smallford and Marshalswick of between three and five thousand new residents. It is the largest potential development site recommended in the Green Belt Review. Residents ask you to bear in mind the consequences for communities faced with a potential 3000/4000 additional vehicles on local roads, insufficient health care and primary and secondary education facilities. Combined with additional demands on water, sewage and energy resources and the loss of productive agricultural land your decision will have repercussions for the residents you represent far into the future.

Councillors are being asked to make recommendations on sites without the necessary information to make informed decisions. The review makes no attempt to compare the suitability of the sites with one another, nor does it consider all five of the purposes of the green belt, leaving out the potential for development on brownfield sites and via urban regeneration. It also fails to make a comparison between the infrastructure constraints/capacity of the different sites or provide any meaningful assessment of the impact on existing
communities. The recommendations in part two of the review take no account of potential developments in neighbouring authorities which may have an impact on St Albans. In other words it is fatally flawed.

SKM acknowledges that “wider issues not considered by this study include infrastructure capacity (in relation to transport and local services and facilities), the availability of land for development (in relation to the market and landownership), site access and District wide sustainability issues.”

When you are visiting Oaklands we urge you to consider the points above and look at the latest clarifications on green belt planning in a ministerial statement from the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Planning (Nick Boles). In particular, the 6 March 2014 statement noted that the Coalition Government are:

- “Committed to reforming the planning system to make it simpler, clearer and easier for people to use, allowing local communities to shape where development should and should not go. Planning should not be the exclusive preserve of lawyers, developers or town hall officials.

- Committed to ensuring that countryside and environmental protections continue to be safeguarded and devolving power down not just to local councils, but also down to neighbourhoods and local residents.

- Re-affirming Green Belt protection, noting that unmet housing need is unlikely to outweigh harm to the Green Belt and other harm to constitute very special circumstances justifying inappropriate development.

- Explaining how student housing, housing for older people and the re-use of empty homes can be included when assessing housing need.

- Ensuring that infrastructure is provided to support new development, and noting how infrastructure constraints should be considered when assessing suitability of sites.

- Stressing the importance of bringing brownfield land into use and made clear that authorities do not have to allocate sites on the basis of providing the maximum possible return for landowners and developers.

- Noting that councils should also be able to consider the delivery record (or lack of) of developers or landowners, including a history of unimplemented permissions. This will also serve to encourage developers to deliver on their planning permissions.

- Incorporating the guidance on renewable energy (including heritage and amenity) published during last summer and making it clearer in relation to solar farms, that visual impact is a particular factor for consideration.

- Allowing past over-supply of housing to be taken into account when assessing housing needs.

- On the five year supply of sites, confirming that assessments are not automatically outdated by new household projections.

- Clarifying when councils can consider refusing permission on the grounds of prematurity in relation to draft plans.

- Encouraging joint working between local authorities, but clarifying that the duty to co-operate is not a duty to accept. We have considered and rejected the proposals of HM’s Opposition to allow councils to undermine Green Belt protection and dump development on their neighbours’ doorstep.”

MNRA on behalf of residents of Marshalswick North