

# **ST HELENS COUNCIL LOCAL PLAN EXAMINATION IN PUBLIC**

## **HEARING STATEMENT**

### **WEEK 2 MATTER 4:**

**ALLOCATIONS, SAFEGUARDED LAND AND GREEN BELT  
BOUNDARIES - BOLD, ECCLESTON, SUTTON MANOR, THATTO  
HEATH AND ST HELENS CORE AREA**

**ON BEHALF OF  
OMEGA ST HELENS LTD**

## INTRODUCTION

This Hearing Statement has been prepared by Progress Planning Consultancy (PPC) on behalf of Omega St Helens Ltd (OSHL).

OSHL are in a conditional contract for the sale of the land referred to as the Omega South Western Extension, with the landowner Homes England. This land comprises 31.2ha and is subject to a proposed Employment Allocation (Site 1EA) in the St Helens Council Local Plan Submission Draft (LPSD).

The Site 1EA is currently the subject of a Hybrid planning application (P/2020/0061) for: Full Planning Permission for the erection of a B8 logistics warehouse (Unit 1: 81,570 sqm) offices and Outline Planning Permission for Manufacturing (B2) and Logistics (B8) development with ancillary offices (Totalling 205,500 sqm).

St Helens Council's Planning Committee resolved to grant planning permission on 27 October 2020 subject to a referral to the Secretary of State. The application was subsequently called-in by the Secretary of State and a Public Inquiry (APP/H4315/V/20/3265899) was held between the dates of 27 April – 06 May 2021.

This Hearing Statement supplements our client's formal representations to the previous stages of the Local Plan process and considers the Inspector's Matters, Issues and Questions (April 2021) in relation to Week 2 - Matter 4 of the St Helens Local Plan Examination in Public and in particular Issue 1.

Given the link between the questions raised by the Inspectors in Issue 1, we have chosen to provide a single response to the Issue as a whole, with the answers provided relating solely to Site 1EA.

### **Matter 4 - Allocations, Safeguarded Land and Green Belt Boundaries - Bold, Eccleston, Sutton Manor, Thatto Heath and St Helens Core Area**

#### **Issue 1: Omega South Western Extension (1EA) and Omega North Western Extension (1ES)**

Site 1EA is allocated to meet Warrington's needs. Site 1ES is safeguarded to meet St Helens long term needs.

- 1. Do the Green Belt assessments support the allocation and safeguarded land and demonstrate exceptional circumstances for the removal of the land from the Green Belt?*
- 2. In relation to these exceptional circumstances, is Site 1EA justified to meet Warrington's needs, having particular regard to the stage that Warrington's LP has reached?*
- 3. If exceptional circumstances have been demonstrated have these been clearly articulated in the Plan?*
- 4. Are the configuration and scale of the allocation and safeguarded land justified taking into account development needs and the Green Belt assessments?*
- 5. Would the adverse impacts of developing Site 1EA (Green Belt impacts, traffic, air quality) outweigh the benefits?*

6. *Is Site 1EA deliverable, taking into account any offsite transport infrastructure required?*
7. *Should Site 1ES be allocated rather than safeguarded so that it can contribute to meeting needs in the Plan period?*
8. *Are the indicative site areas and appropriate uses for Sites 1EA and 1ES within Tables 4.1 and 4.7 justified and effective?*
9. *Are the requirements for Site 1EA within Policy LPA04.1 (Sections 2, 3, 4 and 5) and Appendix 5 (Site Profile) and for Site 1ES within Appendix 7 (Site Profile) positively prepared and effective?*
10. *Are there any barriers to Site 1EA coming forward in the Plan period?*

## **Response to Issue 1**

St Helens Green Belt Review (December 2018) was prepared by the Council in advance of the publication of the St Helens Local Plan Submission Draft (LPSD) 2019. The Review explains that Green Belt covers approximately 65% (88km<sup>2</sup> of the total 135 km<sup>2</sup>) of the Borough. This is much higher any other district in Merseyside and remains unchanged since 1983 (paragraphs 1.7 & 1.8).

The LPSD evidence base clearly demonstrates a significant lack of available brownfield sites capable of responding to the employment land requirements of the Borough and the wider Liverpool City Region. The current deliverable supply of land on urban sites in the Borough amounts to just 15.79ha of land. This shortfall has led to the need to revisit the Green Belt to consider the release of land for employment land.

St Helens' *Employment Land Need and Supply Background Paper* (SD022, Section. 4.8) states that there has been increasing evidence of the need for employment sites in St Helens that could provide for large-scale logistics operators.

Additionally, the *LCR SHELMA 2018* (SUB001, Section 12) identifies a substantial need for large-scale B8 warehousing and logistics buildings (over 9,000 sq.m / 100,000 sq.ft) for the LCR. Over the period to 2037, a 'Do Minimum' need of 308ha rising to a 'Do Something' need of 397ha for strategic B8 development is identified in the SHELMA. The Report's market analysis points to a shortage of large sites capable of accommodating large-scale B8 development and there is an evident need to identify additional land.

The Council's *Green Belt Review* (SD020) sets out that substantial shortfalls have been identified in the overall quantity, quality and range of sites within existing urban areas that can be made available for housing and employment development over the Local Plan period, both within the Borough and in other nearby locations.

The Council has fully considered, including through their Duty to Cooperate with adjoining authorities, whether employment land needs can be met without the need for further Green Belt release. However, the requirement is significant and there is no scope to substantially increase the supply of deliverable land within the urban area.

The proposed allocation site 1EA sits within parcel GBP\_076 (569.98ha) which the Green Belt Review (Page 353) describes as follows:

*'Very large parcel lying to south of the M62 and north of the A49 Warrington Road. The parcel contains agricultural land and buildings, Mersey Valley Golf Club and in parts dense woodland. Part of the settlement of Bold Heath lies within the south of the parcel. Omega South and Lingley Green and Lingley Mere in Warrington lie to the east of the parcel. The parcel is split into five sub- parcels.'*

Parcel GBP\_076 is then split up into 5 sub plots with plot GBP\_076\_c (31.83ha) being consistent with the proposed allocation site 1EA.

The assessment progressively 'sieves' sites through the following steps:

- Stage 1A – Identification of Green Belt Parcels
- Stage 1B – Assessment of Parcels and Sub Parcels against Green Belt Purposes
- Stage 2B – Assessment of Development Potential within Remaining Parcels and Sub-Parcels
- Stage 3A & B Ranking and Refinement of Results

With regard to the overall significance of the site to Green Belt purposes, the Stage 1B assessment of GBP\_076\_c found that it made a 'Medium' contribution on the basis that it contained *"no inappropriate development and has open views across the sub-parcel, but is boarded by large-scale built development at Omega South and the M62, therefore only has a moderate countryside character"*.

On the basis of this assessment plot GBP\_076\_c proceeded to Stage 2B and was subsequently identified as having medium development potential. The full 2B proformas were published in October 2020 as part of the evidence base for the Local Plan examination, with pages 149-151 concluding that plot GBP\_076\_c could continue to the next stage, with the following conclusion reached on developability: *"The sub-parcels have landscape land sensitivity as medium to high. There is a negligible area of protected woodland within sub-parcel GBP\_076\_C, which would need to be retained, however it would not affect the majority of the site."*

Table 5.2 (Page 54 & 55) of the Green Belt Review then records why the Site has been identified to be allocated in Stage 3 (as opposed to discounted or safeguarded), stating:

*"The sub-parcel lies to the south of the M62, next to the Borough's eastern boundary with Warrington Borough. Development here would form a natural extension of the adjacent Omega employment area, located in Warrington. Warrington BC has confirmed that the site should be developed to help meet its needs for employment uses. There is a small area of protected woodland within the sub-parcel that would need to be retained, however this would not affect the majority of the site. Whilst the cumulative effects of development in this location would need to be addressed, as capacity issues have been identified at Junction 8 of the M62, Warrington BC (in its capacity as highway authority) has not raised any objections in principle to the allocation of this sub-parcel. Warrington BC has also stated in its Local Plan Development Option consultation document 2017 (paragraph 2.38) that the development of the sub-parcel should '...contribute to meeting Warrington's employment land needs'. Although the sub-parcel includes high quality agricultural land, the harm that would be caused*

*by the loss of this needs to be balanced against the potential benefits from providing further employment uses within this location. The 2018 SA concluded that the development of sub-parcel would have a mixed impact on the achievement of SA objectives. However, as the sub-parcel is located within 1km of an area within the 20% most deprived population in the UK, its development for employment uses would help to reduce poverty and social exclusion. There are no other over-riding constraints that apply to the sub-parcel and it is suitable to be allocated and thereby help meet the employment land needs of Warrington.”*

The Warrington Submission Draft Local Plan Policy DEV4 (Economic Growth and Development), identifies a minimum requirement for 362ha of employment land to support both local and strategic employment needs between 2017 and 2037 and explains that Omega’s westward expansion into St Helens is one of four main employment sites that have been identified.

The supporting text in the Plan explains that Warrington Council believe they can currently only demonstrate a realistic supply of 83.91ha in the urban area, with the potential for a further 31.46ha identified in the town centre / waterfront masterplan and a reliance on Omega West to provide 31ha. This leaves a requirement of around 215ha to be provided through Green Belt release. This requirement would be greater should Site 1EA not be able to be relied upon.

Therefore, exceptional circumstances exist to release Site 1EA from the Green Belt under the Duty to Cooperate in order to help Warrington meet their employment land requirements. From a strategic perspective and when considered against all reasonable alternatives, directing additional employment growth towards Site 1EA is justified and supported by evidence.

The *Allocations Local Plan Economic Evidence Paper* (EMP003, Para. 7.4.1) concludes that large-scale logistics is the most active market in the Region. This market is reliant on the availability of highly accessible and deliverable sites capable of accommodating large-scale (over 100,000 sq.ft) warehousing.

The evidence base underpinning the Council’s decision to review the Green Belt to identify new locations for employment development to meet need noted a set of criteria that suitable sites should be able to satisfy, including:

- **Minimum site size 5ha:** Site 1EA measures approximately 31.2ha (gross).
- **Drive time to motorway junctions of 10 minutes or less:** The site benefits from direct access to Junction 8 of the M62, via the existing Omega South highways infrastructure.
- **HGV access to the site must be possible:** The existing Omega South highways infrastructure has been designed to provide HGV access and this design rationale will be extended to the site.
- **Access to the site from A570 / A580 / M6 / M62 via A roads on the SRN:** Access from Junction 8 M62 is via Skyline Drive (A5280) and does not involve the use of any residential highways.

- **Public transport access or potential for public transport access:** an existing bus service connects Omega South to Omega North and beyond and would be extended to serve the site.
- **Good separation from adjacent sensitive uses:** Site 1EA considered to represent a natural extension to an existing strategic employment site (Omega) and is well separated from potential sensitive uses or receptors.

As part of the representations made on behalf of OSHL (then Miller Developments) to the Preferred Options LP Consultation stage (GVA January 2017) a high-level technical assessment of known constraints on the site was undertaken and an indicative masterplan prepared (see **Appendix A**), to demonstrate the capacity of the site. This identified the following potential outputs from the site:

- Total capacity for up to approximately 77,768 sqm (837,087 sq. ft) B1 (ancillary), B2 and B8 uses (split 5%/22.5%/72.5%);
- Indicative units sized:
  - Unit A – 26,576 sqm (286,060 sq. ft)
  - Unit B – 19,416 sqm (208,991 sq. ft)
  - Unit C – 19,120 sqm (216,139 sq. ft)
  - Unit D – 11,696 sqm (125,894 sq. ft)
- Sufficient space for service yard, car parking and turning circle for HGVs to support each unit;
- A new service road running from north to south connecting with existing infrastructure on Omega South; and
- Sufficient buffering to known ecological constraints on the site.

As part of the masterplan process consideration was given to known site constraints at that time including: ecology, highways, and utilities. At the time of the 2017 representations OSHL (Miller Developments) were confident that none of these potential constraints represented a barrier to delivery and it is considered that this confidence has been borne out through the subsequent assessment and recommendation for approval, by the Council, of the Omega West hybrid planning application (P/2020/0061).

As part of the Hybrid application process and in accordance with the NPPF and the Council's adopted Local Plan, a Transport Assessment (TA) accompanied the application. The TA's methodology was, in accordance with relevant policy and guidance, agreed by the Council, Warrington Borough Council (the relevant highway authority) and Highways England.

The TA concludes that residual effects of the Proposed Development with mitigation, would mean that the Strategic Road Network would continue to operate within its capacity, and that there would be no adverse impact to safety. The delivery of these mitigation measures would be ensured through planning conditions. Accordingly, consistent with the aspirations of the NPPF (paragraph 109), the Proposed Development would not lead to an unacceptable impact on highway safety, nor would the residual impacts on the road network be severe.

No objections to the application on highway grounds were received from key consultees including Warrington Borough Council and Highways England and therefore it is considered

that the proposed allocation site would similarly have no unacceptable impact on highway safety and that there are no off-site highways infrastructure constraints that would prevent the delivery of the site.

An Air Quality Assessment was completed for the Environmental Statement (ES) that supported the Hybrid planning application. In summary the conclusions of the ES were that the proposals would not significantly change air quality during the construction and operation phases of the development and would not lead to any exceedances of air quality limit values. As part of the application determination process the Council's Air Quality Officer reviewed the Assessment and found the assessment methodology to be *"robust, best practice and consistent and therefore conclusions drawn from this will be reliable."*

It is accepted that the proposed allocation site, would when developed result in impacts on the Green Belt and to a lesser degree Highways and Air Quality, however as summarised above these could be mitigated for and must be weighed against the benefits that will come from the development of this site and in particular its contribution to building a strong and competitive economy.

To this end it is considered that the proposed allocation site, once developed, would constitute sustainable development, consistent with Section 2 of the NPPF:

**Economic Objective** – the Site will contribute to building a strong, responsive and competitive economy. In particular, the proposals will bring a number of economic benefits in terms of job creation and increased expenditure in the local economy. It will enhance the profile and image of Omega as a major focus for the distribution sector and would send a strong signal of investment confidence. It would build on the competitive advantages of the area for the logistics sector, including investment in the SuperPort and help to grow a sustainable logistics sector in the Liverpool City Region, necessary to maintain and support the growth of other sectors such as manufacturing and higher technology activities and building upon on the investment in the SuperPort. In this way, the proposed allocation will directly meet the Government's objective of 'levelling up.'

**Social Objective** – future proposals for the site will include commitments to local employment & training schemes that will ensure that local people can gain significantly from the new job opportunities. Some of the areas of greatest deprivation in the region and UK are situated within 2-3km of the Application Site. As a consequence, the employment generated by the proposed development, when combined with the new bus links between these areas and the site, will have a significant and positive impact on reducing deprivation in St Helens. Wider community benefits associated with the operation of the development, also include new and enhanced pedestrian and cycle routes through the site that will provide links with the southern areas of the St Helens urban area and multiple connection points into the existing Omega site and wider Warrington network and the provision of a nature conservation and woodland area in the north-west corner of the site which will be open to the public.

**Environmental Objective** – whilst future development at the allocation site will give rise to environmental impacts these will be identified and mitigated for, and where possible net benefits to environmental conditions will be secure through landscaping enhancements

integrated with the ecological habitat design, which will have a long-term positive impact on local ecological conditions.

Finally, it is considered that no physical or technical constraints exist that would prevent the development of the site for employment uses or impact upon its deliverability in the short-term. This is evidenced by:

- OSHL have entered into a conditional contract with Homes England as landowner for the sale of the land, showing willingness and intention to develop the site.
- OSHL's Hybrid planning application that includes Site 1EA (P/2020/0061) that has been granted planning permission by St Helens Council (pending the Secretary of State's decision) with no objections from statutory consultees showing further evidence of demand to develop this site out in the near future;
- OSHL's Hybrid planning application including a named occupier for part of the site clearly demonstrating the immediate demand for employment land in this location and the attractiveness of the site to the logistics market; and
- The site being free of any known legal restrictions, covenants, clawbacks or ransoms meaning there are no third-party interdependencies related to the site which could delay its delivery.

#### Summary – Issue 1

It is considered that the Green Belt assessments support the allocation of Site 1EA and that exceptional circumstances have been demonstrated for the removal of the land from the Green Belt.

The proposed allocation has been identified through the Council's Duty to Cooperate with Warrington Borough Council and is required to help meet Warrington's shortfall in employment land supply, which requires over 240ha of Green Belt land to be released (including Site 1EA).

The masterplan for the site indicates that the site is capable of responding to the demands of the logistics sector and that whilst the development of the site would result in impacts on the Green Belt these would be outweighed by the benefits that development could bring in relation to the Economic, Social and Environmental objectives established in the NPPF.

No physical or technical constraints exist that would affect the deliverability of the site and clear evidence exists to demonstrate strong market demand for development in this location, indicating a high likelihood that the site will come forward during the early stages of the Plan period.



## **Appendix A**

### **Site 1EA Indicative Masterplan (2017)**

**SCHEDULE OF ACCOMMODATION**

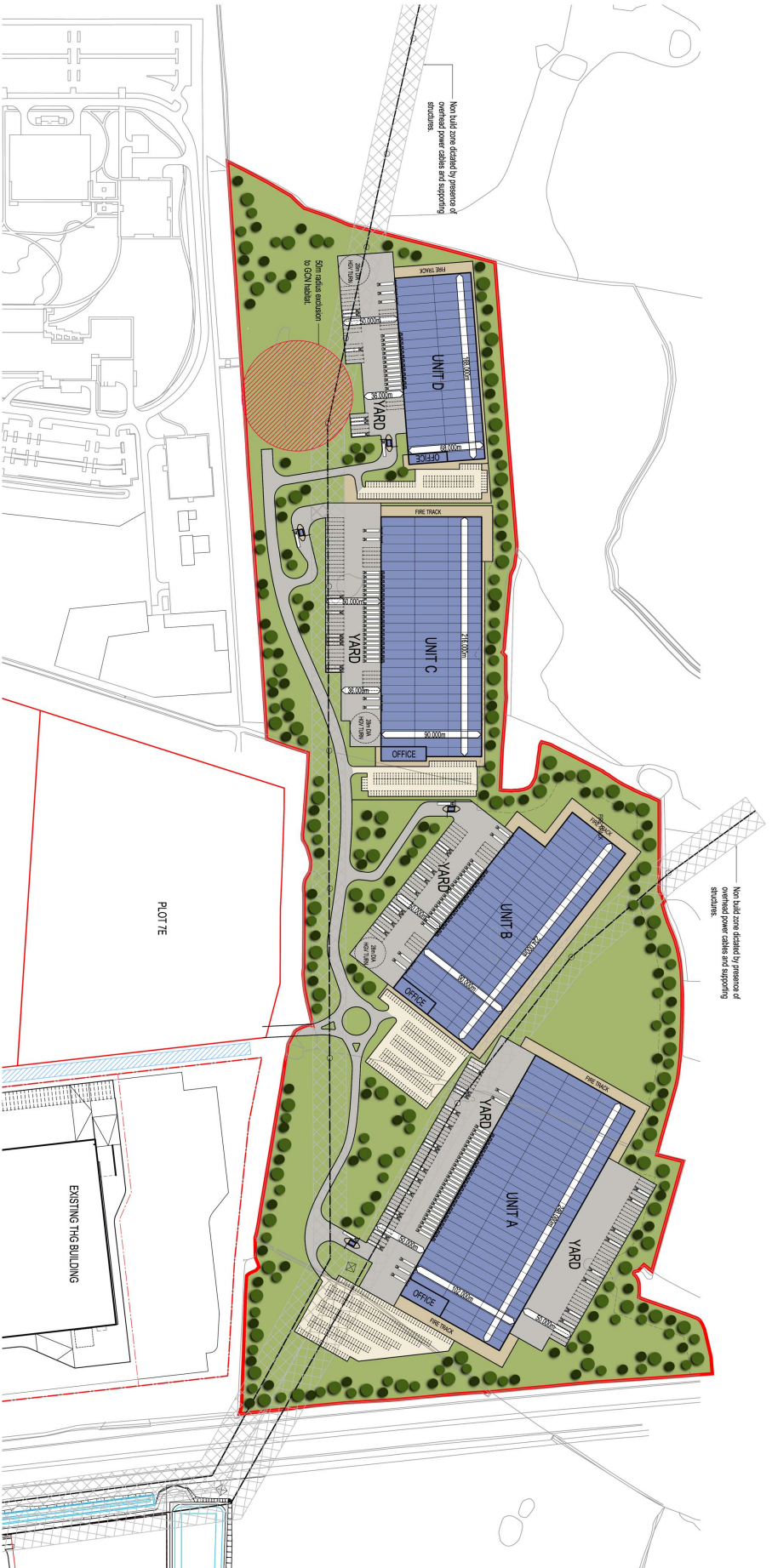
<b>Unit A</b>	Warehouse	: 25,296	sq m	272,283	sq ft
	Offices (2 Floors)	: 1,280		13,777	
	<b>TOTAL (GIA)</b>	<b>: 26,576</b>		<b>286,060</b>	
	Car Parking	: 259 (inc Disabled)			
	Haunch Height	: 7m			
	Building Height	: 2			
	Dock Levelers	: 28			
	Level Access	: 5			
	HGV Parking	: 99			

<b>Unit B</b>	Warehouse	: 18,504	sq m	199,775	sq ft
	Offices (2 Floors)	: 912		9,616	
	<b>TOTAL (GIA)</b>	<b>: 19,416</b>		<b>208,391</b>	
	Car Parking	: 198 (inc Disabled)			
	Haunch Height	: 7m			
	Building Height	: 2m (Maximum)			
	Dock Levelers	: 19			
	Level Access	: 4			
	HGV Parking	: 44			

<b>Unit C</b>	Warehouse	: 19,120	sq m	205,805	sq ft
	Offices (2 Floors)	: 960		10,333	
	<b>TOTAL (GIA)</b>	<b>: 20,080</b>		<b>216,138</b>	
	Car Parking	: 131 (inc Disabled)			
	Haunch Height	: 7m			
	Building Height	: 2m (Maximum)			
	Dock Levelers	: 21			
	Level Access	: 4			
	HGV Parking	: 47			

<b>Unit D</b>	Warehouse	: 11,152	sq m	120,039	sq ft
	Offices (2 Floors)	: 544		5,855	
	<b>TOTAL (GIA)</b>	<b>: 11,696</b>		<b>125,894</b>	
	Car Parking	: 115 (inc Disabled)			
	Haunch Height	: 7m			
	Building Height	: 2m (Maximum)			
	Dock Levelers	: 13			
	Level Access	: 3			
	HGV Parking	: 31			

**OVERALL SITE AREA: 31.28 ha/ 77.29 acres**  
**TOTAL GIA FLOOR AREA: 77,768 sqm/ 837,087 sq ft**  
**APPROX. SITE DENSITY: 24.3%**



Notes:  
 1. All dimensions are in millimetres unless otherwise stated.  
 2. All dimensions are to the centre line of the building unless otherwise stated.  
 3. All dimensions are to the centre line of the building unless otherwise stated.  
 4. All dimensions are to the centre line of the building unless otherwise stated.  
 5. All dimensions are to the centre line of the building unless otherwise stated.  
 6. All dimensions are to the centre line of the building unless otherwise stated.  
 7. All dimensions are to the centre line of the building unless otherwise stated.  
 8. All dimensions are to the centre line of the building unless otherwise stated.  
 9. All dimensions are to the centre line of the building unless otherwise stated.  
 10. All dimensions are to the centre line of the building unless otherwise stated.

