Wirral Density Study

Stage 3: Identifying density zones

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council

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Stage 3: Identifying density zones

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Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this briefing note is to set out the methodology through which the Density Zones have been formulated. The methodology (detailed over the following pages using the example of Heswall) contains a number of steps beginning with the mapping of sustainability variables. Please note that it is not the role of this stage of the report to set the densities within the zones, simply to define their location and size.

1.2 The variables are based on indicators mentioned in paragraph 122 of the National Planning Policy Framework 2019 (the Framework). Collectively, these variables could justify areas of higher residential density as they give access to sustainable modes of transport and key amenities. These variables include railway stations and bus routes in addition to retail centres and schools. Within walking distance of these variables, higher densities are appropriate.

1.3 This study has explored the location of these variables across Wirral and has devised five Density Zones within which higher density development could be provided.

1.4 These are listed below, with the intention being that densities will decrease down the scale (see stage 4 report for full details).

1. Waterfront Density Zone
2. Urban Core and Town Centres Density Zone
3. Transit Density Zone
4. Suburban Density Zone
5. Urban Edge

1.5 Each Density Zone responds to the different characteristics of the type of area in which they have been applied and the extent to which services and facilities are accessible within that area. They also take account of land which should be protected due to specific heritage or recreational value. Nearby assets such as public open spaces, playing fields and other recreational facilities can also justify higher densities.

1.6 Higher densities are not recommended in locations within or adjacent to Conservation Areas and other heritage assets, as a precaution, even though in some cases, depending on the local character and built form, they may be capable of accommodating smaller grain or higher density development.

1.7 It should be noted that these density zones have been prepared based on physical characteristics and features within the Borough, and do not include an assessment of market or viability which will be tested through other mechanisms (such as the viability testing for the Local Plan, the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) and to some degree stage 4 and the work associated with the Birkenhead Regeneration Framework) associated with the development of the emerging Local Plan.

Step 1 – Mapping key facilities

2.1 The first task is to map key facilities and infrastructure within Wirral which provide a service to local residents to help take account of the criteria in NPPF paragraph 122 c. This ranges from children's nurseries and schools to corner shops and retail centres (the latter mapped from the Wirral Retail and Centres Study 2019). In addition to these facilities, public transport is mapped with a focus on high frequency bus routes and railway stops.

2.2 High frequency bus routes have been identified based on a study of timetables from September 2019. Where a route has more than three buses an hour (in both directions) and has night or later evening services, which would allow their use for commuting and leisure activities, then they have been classed as 'high frequency'.

2.3 Railway stations in the Borough all have a regular daily and weekend service. Those which are part of the Borderlands Bidston-Wrexham service (Upton and Heswall) have recently seen improvements to the regularity of services and destinations served.

A - Map the bus routes and railway stations (differentiate high and lower frequency routes).

B – Add defined retail areas and town centres and map the primary and secondary schools, in addition to college and nursery education.

Step 2 – Identify assets with leisure, recreation and conservation value

3.1 Next, facilities which are considered to be an asset to those who live nearby are mapped. This is a mix of public open space, playing fields and recreational facilities. Assets such as areas of public open space also offer an opportunity to increase densities within a certain radius as they can offset the requirement for onsite provision leisure and recreation. Again these assets are specified in paragraph 122e of the Framework.

3.2 In addition, heritage assets such as Conservation Areas and Scheduled Ancient Monuments have been mapped. Heritage assets, whilst offering benefit to those who live in and within them, are under formal protection and thus should be excluded from areas where higher densities are promoted, as a precaution. Here, however, the duty to preserve or enhance heritage assets would in some circumstances not automatically disbar consideration of higher residential densities. Character and setting is a key consideration as part of increasing densities mentioned within paragraph 122d of the Framework.

C – Public open space and Conservation Areas are mapped.

Step 3 – Set out a hierarchy of density zones

4.1 With the above information mapped, the next step is to arrive at the Density Zones. In many cases this has been arrived at using the walking distance to key variables such as transit stops and / or clusters of retail and other service activity.

4.2 Please note that in all cases the boundaries of these zones have been adapted or amended to take account of features on the ground so that they have a 'physical logic'. Given that many also include a measure of walking distance, barriers to walking such as rivers, canals and busy arterial routes have also curtailed the area of some of the zones.

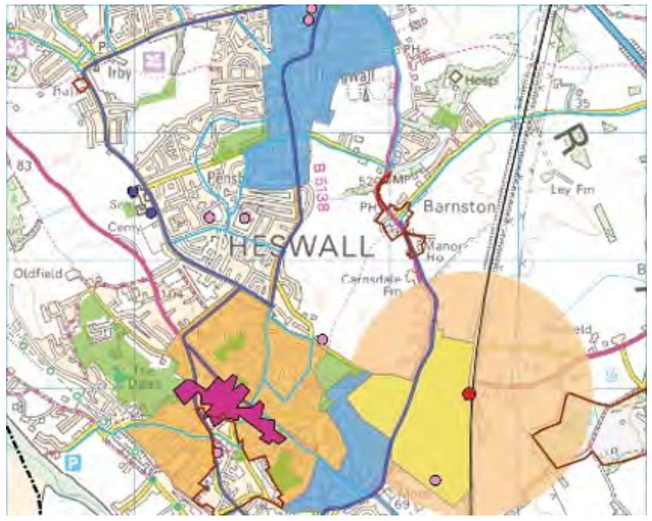
4.3 In addition, areas that are identified as a being at risk of flooding have been excluded from all density zones as it would be considered inappropriate to consider housing or higher densities in these areasIn addition, areas that are identified as a being at risk of flooding have been excluded from all density zones as it would be considered inappropriate to consider housing or higher densities in these areas.

4.4 Using this mapped information the five density zones can then be mapped as follows:

1. **Waterfront Density Zone** – Development of higher densities is appropriate within 800m (10minute walk) of the waterfront (including the former docks and floats) at Birkenhead, and Seacombe. All of this zone falls within the area defined by the Birkenhead Regeneration Framework which seeks to make use of a series of medium and large previously developed sites which will change and improve the character and appearance of the area in line with paragraph 122d of the Framework. The waterfront also includes an area with access to high frequency public transport interchanges (including the ferry terminals).
2. **Urban Core and Town Centres Density Zone** – This zone of higher density is identified as including town centres and the areas within 800m (10 minute walk) of Birkenhead town centre (the largest and most diverse) and within 400m (5 minute walk) of other town centres, as defined by the Wirral Retail and Centres Study. All of these areas are well served by public transport and other community facilities.
3. **Transit Density Zone** – As noted from earlier work in stages 1 and 2 of this study, development of higher densities is appropriate within 800m (10 minute walk) of railway stations or where there is a high frequency bus route. As a result this area is defined as any existing built up area that falls within these distances but is not already covered by the Waterfront or Town Centres zone.
4. **Suburban Density Zone** - Development of higher densities is also considered appropriate within 1200m (20 minute walk) of railway stations and / or where there are other multiple community services and facilities including district centres, schools and green spaces within 400m walk. Research by the CIHT has suggested that a railway station may be used effectively for commuting and leisure use up to 20 minutes' walk away.
5. **Urban Edge Density Zone** – Please note that the identification of this zone does not necessarily mean that these sites are to be developed, however should greenfield land be required as part of the adopted Local Plan housing strategy these sites would also need to be considered within the density zone methodology. These areas include undeveloped land on the edge of the existing built form where it is within 1km (approx. 15 minutes' walk) of an existing railway station, and where these sites also are within close proximity to existing community infrastructure. The identification of this area does not mean that this land should be released but identifies possible locations where higher densities could ensure efficient use of land.

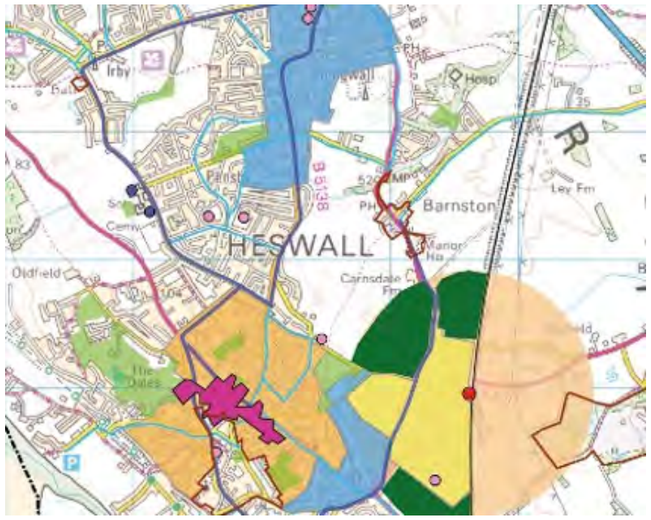
D – To identify, for example, the Transit Density Zone (shown yellow above), an 800m walking distance is drawn around each railway station and land within the built up area identified. For the Urban Core and Town Centres Density Zone (shown orange) 400m is drawn around the defined retail centre. Conservation Areas and open spaces are excluded. Both areas within this walking distance are identified using logical boundaries and barriers to mark its extent (e.g. railway lines, busy roads and rivers).

E – The Suburban Density Zone (shown blue) is identified with particular focus on areas which are within 5 minutes walking distance to key services and facilities such as schools, retail centres and open spaces especially where they are also within 1200m of a railway station.



F - The Urban Edge Density Zone (shown brown, as the crow flies) is identified by identifying undeveloped land on the edge of the existing settlement which is within 1000m of a railway station, using logical boundaries and barriers to mark its extent (e.g. railway lines, busy roads and rivers). In these areas higher densities could be promoted to allow for more efficient use of land if it is required to be released.

G - The town centres, services and buffers are all removed to show the defined density zones. In the Urban Edge areas higher densities could be promoted to allow for more efficient use of land if it is required to be released.



H – This diagram shows the Transit, Suburban and Urban Edge Density Zones at Heswall.

Step 4 – Identify sites within each of the density zones

5.1 The final step is to identify specific sites within each Density Zone which are available, achievable and deliverable for residential development. The most robust way to achieve this is to consider sites within the latest Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) and map these against the density zones shown.

KEY

DENSITY ZONE METHODOLOGY

- Birkenhead Regeneration Framework
- Birkenhead Town Centre
- Town Centre
- District Centre
- Bus route
- High frequency bus route
- Railway station
- Motorway
- Waterfront
- Urban Core and Town Centres
- Transit Area
- Suburban Area
- Urban Edge
- Green Space
- Primary School
- Secondary School
- Conservation Area/Heritage Asset
- Flood risk area

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