



# Wirral Density Study

**Final report and policy recommendations  
(inc. draft density policy)**

Wirral Local Plan

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# 1. Introduction

## **Density and the emerging Local Plan**

1.1. This is the final report of four that have been prepared in support of the emerging Wirral Local Plan considering the policy approach to housing density. This final report draws together the findings of the previous three reports and sets out the recommended draft policy.

1.2. For clarity, the previous reports are as follows:

- Stage 1 and 2 report (December 2019) - this includes an assessment of the current position to the delivery of higher densities in Wirral and examined a number of best practice examples from elsewhere. This was the subject of feedback from the January 2020 public consultation. This is known as the baseline report.
- Stage 3 report (August 2020) - set out proposed density zones based on guidance included in the National Planning Policy Framework 2019 (hereafter the Framework). This work focused on ensuring that areas that were well served by public transport and local shops and services were prioritised into a sensible hierarchy. This is known as the density zones report.
- Stage 4 report (September 2020) - included detailed assessments of how to increase densities based on designs for specific sites as well as exploring neighbourhood densification. This work concluded with a detailed table linking these explorations to the density zones.

1.3. This final report (which is stage 7 of the project) now draws this work to a close and proposes a recommended policy and associated justification, which can be found at appendix 1 of this report. It includes work on the following two stages, but refers back to the previous three reports:

- Stage 5 (October 2020) involved a review of the then emerging draft Local Plan policies to explore how the draft Density Policy would work alongside them. This stage concluded with a report recommending the workings of the Density Policy and how it could fit into the wider Local Plan.
- Stage 6 (October 2020) concluded with a draft Density Policy based on feedback from the Local Authority

1.4. Whilst this report has been designed to be stand alone, reference is made within the report to the Framework and the previous three reports. Those wishing to examine matters in more detail should refer to these as indicated.

1.5. In developing this final draft policy, we have worked closely with a number of different groups and organisations including planning officers and members from Wirral Council, the Council's Local Plan advisors Arup and the consultant team developing the Birkenhead Regeneration Framework (BRF) (led by Avison Young).

## Outline of this report

1.6. This report has three sections which are as follows:

- A summary of the key findings and policy recommendations from the work to date drawing on the information presented in the previous three reports
- A short section setting out wider considerations which this work has highlighted that go beyond the scope of a density policy
- A final section setting out the approach taken to drafting the draft density policy (linked to appendix 1)

## Summary of recommendations on density

1.7. The report recommends the use of four density zones to drive the policy. The stage 1-2 baseline report and the stage 4 report includes full details but they are summarised here for completeness. These zones and their characteristics are as follows:

**Waterfront zone** – an area within approximately a 5 minutes' walk from the waterfront either along the Mersey or around the Birkenhead Dock complex. In these areas there is the opportunity for higher density developments and tall buildings. Within this area there is already an increasing trend to higher densities. The BRF also supports ultra-high densities in this location. Densities approximately 70 - 75 dph have, and can be, delivered.

**Urban core & town centres zone** – This area is focused on an area within 800m of Birkenhead town centre and within 400m of the other town centres identified within the settlement hierarchy. Access to shops, services and facilities

allows for higher densities including densification of the retail areas using upper floors and backland sites. Densities of around 60 dwellings per hectare can be accommodated comfortably and, in many cases, have been delivered to a much higher density.

**Transit zone** – These are areas either along high frequency bus routes or within 400m of a railway or metro station that offer easy access to services and facilities through the concept of Transit Orientated Development (TOD). These areas allow for higher density development and densification of existing neighbourhoods making more efficient use of land and buildings within this zone. A variety of higher densities can be (and have been) accommodated in this zone, but in most cases evidence supports a range somewhere between 50 – 75 dph.

**Suburban zone** – These are areas that may not be so well served by public transport but local shopping facilities (district centres) and access to community infrastructure (schools, healthcare etc.) means that higher densities can be accommodated, or the densification of existing neighbourhoods supported. Within this zone some of the lowest densities have been delivered but existing average densities are approximately 40 dph.

**Table 1: Summary of broad characteristics of the density zones**

## 2. Final policy recommendations

### Context for a policy based approach to density

- 2.1. As part of the development of the emerging Wirral Local Plan there is a requirement to provide new land for residential development to meet the objectively assessed need. The Borough has a number of previously developed sites, including some large cleared sites within Birkenhead, as well as a number of small and medium sized sites throughout the Borough, mainly associated with town and district centres.
- 2.2. Outside of the existing urban areas within Wirral, almost all of the land is designated as Green Belt. The previous studies into this topic have clearly demonstrated that in Wirral recent trends can be seen towards higher densities in recent permissions since 2015.
- 2.3. Density is a common thread throughout the Framework. It integrates chapters focused on making efficient use of land, achieving well designed places and protecting the Green Belt. Paragraph 137 of the Framework sets out the need to use Green Belt land, that use should be made of brownfield land and that the densities of any area are optimised. This should include a consideration of whether policies should introduce a significant uplift in minimum density standards, in town and city centres and areas well served by public transport.
- 2.4. Paragraph 122 and 123 of the Framework clearly signpost the approach that should be taken in achieving appropriate densities as part of plan making, where there is an aspiration to deliver higher densities. This is especially the case where

there is an anticipated shortage of land to meet identified housing needs.

- 2.5. This includes an element of densification or increasing densities within existing urban areas. Paragraph 127 clearly sets out that responding to local character is important, however, this needs to be balanced as a desire to not prevent or discourage innovation and change when increasing densities is specifically mentioned.
- 2.6. Regardless of whether Green Belt land is to be released (which is not the Council's preferred option) there is a requirement for the development of a Local Plan as set out within the Framework to consider how it will optimise the use of brownfield land and the densities of existing residential areas.
- 2.7. The presence of a number of previously developed sites (some of which are already identified as part of the BRF) as well as significant areas of residential neighbourhoods that are well serviced by shops, facilities and public transport, offers a strong opportunity to increase densities in new developments.
- 2.8. A full assessment and record of the relevant national and locally adopted policies and guidance that have preceded the new draft density policy is included in the stage 1 and 2 report (December 2019).

***POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: It is this national policy context that justifies both the need for, and the approach taken to developing, a density policy. A density policy will allow for the most effective use of land within existing urban areas and offers the opportunity to explore a significant uplift in densities.***

## The existing situation

- 2.9. The work which was undertaken and set out within the stage 4 report of the density study has shown that average densities within Wirral are approximately 40 dwellings per hectare (dph). In many cases this is made up of areas of terraced and semi-detached housing and in some cases small clusters of flatted development. In some places, such as around town and district centres and near railway stations, terraced streets with densities of 80-100 dwellings per hectare are found.
- 2.10. Whilst some of these terraced streets would not meet modern space standards many of them are actually quite generous, the biggest detractor being that they have small yards or limited gardens. Interestingly, these forms of development have also delivered a wide mix of housing types and sizes from 3 and 4 bed family homes to smaller apartments and terraced units.
- 2.11. There are pockets of lower density housing throughout Wirral, some of these being larger homes in generous plots – many being from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century - however increasingly this is made up of bungalows or villas built in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Past plans have sought to retain some of these areas through a suite of place specific policies that seek to maintain ‘low density’ areas, which remain part of the current saved development plan policies. Whilst some are Conservation Areas, in most cases these areas have no designated protection and as a result the low density policy appears somewhat counter to the guidance in the Framework.
- 2.12. It is recommended that these previous policies are not taken forward or embodied into the approach to density and densification. They have not been used to shape and develop this future policy, however, the development of all emerging policies will need to consider the relationship between character and density.
- 2.13. Work undertaken as part of the baseline report, namely studying past planning permissions, has shown that in recent years there has already been the beginnings of a move towards higher densities. Whilst the approvals for Wirral Waters clearly show a significant uplift in the densities over this average, even discounting these there has been a steady upward trend. This study found that there were two broad conclusions:
- Firstly, that development on a smaller site was more likely to have a higher density than development on a larger site, and;
  - Secondly, that the redevelopment of a previously developed site was more likely to yield a higher density than that of a greenfield site.
- 2.14. Some of this can of course be identified as the reflection of the economics of these individual sites, but it is clear that it is entirely viable to bring forward higher densities. Full details of this can be found within the initial stage 1 and 2 density report (December 2019).
- 2.15. As a final note here, there is significant work underway within Birkenhead and the surrounding neighbourhoods as part of the BRF. This work is already looking at the viability and design characteristics of developing at a higher density

with focus on the town centres and the Waterfront.

***POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: Within Wirral higher densities are not uncommon, and there has been a trend towards higher densities already when determining applications for sites of all scales. Local character will also need to be taken into account. It is also considered that the saved policies setting out low density areas are considered out of step with present approaches to policy making.***

#### **Density zones and minimum densities**

2.16. Stage 3 of the work undertaken sought to establish a series of zones that could allow for increased residential densities within the existing urban areas. Full details of this process are set out in the stage 3 report, issued in September 2020. This activity was undertaken ‘policy blind’ (without using or being shaped by any existing or emerging policy for Wirral). At this stage it should be noted that sites within the zones are not necessarily suitable for residential development.

2.17. We recommend that these density zones should be used as the basis for the policy and a map showing the four density zones identified is included at appendix 2. This will allow the policies on density to relate to the varied characteristics of the plan area with each policy zone based on different features or qualities.

2.18. The stage 3 report focused on ensuring that the policy would reflect paragraph 122 criterion b of the Framework which sets out that higher densities should be taking account of the ‘availability and capacity of infrastructure and services and the scope to promote sustainable travel modes.’ These community infrastructure

assets, public transport routes and town and district centres (further reflecting the guidance in paragraph 123b) were mapped to ensure that these elements were used to define the density zones.

2.19. Furthermore, work that is already underway as part of the BRF has been considered when setting the density zones. Collectively this seeks to achieve an integrated approach to increasing densities through regeneration, as outlined in paragraph 122d of the Framework. Further details are provided in the stage 3 report.

2.20. Once mapped, it was necessary to consider what appropriate densities should apply in each of these zones. This was covered in the stage 4 report (also published September 2020). This report has two main elements identified in the following paragraphs.

2.21. Firstly, the stage 4 report included a detailed study of the existing residential densities within each of the established ‘density zones’. The main focus of this work was to ensure that the approach to these densities was contextually responsive and expressed clearly what ‘high’ or ‘low’ density meant. This was expressed as a density scale that was then used to guide more detailed studies at the site and neighbourhood level exploring the delivery of higher densities on key urban sites of a variety of scales. Full details are provided within chapter 3 of that report.

2.22. Secondly, the stage 4 report explores how development could respond to this density scale. It concludes with a final table that looks at each zone in turn bringing together the findings. It proposes a staircase progression of densities across the zones. When preparing the draft policy



this final table was used as a guide, however it is by no means the final policy.

***POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: That the density zones identified should be used as the basis for the policy linked to the detailed assessment set out in the concluding table within the stage 4 report, creating a 'staircase' of minimum densities, which is based on a 'calibrated' density scale specifically for Wirral.***

#### **Case study based decision making**

2.23. Detailed consideration of small, medium and large urban sites was undertaken to set out what densities could effectively be achieved whilst delivering good design. The conclusion was that higher density development could be delivered in a variety of different sites and locations. These were focused on the waterfront and urban core / town centre zones.

2.24. These case studies use a variety of different types of dwelling which was reflective of the housing need identified which supported a focus on homes for smaller households. What was clear was that whilst higher densities (above the average) could easily be achieved with the use of apartments as a typology this would not always be required. Terraced townhouses, villas and even semi-detached houses (with gardens) all would allow for higher densities and should allow for housing choice.

2.25. Detailed studies have also been undertaken of six neighbourhoods within the transit and suburban density zones as part of the work with stage 4 of the density study. These studies have considered the opportunities for densification through a variety of types of development. Opportunities have been identified for the use of upper floors

above retail premises, backland and infill development (including plot subdivision) and also more standard changes of use and conversions of existing buildings to flats and apartments. This approach is in accordance with paragraph 118d of the Framework.

2.26. These types of development provide an opportunity to provide a wide range of different housetypes ranging from: small bungalows in rear gardens; starter homes on backland sites or former industrial or commercial land; apartments above shops; and even smaller family homes on a large site replacing a 5 - 6 bedroomed detached dwelling.

2.27. The study of planning permissions has demonstrated that these types of development are increasingly being submitted (especially in town and district centres away from Birkenhead) and are a very real source of supply in line with paragraph 70 of the Framework. The study has shown that there is a potentially longer term supply of these unallocated (or windfall) densification developments within existing urban areas.

2.28. In most cases, redevelopment of these smaller sites will be at densities much higher than the minimum densities identified for the policy and as such it is worth ensuring that these are identified as an acceptable form of supply. Many of these forms of development have specialist or specific policies (as density is only one aspect of creating sustainable developments) and therefore it is strongly recommended that wider policies in the plan are equally as supportive of the principle of such development types. We recommend that further guidance on design and density be provided by way of a Supplementary Planning Document.

***POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: That the densities set out in the stage 4 report can deliver appropriate development which not only responds to the opportunities available and past trends, but also delivers the type and nature of housing development that would meet local needs and respond to local character.***

### **Character and density**

- 2.29. The approach to retaining the character of particular areas in terms of density, scale, mass and height has been a feature of planning and design policies for some time – especially in Wirral – and is reflected in some of the older policies of the extant plan (like the aforementioned low density areas).
- 2.30. It is recommended that there is a step change away from this approach of simply ‘more of the same’ and that we recommend some flexibility – taking account of character - which would allow some sites to deliver more dwellings at higher densities.
- 2.31. It should be noted that the density zones specifically exclude Conservation Areas where, as a result of their unique characteristics, the well-established approach to preservation and enhancement of these heritage assets should take the lead. Nevertheless, work undertaken in the stage 4 report, where a selection of Conservation Areas were analysed, showed that many Conservation Areas have densities equal to or in excess of the 40 dph average.
- 2.32. The Framework discusses the ‘desirability of retaining an area’s prevailing character’ (para 122d) and this allows for a balance to be struck between rigid reflection of character, to areas where the character might change. Paragraph 123

uses the term ‘significant uplift’ to describe the approach to densities within areas with an anticipated shortage of land and as such it clearly possible to depart from the character-based approach in certain areas.

- 2.33. Given the current housing land supply context for this policy, this balance should be weighted, in our professional opinion, in favour of the change to accommodate higher densities where this would not be incompatible with heritage or conservation matters.
- 2.34. The minimum densities that we propose in the recommended transit and suburban density zones are broadly in line with the characteristics of existing neighbourhoods identified when we calibrated the density scale for these neighbourhoods. In this case these minimum density standards ensure that delivery is commensurate with character and makes optimum use of the land in these urban areas.
- 2.35. When considering the waterfront and urban core zones, we have been mindful that these density zones are the most accessible, and benefit from a range of shops, services and facilities. Given that the Framework suggests that in these areas there should be a ‘significant uplift’ then clearly there is a case for a change in the character of these particular zones. In these areas, the minimum densities proposed in the emerging policy also have the ability to be higher.

***POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: In developing the density policy, it will need to be accepted that some changes to local character will occur when implementing minimum densities, especially in the areas where a significant uplift may occur. A balance needs to be taken between these changes and establishing higher densities.***

### 3. Wider considerations

- 3.1. There are a number of wider planning policy matters that are related to, but separate from, the specific policy approach to density that should be considered in concert. Further details regarding these matters can be found within the concluding table in the stage 4 report. These are outlined below:

#### **Design quality**

- 3.2. The recommended approach to the density policy (as outlined in the previous chapter) references the importance of the design led approach to higher density development. This is vitally important in ensuring that density is delivered in a sustainable manner. Given that it is identified that the character of some of these areas will change, it is important that this 'change' is high quality.
- 3.3. The suburban and transit zone densities will be able to be delivered using types of dwellings that are commonplace within Wirral using two and three storey homes and units. Design policies will need to recognise that plot ratio and street scenes may change as a result of the approach to higher densities but scale, mass and bulk of buildings should be more easily assimilated into these neighbourhoods.
- 3.4. Within the waterfront and urban core / town centre zone a different approach to design and density may be required. The work undertaken by the team associated with the BRF has been factored into, at a strategic level, the development of this policy.
- 3.5. Within the study the consultant team (Avison Young / OP-EN) have based their design and

delivery assumptions on densities ranging from 55 dph through to 240 dph - all of which demonstrate the potential for a significant uplift over the existing average densities within Wirral. Whilst this work has yet to result in a formal development plan document, the evidence that it has generated clearly demonstrates that higher densities can be accommodated within the waterfront and urban core / town centre density zones.

- 3.6. These densities were developed and applied based on design and market inputs from the team working on the BRF, which focused on delivering the parameters of the stage 1 and 2 baseline evidence base report.
- 3.7. Whilst detailed design and development work has been undertaken for a number of sites, the BRF team have advised against developing a policy that is too prescriptive on density. Instead, the approach should favour the evidence generated in this study.
- 3.8. That said, the density assumption shows the potential application of that evidence base at a site specific level and confirms that there are opportunities for higher densities within the BRF boundary using a variety of innovative and contemporary design solutions. The recommended policy has therefore been developed to encourage such approaches in these areas.

#### **Application of standards**

- 3.9. One of the matters identified by the stage 4 reports was that traditional policy approaches to parking, open space and even amenity may need to be considered in a different way on some of the higher density developments. This will especially

be the case with sites in the waterfront, urban core / town centre zones.

- 3.10. In these areas, the use of walking, cycling and public transport for daily needs is a real prospect and this would justify lower parking provision. Additionally, these sites are all within 10 minutes' walk of a large public open space, recreational area or similar and as such there is some benefit to considering a contribution to these rather than further provision.
- 3.11. It is also important that amenity is maintained given that one of the easiest ways of increasing density is to reduce the distances between buildings. However, creative and reflective design, including the use of landscaping can assist in overcoming these concerns.
- 3.12. The Framework (paragraph 123c) does suggest that in making decisions regarding higher densities, standards of daylight and sunlight could be flexibly applied when it states "... authorities should take a flexible approach to applying policies or guidance relating to daylight and sunlight, where they would otherwise inhibit making an efficient use of a site (as long as the resulting scheme would provide acceptable living standards)."
- 3.13. It is clear that the Framework implies flexibility and not an abandonment of such standards.

#### **Space standards**

- 3.14. There has been much consideration about internal 'space standards'. Central government has a series of non-binding space standards for new dwellings known as the Nationally Described Space Standards, which Local Planning Authorities can seek to adopt if they consider there to be

exceptional circumstances. In this case and given that the policies in the plan are focusing on higher densities, it is considered that adopting these can be justified.

- 3.15. This does not include any standards for external space (gardens etc.) and whilst standards for publicly accessible green space have long been a feature of policy making, specific private amenity space is less so considered. There may be some value in exploring this as part of the emerging Local Plan. Our design work that underpinned stage 4 of the work focused on the goal of trying to achieve 60sq.m of external space as a minimum for family homes, and in apartments a minimum of 15sq.m of shared space per unit.

#### **Housing mix**

- 3.16. The work that we have undertaken in stage 4 has demonstrated that the housing need (certainly for market homes) can be delivered in a variety of ways at higher densities including the use of townhouses, terraces, larger apartments and even modest use of semi-detached homes.
- 3.17. The use of detached homes is unlikely to be used extensively if the densities are to be achieved and this may have a greater implication for the viability of larger sites delivered by volume housebuilders.

However, a study of the small and medium sites has demonstrated that a mix of different housetypes has been used recently on urban sites. This is evidenced not only through the review of the previous planning permissions (see stage 1-2 report) but also as part of the design work undertaken on the smaller sites includes as part of the stage 4 report.

## 4. The recommended draft density policy

- 4.1. Appendix 1 of this report sets out a recommended draft policy, and its justification, to be included in the emerging Local Plan. Appendix 2 sets out the recommended four density zones as referenced in the policy. The wording of the policy is set out below in italics. The paragraphs that follow set out the approach taken in developing this policy from the recommendations.

### **Policy CSXX: Housing Density**

*Proposals for new residential development must contribute to achieving well-designed, attractive and healthy places and make effective use of land and buildings, in line with the requirements in the table below having regard to published Supplementary Planning Documents:*

<b>Density Zone (as shown on the policies map)</b>	<b>Minimum density (dwellings per hectare)</b>
<i>Waterfront</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Urban Core &amp; Town Centres</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Transit</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>Suburban</i>	<i>40</i>

*Schemes that do not achieve these minimum densities will be refused unless it can be demonstrated that the application of these minimum standards is inappropriate having regard to identified constraints, including but not limited to the natural environment and heritage assets.*

*Densities in excess of the minimum will be encouraged within these zones where the development is the result of a robust high-quality design-led approach; there is good access to shops, services and public transport connections; and/or the proposals are in accordance with an approved*

*regeneration strategy, neighbourhood plan or Supplementary Planning Document.*

*Outside these four density zones shown on the policies map, new residential development must achieve efficient use of land having regard to the prevailing character of the area. Sites with an area of 1 hectare or more should achieve a minimum density of 30 dwellings per hectare, subject to any additional identified constraints.*

*Developments which increase residential density within existing neighbourhoods through conversions will be permitted where they meet or exceed the minimum densities set out above subject to compliance with Policies [Insert relevant policy notations here].*

### **Policy language**

- 4.2. The language within the policy (particularly the first three paragraphs) directly reflects the terminology and phraseology used by the Framework. The policy directly refers to a number of important considerations that decision makers should consider designed to respond to the five criteria, a-e, within paragraph 122 of the Framework.
- 4.3. It is recommended that a strong position should be taken over refusing developments that do not respond to the densities set out within the policy. Whilst on a case by case basis with some flexibility built into the policy, the onus is placed on applicants to set out how they have responded to the minimum density staircase in order to avoid a refusal. This sends a clear message as to the importance of density within the decision-making process. This approach is in line with paragraph 123c of the Framework.

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## **Environmental considerations**

- 4.4. Given that the density zones sought to avoid areas in which higher density residential development would not be appropriate - or require an alternative established approach to design and character (such as within the conservation areas where other policies would apply – see stage 3 report for further details) - it is unnecessary to include guidance for such circumstances within the density policy. However, it is important that the policy builds in some degree of flexibility to accommodate the unique constraints of a particular site where there are no other policy mechanisms.
- 4.5. The second paragraph of the recommended policy allows applicants to respond through a more detailed assessment of constraints on the site which might reduce the developable area. This in turn would mean that the overall gross density for a site might fall below targets sought, but that the remaining developable area would still achieve the minimum densities. In accordance with the guidance set in *Barwood LLP vs ESBC* and the *SoSCLG (2017)* this allows for the process to be an ‘exercise in planning judgement’. Further details on this specific matter are provided in later paragraphs.

## **Setting the density ‘steps’**

- 4.6. The stage four report includes a number of different approaches to considering how density might be delivered in each of the proposed density zones. The concluding table set out in great detail the approach that could be taken to density in each of the density zones and in the areas not covered by any zone. This is required to be balanced against creating a policy which is easy to

understand and logical (introducing simple and even steps) and delivering a ‘significant uplift’ in areas where this is appropriate.

- 4.7. As a result, the four established density zones are used as the basis for these steps. The suburban zone reflects the ‘average’ density for Wirral (40 dph) and establishes the bottom end of the scale. The scale then increases in regular steps to the waterfront zone with a suggested minimum density of 70 dph. This is an uplift over the average densities within the Borough but is in line with evidence gathered and presented in previous reports.
- 4.8. All of the steps reflect a point found within the density ranges set out in the calibrated density scale (see Figure 3.3 in the stage 4 report). However, as noted, a range of techniques have been used to establish appropriate densities over the course of this study. The following table draws together key findings from the stage 4 report to illustrate how the proposed densities are in line with the evidence gathered.

	Suburban	Transit	Urban Core / Town Centre	Waterfront
Existing average densities (Table 2, Stage 4 report) (dph)	42	42	61	60
Highest existing density (Table 2, stage 4 report) (dph)	71	67	125	128
Calibrated density scale (Figure 3.3, Stage 4 report) (dph)	30-60	50-75	60+	70+
Concluding tables (Stage 4 report) (dph)	n/a	50+	60 - 75	70 - 90
<b>Policy recommendation (dph) - as set out in paragraph 4.1</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>70</b>

**Table 2: Summary of density evidence**

4.9. This policy recommends minimum densities which are not out of step with previous performances in delivering higher densities in many of the neighbourhoods covered by the density zones (see stage 1 - 2 baseline report). The average density achieved by planning permissions granted between 2017 and 2019 was 91 dwellings per hectare.

4.10. Even excluding the higher densities delivered in the Waterfront area, the density is still 69 dwellings per hectare. In many of the wards that are within the transit, town centre and waterfront zones planning permissions in the past three years have, on average, regularly been over 70 dph (see stage 1-2 baseline report).

4.11. In all cases the proposed minimum densities are in excess of the lowest recorded values. This is an intentional approach which is designed to respond to the Framework's desire for an 'uplift' in town centres and other locations well served by public transport (paragraph 123a).

**Areas not covered by a density zone**

4.12. One of the elements highlighted in the final concluding table of the stage 4 report, was how to approach development outside of the density zones. No minimum density has been recommended to be included in the table in the policy but it seems prudent to ensure that land is still used efficiently, especially where it exceeds 1 hectare. As a result, a 'backstop' is recommended to be included in the text of the policy to ensure that outside of the density zones any development of over 1 hectare delivers a minimum of 30 dph.


**Applying the policy – gross vs net density**

4.13. As is clear from much of the design work undertaken within chapter 4 of the stage 4 report, the way that density is applied to specific developments is important. It is recommended that in almost every case the densities are applied using a gross site area. Specific details on this matter have been omitted from the policy as there are a great many different ways that the specific opportunities and constraints affecting a site could affect the overall density.

4.14. As a result, the whole of the site - including access, circulation, gardens and open spaces – should be included in any density calculation. This approach reflects the work undertaken as part of the stage 4 report where the whole of a site area is

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considered. This will allow the best reflection of the local characteristics.

- 4.15. However in some cases, especially when developing proposals for previously developed sites, there may be a greater number of physical constraints that might limit the developable area of a site. As such, where this is considered appropriate, these should be removed from the total site area. It is therefore recommended that the densities be applied based on a gross developable area, as opposed to net site area or gross site areas. This allows for the applicant and the decision maker to effectively consider constraints and take account of them in applying this policy.
- 4.16. Furthermore, it may be that some proposed developments within the waterfront and town centre density zones may include a number of 'other uses' such as commercial or retail space. Within the stage 4 report some of the case studies have accounted for a portion of such uses as part of a residential-led scheme and it demonstrates that clearly an element of mixed use is able to be accommodated whilst delivering higher densities. Nevertheless, as with all policy, the opportunity exists for the decision maker to take account of any significant 'other uses' and omit this from the developable areas, or, as indicated previously apply the policy with a degree of flexibility. 



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Appendix 1 – Draft density policy

## Policy CSXX: Housing Density

Proposals for new residential development must contribute to achieving well-designed, attractive and healthy places and make effective use of land and buildings, in line with the requirements in the table below having regard to published Supplementary Planning Documents:

Density Zone (as shown on the policies map)	Minimum density (dwellings per hectare)
Waterfront	70
Urban Core & Town Centres	60
Transit	50
Suburban	40

Schemes that do not achieve these minimum densities will be refused unless it can be demonstrated that the application of these minimum standards is inappropriate having regard to identified constraints, including but not limited to the natural environment and heritage assets.

Densities in excess of the minimum will be encouraged within these zones where the development is the result of a robust high-quality design-led approach; there is good access to shops, services and public transport connections; and/or the proposals are in accordance with an approved regeneration strategy or neighbourhood plan or Supplementary Planning Document.

Outside these four density zones shown on the policies map, new residential development must achieve efficient use of land having regard to the prevailing character of the area. Sites with an area of 1 hectare or more should achieve a minimum density of 30 dwellings per hectare, subject to any additional identified constraints.

Developments which increase residential density within existing neighbourhoods through conversions will be permitted where they meet or exceed the minimum densities set out above subject to compliance with Policies [Insert relevant policy notations here].

### Justification / explanatory:

Given the pressures for new residential dwellings within Wirral there is an increasing requirement to make more effective use of the land that is available in line with the National Planning Policy Framework. Within the existing urban areas there are a number of sites, including many previously developed sites of a variety of sizes, that can help contribute effectively to delivering increased housing numbers. Over the last three years a number of small and medium sized sites have made a notable contribution to meeting the Borough's housing need, some of which have been delivered at what may be considered higher density, but which are not out of place within the Wirral context.

In Wirral, the average housing density is around 40 dwellings per hectare, but there are many areas of the Borough where the density is higher. Even considering some of the more historical areas (including conservation areas) densities below 30 dwelling per hectare are

uncommon, but since the 1950's, some residential development has been delivered at much lower densities. As a result this policy seeks to ensure that density is a key component of ensuring the sustainable development of sites and premises that come forward. There are forms of development, including terraces, townhouses and apartment developments that will not appear out of place within the local context but are capable of meeting a variety of the housing needs identified.

Evidence prepared in support of the local plan (Stage 3 density study prepared by Urban Imprint) has identified four 'density zones' – 'Waterfront', 'Urban Core and Town Centres', 'Transit' and 'Suburban' – which are now shown on the policies map, where there is good access to shops, services and public transport – specifically the Merseyrail network – where higher densities could be accommodated as part of a robust urban design led approach to residential development. In these zones minimum density requirements have been set. This is based on an assessment of the local densities and accessibility in these areas, but also on ensuring that a sensible 'staircase' of increasing densities is proposed, allowing a significant uplift in the approach to densities in line with national policy.

The density zones do not cover protected open spaces or conservation areas where national and local policy requires a different approach to design and development, based on the character and appearance of these specific areas. Outside of these areas a minimum density is provided to ensure that all land is used effectively. Just because a site is within a 'density zone' does not necessarily mean that it is allocated for housing, simply that where other policies allow for residential development this policy comes into force. Further guidance regarding the implementation of appropriate densities for the strategic allocations identified in the Plan is included in relevant settlement area policies.

There are also opportunities to make more effective use of the land and properties that already exist in line with national policy and guidance. The evidence shows that some areas of the Borough are built to a very low density, but are well served by shops, services and public transport. Opportunities for increasing the supply of new homes through conversions, backland and infill development and in town centres making better use of upper floors, are all encouraged. This approach will need to be balanced against local housing needs and an appropriate design approach that safeguards residential amenity.

A number of case studies undertaken in support of this policy (As outlined in the stage 4 density study prepared by Urban Imprint) have demonstrated that many neighbourhoods within the identified density zones have capacity and opportunity to deliver a variety of different types of residential development, from smaller apartments above shops to larger family homes in larger back or side gardens of some of the properties, which has been demonstrated through planning applications in recent years.

Further guidance on an appropriate design-led approach to achieving higher densities will be provided in an accompanying Supplementary Planning Documents.

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## Appendix 2 - Density zones map





- 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
  - Green Space
  - Primary School
  - Secondary School
  - Conservation Area/Heritage Asset
  - Flood risk area

SCALE 1:30,000





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