

Initial Review of the Green Belt – Revised Methodology

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Initial Review of the Green Belt will form part of the evidence to support the Council's emerging Core Strategy Local Plan which will be submitted to the Secretary of State for public examination before adoption as part of the statutory development plan for Wirral.
- 1.2 The Initial Review of the Green Belt is part of a wider review of development options that will include a revised assessment of the Borough's urban housing and employment land supply and development viability.
- 1.3 This report sets out background information before introducing a methodology for undertaking an initial high-level review of land in the Green Belt, in section 4, that will:
- assess all Green Belt land in Wirral against the five purposes set out in the National Planning Policy Framework;
 - identify any other physical or policy constraints that may be relevant to take into account; and
 - enable the Council to begin to assess any likely consequences for sustainable development.
- 1.4 The proposed methodology for the Initial Review was published for public consultation between October and December 2017. Information on the comments received and the actions taken in response is available in a separate report of consultation.
- 1.5 Further information can be obtained from:

Forward Planning Section
Wirral Council - Economic and Housing Growth
PO Box 290
Brighton Street
Wallasey CH27 9FQ or
forwardplanning@wirral.gov.uk

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Wirral Council published a Proposed Submission Draft Core Strategy Local Plan for public consultation in December 2012.
- 2.2 Although the spatial vision and broad spatial strategy was primarily directed towards the regeneration of the existing urban area, Proposed Submission Draft Policy CS20 – Housing Contingencies, provided for a potential review of the Green Belt, if an adequate supply of land for new housing development could not be identified by 2018¹.

¹ The Proposed Submission Draft Core Strategy (December 2012) can be viewed at <http://www.wirral.gov.uk/planning-and-building/local-plans-and-planning-policy/local-plans/core-strategy-local-plan-0> (page 62 refers)

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- 2.3 Representations received at that time indicated that the Council needed to re-assess the need for housing and re-consider the future supply of housing land. Similar comments have also continued to be submitted in response to more recent consultations.
- 2.4 Following further consultation on the Borough's housing needs and land supply, in August and September 2016, the Council decided to undertake a wide-ranging review of development options before deciding on the sites that will need to be included in the Council's Local Plan.
- 2.5 Depending on the outcome of the most up-to-date assessment of the Borough's urban land supply, which is due to be published using a revised methodology in September 2018, this may require land to be identified for development in the Green Belt.
- 2.6 A number of sites have already been submitted by landowners and developers for evaluation as part of previous Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessments (SHLAA) and the Council will need a robust, measurable and consistent method for identifying the most appropriate sites to take forward, if any are needed.
- 2.7 This report, therefore, sets out the methodology that will be used for undertaking an initial high-level review of land in the Green Belt in Wirral, to identify any areas that may, if needed, merit further more detailed investigation.
- 2.8 The Initial Review will not commit the Council to any future land releases but is intended to enable the Council to determine the environmental and other constraints that would apply, if land within the Green Belt was needed for any additional development to accommodate the Borough's needs over the next 15-years.
- 2.9 The Initial Review will also enable the Council to demonstrate that all the available alternatives have been properly assessed and whether any adverse impacts of providing for objectively assessed needs for housing and other uses would "significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits" when assessed against the policies in the National Planning Policy Framework taken as a whole (NPPF, paragraph 11 refers).

3.0 HISTORY OF THE GREEN BELT IN WIRRAL

- 3.1 Just under half (45%, 7,317 hectares) of the land area of Wirral is currently designated as Green Belt in the Council's existing Unitary Development Plan, adopted in February 2000.
- 3.2 The majority of the existing boundary was established by the former Merseyside Green Belt Local Plan, in December 1983.
- 3.3 The former Merseyside Green Belt Local Plan Written Statement stated that the Green Belt was necessary in order to:

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- (i) check the outward spread of the built-up area, direct development into existing towns, and encourage their regeneration;
 - (ii) ensure that towns and villages retain their individual character; and
 - (iii) safeguard the surrounding countryside, so that its potential for agriculture, nature conservation and recreation and its value as an amenity for townspeople is preserved².
- 3.4 Strategic Planning Guidance for Merseyside, issued by the Secretary of State in August 1988, to inform the preparation of Unitary Development Plans in Merseyside, re-stated the importance of the Green Belt for Merseyside and concluded that there was no need for a general review but that the preparation of Unitary Development Plans provided the opportunity to give precision to the detailed boundaries of the Green Belt where they had not been clearly defined.
- 3.5 In Wirral, additional land within the M53 Motorway Corridor³ and to the west of Elm Road in Irby was added to the Green Belt; and an area of residential development at Poulton Green Close was removed from the Green Belt; in the Wirral Unitary Development Plan, adopted in February 2000 (UDP)⁴.
- 3.6 A small area of existing Green Belt at Boathouse Lane in Gayton, originally designated as Green Belt in the former Ellesmere Port and Neston Local Plan, was also included in the Wirral Green Belt, following an administrative boundary change in April 1993.
- 3.7 The role of the Green Belt in Wirral, identified in the reasoned justification to UDP Policy GBT1 – Green Belt Boundaries, was to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas; to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another; to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment; and to assist in urban regeneration.
- 3.8 As in most of Merseyside, over the years since the Merseyside Structure Plan was adopted in 1980, the strongest overall emphasis has been on the promotion of urban regeneration, which, in response to previous consultation, remains the principal focus of the spatial vision and broad spatial strategy of the emerging Core Strategy Local Plan for Wirral.

² The Merseyside Green Belt Local Plan (page 3, paragraph 2.3 refers), can be viewed at http://www.knowsley.gov.uk/pdf/PG44_Merseyside-Green-Belt-Local-Plan-1983-Written-Statement.pdf

³ originally identified in the Merseyside Structure Plan (page 99 and Figure 71 refer), as an area where special policies will be adopted pending completion of detailed local studies

⁴ UDP Proposal GB1 – Amendments to the Green Belt Boundary (page 77 of the UDP refers). The existing UDP and its Proposals Map can be viewed at <http://www.wirral.gov.uk/planning-and-building/local-plans-and-planning-policy/local-plans/unitary-development-plan> (Section 7 of the UDP refers to the Green Belt and its history)

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National Policy

- 3.9 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, July 2018) sets out the Government’s policies for the provision of land for development.
- 3.10 In particular, “plans should positively seek opportunities to meet the development needs of their area and be sufficiently flexible to adapt to rapid change...strategic policies should, as a minimum, provide for objectively assessed needs for housing and other uses, as well as any need that cannot be met within neighbouring areas, unless the application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area or any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole” (NPPF, paragraph 11 refers).
- 3.11 The National Planning Policy Framework also sets out Government policy on the protection of Green Belt
- 3.12 The National Planning Policy Framework states that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open (NPPF, paragraph 133) and indicates that the Green Belt serves five purposes:
- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
 - To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
 - To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
 - To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
 - To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land (NPPF paragraph 134).
- 3.12 The National Planning Policy Framework does not suggest that any of the purposes are any more or less important than the others.
- 3.13 The National Planning Policy Framework also states that “Once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered where exceptional circumstances are fully evidenced and justified, through the preparation or updating of plans. Strategic policies should establish the need for any changes to Green Belt boundaries, having regard to their intended permanence in the long term, so that they can endure beyond the plan period” (NPPF, paragraph 136).
- 3.14 “When drawing up or reviewing Green Belt boundaries, the need to promote sustainable patterns of development should be taken into account...where it has been concluded that it is necessary to release Green Belt land for development, plans should give first consideration to land which has been

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previously-developed and/or is well-served by public transport” (NPPF, paragraph 138).

4.0 CONTENT OF THE INITIAL REVIEW

4.1 The Council proposes to undertake the initial review of the Green Belt, alongside a wider review of development options, in three main stages:

Stage 1 - Initial assessment against the purposes of including land in the Green Belt

Stage 2 - Initial assessment of additional physical and policy constraints

Stage 3 - Initial assessment of the likely consequences for sustainable development

4.2 The proposed content of each stage of the initial review is set out in further detail below.

4.3 The outcomes from Stage 1 and Stage 2 are reported in the Core Strategy Local Plan - Initial Green Belt Review Background Report (September 2018); and the Core Strategy Local Plan - Summary of Initial Green Belt Assessment (September 2018).

4.4 The outcome of Stage 3 will be completed using the findings of public consultation to be undertaken in September and October 2018.

4.5 The results of Stage 1 and Stage 2 will be a list of sites for further investigation, which will be published for public consultation before any further conclusions will be reached.

4.6 The results of consultation with the public and other stakeholders, including national agencies, landowners, developers, utilities and other public service providers, will then be used to prepare a final assessment for approval by the Council by July 2019.

4.7 The results of the initial review will be presented in a series of datasheets with an accompanying written commentary.

5.0 BUILDING BLOCKS FOR INITIAL ASSESSMENT

5.1 The three main building blocks for the Council's initial assessment will be:

- the Settlement Areas identified in the existing Proposed Submission Draft Core Strategy, which were approved by Council in October 2012 (shown in Appendix 1);
- the individual parcels of land identified by the Council to support the assessment ('Green Belt Parcels', shown in Appendix 2); and
- the sites in the Green Belt submitted by landowners and developers for consideration for future development as part of the annual preparation of

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the Council's Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment ('Green Belt SHLAA Sites', shown in Appendix 3).

- 5.2 The boundaries to each of these areas can also be viewed on the Council's website at <http://www.wirral.gov.uk/planning-and-building/local-plans-and-planning-policy/local-plans/unitary-development-plan/forward>

6.0 IDENTIFICATION OF SETTLEMENT AREAS

- 6.1 The emerging Wirral Core Strategy Local Plan identifies a series of seven urban Settlement Areas, based on the main groups of settlements within the Borough; and a single rural Settlement Area that corresponds with the boundary to the existing Wirral Green Belt defined in the Wirral Unitary Development Plan adopted in February 2000⁵.
- 6.2 The boundaries to the Settlement Areas were first identified in the Core Strategy Spatial Options Report in January 2010 and were subject to public consultation in the Core Strategy Preferred Options Report in November 2010 and as part of the consultation on Draft Settlement Area Policies in January 2012⁶.
- 6.3 The boundaries to the Settlement Areas were then approved by the Council, as part of the Proposed Submission Draft Core Strategy, on 15 October 2012 (Minute 60 refers).
- 6.4 The boundaries to the 'Core Strategy Settlement Areas', which are shown in Appendix 1, will be used to assess the likely impact on separation (under Purpose 2) set out in section 9 below.

7.0 IDENTIFICATION OF GREEN BELT PARCELS

- 7.1 The Council has identified 111 separate land parcels in the Green Belt ('the Green Belt Parcels').
- 7.2 The boundaries to each of the parcels are shown in Appendix 2.
- 7.3 The boundaries for each of the parcels have been identified to reflect national policy, which states that plans should "define boundaries clearly, using physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent" (NPPF, paragraph 139f).
- 7.4 The boundaries for each of the parcels have, therefore, been identified using the clearest and strongest boundaries available, such as roads and railways, which would normally meet the requirements of a new Green Belt boundary in national policy.

⁵ Settlement Area 8 – Rural Area

⁶ All the previous stages in the preparation of the Core Strategy Local Plan can be viewed at <http://www.wirral.gov.uk/planning-and-building/local-plans-and-planning-policy/local-plans/core-strategy-local-plan>

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- 7.5 Sub-parcels have also been identified to reflect the Infill Villages and the Major Developed Sites designated under Proposal GB7 and Proposal GB9 of the existing adopted Unitary Development Plan (UDP), to follow the boundaries shown on the existing UDP Proposals Map.
- 7.6 The boundaries for villages that are designated as Conservation Areas but which are not identified as an Infill Village in the UDP, will normally follow their designated area, which in some cases may not follow a clearly identifiable feature on the ground.
- 7.7 Other existing developed areas, which are ‘washed-over’ by the existing Green Belt, where no Infill Village or Major Developed Site boundary has previously been defined, will be included within the Parcels identified in paragraph 7.4.
- 7.8 The Green Belt Parcels will each be tested for their impact against each of the five purposes of the Green Belt set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, paragraph 134 refers), as indicated in section 9 below.
- 7.9 The boundaries to the Green Belt Parcels will be used to assess the extent of containment and enclosure (under Purpose 1) and the impact on separation (under Purpose 2) set out in section 9 below.
- 7.10 The assessment of Green Belt Parcels will also be used to identify the need for any corrections to the existing Green Belt boundary, as indicated in section 11 below; and to identify the potential to accommodate any additional infill development, through the identification of additional Infill Villages in the Green Belt, as indicated in section 12 below.

8.0 IDENTIFICATION OF SEPARATE GREEN BELT SITES

- 8.1 The initial assessment will include all the sites recorded as being in the Green Belt in the Council’s Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment for April 2018 (the ‘Green Belt SHLAA Sites’).
- 8.2 The boundaries to each of the Green Belt SHLAA Sites are shown in Appendix 3.
- 8.3 The Green Belt SHLAA Sites will each be tested for their impact against each of the five purposes of the Green Belt set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, paragraph 134 refers), as indicated in section 9 below.
- 8.4 The boundaries to the Green Belt SHLAA Sites will be used to assess the extent of containment and enclosure (under Purpose 1) and the impact on separation (under Purpose 2), as indicated in section 9 below.
- 8.5 The boundaries to the Green Belt SHLAA Sites will also be tested against their ability to be defined by clear, permanent, physical features, in order to meet national policy (NPPF, paragraph 139f), as indicated in section 10 below.

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- 8.6 The assessment of Green Belt SHLAA Sites will also be used to identify the need for any corrections to the existing Green Belt boundary, as indicated in section 11 below; and to identify the potential to accommodate any additional infill development, through the identification of additional Infill Villages in the Green Belt, as indicated in section 12 below.

9.0 INITIAL ASSESMENT AGAINST THE PURPOSES OF GREEN BELT

- 9.1 The Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites will each be assessed against each of the five purposes of the Green Belt set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, paragraph 134 refers), as set out below.
- 9.2 The Council will use the assessment to identify a list of Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites which may be suitable for further investigation.
- 9.3 A list of sites that may need further investigation will first be compiled from the Green Belt Parcels that appear to score best against each of the Green Belt purposes, taken as a whole, with an emphasis on Parcels that are already highly enclosed by the existing urban area (under Purpose 1) or which would have no impact on reducing the physical separation between urban Core Strategy Settlement Areas (under Purpose 2).
- 9.4 The list of Parcels that may need further investigation will then be supplemented by any additional Green Belt SHLAA Sites, falling outside the Green Belt Parcels already identified, that would also score best against the same criteria. The emphasis will, again, be on Sites that are already highly enclosed by the existing urban area or which would have no impact on reducing the separation between urban Core Strategy Settlement Areas, taking account of any other negative intrusion on the open countryside.

Purpose 1 - To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas

- 9.5 The existing Green Belt in Wirral has helped to prevent the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas by defining where new development should and should not take place.
- 9.6 Locations that are well-contained or 'highly enclosed' by an existing urban area could, however, have a lower impact on urban sprawl than locations that have no connection with the existing urban area or which would cause development to project discordantly into the open countryside beyond an existing clear, strong boundary.
- 9.7 Assessment against Purpose 1 will be undertaken by considering the extent to which each Green Belt Parcel or Green Belt SHLAA Site is already contained or enclosed by the existing urban area.
- 9.8 The level of containment or enclosure of each proposed Green Belt Parcel and of each Green Belt SHLAA Site will be assessed by measuring the percentage of the boundary to each Parcel or Site that is directly adjacent to the existing urban area.

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- 9.9 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites will be classified as ‘highly enclosed’, where the urban edge comprises more than three-quarters of their boundary (equivalent to being enclosed on three sides by the urban area).
- 9.10 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites will be classified as ‘partially enclosed’, where the urban edge comprises more than half but less than three-quarters of the boundary.
- 9.11 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites will be classified as ‘poorly enclosed’, where the urban edge comprises less than a half but more than a quarter of the boundary.
- 9.12 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites will be classified as ‘not enclosed’, where the urban edge comprises less than a quarter of the boundary.
- 9.13 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites will be classified as ‘rural’, where none of their boundary is adjacent the existing urban area.
- 9.14 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites that are identified as ‘highly enclosed’ by the existing urban area will be considered as having the lowest likely impact on urban sprawl.
- 9.15 The existing urban area will be defined by the boundary to the existing Green Belt around each of the urban Core Strategy Settlement Areas that are identified in Appendix 1.

Purpose 2 - To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another

- 9.16 Many of the Borough’s original towns and villages have already merged together to form larger built-up areas. The Green Belt in Wirral was originally designated to prevent this trend from continuing unabated.
- 9.17 Assessment against Purpose 2 will be undertaken by considering the impact that development on a Green Belt Parcel or on a Green Belt SHLAA Site could have on the separation between the urban Core Strategy Settlement Areas that are identified in Appendix 1.
- 9.18 The impact on separation will be measured against the existing minimum linear distance between adjoining urban Core Strategy Settlement Areas.
- 9.19 The initial assessment will also consider the impact on the separation of rural villages and other existing developed areas in the Green Belt.
- 9.20 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites that will have no impact on the existing separation between urban Core Strategy Settlement Areas will be considered as having the lowest impact on this purpose of including land in the Green Belt.

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Purpose 3 - To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment

- 9.21 The majority of Wirral's existing Green Belt is open countryside.
- 9.22 Assessment against Purpose 3 will be undertaken by recording the existing predominant land use and the extent to which any new development would appear to intrude discordantly into the open countryside.
- 9.23 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites that are not subject to an existing countryside use and would not lead to development that would intrude discordantly into the open countryside will be considered to have the lowest impact on this purpose of including land in the Green Belt.
- 9.24 The impact of topography and on any prominent landscape or land form features will also be taken into account when assessing the extent to which any new development would appear to intrude discordantly into the open countryside.

Purpose 4 - To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns

- 9.25 Purpose 4, as currently worded in the National Planning Policy Framework, does not directly apply to the Green Belt in Wirral, as the Borough does not have any recognised historic town (such as Chester or York) that could be affected.
- 9.26 The conservation of historic villages could, however, be an additional local consideration, particularly as heritage assets are also identified for specific protection in national policy (NPPF, paragraph 184)⁷.
- 9.27 As one of the reasons for designating the Merseyside Green Belt was to ensure that towns and villages retained their individual character, the potential to impact on a designated Conservation Area will also be considered in the initial assessment.
- 9.28 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites that are not likely to have any impact on the character or setting of a designated Conservation Area will be considered to have the lowest impact on this purpose of including land in the Green Belt.

Purpose 5 - To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land

- 9.29 Purpose 5 would appear to apply equally to all undeveloped sites in the Green Belt in Wirral, as it is related to preventing any over-allocation of

⁷ the Council has a legal duty to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing designated conservation areas, which in the Green Belt in Wirral includes the rural villages of Barnston; Eastham; Frankby; Thornton Hough; and Thurstaston

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development land that could discourage urban regeneration and the reuse of urban land.

- 9.30 As the Green Belt in Wirral was deliberately intended to help focus development and investment into the existing urban areas, including in neighbouring authorities such as Liverpool, the release of any Green Belt site in Wirral is likely to have a negative impact on urban regeneration.
- 9.31 As the location of some sites may be able to provide additional benefits for areas in need of social, economic or physical improvements, the proximity to areas of greatest need will also be taken into account as part of the initial assessment⁸.

10.0 ASSESSMENT OF BOUNDARY STRENGTH

- 10.1 As the boundaries to SHLAA Sites are normally based on land ownership, an additional analysis will also be undertaken to assess the relative ‘strength’ of the boundaries to each Green Belt SHLAA Site in relation to the presence of permanent physical features, to assess their ability to meet the requirements of national policy (NPPF, paragraph 139f).
- 10.2 The additional analysis will only consider the ‘strength’ of the perimeter of each Green Belt SHLAA Site that may be used to form a new boundary to the Green Belt.
- 10.3 A boundary will be categorised as ‘strong’ where over three-quarters of the non-urban boundary is comprised of strong and durable features that are already intact, well-developed and prominent in the landscape.
- 10.4 A boundary will be categorised as ‘moderate’ where half to three-quarters of the non-urban boundary is comprised of strong and durable features, there are fewer prominent features and the remainder of the boundary is comprised of features lacking durability.
- 10.5 A boundary will be categorised as ‘weak’ where less than half of the non-urban boundary is comprised of strong and durable features, there are fewer prominent features and the remainder of the boundary is comprised of features lacking durability.
- 10.6 Durable features will be taken to include well-established woodland and tree belts (but not single rows of trees); adopted public roads (hard-surfaced), including the M53 Motorway; railway lines; and existing permanent development in the Green Belt.
- 10.7 Features lacking durability will be taken to include field boundaries, such as hedges, fences and single rows of trees; drainage ditches; tracks; and private roads.

⁸ Defined, in accordance with the Proposed Submission Draft Core Strategy (December 2012), as areas falling within the lowest 20 percent of scores in the latest Index of Multiple Deprivation for England

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- 10.8 Watercourses that are not reinforced by other strong features will not be considered to be ‘strong’ boundaries for the purpose of this assessment.
- 10.9 The assessment will be used to determine whether the boundary to each Green Belt SHLAA Site could be considered appropriate to use to define a new Green Belt boundary in line with national policy (NPPF, paragraph 139).

11.0 BOUNDARY CORRECTIONS

- 11.1 The initial assessment will also identify areas where the existing boundary to the Green Belt may need to be corrected, to better reflect the pattern of existing development.

12.0 EXISTING DEVELOPED AREAS

- 12.1 The initial assessment will also identify areas that may be suitable to accommodate some additional infill development, in line with national planning policy for the Green Belt (NPPF, paragraphs 140, 145e and 145g refer).

13.0 IMPACT ON OPENNESS AND PERMANENCE

- 13.1 National policy states that the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence (NPPF, paragraph 133).
- 13.2 In practice, most new development in the Green Belt is likely to have an impact on openness⁹; and any change to the Green Belt boundary will have an impact on the permanence of the existing Green Belt¹⁰.
- 13.3 As the detailed impact on openness is best assessed when a site-specific proposal is being considered and a conclusion on the permanence of any future Green Belt boundary can only be assessed as part of the impact of the Local Plan as a whole, considerations related to the impact on openness and permanence will be assessed at a later stage, when any final proposed land allocations are subject to a more detailed consideration, alongside the identification of the exceptional circumstances that would be necessary to justify any change to Green Belt boundaries (NPPF, paragraph 136 to 139 refer).

14.0 INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF ADDITIONAL PHYSICAL OR POLICY CONSTRAINTS

- 14.1 An initial assessment will also be undertaken to anticipate whether any other known constraints might also prevent some Green Belt Parcels or SHLAA Green Belt Sites from being considered suitable for development.
- 14.2 While some of these constraints may be able to be overcome; for example, by reducing the developable area or by providing necessary infrastructure, subject to viability; the initial assessment will need to be able to identify which

⁹ With the possible exception of development on previously developed sites

¹⁰ With the possible exception of the identification of Infill Villages in the Green Belt

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types of constraint are likely to apply in each particular area, to, if found necessary, inform a more detailed investigation of their site-specific implications and impacts at a later stage.

- 14.3 The Council will therefore first undertake a high-level review of the main large scale environmental constraints, which are already identified and available as part of published datasets.
- 14.4 The information collected for each Green Belt Parcel and each SHLAA Green Belt Site will be presented in a published datasheet as part of the Core Strategy Local Plan – Initial Green Belt Review Background Report (September 2018) and set out in the Core Strategy Local Plan – Summary of Initial Green Belt Assessment (September 2018).
- 14.5 The Council will use the high-level review of any additional physical or policy constraints to further refine the list of Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites, identified from the assessment against the purposes of including land in the Green Belt in section 9, to remove Parcels or Sites that would appear to be subject to a level of constraint that could prevent them from being considered suitable for development.
- 14.6 The initial high-level review will be based on the information set out below:

15.0 FLOOD RISK

- 15.1 National planning policy states that inappropriate development in areas at risk of flooding should be avoided by directing development away from areas of highest risk (NPPF, paragraph 155).
- 15.2 The initial high-level assessment will, at this stage, be based on the latest Environment Agency Flood Map for Wirral, as shown in Appendix 4¹¹.

16.0 BIODIVERSITY AND NATURE CONSERVATION

- 16.1 The Liverpool City Region Ecological Network, developed by the Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service, draws together a number of the most important elements of the City Region's biodiversity value, including internationally, nationally and locally designated sites and priority habitats, as part of a Core Biodiversity Area, which represents the critical biodiversity resource for the Liverpool City Region as a whole¹².
- 16.2 The initial high-level assessment will, at this stage, be based on the extent of the existing Liverpool City Region Core Biodiversity Area in Wirral shown on Appendix 5.

¹¹ An up-to-date Stage 1 Flood Risk Assessment is currently being prepared by JBA Consulting, in consultation with the Environment Agency, which will be used as the basis for any further more detailed analysis

¹² The Liverpool City Region Ecological Network can also be viewed at <http://www.meas.org.uk/1263>

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- 16.3 The Borough's Sites of Biological Importance were revised during March 2017 and will be taken into account in the Core Strategy Local Plan - Summary of Initial Green Belt Assessment Report (September 2018).

17.0 EUROPEAN SITES AND SUPPORTING HABITAT

- 17.1 The Council has an additional legal duty to protect European Sites designated for their international importance for nature conservation. This protection extends to functionally linked land located outside the designated area that may also contribute to the support of the species within them, including off-site roosting, breeding and feeding habitats for qualifying species.
- 17.2 As areas of functionally linked land have not yet been formally identified in Wirral, the initial high-level assessment will, at this stage, be based on the Core Count Areas for the Wetland Bird Survey shown in Appendix 6.

18.0 AGRICULTURAL LAND

- 18.1 National planning policy states that local planning authorities should take into account the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land and where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, should seek to use areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of a higher quality (NPPF, paragraph 112).
- 18.2 The initial high-level assessment will, at this stage, be based on the latest available information on the current extent of best and most versatile agricultural land in Wirral, shown on Appendix 7, to highlight the potential presence of high quality agricultural land within Grades 1, 2 and 3¹³.

19.0 LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

- 19.1 National planning policy states that the planning system should protect and enhance valued landscapes (NPPF, paragraph 109).
- 19.2 The Wirral Landscape Character Assessment identifies the special features and characteristics of the Wirral landscape and divides the Borough into five broad landscape character types and thirteen more detailed landscape character areas¹⁴.

¹³ The national Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) provides a method for assessing the quality of farmland to enable informed choices to be made about its future use within the planning system and classifies land into five grades, with Grade 3 subdivided into Sub-Grades 3a and 3b. Land within Grades 1, 2 and Sub-Grade 3a is considered to be the best and most versatile and proposals that are likely to affect best and most versatile agricultural land must be notified to Natural England.

¹⁴ The Wirral Landscape Character Assessment can be viewed at <http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ecSDDisplay.aspx?NAME=SD396&ID=396&RPID=193731&sch=doc&cat=13005&path=12848,13003,13005>

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19.3 As information on landscape character is largely qualitative, the main features of the relevant recommended landscape strategy for each identified landscape character area will, at this stage, be set out for each Green Belt Parcel in the Core Strategy Local Plan - Summary of Initial Green Belt Assessment Report (September 2018).

20.0 PUBLIC RIGHTS OF WAY

20.1 A Definitive Map, prepared by the Council, records the Borough's legally protected public rights of way in three categories: footpaths; bridleways; and byways. Other permissive paths are also identified where known¹⁵.

20.2 Public rights of way will, at this stage, be identified in the high-level assessment of each Green Belt Parcel set out in the Core Strategy Local Plan - Summary of Initial Green Belt Assessment Report (September 2018).

20.3 Any other known constraints will, where relevant, also be recorded in the Core Strategy Local Plan - Summary of Initial Green Belt Assessment Report (September 2018).

21.0 INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CONSEQUENCES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

21.1 National policy requires the Council, when reviewing Green Belt boundaries, to take account of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development, including the consequences of channelling development towards urban areas inside the Green Belt boundary, towards towns and villages inset within the Green Belt or towards locations beyond the outer Green Belt boundary (NPPF, paragraph 138).

21.2 As the purpose of the Initial Review of the Green Belt is to identify a preliminary list of sites for further investigation, a more detailed assessment of the sustainability of each individual site has not yet been undertaken but will be completed following consultation with the public and other stakeholders, including national agencies, landowners, developers, utilities and other public service providers, during September and October 2018.

¹⁵ Further information can be found at <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/parking-roads-and-travel/public-rights-way/definitive-map-and-statement-public-rights-way>