



WIRRAL METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK FOR WIRRAL

CORE STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT PLAN DOCUMENT

**HABITATS REGULATIONS ASSESSMENT – INTERIM
SCREENING ASSESSMENT**

NOVEMBER 2009

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1. Introduction to Habitats Regulations Assessment

- 1.1. The EU Wild Birds Directive (79/409/EEC of 2nd April 1979) and EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC of 21st May 1992) have been brought in by the European Union to tackle the long term decline in European Biodiversity. Both Directives aim to maintain and where necessary restore to favourable conservation status, flora, fauna and habitats of European importance. Each Directive has established a network of protected areas:

Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for rare vulnerable or migratory birds under the Birds Directive;

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for other flora, fauna and habitats of community importance under the Habitats Directive

Sites which are being considered for designation as one of the above are referred to as pSPA or cSAC.

Collectively, these sites form part of the Natura 2000 network. In the UK SPAs and SACs are collectively known as European Sites.

Ramsar Sites are wetlands of international importance, listed under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. Most Ramsar sites overlap with European Sites and it is government policy (PPS9 para 6) that they be afforded the same protection as European Sites

- 1.2 The Habitats Directive is implemented in UK law by the Conservation (Natural Habitats & c) Regulations 1994, (the “Habitats Regulations”) as amended, which apply also to areas classified under the EU Wild Birds Directive.
- 1.3 Articles 6(3) and 6(4) of the Habitats Directive set out a step by step approach to the evaluation of the impact of plans and projects on European Sites and their treatment in decision-making. This process is sometimes referred to as Appropriate Assessment, but as this term also refers to a key discrete stage in the evaluation process the term Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) is used to describe the process as a whole.
- 1.4 The Offshore Marine Conservation (Natural Habitats &c) Regulations 2007 transpose the requirements of the Habitats Directive into UK law in relation to marine areas where the United Kingdom has jurisdiction beyond its territorial sea, providing for the designation of European Offshore Marine Sites.
- 1.5 A recent ruling by the European Court of Justice confirmed that the requirements of Habitat Regulations Assessment apply to land use plans. Under the Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c (Amendment) (England and Wales) Regulations 2007 (issued in response to the above ruling), a plan-making authority must consider whether their land-use plan is likely to have a significant effect on a European Site in Great Britain or a European Offshore Marine Site. If any significant effect is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site, an appropriate assessment must be made of the implications for the site in view of the sites consultation objectives (Regulation 85B refers). The plan-making authority is to give effect to the plan only after

having ascertained that it will not adversely effect the integrity of the site, unless they are satisfied that there are no alternative solutions and there are imperative reasons of over-riding public interest. The Council is therefore required to apply the requirements of the Habitats Regulations to the Wirral Core Strategy Development Plan Document.

2. Habitats Regulations Assessment Methodology

- 2.1 Following the amendments to the Habitats Regulations in 2007, accompanying Guidance is still to be published by the Department for Communities and Local Government. Consultation on a draft document 'Planning for the Protection of European Sites: Appropriate Assessment' was undertaken by DCLG in August 2006 ("the draft CLG Guidance").
- 2.2 Some guidance on Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) is contained within PPS 9: "Biodiversity and Geological Conservation" and the accompanying Circular 06/2005: "Biodiversity and Geological Conservation – Statutory Obligations and their Impact within the Planning System". However, this advice predates the ECJ judgement and therefore does not reflect the fuller application of the Habitats Directives to plans and projects in the UK as determined by the European Court. For this reason and pending the issuing of the finalised CLG guidance, whilst regard is to be had to PPS9 and Circular 06/2005 (paragraphs 54 and 55), reference has also been made to the EC publication "Assessment of Plans and Projects Significantly Affecting Natura 2000 sites – Methodological Guidance on the Provisions of Article 6(3) and (4) of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC" (November 2001) and other independent guidance on HRA which has been issued, notably the joint guidance from Scott Wilson, Levett-Therival, Treweek Environmental Consultants and Land Use Consultants and that produced by the RSPB.
- 2.3 The stages of HRA are presented below in simplified form:

Stage 1 – Screening

This is the process of assessing whether HRA is required for a particular land use plan. It reflects the formal requirement of the Habitats Directive that all plans or projects likely to have a significant effect on a European Site (either alone or in combination) must be subject to HRA unless directly connected with or necessary to the management of European Sites. The Wirral Core Strategy DPD is not considered to be covered by this exemption because it is unlikely to include detailed policies dealing with the conservation management of any European Site. As such, the stages involved with screening are:

- A. Identify a "long list" of international sites potentially affected by the plan
- B. Identify the conservation objectives and measures needed to sustain the features of interest, and any current pressures
- C. Examine other plans and programmes that could contribute to 'in combination' effects
- D. Consider whether the plan, either alone or in combination with other relevant projects or plans is likely to result in a significant adverse effect upon European Sites
- E. If no effects are likely – report that there is no significant effect.

- F. If effects are judged likely or uncertainty exists – the precautionary principle applies - proceed to Stage 2

Stage 2 – Appropriate Assessment

- G. Collate information on international sites and evaluate the potential impact in light of conservation objectives
- H. Consider how the plan ‘in combination’ with other plans and programmes will interact when implemented (the Appropriate Assessment)
- I. Consider how any effect on the integrity of an international site could be avoided by changes to the plan and the consideration of alternative solutions
- J. Develop mitigation measures (including timescale and mechanisms)
- K. Report outcomes and develop monitoring strategies
- L. If effects remain following the consideration of alternatives and development of mitigation measures proceed to stage 3

Stage 3 - Assessment where no alternatives and adverse impacts remain

- M. Identify any ‘imperative reasons of overriding public interest’ (IROPI)
- N. Identify and develop potential compensatory measures.

3. Wirral Core Strategy DPD

3.1 The Core Strategy for Wirral is a key document within the Local Development Framework and is intended to set the longer-term vision, objectives and spatial strategy for the Borough to 2031. The Core Strategy Development Plan Document will address issues such as:

- The broad strategy for the distribution of all types of new investment and development
- The delivery of the Mersey Heartlands Growth Point
- The future housing requirement derived from the Regional Spatial Strategy, including the broad distribution of new dwellings in the Borough;
- Changes to the pattern of employment and future employment land requirements;
- The sequence of land development;
- The location of areas for growth and restraint;
- The identification of a hierarchy of town and local centres in the Borough;
- The reduction of energy consumption and the need to travel;
- The requirement for good design throughout all aspects of development;
- Major investment and regeneration activities by the public and private sectors;
- The identification of broad areas at risk of flooding;

- Protection from inappropriate development for the Green Belt, countryside, landscape, biodiversity and nature conservation resources; and
- The overall strategy for minerals and waste.

The Core Strategy Spatial Options Report

3.2 Consultation on Issues, Vision and Objectives in February 2009 set out the context for the development of spatial options for the Core Strategy Development Plan Document and for subsequent Development Plan Documents. Having considered the representations received, the Council has revised the objectives for the Core Strategy and has generated a series of options. A Spatial Options Document has been produced for public consultation. The Spatial Options follow a description of the Borough and the main groups of settlements within it, a vision of what the Borough may become in the future and a statement of the objectives that the Core Strategy will be seeking to implement. Two sets of options are presented. The first set of three Broad Spatial Options considers the overall pattern of future development across the Borough:

- Broad Spatial Option 1: Focused Regeneration
- Broad Spatial Option 2: Balanced Growth
- Broad Spatial Option 3: Urban Expansion

3.3 The second set of options consider the range of policy responses that could be made to a number of other subjects, as required by national policy. The extent to which each option would fit with the vision and objectives for the Core Strategy is explained, alongside a summary of the findings of the accompanying sustainability appraisal and a brief statement of the Council's conclusions so far. These options include:

- Providing for Housing (Distribution and phasing of New Housing Development and priorities for Affordable and Specialist Housing and Gypsies and Travellers)
- Providing for Employment
- Providing for Retailing
- Providing for Renewable, Decentralised and Low Carbon Energy
- Providing for Better Design
- Providing for Development Management
- Providing for Developer Contributions
- Providing for Green Infrastructure

Links to Other Assessments Produced for the Core Strategy

3.4 While the processes are separate with their own legal requirements, there are parallels between HRA, Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and

Sustainability Appraisal (SA) as all three are processes for assessing and minimising the environmental and sustainability impacts of plans. Furthermore, the EU SEA Directive and the corresponding Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004, make clear that a requirement for HRA of a plan also triggers the application of SEA to the plan in question (Regulation 5(3)). The Council has already determined that the Core Strategy DPD will require SEA, and that this will be addressed through the Sustainability Appraisal process for the Plan.

4. The Purpose of this Report

- 4.1 This report is concerned principally with Stage 1 of the HRA process set out above. It is considered prudent to begin developing the HRA framework and preparing for significance assessment at this stage, so that HRA considerations can be 'front-loaded' into the development of the Preferred Options.
- 4.2 This report is intended to achieve consensus from consultees on the European Sites that will be considered to be of relevance to the Wirral Core Strategy DPD, together with their qualifying features, their nature conservation objectives, the environmental conditions needed to support site integrity and current pressures. This information is set out in a series of tables in Appendix 1 to this report. In addition, the tables begin to sketch out an initial assessment of possible impacts from the Core Strategy, focusing on the three Broad Spatial Options being put forward for consultation. As the other policy options merely provide additional details on how these Broad Spatial Options could be implemented and are still emerging, the other policy options have not been assessed in the same way at this stage.
- 4.3 This report is being presented for public consultation alongside the Wirral Core Strategy DPD Spatial Options Report and the Spatial Options Interim Sustainability Appraisal for public consultation so that consultees can take account of its recommendations when framing their responses to the Spatial Options Report.

5. Initial Screening Assessment

Stage 1 Task A - Identifying the "long list" of European Sites

- 5.1 The geographical scope of the Wirral Core Strategy DPD is the administrative area of the Metropolitan Borough of Wirral. Along the coast planning powers end at the Low Water Mark, although the Borough's administrative boundaries generally extend beyond the low water mark.
- 5.2 Methodological guidance on HRA suggests that evaluation should begin with the identification of a 'long list' of European Sites which will be subject to the initial assessment of likely significant effects. This list includes sites outside the plan area but which may be affected as a result of cumulative impacts and pathway effects. Pathways in this context are routes by which a change in activity within Wirral could result in an effect on a European Site, such as dispersal of emissions downwind, liquid discharges downstream outside the plan area or abstraction of drinking water downstream from a river/reservoir with a European

Site designation. The European Sites which are either within the Borough boundary or which may have links via pathways to development within Wirral are set out in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Core Strategy DPD Potential “Long List” of European Sites

Site Name	Area (HA)	Status
Sites within the plan area		
Dee Estuary	5241	SPA Ramsar
Dee Estuary	15805.07	cSAC
Mersey Estuary	6714	SPA Ramsar
Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore	116 1962	pSPA Ramsar
Sites within 15km of the plan boundary		
Ribble & Alt Estuaries	9348	SPA Ramsar
Sefton Coast	4634	SAC
Liverpool Bay	197504	pSPA
Martin Mere	119.85	SPA Ramsar
River Dee and Bala Lake	350	SAC
Deeside and Buckley Newt sites	207	SAC
Halkyn Mountain	610	SAC
Sites beyond 15km of the plan boundary		
Alyn Valley Woods	168.3	SAC
Berwyn and South Clwyd Mountains	27221.21	SAC
Oak Mere	68.82	SAC
West Midland Mosses	184.18	SAC

The Sites shown shaded grey are potential or candidate sites only.

Stage 1 Task B: Identify conservation objectives, measures needed to sustain the features of interest, and current pressures

- 5.3 The tables for each site, set out in Appendix 1, include a number of sets of information which have been drawn from the web sites of Natural England, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) and from the Council's specialist environmental advisors the Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service (MEAS). In addition, regard has been had to the Habitats Regulations Assessments for the Regional Spatial Strategy for the North West and assessments completed or in preparation for plans in neighbouring districts.

Qualifying interest features: These include the reasons why the European Site has been designated, such as the endangered species that occupy the SAC; rare habitats that occur there; or threatened birds that breed or over-winter in the SPA. The HRA focus is on the qualifying interest features that were the primary reasons for the site's designation.

The site's conservation objectives: Conservation objectives are a statement of the overall nature conservation requirements for a site, expressed in terms of the favourable condition required for the habitats and/or species for which the site was selected.

Identifying conditions needed to support site integrity: The integrity of a site relies on the maintenance of an environment that will sustain its qualifying features and ensure their continuing viability. Essential to the maintenance of interest features and the integrity of the site are those environmental conditions which enable key ecological processes and functions to persist. These might include for example, the quantity of water reaching a site, the quality of air, the stability of the climate, or a low level of disturbance.

Current pressures: These are the current pressures potentially impacting on the Site's designation and are generally taken from the Natura 2000 data forms on the JNCC web site.

Stage 1 Task C: Consider whether the plan, either alone or in combination with other relevant projects or plans is likely to result in a significant adverse effect upon European Sites

- 5.4 Guidance issued by English Nature in 1999 provides a useful definition of what a significant effect is:

"...any effect that may reasonably be predicted as a consequence of a plan or project that may affect the conservation objectives of the features for which the site was designated, but excluding trivial or inconsequential effects"

- 5.5 The draft CLG Guidance advises that the precautionary principle must be used when assessing whether effects are significant. In cases where information is not available or where there is doubt and further research is needed rather than attempting to create a case of 'no significant effects' which could lead to quite a big piece of work, the CLG draft Guidance indicates that the Local Planning Authority should proceed with the AA process. The draft CLG Guidance also highlights the "Waddenzee case" (C-127/02) which helps interpret the concept of significant effect and which confirmed that a significant effect is triggered when:

- There is a probability or risk of a plan or project having a significant effect on a European Site;
 - The plan is likely to undermine the Site’s conservation objectives; and
 - A significant effect cannot be excluded on the basis of objective information
- 5.6 The draft CLG Guidance also notes that as part of establishing what effects are significant it may also be useful to consider “the probability of the impact; the duration, frequency and reversibility of the impact.”

Identify other plans and policies which may act in combination

- 5.7 Other plans and policies of particular relevance include the requirements of the Regional Spatial Strategy as they apply to neighbouring districts, individual districts development plans, and proposals for major infrastructure and other development. Table 2 below sets out the plans and projects identified as being of relevance to the Habitats Regulations Assessment of the Wirral Core Strategy.

Table 2: List of Potential Plans and Projects

Plan/Project	Relevance
The North West Plan: Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) (2009) and associated HRA (partial review in progress)	Sets out the requirements for regional housing, employment and other development for the entire North West Region.
The Wales Spatial Plan (2008 update)	Sets out the regional housing, employment and other development allocations for Wales – since parts of north east Wales obtain some of its potable water from the same sources as Wirral, this information is therefore relevant
Draft West Cheshire and North East Wales Sub-Regional Spatial Strategy (2007)	Sets out the sub-regional strategy to support the delivery of the four strategic centres of Chester, Wrexham, the Deeside conurbation and Ellesmere Port.
Great Ormes Head to Formby Point Shoreline Management Plan (under review)	Details the flood defence strategy relating to part of the Merseyside coast. Potentially relevant in terms of the effects of coastal squeeze on internationally designated sites
Formby Point to River Wyre Shoreline Management Plan (under review)	Details the flood defence strategy relating to part of the Merseyside coast. Potentially relevant in terms of the effects of coastal squeeze on internationally designated sites
Gwynt Y Mor Offshore Windfarm Project	Details of a major windfarm project that will be situated within Liverpool Bay and could result in adverse effects on the interest features of the pSPA on its own account
Liverpool LDF Core Strategy (Preferred Options, 2008) Further consultation late 2009	Sets out the housing and development strategy for Liverpool; relevant in that it provides more detail to the likely implementation of RSS requirements.
Knowsley LDF Core Strategy (Plan	Sets out the housing and development strategy

Knowsley stakeholder & community workshops, 2008, Issues and Options to be issued shortly)	for Knowsley; relevant in that it provides more detail to the likely implementation of RSS requirements.
Sefton LDF Core Strategy (Preferred Options emerging 2010)	Sets out the housing and development strategy for Sefton; relevant in that it provides more detail to the likely implementation of RSS requirements.
Halton LDF Core Strategy (Preferred Options 2009)	Sets out the housing and development strategy for Halton; relevant in that it provides more detail to the likely implementation of RSS requirements.
St Helens LDF Core Strategy Draft for Submission 2009 (due to be republished early 2010)	Sets out the housing and development strategy for St Helens; relevant in that it provides more detail to the likely implementation of RSS requirements.
Flintshire Unitary Development Plan + Proposed Modifications	Sets out the housing and development strategy for Flintshire: relevant in that it provides more detail on the likely implementation of the Wales Spatial Plan.
Denbighshire Unitary Development Plan + Local Development Plan (in preparation)	Sets out the housing and development strategy for Denbighshire: relevant in that it provides more detail on the likely implementation of the Wales Spatial Plan.
Merseyside Joint Waste Development Framework (Preferred Options due 2010)	Sets out the waste development strategy for Merseyside. Would be relevant in terms of any cumulative impact arising from waste development and LDF development arising on the same European sites
Cheshire West and Chester Core Strategy Issues and Options (consultation late 2009)	Sets out the housing and development strategy for Cheshire West and Chester; relevant in that it provides more detail to the likely implementation of RSS requirements.
Mersey Heartlands Growth Point Programme of Delivery	Sets out implementation framework for the nationally designated New Growth Point in Wirral and Liverpool at the heart of the older urban areas along the Mersey Estuary. Commits both authorities to 20% additional provision above RSS housing requirements in each district.
The Mersey Gateway: Proposed 2nd Mersey Crossing (Halton)	Details a road scheme that has been submitted to the Secretary of State, with a Public Inquiry in May 2009 which could alter traffic patterns in Merseyside. The Environmental Statement for the project has concluded that there will be no residual adverse effects on the interest features of the Mersey Estuary SPA & Ramsar site.
Liverpool Airport Expansion	Phased expansion of Liverpool Airport on north side of Mersey Estuary
Liverpool Superport	Overarching Strategy for integrating port, airport and other facilities along or close to the Mersey Estuary
Frodsham Wind Farm	Proposed wind farm on land south of the Mersey Estuary (pre-application stage)
Power from the Mersey	Project to assess potential for generating tidal power in the Mersey Estuary – second stage

	feasibility work commencing
United Utilities Water Resource Management Plan (September 2009)	Provides information concerning the future water supply strategy that United Utilities need to adopt to support the future planned supply of housing within their area. Has been subject to HRA
Dee Catchment Abstraction Management Strategy (March 2008)	Sets out the Environment Agency policy on abstraction and water resource management within the CAMS area
Dee Draft River Basin Management Plan (2008)	Sets out river management required to meet the needs of the Water Framework Directive
North West River Basin Management Plan (2008)	Sets out river management required to meet the needs of the Water Framework Directive

Consideration of the potential for the Broad Spatial Options to have a significant effect on European Sites

- 5.8 The Borough has no inland terrestrial European Sites within its boundaries. Although in relation to the Dee Estuary a number of inland sites have been identified as being important roosting areas for qualifying bird species, these areas are not included within the site boundaries. Almost the entire intertidal foreshore along Wirral's coastline is however, subject to European site designations. The Core Strategy (nor the RSS) does not contemplate in any of its Broad Spatial or other Policy Options any land reclamation onto the foreshore, or other forms of development within the intertidal area. The emerging Shoreline Management Plan for the Cell 11a area (which includes Wirral) is not proposing a strategy of "advance the line" for Wirral's coastal defences. Although still at an early stage of preparation, the Core Strategy DPD is unlikely to result in a significant effect on European Sites by virtue of direct land take from within the boundary of any designated European Sites. In addition, however potential indirect effects also need to be considered.
- 5.9 Common to all three Broad Spatial Options are the requirements of RSS relating to housing and employment land, and the Broad Spatial Options set out three alternative ways of accommodating them. Given the relatively small size of the Borough and the fact that almost all its surrounding coastline has European Site designations, the numbers of dwellings proposed have the potential to generate airborne emissions, sewage discharges and create recreational disturbance and potentially a significant effect on European Sites irrespective of how they are distributed under the three Broad Spatial options. Other development near or on the coast may also lead to noise and visual disturbance and generate potential air and water-borne pollution.
- 5.10 Wirral is located within the Integrated Resource Zone as identified in the United Utilities Water Resources Management Plan (which has been subject to Habitats Regulations Assessment). The call on drinking water resources abstracted from the River Dee/Bala Lake will occur irrespective of where in the Borough new housing is located, as this is the main source of drinking water (87%) for the whole Borough. Excessive abstraction from the Dee associated with population/household growth in the Wirral could therefore result in sufficient

drawdown of water to damage the interest features of the River Dee and Bala Lake SAC by affecting the balance of freshwater and sediments and impacting on water quality. The Dee Catchment Abstraction Management Strategy states however that the Environment Agency are required to assess the effects of existing abstraction licences and any new applications to ensure that they are not impacting on European Sites and a Review of Consents process has been undertaken. Discharges from Waste Water Treatment works or pollution from shipping into the Tidal Dee, or Mersey Estuaries or North Wirral Coast all have potential to create upstream or downstream impacts on coastal European sites and the proposed Liverpool Bay SPA.

- 5.11 Atmospheric pollution is an additional potential indirect effect. The prevailing wind direction in Wirral is from the west and as such the sites potentially impacted by airborne emissions will be to the east of the Borough. However, the approach adopted by English Nature in the case of Runnymede Borough Council in 2006 was that their LDF can only be concerned with locally emitted and short range locally acting pollutants. On this basis any long-range contribution made to background concentrations of atmospheric pollutants by development which may be enabled by the Core Strategy DPD is outside the remit of the Habitats Regulations Assessment for the Core Strategy. Subject to confirmation by Natural England and CCW, this issue need not be considered further.
- 5.12 There is however potential for different degrees of impact depending on the Broad Spatial Option chosen. The Interim Sustainability Appraisal for the Core Strategy DPD considers the environmental impact of the Broad Spatial Options in detail and provides an additional guide to the potential for significant effects to occur.

Outline of Broad Spatial Option 1

- 5.13 The first Broad Spatial Option, aims to maintain a very strong focus on growth and development within the older inner urban areas of east Wirral and other areas which are in the greatest need of social, economic and environmental regeneration. Sites within the Plan area would seek to focus growth and new development, almost exclusively, into identified regeneration priority areas including the Newheartlands Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder and other areas that demonstrate the highest levels of need as measured by the Index of Multiple Deprivation for England. This priority would apply to all forms of development, including housing, retail, employment and services. Outside the regeneration priority areas the emphasis would be on maintaining existing patterns of provision, replacing existing facilities and providing for identified local needs, unless specific strategic opportunities could identified, such as the Wirral International Business Park, the Manchester Ship Canal and the Hoylake Golf Resort. Previously undeveloped greenfield sites would not be developed until previously developed brownfield opportunities had first been taken up.

Potential for Broad Spatial Option 1 to have a significant effect on European Sites

Sites within the plan area

- 5.14 Broad Spatial Option 1 would focus development to the east of the Borough. Impacts from noise and visual disturbance from construction, industrial and recreational activity, water-borne pollution and airborne emissions would be concentrated on the Mersey coastline. Although the Spatial Option relating to focused regeneration would concentrate growth in the east of the Borough, the coast in the east is relatively inaccessible other than the Promenade at Seacombe and at Eastham Country Park. There is, however, an aspiration to extend public access along the Mersey Coastline, wherever feasible. In the north, the whole of the coastline is accessible from New Brighton to Red Rocks Hoylake along the North Wirral Coastal Park. In the west of the Borough the main coastal recreation destinations are at Wirral Country Park Thurstaston, at West Kirby, Hoylake and at Heswall Shore. It is likely that residents in the east would travel to the coast on the north and west of the Borough for recreation purposes in addition to the Mersey Coast. A significant effect on all the European Sites within the Plan area is therefore considered likely.

Sites within 15 km of the plan area

- 5.15 There is potential for a significant effect on the River Dee and Bala Lake through water abstraction and possibly recreational pressure. In relation to Martin Mere despite the hydrological sensitivity of the site there is no pathway by which water resource requirements of the Borough could lead to adverse effects upon the hydrology of the site. The only possible pathway for impacts upon this site would be as a result of increased recreational pressure. However recreational pressure at Martin Mere is controlled as the site is a Wildlife and Wetlands Nature reserve and this should therefore not be an issue. There is potential for impact by virtue of waterborne pollution on the Ribble/Alt Estuary. In relation to the Sefton Coast SAC, the only pathway connecting the Core Strategy Broad Spatial Option 1 is increased recreational pressure. This is however less likely given the facilities already available along the Wirral Coastline. The only potential pathways identified to Deeside and Buckley Newt Sites or Halkyn Mountain is atmospheric pollution (notwithstanding the prevailing wind direction) and subject to confirmation by CCW, these sites could be screened out from further consideration.

Sites beyond 15 km of the plan area

- 5.16 There is no known hydrological link with Oak Mere or the West Midland Mosses: the only obvious pathways are potential recreational pressures or atmospheric pollution, although Oak Mere has limited public access and the distance of the sites suggests that subject to confirmation from Natural England these sites can be screened out of consideration. The previous comments on long-range atmospheric background pollution also apply. Similarly there are no obvious pathways to Alyn Valley Woods or Berwyn and South Clwyd Mountains, other than recreational pressure or atmospheric pollution. The extent of this would require further investigation before a conclusion of no significant effect can be adopted, but the distances involved and (in the case of recreation) the range of facilities in Wirral make this less likely to be significant.

Outline of Broad Spatial Option 2

- 5.17 The second Broad Spatial Option for the Core Strategy would continue to maintain an emphasis on development within the older inner urban areas of East Wirral but would also seek to direct growth more widely across the existing urban areas. Broad Spatial Option 2 would still seek to direct growth and investment to regeneration priority areas in east Wirral but would make a greater allowance for supporting development in other sustainable urban locations across the Borough. Priority would be given to locations close to existing centres or with good access to public transport. This would apply to all forms of development, including housing, retail, employment and services. Previously undeveloped greenfield sites would still not be developed until previously developed brownfield opportunities had been taken up.

Impact of Broad Spatial Option 2

Sites within the plan area

- 5.18 Effects would largely be the same as with Broad Spatial Option 1 as the geographical differences in the dispersal of development are relatively small and confined to the existing urban areas. Broad Spatial Option 2 could, however, allow a greater level of residential development in areas away from the Mersey Coast, in North and West Wirral, which could increase the pressure on European Sites in these areas.

Sites Within 15km of the plan area

- 5.19 Effects would be the same as Broad Spatial Option 1. The closer proximity of local population to the natural and semi-natural facilities in North and West Wirral could, however, reduce the pressure to travel to more distant sites.

Sites beyond 15km of the plan area

- 5.20 Effects would be the same as Broad Spatial Option 1.

Impact of Broad Spatial Option 3

- 5.21 The third Broad Spatial Option, is to pursue a strategy of urban expansion. It would involve actively permitting development to take place outside the existing urban areas on land currently within the Green Belt. Priority would be given to the most sustainable locations, that could best integrate with existing infrastructure and services such as public transport and existing centres that would have the least impact on existing settlement patterns and that would continue to protect areas of environmental importance.

Sites within the plan area

- 5.22 Broad Spatial Option 3 would allow for a far more dispersed pattern of development across the Borough. In the absence of additional controls, increased levels of development in the north and west of the Borough, could impact on possible roosting areas associated with the Dee Estuary SPA/cSAC/Mersey Narrows & North Wirral Foreshore pSPA, increased discharges through WWTWs in the north and west of the Borough and increased recreational pressure/disturbance along the North Wirral Foreshore and the Dee side of the Borough. There may however, be less pressure on the Mersey as a result of the implementation of Broad Spatial Option 3.

Sites within 15km of the plan area

- 5.23 Effects would largely be the same as under Broad Spatial Option 1 and Broad Spatial Option 2

Sites beyond 15km of the plan area

- 5.24 Effects would largely be the same as Broad Spatial Option 1 and Broad Spatial Option 2.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 At this stage, the Initial Screening Assessment suggests that a conclusion of no significant effect is not likely in relation to the emerging Wirral Core Strategy, in view of the proximity of the European Sites around the Borough's coastline, and the potential impact of increased water abstraction on the Dee Estuary/Bala Lake SAC. Development under any one of the Broad Spatial Options could lead to significant effects on any of the coastal European Sites surrounding the Wirral coastline as a result of direct or indirect harm to the qualifying species that for any reason such as breeding or feeding spends time both on the coastal sites and within Wirral.
- 6.2 Subject to confirmation by Natural England and Countryside Council for Wales, it is proposed to "screen out" Alyn Valley Woods, Deeside and Buckley Newt Sites, Halkyn Mountain, West Midland Mosses and Oak Mere from further consideration. Further investigation is required of the links with the Berwyn and South Clwyd Mountains SAC – but it may also be possible to screen this site out from further assessment.
- 6.3 A full screening statement will be completed during preparation of the Preferred Options – currently scheduled for Spring 2010 - once there is a clearer picture of likely Preferred Options for Wirral's overall spatial planning strategy. HRA will be undertaken in parallel with the Sustainability Appraisal (SA) of the Core Strategy DPD, which will also need to evaluate the effects of plan policies on a full range of nature conservation assets including the European Sites, Sites of Special

Scientific Interest, etc. It is envisaged that the HRA will contribute to the SA by undertaking the detailed assessment of impacts on European Sites so that this aspect of the work is fully compliant with the requirements of the relevant Directives, preventing duplication of effort in evidence gathering and analysis.