



**CORE STRATEGY LOCAL PLAN**

**INITIAL GREEN BELT REVIEW**

**PROPOSED METHODOLOGY FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION**

**OCTOBER 2017**

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## PREFACE

- 1.1 Following further consultation on the Borough's housing needs and land supply, in August and September 2016, the Council is undertaking a wider review of development options before deciding on the sites that will need to be included in the Council's Local Plan.
- 1.2 The objective of this report is to agree a methodology for undertaking an initial review of land in the Green Belt that will:
  - assess all the land in the Green Belt in Wirral against the purposes of including land in the Green Belt 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 assess the likely consequences for sustainable development.
- 1.3 This report sets out how the Council proposes to undertake this initial review and public comments are invited.
- 1.4 The comments received will be used to finalise the methodology that will be used by the Council to identify any areas that may merit further, more detailed, investigation at a later date.
- 1.5 This report does not identify or allocate any sites for development, as it only sets out a proposed methodology. It will be the role of the later Local Plan to determine how much land is needed and where.

### How to Comment

- 1.6 Comments on the content of this report should be submitted in writing, to arrive **no later than 5.00pm on Wednesday 6 December 2017**, to one of the following addresses:

Forward Planning Section, Wirral Council Environmental Services  
PO Box 290, Brighton Street, Wallasey CH27 9FQ  
or  
[forwardplanning@wirral.gov.uk](mailto:forwardplanning@wirral.gov.uk)
- 1.7 Please note that the Council will not be able to keep any of the comments you make private and that your name and/or organisation, as well as your comments, may need to be recorded in a published report of public consultation.
- 1.8 Copies of this document have also been placed for public inspection at public libraries and in the Forward Planning Section at the South Annexe at Wallasey Town Hall, Brighton Street, Wallasey, Wirral CH44 8ED and can be made available in alternative formats on request from one of the addresses above.

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## INTRODUCTION

- 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 development could not be identified within the existing urban area<sup>1</sup>.
- 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.
- 2.4 The need for new housing in Wirral has recently been assessed in the Council's Strategic Housing Market Assessment Update (May 2016). The findings suggest that between 15,750 and 22,230 additional homes may need to be provided in Wirral between 2014 and 2032; and between 19,665 and 27,255 additional homes between 2014 and 2037<sup>2</sup>.
- 2.5 The Council has also recently updated its annual assessment of the land that is likely to be available for housing over the next 15 years<sup>3</sup>.
- 2.6 Following additional consultation, in August and September 2016<sup>4</sup>, the Council has begun to undertake a wider review of potential development options, which will include:
- a further revision to the Council's Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (published for consultation in July 2017);
  - a Playing Pitch Strategy Update;
  - an Employment Land and Premises Study Update;
  - a Strategic Housing and Employment Land Market Assessment, undertaken with City Region partners (published for consultation in October 2017); and
  - an initial review of the Green Belt.
- 2.7 The review of potential development options 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 to any potential future development sites, which could affect the ability to secure the ongoing housing land supply required by national planning policy.
- 2.8 The review will also enable the Council to demonstrate that all the available alternatives have been properly assessed and whether any adverse impacts of meeting the objectively

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<sup>1</sup> 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)

<sup>2</sup> The Strategic Housing Market Assessment (May 2016) can be viewed at <http://www.wirral.gov.uk/planning-and-building/local-plans-and-planning-policy/local-planning-evidence-and-research-reports-3>

<sup>3</sup> The Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment for April 2016 can be viewed at <http://www.wirral.gov.uk/planning-and-building/local-plans-and-planning-policy/local-planning-evidence-and-research-reports-4>

<sup>4</sup> Further Consultation on Housing Needs and Land Supply (August 2016) can be viewed at <http://www.wirral.gov.uk/planning-and-building/local-plans-and-planning-policy/local-plans/core-strategy-local-plan/further-0>

assessed needs for new development would “significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits” when assessed against the policies in the National Planning Policy Framework taken as a whole (NPPF, paragraph 14 refers).

- 2.9 A number of sites in the Green Belt have already been submitted to the Council by landowners and developers for evaluation as part of previous Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessments (SHLAA).
- 2.10 Before considering the suitability of these sites, the Council is proposing to undertake an initial review of the entire Green Belt in Wirral, as part of a wider review of the Borough as a whole, to assess the contribution that each part makes to the purposes of including land in the Green Belt; to identify any additional potential constraints that could still prevent development for other reasons; and to consider the likely consequences for achieving a sustainable pattern of development.
- 2.11 This report, therefore, sets out the Council’s proposals for undertaking that initial review, to enable to Council to identify any areas that may merit further, more detailed, investigation at a later date.

## **BACKGROUND**

- 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:
- (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 preserved<sup>5</sup>.
- 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 Corridor<sup>6</sup> and to the west of Elm Road in Irby was added to the Green Belt; and an area of residential development at Poulton

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<sup>5</sup> 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](http://www.knowsley.gov.uk/pdf/PG44_Merseyside-Green-Belt-Local-Plan-1983-Written-Statement.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> 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



Green Close was removed from the Green Belt; in the Wirral Unitary Development Plan, adopted in February 2000 (UDP)<sup>7</sup>.

- 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.

### **National Policy**

- 3.9 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, March 2012) sets out the Government's policies for the provision of land for development.
- 3.10 In particular, local authorities are expected to “positively seek opportunities to meet the development needs of their area. Local Plans should meet objectively assessed needs, with sufficient flexibility to adapt to rapid change, unless any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in the Framework taken as a whole; or specific policies in this Framework indicate development should be restricted” (NPPF, paragraph 14 refers).
- 3.11 The National Planning Policy Framework also sets out Government policy on the protection of Green Belt. It states that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open 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 80).
- 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 in exceptional circumstances, through the preparation

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<sup>7</sup> 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)

or review of the Local Plan. At that time, authorities should consider the Green Belt boundaries having regard to their intended permanence in the long term, so that they should be capable of enduring beyond the plan period” (NPPF, paragraph 83); and “When drawing up or reviewing Green Belt boundaries local planning authorities should take account of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development” (NPPF, paragraph 84).

3.14 The Council therefore proposes to undertake the initial review of the Green Belt 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 consequences for sustainable development

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

3.16 At each stage, the emphasis will be on information gathering, to enable the Council to identify areas that may merit further, more detailed, investigation at a later date.

### **BUILDING BLOCKS FOR THE INITIAL ASSESSMENT**

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

4.2 Each of these proposed building blocks is explained in further detail below:

4.3 The boundaries to the sites and parcels proposed to be included in this initial assessment can also be viewed at a larger scale 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>

### **Identification of Core Strategy Settlement Areas**

4.4 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<sup>8</sup> that corresponds with the boundary to the existing Wirral Green Belt defined in the Wirral Unitary Development Plan adopted in February 2000.

4.5 The boundaries to these Settlement Areas were first identified in the Core Strategy Spatial Options Report in January 2010 and were subject to consultation in the Core Strategy

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<sup>8</sup> Settlement Area 8 – Rural Area

Preferred Options Report in November 2010 and as part of the consultation on Draft Settlement Area Policies in January 2012<sup>9</sup>.

- 4.6 The boundaries to each of the Core Strategy Settlement Areas are shown in Appendix 1.

#### **Identification of Green Belt Parcels**

- 4.7 The Council has identified 110 land parcels, which are proposed to be used as the basis for the Stage 1 initial assessment.
- 4.8 The boundaries to each of the proposed Green Belt Parcels are shown in Appendix 2 and 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>.
- 4.9 The boundaries to the proposed Green Belt Parcels have been identified to reflect national policy, which states that "When defining boundaries, local planning authorities should define boundaries clearly, using physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent" (NPPF, paragraph 85).
- 4.10 The boundaries to the proposed Green Belt Parcels identified are therefore primarily based on identifying the clearest and strongest boundaries available, mainly roads and railways, which would normally be expected to meet the requirements of a new Green Belt boundary in national policy.
- 4.11 In the case of villages that are already designated as Infill Villages in the Green Belt, under Proposal GB7 of the existing adopted Unitary Development Plan (UDP), the proposed Green Belt Parcels will be drawn to follow the boundary to the Infill Village shown on the existing UDP Proposals Map.
- 4.12 In the case of villages that are designated as Conservation Areas, the proposed Green Belt Parcels will be drawn to follow their designated areas, even where, in some cases, the boundary to the designated area does not follow any clearly identifiable feature on the ground.
- 4.13 In the case of villages and other existing developed areas which are 'washed-over' by the existing Green Belt, where no village boundary has previously been defined, the proposed Green Belt Parcels will be drawn using the boundaries identified in paragraph 4.10.

#### **Identification of Green Belt Sites**

- 4.14 The sites proposed to be included in the initial assessment will be based on the sites recorded as being in the Green Belt in the Council's Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment April 2016 or which have been submitted since the further consultation on housing needs and land supply undertaken in August 2016 (the 'Green Belt SHLAA Sites').

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<sup>9</sup> 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>

- 4.15 The boundaries to each of the Green Belt SHLAA Sites are shown in Appendix 3 and 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>.

### **Assessment of boundary strength**

- 4.16 As the boundaries to these submitted Green Belt SHLAA Sites do not always correspond with the clear, strong boundaries for the proposed Green Belt Parcels, an additional analysis is proposed to be undertaken to also assess the relative 'strength' of the boundaries to each Green Belt SHLAA Site, to assess their individual ability to meet the requirements of national policy.
- 4.17 This additional analysis will only consider the 'strength' of the perimeter of each Green Belt SHLAA Site which would theoretically be used to form a new boundary to the Green Belt.
- 4.18 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.
- 4.19 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.
- 4.20 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.
- 4.21 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.
- 4.22 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.
- 4.23 Watercourses that are not reinforced by other strong features will also not be considered to be 'strong' boundaries for the purpose of this assessment.

### **STAGE 1 – INITIAL ASSESSMENT AGAINST THE PURPOSES OF INCLUDING LAND IN THE GREEN BELT**

- 5.1 The proposed Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites will each be assessed against the five purposes of including land in the Green Belt set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, paragraph 80 refers).
- 5.2 Further information on how the Council proposes to assess the performance of each Green Belt Parcel and of each Green Belt SHLAA Site against each of the five purposes of including land in the Green Belt, in the local context, is set out below:

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

- 5.3 The Green Belt in Wirral has helped to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas by defining where new development should and should not take place, to prevent any further intrusion into the open countryside.
- 5.4 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.
- 5.5 The level of containment or enclosure of each proposed Green Belt Parcel and of each Green Belt SHLAA Site is therefore proposed to be assessed by measuring the percentage of the boundary to each Parcel or Site that is directly adjacent to the existing urban area.
- 5.6 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).
- 5.7 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.
- 5.8 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.
- 5.9 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.
- 5.10 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites will be classified as 'rural', where none of their boundary is adjacent the existing urban area.
- 5.11 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites that are identified as 'highly enclosed' by the existing urban area will be taken as having the lowest likely impact on urban sprawl.
- 5.12 The existing urban area will be defined by the boundary to the existing Green Belt around each of the urban Settlement Areas identified in Appendix 1.

**Purpose 2 - To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another**

- 5.13 In Wirral, 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.
- 5.14 Purpose 2 is therefore proposed to be assessed by measuring the impact that development on a Green Belt Parcel or on a Green Belt SHLAA Site would have on the separation between the urban Settlement Areas identified in Appendix 1.
- 5.15 The impact on separation will be measured on the basis of the likely potential impact on the existing linear distance between adjoining urban Settlement Areas.

- 5.16 For completeness, the initial assessment will also include information on the impact on the separation of rural villages and other existing developed areas in the Green Belt.
- 5.17 Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites that will have no impact on the existing separation between urban Settlement Areas will be taken as having the lowest impact on this purpose of including land in the Green Belt.

**Purpose 3 - To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment**

- 5.18 Purpose 3 is proposed to be assessed against the extent to which a site can be said to be subject to countryside uses, by recording the existing predominant land use and the extent to which any new development would appear to intrude discordantly into the open countryside.
- 5.19 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 taken to have the lowest impact on this purpose of including land in the Green Belt.

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

- 5.20 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. The conservation of villages could, however, be an additional local consideration, particularly as heritage assets are also identified for specific protection in national policy (NPPF, paragraph 14).
- 5.21 As one of the reasons for designating the Merseyside Green Belt was to ensure that towns and villages retained their individual character and as the Green Belt in Wirral contains a number of designated Conservation Areas<sup>10</sup>, which the Council has a legal duty to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing, the potential to affect these designated Areas is also proposed to be included in the initial assessment.
- 5.22 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 taken 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**

- 5.23 Purpose 5 is largely related to the impact on the overall supply of land, to prevent any over-allocation of development land from discouraging urban regeneration and the reuse of urban land, which would appear to apply equally to all sites in the Green Belt in Wirral.
- 5.24 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, it will be assumed for the purpose of the initial assessment that the release of any Green Belt site in Wirral is likely to have a similarly negative impact on urban regeneration and that all proposed Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites would currently fulfil this purpose in equal measure.

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<sup>10</sup> Including the rural villages of Barnston; Eastham; Frankby; Thornton Hough; and Thurstaston

- 5.25 The proximity to areas of greatest need is, however, proposed to be recorded as part of the initial assessment<sup>11</sup>.

### **Existing Developed Areas**

- 5.26 The initial assessment will seek to identify areas that may also be suitable for consideration to accommodate some additional infill development, in line with national planning policy for the Green Belt (NPPF, paragraph 89 refers).

### **Boundary Corrections**

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

### **Impact on Openness and Permanence**

- 5.28 National policy states that the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence (NPPF, paragraph 79).
- 5.29 In practice, most new development in the Green Belt is likely to have an impact on openness<sup>12</sup>; and any change to the Green Belt boundary will have an impact on the permanence of the existing Green Belt<sup>13</sup>.
- 5.30 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 (NPPF, paragraph 83 and 85 refer) can only be reached towards the end of the process of review, considerations related to openness and permanence are proposed to be assessed at a later stage, when potential land allocations come under more detailed consideration.

## **STAGE 2 – INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF ADDITIONAL PHYSICAL OR POLICY CONSTRAINTS**

- 6.1 The proposed Green Belt Parcels and Green Belt SHLAA Sites will also need to be assessed to anticipate whether any other existing constraints may also prevent some sites from being considered suitable to accommodate new development.
- 6.2 These constraints may be physical, in terms of ground conditions or related to the capacity of supporting infrastructure, such as highways or sewers; or policy-based, in terms of the special consideration afforded to nature conservation, flood risk or high quality agricultural land.
- 6.3 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 types of constraint are likely to apply in each particular area, to, if necessary, inform a more detailed investigation of their site-specific implications and impacts at a later stage.

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<sup>11</sup> defined in accordance with the Proposed Submission Draft Core Strategy, as areas falling within the lowest 20 percent of scores in the latest Index of Multiple Deprivation for England

<sup>12</sup> With the possible exception of development on previously developed sites

<sup>13</sup> With the possible exception of the identification of Infill Villages in the Green Belt

6.4 The Council therefore proposes to first undertake a high-level review of the main large scale environmental constraints, which are already available as part of published datasets; and to consult with relevant infrastructure and public service providers, to obtain an initial view of whether any identified constraint would prohibit development altogether; whether the constraint would place restrictions on the type or scale of development that could be accommodated; or whether the constraint could be capable of satisfactory mitigation, for example, through the provision of additional supporting infrastructure.

6.5 Data has so far been gathered for the following main potential 'high-level' constraints:

### **Flood Risk**

6.6 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 100).

6.7 The Environment Agency Flood Map for Planning (rivers and sea), that identify areas that would naturally be affected by flooding if a river rises above its banks or where high tides and stormy seas could cause flooding in coastal areas, can be viewed at: <https://flood-map-for-planning.service.gov.uk/>

6.8 Areas falling within Flood Zone 3 have the highest level of risk, where, if there were no flood defences, there is 0.5% (1 in 200) chance or greater of flooding from the sea happening each year or 1% (1 in 100) chance or greater of flooding from a river happening each year.

6.9 The Council proposes to base its initial assessment on the latest Environment Agency Flood Map for Wirral, as shown in Appendix 4.

6.10 On affected sites, further information from landowners and developers will be needed to demonstrate how any flood risk identified would be dealt with, to the satisfaction of the Environment Agency and/or Lead Local Flood Authority, before any site will be recommended for inclusion in the Core Strategy Local Plan.

### **Biodiversity and Nature Conservation**

6.11 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 whole<sup>14</sup>.

6.12 The Council therefore proposes to base the initial assessment on the extent of the existing Liverpool City Region Core Biodiversity Area in Wirral, shown in Appendix 5.

6.13 Landowners and developers with sites likely to affect assets forming part the identified Core Biodiversity Area will need to demonstrate how any harm to identified biodiversity assets would be avoided or mitigated, before any site will be recommended for inclusion in the Core Strategy Local Plan.

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<sup>14</sup> The Liverpool City Region Ecological Network can be viewed at <http://www.meas.org.uk/1263>



## **European Sites and Supporting Habitat**

- 6.14 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.
- 6.15 The national Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) monitors non-breeding waterbirds in the UK, to identify population sizes, determine trends in numbers and distribution and identify important sites for waterbirds. As areas of functionally linked land have not yet been formally identified in Wirral, the Council proposes to base the initial assessment on the Core Count Areas for the Wetland Bird Survey, shown on Appendix 6, which will be used to 'flag' areas of potential supporting habitat.
- 6.16 As the Council cannot include proposals in a Local Plan that would cause harm to a European Site or its functionally linked land, which must be verified by Natural England, landowners and developers will need to demonstrate that any development they propose will not have any significant effect on a European Site before any site can be recommended for inclusion in the Core Strategy Local Plan.

## **Agricultural Land**

- 6.17 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).
- 6.18 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.
- 6.19 The Council therefore proposes to base the initial assessment on the latest available information on the current extent of best and most versatile agricultural land in Wirral, shown on Appendix 7, to 'flag' the potential presence of high quality agricultural land within Grades 1, 2 and 3.
- 6.20 Landowners and developers will need to provide additional information to demonstrate that any development that would lead to the loss of agricultural land would have no significant implications for the Borough's agricultural land resource or for the continued productivity and viability of individual agricultural land holdings, before any site will be recommended for inclusion in the Core Strategy Local Plan.

## **Landscape Character**

- 6.21 National planning policy states that the planning system should protect and enhance valued landscapes (NPPF, paragraph 109).

- 6.22 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 areas<sup>15</sup>.
- 6.23 The Landscape Character Assessment provides an assessment of the landscape quality of each of the landscape character areas and considers the capacity and sensitivity of the landscape in each landscape character area to accommodate change without having a severe detrimental effect on their character and integrity.
- 6.24 As part of the initial assessment, the Council proposes to note the main features of the relevant recommended landscape strategy for each area; and landowners and developers will be required to undertake a further, more detailed, site-specific landscape and visual impact assessment before any site will be recommended for inclusion in the Core Strategy Local Plan.

### **Public Rights of Way**

- 6.25 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 known<sup>16</sup>.
- 6.26 As public rights of way are unlikely to prevent development, they will at this stage merely be noted as part of the initial assessment but landowners and developers will, again, need to demonstrate how any rights of way identified can be accommodated in any future development they propose, before any site will be recommended for inclusion in the Core Strategy Local Plan.

### **Other Constraints**

- 6.27 The Council will consult the full range of infrastructure and public service providers to determine which, if any, additional constraints or facility requirements are likely to apply.
- 6.28 A further, more detailed, analysis will then be undertaken before a final conclusion is reached on which sites might be suitable for development.
- 6.29 The Council would be particularly interested in the views of respondents on the range of the potential constraints that should be considered, which could influence, limit or prevent the future delivery of potential development sites.

## **STAGE 3 – INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CONSEQUENCES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

- 7.1 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

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<sup>15</sup> The Wirral Landscape Character Assessment can be viewed at <http://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/ecSDDisplay.aspx?NAME=SD396&ID=396&RPID=193731&sch=d oc&cat=13005&path=12848,13003,13005>

<sup>16</sup> 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>

boundary, towards towns and villages inset within the Green Belt or towards locations beyond the outer Green Belt boundary (NPPF, paragraph 84).

- 7.2 Some sites may also perform better against factors such as access to local facilities and services, such as schools, shops, health facilities and a choice of means of transport.
- 7.3 Landowners and developers will therefore need to demonstrate how their proposals will contribute towards achieving sustainable development and that their proposals will be adequately served by appropriate supporting infrastructure, before any site will be recommended for inclusion in the Core Strategy Local Plan.
- 7.4 The Council has already identified the criteria that it will use to assess the sustainability of policies that are proposed for inclusion in the Local Plan, which are also applied to Neighbourhood Plans prepared by the local community. The Council now proposes to further develop these criteria to allow more site-specific conclusions to be reached.
- 7.5 Appendix 8 sets out the Council's latest proposals and the Council would be particularly interested in the views of respondents on how best to assess the sustainability of individual site-specific proposals (as defined in the National Planning Policy Framework<sup>17</sup>).

## **NEXT STEPS**

- 8.1 The Council will use the responses received to inform the final methodology for undertaking the initial assessment.
- 8.2 The findings of the initial assessment, comprising data tables for each element of the analysis and a summary of the conclusions, will be reported to the Council's Cabinet alongside a series of recommendations for any sites or areas that may appear to merit further investigation.
- 8.3 A further, more detailed, analysis of each site or area will be undertaken before a final conclusion is reached on which sites might or might not be suitable for development, with any site-specific proposals subject to public consultation before being included in the Local Plan.
- 8.4 Only once the wider review of development options has been completed, will the Council decide on the sites that will need to be allocated for future development in the Local Plan.

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<sup>17</sup> The National Planning Policy Framework, which sets out the Government's national policies for the planning system to achieve sustainable development and its supporting national Planning Practice Guidance can be viewed at <http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/>

**DRAFT**

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