What is a Local Plan?

A Local Plan is a statutory land-use planning document that sets out how the Borough should be developed over the next 15 years, in line with the requirements of national policy and legislation. It comprises a book of policies and a map of proposals that will replace the Council's existing Unitary Development Plan, adopted in February 2000.

The Local Plan must set the overall requirement for housing and other development over the plan period and must identify enough land for development to meet this requirement. The Council's proposed Local Plan is being prepared to be submitted to the Secretary of State during 2019 and will be used for in making decisions on individual planning applications over the fifteen years to 2035.

What are Wirral's future housing needs?

The Government has produced a standard method for calculating the minimum number of homes needed in a local authority area based on nationally-published household projections and local incomes which can be viewed at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/728247/How_is_a_minimum_annual_local_housing_need_figure_calculated_using_the_standard_method.pdf

This calculation currently shows an overall minimum need for new housing of 12,045 new dwellings over 15 years, equal to 803 dwellings per year (net of demolitions and other losses). This is broadly consistent with the Council's earlier findings and a more recent assessment undertaken at Liverpool City Region Level. It does not allow for economic growth.

What provisions for social housing can be included in the Plan?

Under national policy, the Council can require affordable housing to be provided by developers as part of their proposals subject to viability and evidence of local housing need. The proposed Plan currently includes a policy to require 20% of all new housebuilding to be affordable housing, with a lower rate of up to 10% within areas that are less viable to develop. Developers can only avoid this if they can demonstrate that it would not be viable to provide affordable housing on their particular site and their assessment has been independently verified by a Council-appointed expert at their own expense.

What do we need to do to meet Wirral's Future Housing Needs?

National policy requires that the Local Plan must be able to demonstrate a supply of specific deliverable housing sites sufficient to provide five years’ worth of housing against our housing requirement. The Local Plan is also required to identify a supply of specific, developable sites or broad locations for years 6-10 and, where possible, for years 11-15.
What is a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment?

A Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) is a technical study to establish realistic assumptions about the availability, suitability and economic viability of land to meet the identified need for housing.

The last SHLAA was produced in 2016. Consultation on a revised methodology took place in 2017. The latest SHLAA, which has now been published for public consultation, has been updated to April 2018 and will be updated to April 2019 before the Local Plan is submitted to the Secretary of State for public examination.

What options have been considered for increasing the supply of housing land?

Surplus employment land

A review of the Borough’s employment land was completed in December 2017. This review identified 8 sites that were recommended to be excluded from the employment land supply, in some cases because they were already under construction for housing development. The study shows that there may still be a shortage of suitable land for new employment development by 2035.

The current consultation includes proposals for potential employment and mixed use sites.

Open space and other previously un-developed urban land

The latest Playing Pitch Strategy shows that there is still a shortfall in provision for pitch sports in the Borough.

Reviewing the provision of public open space to provide for additional housing could mean the re-designation of currently protected sites and/or reducing the existing standard of recreation and open space provision.

Increasing the density of development

Increasing densities over those already built into the calculations could change the number and type of dwellings that could be provided on each individual site but may have a detrimental impact on the character of urban areas that are not already protected by existing density controls or heritage designations like conservation areas.

The potential for other neighbouring local authorities to meet Wirral’s identified needs

The surrounding local authorities of Cheshire West and Chester, Liverpool, Sefton, Knowsley and West Lancashire have each already indicated that they would be unable to provide for any of Wirral’s identified housing needs.
Wirral Waters

The main element of Wirral Waters, a long-term, 40-year, privately-funded project to create a new city neighbourhood at East Float in the Birkenhead and Wallasey Docks, already has a 22-year outline mixed-use planning permission for 13,500 residential units and a further 620,757sqm of office, retail, hotel and conference, cultural, educational, community and amenity floorspace.

The main proposals include:

- Four Bridges – mixed uses including the Wirral Metropolitan College and a new Maritime Knowledge Hub along Tower Road in Seacombe
- West Float – a new Marine, Energy and Automotive (MEA) Park at Beaufort Road
- Northbank, Dock Road, Seacombe – mainly residential-led – comprises:
  - Northbank West - detailed application now submitted for 500 new dwellings (Legacy)
  - Northbank East - Urban Splash - 347 new dwellings (subject to pre-application discussions)
  - Northbank East – a new ‘Belong’ dementia care village (application submitted)
  - Northbank East – a potential further 150 new dwellings (subject to pre-application discussions)
- Marina View and Vittoria Studios – a high density, mixed use residential and commercial proposal to replace the existing dockside transit sheds at Corporation Road; and
- Sky City – a tall buildings cluster to replace the existing dockside transit sheds at Vittoria Dock

Wirral Waters currently comprises most of the former dockland, on the main HGV route to the Motorway, surrounded by existing industrial uses, with issues related to ground conditions, infrastructure and viability, which has made it difficult to attract significant development interest.

The Council’s calculations currently provide for 1,100 units at Wirral Waters during the plan period, based on the most recent detailed proposals and the proposed housing allocations currently include the proposals at Northbank East and Northbank West.

Do these other options, including Wirral Waters, meet our future housing land requirements?

No – there is still a shortfall of housing land to meet our local housing needs.

What is the Development Options Review?

In 2016 the Council undertook further consultation on the Borough’s housing needs and land supply, as part of the preparation of the Council’s proposed Local Plan. This did not identify any significant additional development opportunities to meet the likely identified need for new housing.
In February 2017, the Council's Cabinet approved the undertaking of a wider review of potential development options before any decision is taken on the final sites to be included in the Local Plan (Minute 96).

As a first step, the Council consulted on the approach to assessing the supply of housing land, in July 2017; and consulted on a methodology for undertaking a review of the Green Belt, in October 2017.

**What was the purpose of the report to Cabinet on 23 July 2018?**

The report summarised the latest available evidence and set out the results of the review of development options approved by Cabinet in February 2017.

It also identified the potential sites that could be allocated for housing, employment and mixed uses for public consultation.

**Why do we need to consider land in the Green Belt?**

As none of the options discussed above will fully close the gap between our local housing needs and the shortfall of housing land, there is no realistic alternative but to review the potential of land in the Green Belt to accommodate future development.

Even if no land is eventually released from the Green Belt, the review is still required to demonstrate that all the available alternatives have been properly identified and assessed.

**What is the Green Belt?**

The boundary to the Green Belt is designated locally by the Council and is then protected in line with national planning policy.

National planning policy sets out five purposes for including land within a Green Belt:

- 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.

Once designated, inappropriate development is restricted in the Green Belt, unless there are very special circumstances.

The Wirral Green Belt

The Green Belt in Wirral was last amended by the Council in February 2000, when the existing Unitary Development Plan was adopted.

Just under half (45%, 7,317 hectares) of the land area of Wirral is currently designated as Green Belt and the designation applies to the majority of the remaining countryside outside the existing urban area.

The original boundary, which was first identified in 1983, was tightly drawn around the existing built-up area of Wirral to support urban regeneration.

Can Green Belt boundaries be changed?

National policy states that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances that are fully evidenced and justified, through the preparation or updating of Local Plans.

The Council is required to demonstrate that it has examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting its identified needs for development before releasing land from the Green Belt.

Who has undertaken the initial review of the Green Belt?

The initial review has been undertaken by Council officers in line with the requirements of national policy and legislation.

What does the initial review of the Green Belt involve?

The approach that has been taken is set out in the ‘Initial Review of the Green Belt Revised Methodology (September 2018)’.

The review has assessed every part of the existing Green Belt against the five purposes of Green Belt set out in national policy and against some of the most relevant higher-level environmental constraints which may also indicate that a particular site might be unsuitable for development.

Sites already submitted by landowners and developers have also been assessed for their likely impact on national policy and the environment.

The overall findings of the initial review are set out in the ‘Initial Green Belt Review Background Report’ (September 2018) and in the ‘Summary of Initial Green Belt Assessment’ (September 2018), which have now been published for public consultation.
Where have the urban Settlement Areas that have been used in the review come from?

The urban Settlement Areas, which can be viewed in the 'Initial Green Belt Review Background Report' (September 2018), were approved by the Council in the Proposed Submission Draft Core Strategy in October 2012, following public consultation in 2010 and 2012.

Where have the Green Belt parcels that have been used in the review come from?

In order to make the assessment more manageable a key part of the review has been to split the Green Belt into smaller land parcels. The boundaries for these parcels are shown in Appendix 2 of the methodology document.

The boundaries to the proposed Green Belt Parcels are 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. There are 111 parcels in total.

Each parcel has then been assessed against each of the five purposes of including land in the Green Belt and the information so far gathered is summarised in the 'Summary of Initial Green Belt Assessment'.

All of the land parcels in the existing Green Belt can still be shown to meet at least one or more of the purposes of including land in the Green Belt.

Where have the ‘Sites for Further Investigation’ come from?

The areas that have been identified as suitable for further investigation, which have now been published for public consultation, are either already highly enclosed by an existing urban Settlement Area or, if developed, would not reduce the existing separation with an adjacent urban Settlement Area.

Sites in the open countryside, which are not already highly enclosed or which would reduce the separation with an adjacent urban Settlement Area have not been identified for ‘further investigation’.

What will this ‘further investigation’ involve?

‘Further investigation’ will involve a full assessment of the likely impacts of developing each site, including physical constraints, such as biodiversity and flood risk, agricultural land, landscape character, infrastructure, transport accessibility, impact on the existing highway network, utilities infrastructure, public services such as schools and healthcare and an assessment of the impacts on sustainable development objectives.

The results of this public consultation will also be used to inform these further assessments.
If a site has been identified for further investigation’ does this mean that it has already been removed from the Green Belt?

No. No decision has been taken to change the Green Belt boundary in Wirral or on the sites to be included in the Local Plan.

National policy says that an existing Green Belt should only be changed in exceptional circumstances, taking account of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development.

It is possible that no sites will be allocated for development in the Green Belt, if it can be shown that alternative sites are available in the urban area or that the harm caused by developing them would be so great as to be contrary to national policy or legislation.

What will happen to the other sites in the Green Belt that have not been identified ‘for further investigation’?

These other sites are not currently considered to be suitable for release from the Green Belt.

These other sites would only be re-assessed if the ‘sites for further investigation’ were ruled out for consideration; no other, more suitable, alternative sites were available; and it could be demonstrated that the harm caused by developing them would not be contrary to national policy or legislation.

What about existing developed sites in the Green Belt?

National policy already allows for the limited infilling or the partial or complete redevelopment of previously developed sites which would not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt and the purpose of including land within it than the existing development.

Options for new or extended infill villages in the Green Belt, where limited infilling could be allowed without removing them from the Green Belt; and for other, smaller scale amendments to the Green Belt boundary to better reflect the existing pattern of development, have also been included in the review.

Will developers be able to submit planning applications in the meantime?

Developers can submit planning applications at any time but to be approved any proposal will have to meet the requirements of national policy.

National policy currently states that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances through the preparation or review of the Local Plan and that inappropriate development in the Green Belt should not be approved except in very special circumstances (NPPF paragraphs 136 and 143 refer).

National practice guidance currently indicates that unmet housing need is unlikely to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and other harm to constitute the ‘very special circumstances’ justifying inappropriate development on a site within the Green Belt (NPPG Paragraph: 034 Reference ID: 3-034-20141006).
The National Planning Practice Guidance can be viewed at:
https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/planning-practice-guidance

What is the purpose of public consultation on the results of the initial review?

The Council wants to make sure that the information that it has so far collected on each site is correct and that nothing has been missed or overlooked.

The Council also wants to make sure that its future decisions will be based on a complete picture of the potential impacts and facts about each site and location, in consultation with the public and other stakeholders, including service and utility providers and other statutory consultees.

What will the responses to the public consultation be used for?

The consultation responses will be used to complete the initial review and to inform the decisions that the Council will need to take about the sites that may or may not need to be included for development in the Council’s Local Plan.

The first results are expected to be reported to Cabinet in December 2018. The initial review will then be used as part of the evidence to be submitted to a Planning Inspector who will be appointed by the Government to check whether the Council's decisions and proposals are robust and meet national policy, at a formal public examination of the proposals.