

REPORT TO: Environment and Urban Renewal Policy and Performance Board

DATE: 11th September 2013

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director - Policy and Resources

PORTFOLIO: Physical Environment

SUBJECT: Partial Green Belt Review - North Widnes and Hale Green Belt Study

WARDS: Appleton, Birchfield, Broadheath, Ditton, Farnworth , Hale, Halton View, Hough Green and Kingsway.

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The report provides an overview of the methodology for the Widnes and Hale Green Belt Study (the Partial Green Belt Review).
- 1.2 It should be noted that the Green Belt Study itself will not release or allocate land for development but will be a key evidence base document for the Delivery and Allocations Local Plan, which will identify land to meet development needs.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

- (1) the Board note the methodology proposed; and**
- (2) comment, as appropriate, on the methodology and the consultation process.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

NEED FOR A PARTIAL REVIEW OF THE WIDNES/HALE GREEN BELT

- 3.1 At the recent examination of the Core Strategy Local Plan, the Government appointed Inspector concluded that there was insufficient identified land within Widnes/Hale to deliver the level of development to meet the assessed requirements, particularly for housing. To have the Plan found 'sound' the Council had to commit to undertaking a review of the Borough's Green Belt boundaries around Widnes and Hale to ensure there is sufficient development land for the longer term needs to 2028 and beyond. Sufficient sites exist in Runcorn for future housing development (primarily at Sandymoor and Daresbury) and so a review of Runcorn's Green Belt was not deemed necessary at this time. The Inspector also ruled that a partial Green Belt (GB) review should take

place in the early part of the Core Strategy's plan period (2010-2028) and inform the development of the Delivery and Allocations Local Plan.

- 3.2 Work has already commenced on the Delivery and Allocations Local Plan, as the planning policy document which will replace the remainder of the saved policies in the UDP (i.e. not superseded by the adoption of the Core Strategy and Joint Waste Local Plans). This Plan will detail sites across the Borough to be allocated for specific purposes, such as housing, employment or green space. In order to fulfil the objectives of the Core Strategy development allocations must be developable, and with a reasonable prospect of being deliverable. The Plan needs to focus on those most likely to make a contribution to the objectives of the Core Strategy, and new development policies will also give protection to certain areas across the Borough, including important open spaces and Town Centres. In addition to those policies that relate to a specific area of the Borough (shown on an accompanying Adopted Policies Map), more general policies setting out development principles will be included. These will be a key tool when assessing planning applications for all forms of development across Halton and will cover a broad range of topics such as design, car parking standards and contaminated land.
- 3.3 At the Core Strategy examination (2010 figures), the shortfall in housing land amounted to about 844 units to 2028. However, Government guidance states that when being established or amended, green belt boundaries should endure beyond the lifetime of the current plan, and therefore the Council will need to consider future development needs and pressures beyond 2028. This work will be undertaken as part of the evidence to support the Delivery and Allocations Local Plan.
- 3.4 Land needed for longer-term development needs can be identified as 'safeguarded land' which is land that will be protected from development similar to Green Belt in the short term. The Halton UDP had similar allocations in the form of policy S23 Open Countryside where land was excluded from the Green Belt but protected from development.
- 3.5 The Localism Act introduced a Duty to Co-operate on planning matters of strategic importance, i.e. affecting more than one Local Planning Authority area. Green Belt is a strategic issue and the Council have sought co-operation from our neighbouring Authorities, to work in partnership to ensure that a co-ordinated and strategic approach is taken. Knowsley Council, Sefton Council and West Lancashire Council have already conducted a Green Belt Study as part of their Core Strategy Local Plans. We have adopted a combination of the methodologies used learning from their experiences to ensure a consistent approach. This will also comply with the requirements set out in the National Planning Policy Framework which states

...Plans should be kept up-to-date, and be based on joint working and co-operation to address larger than local issues. They should provide a

*practical framework within which decisions on planning applications can be made with a high degree of predictability and efficiency;*¹

3.6 The location of the sites/areas to be released from the Widnes/Hale green belt will be informed by the findings of the Green Belt Study. NPPF² states that when defining Green Belt boundaries, local planning authorities should:

- ensure consistency with the Local Plan strategy for meeting identified requirements for sustainable development;
- not include land which it is unnecessary to keep permanently open;
- where necessary, identify in their plans areas of 'safeguarded land' between the urban area and the Green Belt, in order to meet longer-term development needs stretching well beyond the plan period;
- make clear that the safeguarded land is not allocated for development at the present time. Planning permission for the permanent development of safeguarded land should only be granted following a Local Plan review which proposes the development;
- satisfy themselves that Green Belt boundaries will not need to be altered at the end of the development plan period; and
- define boundaries clearly, using physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent.

GREEN BELT STUDY METHODOLOGY

3.7 The Green Belt Review methodology is broken down into four distinct stages:

- Stage 1: Sub-division of Widnes/Hale into site parcels.
This exercise has initially been completed as a desk study, using electronic mapping and aerial photography. The criteria applied is that parcels should form one land use, exhibit a single character and not contain any physical features on the ground.

Existing built development has been discarded and excluded from further separate assessment at this stage. The status of these sites will be considered later in the production of the Delivery and Allocations Local Plan in the light of the results of the Green Belt Study as part of a detailed boundary review (i.e. existing Green Belt boundaries will be reviewed to identify and remove anomalous or incoherent alignments).

All remaining sites will be visited to validate and supplement the desk-based work and this may result in parcels being further sub divided or amalgamated depending on prevailing boundary strength and land use characteristics.

¹ CLG (2012) National Planning Policy Framework para 17

² CLG (2012) National Planning Policy Framework para 85

- Stage 2: Assessment of parcels against constraints information and sustainability criteria.

- a. Constraints -

Sites will be assessed against known 'show stoppers', namely constraints that effectively prohibit the development of the land i.e.

- land with the highest flood risk (zones 3a and 3b).
- sites subject to unacceptable risk (e.g. COMAH / Airport PSZ)
- Sites of Special Scientific Importance,
- sites containing ancient woodland, and
- sites with known remediation or contamination issues that would affect the deliverability of a site.

Such sites will not be taken forward for further assessments.

Sites will also be assessed against restrictive constraints that would not entirely prohibit development and could be mitigated against.

- b. Sustainability Criteria –

A draft site appraisal form has been produced which provides information regarding the sites sustainability and lists informative criteria against which sites will be assessed (Appendix A).

- Stage 3: Assessment of all remaining parcels against the purposes of including land in the Green Belt.

National Planning Policy Framework lists five functions of the Green Belt (largely consistent with previous guidance) these being:

1. To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas;
2. To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another
3. To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
4. To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns;
and
5. To assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

To measure each of the functions above criteria have been identified (Appendix B). It is also proposed to provide a commentary setting out how each parcel meets any or all of the functions.

- Stage 4: Assessment of how the parcels remaining at stage 4 contribute to meeting the needs identified in the adopted Core Strategy, together with an indicative capacity of those parcels.

- 3.8 A detailed technical report has been produced (Appendix C) listing the scoring methodology proposed to be consulted on for each of the stages above.

CONSULTATION ON THE PROPOSED METHODOLOGY INCLUDING KEY ASSUMPTIONS

- 3.9 Due to the anticipated stakeholder interest in this study it is considered important to frontload the process by being transparent and inviting comments on the proposed methodology. The benefits of this approach will provide the outcomes of the study to be more robust in terms of the strength of evidence required to inform the Delivery and Allocations Local Plan. Therefore it is proposed that a consultation on the methodology is carried out using the following methods:
1. Letters to all existing consultees who have previously requested to be informed of the production of the Delivery and Allocations Local Plan held on the LDF database.
 2. Offer of presentation of the methodology at the Area Forums in Widnes and Hale, and to Hale and Halebank Parish Councils
 3. Press advertisement(s) giving details of a four week public consultation period including a drop in session.
 4. A drop in session at the Stadium.
 5. Presentation to the Active Stakeholder Group of the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment annual update.

PROJECT TIMETABLE

3.10 Green Belt Study

Consultation on the proposed methodology	Aug – Sept 2013
Green Belt Review stage 1-3 completion	Oct - Nov 2013
Stage 4 completion	Dec – Jan 2014
Green Belt Study Final Report	Feb - Mar 2014

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1** The Green Belt Study will form an essential part of the evidence base upon which the Delivery and Allocations Local Plan will be based. The Delivery and Allocations Local Plan will be a key policy document for the allocation of land for the future development of the Borough and the Council's investment strategies.

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1** None identified

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

Providing sufficient development land for the identified needs of the Borough as set out in the Core Strategy Local Plan will contribute to addressing the need to encourage and provide opportunities for children and younger people.

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

The Green Belt Study may identify suitable land to support the enhancement of the Borough's economy and hence deliver economic growth.

6.3 A Healthy Halton

None identified

6.4 A Safer Halton

None identified

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

The Green Belt Study may identify suitable land to support the renewal and or enhancement of the Borough's green and built environment.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

It is anticipated that identifying potential sites in the green belt for further investigation and future release for development (as part of the Delivery and Allocations Local Plan) will result in high levels of public interest. It is essential that this process is managed sensitively and the agreed methodology followed diligently.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

None identified

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
Halton Core Strategy Local Plan, HBC	Municipal Building	Alasdair Cross
Report on the Examination into Halton Core Strategy Local Plan, The Planning Inspectorate	Municipal Building	Alasdair Cross
National Planning Policy Framework and Technical Guidance (March 2012)	Municipal Building	Alasdair Cross
The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012	Municipal Building	Alasdair Cross
Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004	Municipal Building	Alasdair Cross