

**VALE ROYAL BOROUGH COUNCIL
LOCAL PLAN FIRST REVIEW ALTERATION
PUBLIC INQUIRY**

**GENERAL STRATEGY CORE
STATEMENT**

CORE DOCUMENT – VRBC/FRA/CS/1

AUGUST 2005

Contents

1.	Introduction	2
2.	Strategic Context/Key Statistics	2
3.	National Planning Guidance	3
4.	Regional Spatial Strategy	6
5.	Cheshire County Council Structure Plan	10
6.	Vale Royal Borough Local Plan Alteration	12
7.	Conclusion	25
8.	Bibliography	28
9.	Appendix 1 – Areas of designated Green Belt Land	30

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This document is one of a series of Core Statements dealing with issues which are central to the consideration of the Vale Royal Borough Local Plan First Review Alteration (VRLPFRA). It details specific policies in the General Strategy chapter of the Local Plan which include Green Belt and the Open Countryside and summarises the strategic and historical background to these policies and sets them firmly within their national, regional and county policy context.
- 1.2 The Statement sets out the key facts and figures in terms of the extent of the Green Belt across Vale Royal and details the proposed changes to the Green Belt boundaries.
- 1.3 In addition, the Proof explains the rationale behind the proposed changes to the Green Belt and Open Countryside policies within the VRLPFRA and a brief commentary is given on each of the specific changes.

2. Strategic Context/Key Statistics

- 2.1 The district of Vale Royal is located in the heart of Cheshire and has borders with all five of the other Cheshire districts. It covers an area of 38,331 hectares. The main towns are Northwich, Winsford, and Frodsham. Much of the remainder of the Borough is rural in character with agriculture and forestry still being important activities.
- 2.2 The North Cheshire Green Belt extends across the northern part of the Borough. The area of the Borough covered by Green Belt is currently 17,270 hectares (45% of the Borough). Vale Royal contains 20% of the Green Belt land in Cheshire.

- 2.3 The Green Belt was established in Cheshire in 1977 through the Cheshire County Structure Plan adopted in 1977. Detailed boundaries around Vale Royal were established through two of the four district local plans; The Frodsham and Helsby District Plan adopted in 1980 and the Northwich District Plan adopted in 1981.
- 2.4 The Borough-Wide Local Plan which replaced the four District Local Plans was adopted in 1992 and covered the period 1986 to 1996. The Borough Wide Local Plan re-affirmed the Council's commitment to the North Cheshire Green Belt which extends across the north of the Borough. The Plan defined the Green Belt boundary on the Proposals Map and included policies of restraint on development in the Green Belt.

3. National Planning Guidance

3.1 Planning Policy Guidance 2 - Green Belts (1995)

Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 'Green Belts' was published in 1995 and sets out the Government's approach to Green Belts and:

- States the general intentions of Green Belt policy, including its contribution to sustainable development objectives;
- Sets out the specific purposes of including land in Green Belts;
- Sets out specific objectives for the use of land in Green Belts;
- Confirms that Green Belts must be protected as far as can be seen ahead;
- Advises on defining boundaries and on safeguarding land for longer-term development needs;

- Maintains the presumption against inappropriate development within Green Belts, including making provision for the future of major existing developed sites and revising policy on the re-use of buildings.
- 3.2 The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the most important attribute of Green Belts is their openness (para 1.4).
- 3.3 The five purposes of including land within Green Belts set out in para 1.5 are:
- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
 - To prevent neighbouring towns from 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.
- 3.4 Up-to-date approved Green Belt boundaries are seen as essential, to provide certainty as to where Green Belt policies do and do not apply and to enable the proper consideration of future development options (para 2.4).
- 3.5 Where existing Local Plans are being revised and updated, existing Green Belt boundaries should not be changed unless alterations to the Structure Plan have been approved, or other exceptional circumstances exist, which necessitate such revision (para 2.7).

3.6 When drawing Green Belt boundaries in development plans, local planning authorities should take account of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development. They should consider the consequences for sustainable development (for example in terms of the effects of car travel), of channelling development towards urban areas inside the inner Green Belt boundary, towards towns and villages inset within the Green Belt, or towards locations beyond the Green Belt boundary (para 2.10).

3.7 Planning Policy Statement 1 (PPS1) 'Delivering Sustainable Development'

This document sets out the Government's aims for the Planning System. The Government is committed to protecting and enhancing the quality of the natural and historic environment, in both rural and urban areas. Planning policies should seek to protect and enhance the quality, character and amenity value of the countryside and urban areas as a whole. A high level of protection should be given to most valued townscapes, and landscapes, wildlife habitats and natural resources (para 17).

3.8 Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS7) 'Sustainable Development in Rural Areas'

The Government's objectives for rural areas are to raise the quality of life and the environment in rural areas through the promotion of the continued protection of the open countryside for the benefit of all, with the highest level of protection for our most valued landscapes and environmental resources. A further objective is to promote more sustainable patterns of development by preventing urban sprawl and promoting a range of uses to maximise the potential benefits of the countryside fringing urban areas.

- 3.9 While the policies in PPG2 continue to apply in Green Belts, local planning authorities should ensure that planning policies in Local Development Documents address the particular land use issues and opportunities to be found in the countryside around all urban areas, recognising its importance to those who live or work there, and also providing the nearest and most accessible countryside to urban residents. Planning authorities should aim to secure environmental improvements and maximise a range of beneficial uses of this land, whilst reducing potential conflicts with neighbouring land uses. This should include improvement of public access (e.g. through support for country parks and community forests) and facilitating the provision of appropriate sport and recreation facilities (para 26).
- 3.10 The Government recognise that diversification into non-agricultural activities is vital to the continuing viability of many farm enterprises. In relation to Green Belts local authorities should, where relevant, give favourable consideration to proposals for diversification in Green Belts where the development preserves the openness of the Green Belt and does not conflict with the purposes of including land within it. (Where farm diversification proposals in the Green Belt would result in inappropriate development in terms of PPG2, any wider benefits of the diversification may contribute to the 'very special circumstances' required by PPG2 for a development to be granted planning permission) (para 30 iii).

4. Regional Spatial Strategy

- 4.1 Regional Planning Guidance for the North West was published in March 2003 and became Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) on 28th September 2004. Regional Spatial Strategy now forms a part of the development plan for Vale Royal.

4.2 Policy SD5 - The Green Belts

The need for exceptional substantial change to the Green Belt in the Region should be investigated by a strategic study, which should involve:

- Identification of the extent of allocated, undeveloped, safeguarded and redevelopable brownfield land;
- Identification of any Green Belt land which does not serve the purpose of its designation, and whose removal would not impact adversely on the maintenance of the Green Belt;
- Trends in the rate of consumption of both greenfield and brownfield land for both residential and all forms of non-residential development; and
- Assessment of the feasibility of individuals districts' housing and employment needs being met by provision in adjoining districts consistent with the principles of social inclusion and sustainable development.

4.3 Any subsequent change to the Green Belt boundaries should have full regard to:

- The principles of sustainable access;
- The relation to social inclusion and economic competitiveness of any release of Green Belt land for employment uses;
- The effect of any release on urban regeneration;
- The guidance in National Planning Policy Guidance on the density of residential development;

- The potential robustness of revised Green Belt boundaries;
- The intentions of the Spatial Development Framework;
- The need to preserve the extent and quality of the countryside;
and
- Conformity with the purpose of Green Belts as set out in National Planning Policy Guidance.

4.4 Urban Potential Studies and information on the availability of land suggest that long-term development needs in Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Cheshire can be accommodated up to at least 2016 without the need to significantly encroach upon the Green Belt. Strategic reviews of the Green Belt in these areas need not therefore be undertaken before 2011, although the NWRA will still review the situation as part of its monitoring process (para 3.30)

4.5 The sites identified in the Region's current employment portfolio are believed adequate to meet business needs. If, in exceptional circumstances, additional sites are required within Green Belt locations these must be justified in line with PPG2 and Policy EC5 (Regional Investment Sites) (para 3.33).

4.6 Policy SD4 – Maintaining Urban Form and Setting, and the Treatment of North Cheshire

This policy states that the continued and extensive use of Green Belt policy and other policies to protect open land will be an essential tool to ensure that:

- The overall physical extent of the North West Metropolitan Area remains reasonably stable;
- Development on the urban/rural edge respects and enhances the urban setting and countryside character;
- Positive land use planning and management of land on the edge of settlements is encouraged in all development plans; and
- The recreational potential of urban edge environments is enhanced.

4.7 Policy SD4 goes on to state that given the continued high demand for development in the North Cheshire area (which includes Northwich), much of which is in the Green Belt, development plan allocations in that area should be reviewed to ensure that any existing and proposed land allocations for further development in the North Cheshire area are fully justified regarding the Core Development Principles and the RPG's Spatial Development Framework. In North Cheshire, beyond the North West Metropolitan Area, only those allocations which are sustainable and which will add significant value to the development of the national economy or which are of greater than regional significance should be retained, together with those which meet purely local needs.

4.8 Spatially, the physical extent of urbanised areas and their relationship with their surroundings is a matter of considerable sensitivity. In the North West there is a history of urban sprawl and the land around settlements of all sizes – partly within and partly outside the Green Belt – is of variable attractiveness as setting and edging to built-up areas, and it tends to be poorly planned and indifferently managed (3.21).

4.9 Where schemes for inappropriate development are proposed for areas in the North Cheshire Green Belt, they will not be approved unless it is

clearly established that there are very special circumstances which justify them, in line with National Planning Policy Guidance on Green Belts (para 3.25).

- 4.10 This policy also states that the Green Belt is an essential means of assisting urban regeneration; but it is important also to curb unwarranted and unsustainable growth of settlements beyond designated Green Belts. Thus the maintenance of urban form is a central principle of the Spatial Development Framework and support to policies for urban renaissance (para 3.26).

5. Cheshire County Council Structure Plan

5.1 Cheshire Replacement Structure Plan 2011

The adopted Cheshire Replacement Structure Plan (CRSP) was adopted in 1999 and covers the period up to 2011. The general strategy of the CRSP is to guide development primarily to sites within towns, or to sites on the edges of selected suitable towns and to give priority to the use of previously developed land.

5.1.1 Policy GEN1

Paragraph 6.15 states that the Structure Plan designates Green Belts and their broad extent. Detailed boundaries are defined in Local Plans prepared by District Councils. The current Structure Plan retains the broad extent of the Green Belts set out in the previous Structure Plan, and designated a new area as Green Belt.

5.1.2 Policy GEN2 – Green Belt

This Policy focuses on Green Belts within Cheshire and states that the Green Belt will be extended to include Frodsham, Helsby and Lordship Marshes, all of which are within Vale Royal. Within the Green Belt, planning permission will not be given for inappropriate development, except in very special circumstances.

5.1.3 The development proposed in the Structure Plan can be accommodated without any changes to the broad extent of the Green Belt in Cheshire. A review of the broad extent of the Green Belt in order to accommodate longer term development needs will form part of the review of the Structure Plan. When Local Plans are being reviewed, only minor changes to Green Belt boundaries may be made, in exceptional circumstances.

5.2. **Cheshire 2016 Draft Deposit Structure Plan Alteration and EIP Panel Report.**

5.2.1 The Cheshire 2016 Deposit Draft Structure Plan Alteration was placed on deposit in April 2004 and the Examination in Public (EIP) into the plan took place in January 2005. The EIP Report of the Panel was published on 14 April 2005 and Cheshire County Council are anticipating Modifications in Autumn 2005 and Adoption in early 2006.

5.2.2 The approach of the Structure Plan Alteration (SPA) is to guide development to sites within towns, give priority to the use of previously developed land and ensure developments are capable of being well served by public transport.

5.2.3 One of the main objectives is the effective protection of the environment, with a target to maintain the Green Belt and minimise development on open land outside the Green Belt. Chapter 4 sets out the strategy for implementing this objective which includes no reduction in the broad extent of the Green Belt in Cheshire; all vacant, previously used land to be brought into beneficial use, brownfield land is to be used for building in preference to greenfield or urban greenspace and the protection and enhancement of recreational land and open spaces in towns and villages.

5.2.4 The content of Policy GEN1 remains the same as the Adopted Structure Plan apart from a few minor changes to refer to Local Development Documents rather than Local Plans.

5.2.5 Policy GEN2 also remains as in the Adopted Structure Plan apart from the deletion of the reference to the Frodsham, Helsby and Lordship Marshes area which has been included in the Green Belt in both the Adopted Structure Plan and the Vale Royal Borough Local Plan First Review.

6. Vale Royal Borough Local Plan Alteration

6.1 It is the function of the VRLPFRA to set the detailed boundaries of the Green Belt and outline the policies and proposals which will apply within the Green Belt, having regard to the advice set out in PPG2. Chapter 2 'General Strategy' contains the following policies relating to Green Belt and the Open Countryside:

- GS3 – Selection of Sites
- GS4 – Existing Villages in the Green Belt
- GS5 - Changes to the North Cheshire Green Belt
- GS6 – The Open Countryside

6.2 The introduction to the General Strategy chapter sets out Vale Royal's Major Objectives. Major objective 3 is to:

“create a cleaner and more attractive living environment in Vale Royal where resources are used wisely and pollution is minimised”.

Policy objectives 8, 9 and 10 under this section are intended to protect and enhance the character of the countryside, to sustain a long-term Green Belt boundary and to protect the openness of the Green Belt.

6.3 This chapter also sets out the development considerations in rural areas (page 18). The retention, protection and enhancement of the countryside are seen as important issues for the VRLPFRA in the future planning of the Borough. The countryside is a valuable resource for agriculture, recreation, nature conservation and as a source of rural employment. In addition, it is also an important element in maintaining the character and separate identities of the Borough's towns and villages. The VRLPFRA re-affirms the Borough Council's commitment to maintaining the strategic aims of the North Cheshire Green Belt to restrict urban sprawl, safeguard the countryside, prevent the coalescence of towns and assist in urban regeneration both in Cheshire towns and in the conurbations.

6.4 **GS3 – Selection of Sites – Control of development in the Green Belt**

This policy sets out the types of development which may not be considered inappropriate in the Green Belt. Only one minor change has been made to this policy in that criteria (iv) removes reference to the limited infilling in existing villages as acceptable development.

6.5 **The rationale for not allowing limited infilling in existing villages**

The deletion of the reference to infilling from Policy GS3 has been challenged by a number of objectors including The Countryside Agency (rep 50/15), CB Homes Ltd (rep 949/2), NPL Estates (931/2) and Land and Development Ltd (898/1).

The principle concerns are:

- That the Council should take into account situations where general housing is required in rural areas to sustain rural communities;
- The ability to provide affordable housing may rest on whether market housing can also be provided;

- Sites suitable for infilling can include redundant and vacated sites and may be environmentally beneficial to redevelop;
- Infill sites are unlikely to detract from other regeneration initiatives;
- PPG3 allows for infill development in settlements washed over by the Green Belt, there is therefore no reason why such settlements should be treated any differently to settlements outside the Green Belt.
- In relation to Land at Lostock, NPL Estates consider that the benefits of employment development outweigh the benefits from including the site within the Green Belt.
- Limited infilling in villages is a well established part of National Policy.

Other objectors to Policy GS3 include: Emery Planning Partnership (410/6), Roland Bardsley Homes Ltd – (492/4) and The Alpraham Estate - (941/1).

6.6 A policy relating to windfall development in rural villages (H6a) was included in the First Deposit version of the VRLPFRA. It is anticipated that such development could take place where, inter alia, it was demonstrated that it was necessary to maintain the viability of essential community facilities. This policy is proposed to be taken out of the Plan because of its inconsistency with Government Planning Guidance such as PPG3. Although it is acknowledged that, in certain cases, there may be environmental benefits associated with residential windfall developments the Council is also conscious that such development would generally be less sustainable than the development of previously developed land within the main urban areas. There is no evidence of any village in need of further development to sustain local services and in any instance the number of dwellings that would come forward through infilling would have, at best, a marginal effect on the viability of services and facilities.

6.7 Planning Policy Guidance Note 2: Green Belts, states at paragraph 3.4 that limited infilling in existing villages and limited affordable housing for local community needs can be allowed as exceptions to the general policy of restraint in the Green Belt. The Vale Royal Borough Core Housing Statement explains that the Council's approach to the release of land for housing is optimised towards supporting regeneration aims. This has resulted in a policy context in which the Council is strictly limiting the release of sustainable, previously developed land in the main urban areas of the Borough. Set against this policy background the sanctioning of development in far less sustainable locations is not considered appropriate unless it is specifically for affordable housing to meet an identified local need in accordance with paragraph 18 and Annex B of PPG3.

6.8 In addition, representations have been made to Policy GS3, suggesting minor revisions to the Green Belt Boundaries, these include: Christopher John Oldfield (1145/01), Ian McClelland (1161/1), Mr T Harvey (1156/1) and NPL Estates (1122/9). The Council do not consider that any justification has been made by these objectors to suggest that very special circumstances exist to warrant a change to the Green Belt boundary as required by PPG2.

6.9 **GS4 – Existing Villages In The Green Belt**

This policy has been removed completely from the Plan.

6.10 **The rationale for the removal of Policy GS4 from the Plan.**

Objections to the VRLPFRA: First Deposit have been made to the removal of this policy by Emery Planning Partnership (representation 410/7 & 410/6). The grounds being that limited development including employment, shopping and tourism may increase the vitality and viability of smaller settlements and assist with achieving sustainability objectives.

The Council have deleted Policy GS4. This Policy directed people with development proposals for housing, employment, shopping and recreation and tourism within existing villages in the Green Belt to other policies that were contained in the Plan. As the Plan should be read as a whole and should avoid duplication, the Policy was considered unnecessary. Limited employment development is still allowed on sites identified in Policy E10, limited retail is allowed through Policy STC13 and limited recreation is allowed through Policy RT7 and GS7.

A further objection by CB Homes Ltd (representation 949/3) states that:

“The alteration deletes GS4 and therefore fails to identify clearly which villages are inset in the Green Belt. This would imply that either all villages are washed over by the Green Belt or all the villages are excluded from the Green Belt by virtue of the definition of their settlement policy boundary. It is requested that Policy GS4 is reinstated allowing for clarification on villages are washed over”.

The Council state that this is not the case. The villages that are washed over by the Green Belt are clearly defined on the Proposals Maps and do not have to be specifically referred to in the written document. PPG2 ‘Green Belts’ states that if the village should be included in the Green Belt then ‘The Green Belt notation should be carried across (“washed over”) it. This can clearly be shown on the Proposals Maps.

Other objectors to Policy GS4 include: Emery Planning Partnership (410/7) and Roland Bardsley Homes Ltd (492/7).

6.11 **GS5 – Changes to the North Cheshire Green Belt**

Policy GS5 of the VRLPFRA proposes two amendments to the Green Belt boundary in Vale Royal. It is proposed that land at and adjacent to Weaver Park Industrial Estate, Sutton Weaver be excluded from the Green Belt and that land at Forest Road, Cuddington be included in the Green Belt.

6.12 iv) Land at and adjacent to Weaver Park Industrial Estate, Sutton Weaver be excluded from the Green Belt.

Several representations to the VRLPFRA: First Deposit have objected to the exclusion of this site from the Green Belt. The main grounds for these objections are that a stronger argument should be put forward by the Council for its removal (16/3 GONW), that it would be contrary to RPG13 which advises that there should be no changes to the Green Belt in North Cheshire and also goes against the Policy to strictly control developments on the edge of Frodsham. It is also argued that the site should be identified as a Major Existing Development in the Green Belt (410/8 & 410/59 Emery Planning Partnership) and that its removal would reduce openness of the area and be a step towards merging the towns of Frodsham and Runcorn.

Other objectors to Policy GS5 relating to Weaver Park Industrial Estate include: CTP Limited (930/2), Frodsham Town Council (950/3), Cllr.G.Bondi (1001/3) and Prof.A.Basden (1143/1).

Representations have also been received in support of the exclusion of this site. These state that it is considered that this will allow the comprehensive remodelling and expansion of the Weaver Park Industrial Estate which accords with the priorities of Frodsham Forward (9/3 Cheshire County Council). Support is also given to the “tidying up” of the Weaver Park (896/1 Sutton Parish Council). NPL Estates (624/1) support the proposed removal of the industrial estate and neighbouring properties from the Green Belt in order to provide a key gateway site to the entrance to Frodsham. Support has also been received from Robert Gleaves & Sons Ltd (1140/1).

6.13 The rationale for the exclusion of the Weaver Park Industrial Estate from the Green Belt

The Council consider that there are very special circumstances to warrant the removal of the land at and adjacent to Weaver Park Industrial Estate from the Green Belt. Besides offering potential for significant environmental improvement to the current industrial estate, there is a major opportunity to improve a key gateway area into Frodsham through comprehensive remodelling of the industrial estate and the extension of the site onto land to the east, which consists of previously developed land. A comprehensive scheme would also support several of the prioritised activities identified through the Frodsham Forward Market Town Initiative, including improving the gateways into Frodsham and regenerating waterside sites which are seen as essential to delivering a significant environmental, economic and social benefit to the town and will support a successful Market Town Initiative. In addition, the scheme will help to provide for a specific form of employment provision in Frodsham for small to medium sized enterprises. There is a lack of opportunity for new employment sites in Frodsham because of the restrictions placed on the town by being surrounded by Green Belt. There is a need to provide accommodation for businesses wishing to locate in the Northern part of Vale Royal to assist economic development and help to reduce unemployment in an area containing wards where unemployment is higher than many in Vale Royal e.g (Frodsham North 1.63% May 2005). The Borough Council currently receives around two enquiries a week for sites/premises in the Frodsham area and the Council consider that the allocation of this site for employment development will satisfy this requirement.

6.14 The site is also located at the northern end of the Weaver Valley Regional Park, which is designated in Policy UR12 of RSS as a Regional Park Resource. Policy UR12 states that Regional Parks should, amongst other things:

- ensure the reclamation of derelict and contaminated land;
- significantly improve urban fringe environments.

It is considered that the removal of this site from the Green Belt will achieve these objectives at a key gateway to the Regional Park which would make a significant contribution to the image of this major resource. In addition, a study has been undertaken by TEP commissioned by a number of parties including Vale Royal Borough Council, Cheshire County Council, Frodsham Forward and the Northwest Development Agency. The study was designed to investigate the possible reopening of Frodsham Lock to allow access for pleasure craft to the waterside area around the Weaver Park Industrial Estate and to investigate the potential for regeneration of the Frodsham waterfront area. The study concluded that there would be significant economic, environmental and social benefits for Frodsham and the whole of the Weaver Valley Regional Park area that would derive from the re-opening of the lock although at a cost of some £1.5 million. The study goes on to highlight that in order to generate such funding, a new visitor destination would need to be provided on the waterfront close to Frodsham to attract sufficient visitors to make the project viable. The Council consider that the best location for these facilities is the Weaver Park Industrial Estate allocation which could provide a high quality employment park with some recreational and tourism type facilities on the waterfront area of the River Weaver. Indeed the report states that “the rejuvenation of Frodsham waterfront and the adjacent Weaver Park Industrial Estate should be maximised into the regeneration scheme as not only a northern gateway for the Regional Park but also as a starting and finishing point for the wider use of the Weaver Valley”. It goes on to say that “the Weaver Park Industrial Estate presents a fantastic opportunity to redevelop a minimum standard employment area into an extremely beneficial wider waterfront mixed use regeneration scheme”. The Council therefore

consider that for the factors highlighted above there are exceptional circumstances to justify the removal of this site from the Green Belt.

6.15 (v) Land at Forest Road, Cuddington be included in the Green Belt
Objections have been received to the inclusion of this site within the Green Belt and are made on the basis that no changes to the Green Belt have been approved through the Structure Plan. It is considered that Green Belts should not be drawn to include land which it is unnecessary to keep open, the Council relies on the absence of a need for the land for housing as the exceptional circumstances to warrant Green Belt designation. This approach is seen as unjustified. The land possesses merit for development for a range of uses and it lies in a Tier 1 location which represents the most sustainable locations in the Borough. Overall it is contended that the land is not required in order for the Green Belt to fulfil its key purposes (representations: Osborne House Group (893/4), Johnstone Godfrey, Susan Bennett (894/1). Other objections to Policy GS5 in relation to Forest Road Cuddington have been received from Osbourne House Group (893/4), Johnstone Godfrey, Susan Bennett (894/1) and Helen Schettini (914/4).

6.16 The rationale for the inclusion of land at Forest Road Cuddington in the Green Belt

The Forest Road, Cuddington site was removed from the Green Belt and allocated for residential development in 1992 through the Vale Royal Borough Local Plan First Review (VRLPFR). At that time very special circumstances existed to warrant the removal of the site from the Green Belt. However, the Council consider that there is no longer a need for this large greenfield site to be developed for housing as the Urban Capacity Study has identified that there is a significant amount of sustainable brownfield land within the main built up areas of the Borough to 2016. The Borough Council has identified sufficient land to meet its requirements through the allocations contained in the Plan. In order to ensure that these sites are delivered, a restrictive approach has been taken by the Council to manage particularly housing land

development. If the site is not returned to the Green Belt then there will continue to be pressure to release the land for development.

As the Council has identified sufficient land to meet its requirements until 2016 and the fact that the Urban Capacity Study has a significant level of urban brownfield sites within the Borough, it is highly unlikely that the Forest Road site will be needed to meet the Borough's housing requirement in the long-term. A revised long-term Green Belt boundary can therefore be established. This change directly fulfils a number of the purposes of including land in the Green Belt set out in PPG 2. In particular:

- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment, and
- To assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

The merits of this site and its possible allocation for a mixed use site as per the objectors wishes (Osbourne House Group (893/4), Johnstone Godfrey, Susan Bennett (894/1) and Helen Schettini (914/4) are discussed in a separate site specific Proof of Evidence.

A representation in support of the proposed inclusion of the land in the Green Belt has been received from Cuddington Parish Council (764/1).

6.17 Representations have also been received relating to land south of Weaverham – NPL Estates (931/1). The objector considers that the tourism/recreation and leisure potential of the site located close to Northwich and Weaverham should be facilitated, which could be linked to a transport corridor which would serve Northwich and Weaverham. It is proposed to delete the existing Green Belt designation for land north of the A49 and include the site within the defined settlement boundary. As previously stated, the Council do not consider that any justification

has been made by this objection to suggest that very special circumstances exist to warrant a change to the Green Belt boundary as required by PPG2.

6.18 Three further representations to Policy GS5 proposing Green Belt boundary changes have been received from Honeywell Plc (1157/1), United Utilities (960/6) and Mr D.E Morris (1154/1). The Council maintain that there are no exceptional circumstances that have been put forward by the objectors to warrant the removal of these pieces of land from the Green Belt as required by PPG2.

6.19 **Policy GS6 – The Open Countryside**

Policy GS6 of the VRLPFRA sets out the Council's general policy towards the Open Countryside. It states that the character and appearance of the Open Countryside will be protected. Additional wording has also been added to the policy to state that "New buildings will not be allowed in the open countryside unless provided for through other policies of the Local Plan".

Objections to this amendment have been received with the principle concerns being that the presumption against development within non-Green Belt areas is inappropriate and is far too sweeping and unnecessary which will place an unnecessary constraint on development (Land & Development Ltd (898/2), M J Hardy Esq (899/6) and CB Homes Ltd (949/4)).

6.20 **The rationale for the additional text to Policy GS6**

The Council consider that the proposed wording is consistent with PPS7. Two of the Government's objectives in PPS7 are the continued protection of the Countryside for the benefit of all and to focus most development in, or next to, existing towns and villages. One of its key principles is that new building development in the Open Countryside away from existing settlements, or outside areas allocated for

development in development plans, should be strictly controlled. The additional policy text reflects this approach.

6.21 Objections have been received to the inclusion of the Grange Farm, Hartford site in the Open Countryside (Netherton Estates Ltd (895/1) and Persimmon Homes (Mercia) Ltd (906/4)). on the grounds that it should remain within the settlement boundary as open land. The Grange Farm, Hartford site is a greenfield site that was allocated for residential development in the Adopted Vale Royal Borough Local Plan. The Vale Royal Urban Housing Land Capacity Study (published in 2002) shows that there are sufficient brownfield development opportunities to meet the housing land supply requirement to 2016. The Borough Council has allocated sufficient land in the VRLPFRA to meet its Structure Plan requirement to 2016. This site will therefore not be required within the Plan period to 2016 and it is considered appropriate that it remains as part of the Open Countryside. The Council's regeneration priorities are set out in the VRLPFRA and consist of Northwich Town Centre, Winsford Gateway and Winnington and Wallerscote Urban Village. To allocate a site outside of these areas or to allow a major mixed use development on a greenfield site could deflect interest away from the Council's key regeneration priorities and seriously jeopardise the Council's delivery of regeneration. There is no proven requirement for such a mixed use development. As there is no need for the site to be developed to meet the Borough's development requirements it is sensible to review the settlement boundary around the site to include it within the Open Countryside. In the absence of such a designation there will continue to be pressure for its development. The objectors have made detailed representations on this site and a detailed Proof of Evidence will be prepared in response to these objections for the relevant Inquiry session.

6.22 Several representations have been made to Policy GS6 seeking the extension of settlement policy boundaries into the Open Countryside.

These include:

- Jalsea Marine Services Ltd (representation 1147/01) in relation to the Weaver Shipyard. It is proposed that the boundary of the Open Countryside be amended to identify the Weaver Shipyard as an inset major employment site. The Council contend that there are many instances in the Borough where existing businesses lie outside of the settlement policy boundary in the Open Countryside. There is therefore no policy basis for giving each of these what would be their own settlement boundary. Policy E9 allows for the small scale expansion of existing firms on existing employment sites in the Open Countryside. It is considered that this level of development is appropriate to their location in Open Countryside areas. The Council contend therefore that the Open Countryside should remain in relation to this objection.
- George Wimpey Strategic Land (representation 1084/2), Land East of London Road. It is proposed that this land should be included within the settlement boundary of Northwich and allocated for housing and thus removed from the Open Countryside. The Council contend that there is no need to adjust the policy boundary to accommodate the development needs of the Borough to 2016. In terms of new housing development releasing land for development would conflict with the Government's policy in para 30 of PPG3.
- NPL Estates (representation 931/14), Land off Cooke's Lane, Northwich. It is proposed to delete the existing notation in the Open Countryside and include the site within the defined settlement boundary and to designate the site for roadside services. The Council contend that there is no evidence for the

need for further roadside facilities and therefore no change should be made to the designation of this site to accommodate this proposal.

- Christine Roberts (representation 446/1), Land south of Church Street, Davenham. A minor amendment to the settlement boundary to follow the line of the existing footpath is proposed. The Council contend that there has been no convincing evidence put forward by the objector to suggest why this alteration to the settlement boundary is necessary. The Open Countryside should be protected and this argument for incremental changes to settlement policy boundaries can be put forward in a great number of locations across the Borough. It is therefore not considered necessary to change the boundary in this instance.

In all cases, the Council consider that no circumstances have been put forward in these cases to warrant the removal of land from the Open Countryside. It is considered that the Open Countryside should be protected and the case for minor amendments could be argued time and time again which would lead to a significant loss of the Open Countryside. The Council contend therefore that the Open Countryside should remain in relation to these objections.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 The policy guidance on Green Belts and the Open Countryside is clearly set at the National and Regional level which has engendered a policy of restraint on development in the Green Belt. The Green Belt in Cheshire has remained a central component of land use policy at the local level in Vale Royal since its original designation in 1977, and through two district local plans; The Frodsham and Helsby District Plan adopted in 1980 and the Northwich District Plan adopted in 1981.

- 7.2 At all levels, planning guidance recognises that up-to-date, approved Green Belt boundaries are essential, to provide certainty as to where Green Belt policies do and do not apply and to enable the proper consideration of future development options.
- 7.3 The Borough Council believes that the policies of the VRLPFRA will continue to provide a sound basis for achieving the objectives for the Green Belt set out in PPG2, at the same time as ensuring that the Borough can meet its strategic land supply requirements over the lifetime of the plan to 2016.
- 7.4 The VRLPFRA re-affirms the Borough Council's commitment to maintaining the strategic aims of the North Cheshire Green Belt to restrict urban sprawl, safeguard the countryside, prevent the coalescence of towns and assist in urban regeneration both in Cheshire towns and in the conurbations.
- 7.5 The Council have carefully considered all objections/proposals for the removal of land from the Green Belt and subsequent boundary changes. The Council maintain that no very special circumstances have been put forward to warrant any change to the Green Belt boundary as required by PPG2.
- 7.6 The Council's proposal for the inclusion of land at Forest Road, Cuddington, directly fulfils a number of the purposes of including land in the Green Belt set out in PPG2, including safeguarding the countryside from encroachment and assisting in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.
- 7.7 The Council's rationale and reasons for the exclusion of the Weaver Park Industrial Estate from the Green Belt are numerous and have been discussed at length within this Statement. In summary, the Council consider that there are very special circumstances which necessitate the removal of the site from the Green Belt including the

significant environmental improvements, improvement of the key gateway area to Frodsham, creating employment opportunities and promoting the regeneration of the Weaver Valley Regional Park.

7.8 The Council consider that the Open Countryside should be protected. Several objectors have proposed incremental changes to settlement policy boundaries. In all cases the Council have considered that it will not be necessary to change the settlement boundaries. The Borough Council currently has an estimated oversupply of residential dwellings in the Borough and has allocated sufficient land in the VRLPFRA to meet its Structure Plan requirements to 2016. These sites are therefore not required for either residential or employment development.

7.9 It is clear that there is currently no strategic context for Local Plan Green Belt alterations, given the position in the RSS and the CRSP. The Council are proposing the release of one site from the Green Belt, however, this has been fully justified by the very special circumstances set out in this Core Statement. Furthermore, the Council considers that it would be imprudent to promote the ad-hoc release of any Green Belt sites. For these reasons the Council believe that the VRLPFRA represents a robust and responsible basis upon which to protect the Green Belt and Open Countryside within the Borough up to 2016 and beyond.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Areas of designated Green Belt Land - Cheshire County Council Research and Intelligence Unit (1997). Issued June 2000 – **Appendix 1**
2. Frodsham and Helsby District Plan Written Statement and Proposals Maps – Vale Royal District Council – January 1980 **(CD/VRBC/FRA/BP/13)**
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5. Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 – Green Belts – ODPM **(CD/PPG/2)**
6. Planning Policy Statement 1 – Delivering Sustainable Development, ODPM **(CD/PPS/1)**
7. Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 – Housing, ODPM **(CD/PPG/3)**
8. Planning Policy Statement 7 – Sustainable Development in Rural Areas, ODPM **(CD/PPS/7)**
9. Regional Planning Guidance Note 13 – North West **(CD/RPG/13)**
10. Cheshire Replacement Structure Plan 2011, Cheshire County Council **(CD/CSP/01)**
11. Cheshire 2016 Deposit Draft Structure Plan Alteration, Cheshire County Council **(CD/CSP02)**
12. Frodsham Cut and Lock Restoration Feasibility Study – Final Report May 2005 – TEP **(CD/ED/07A)**
13. Vale Royal Urban Housing Capacity Study 2002 – **(CD/HOU/02)**

Appendix 1:

Areas of designated Green Belt Land - Cheshire County Council
Research and Intelligence Unit (1997). Issued June 2000.

APPENDIX 1



Environment

Areas of Designated Green Belt Land 1997

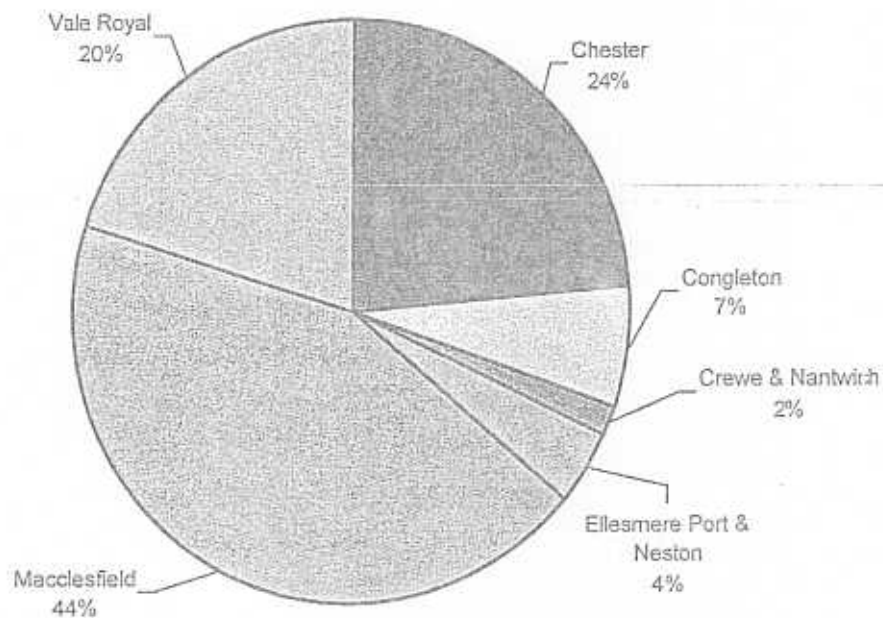
Sheet : Env L 6



Issued : Jun 2000

Updated : Infrequently

Area (Hectares) by District
1997



Commentary:

This sheet presents statistics on designated Green Belt land in Cheshire. It relates to the extent of Green Belt in 1997 and is based on a new methodology in which the extent of the Green Belt is captured in digital form from proposal maps in development plans. This approach provides much more reliable figures than those previously published for earlier years and therefore represents new baseline data.

The above graph shows, in 1997, nearly half of Cheshire's Green Belt land was in Macclesfield. Also Macclesfield has the 4th highest area of Green Belt in England. The smallest areas of Green Belt are in Congleton, Crewe and Nantwich and Ellesmere Port and Neston, where only 13% of the Cheshire total can be found.

In England, based on the new methodology, designated Green Belt amounts to 1,650,000 hectares, about 13% of the total land area. In the North West (Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Cheshire and Lancashire) designated Green Belt land amounted to 249,500 hectares, the third largest Green Belt area in England.

Area (Hectares) of Designated Green Belt Land
Cheshire and Districts 1997

	Hectares
Chester	18,520
Congleton	5,290
Crewe & Nantwich	1,210
Ellesmere Port & Neston	3,450
Macclesfield	34,230
Vale Royal	15,860
Cheshire	78,560

Source:

1. Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, Local planning authority green belt statistics; England 1997. Crown copyright. Crown Copyright material is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of HMSO.