

**Report to the Cabinet**

**Report reference:** C-025-2014/15  
**Date of meeting:** 3 September 2015



**Portfolio:** Planning Policy  
**Subject:** Green Belt Review (Stage 1) and Settlement Hierarchy  
**Responsible Officer:** Amanda Thorn (01992 564543).  
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**Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

- (1) To note the findings of the Green Belt Review (Stage 1) report that is to be added to the Local Plan evidence base;
- (2) To note the findings of the Settlement Hierarchy Technical Paper that is to be added to the Local Plan evidence base; and
- (3) To agree the proposed outline methodology for the Green Belt Review (Detailed Assessment), such that consultants can be appointed to undertake this work.

**Executive Summary:**

The Green Belt Review is a critical part of the preparation of the Local Plan, and a number of recent Local Plan Examinations have failed as a direct result of not having completed a rigorous Green Belt review. A two-stage approach is now being followed, with the strategic first stage now complete and subject of this report. At this strategic level, the findings conclude that all parcels score “strongly” or “relatively strongly” against at least one purpose of the Green Belt.

The second stage of the Green Belt Review will be undertaken jointly with Harlow District Council, and will analyse areas immediately adjoining the existing settlements within the two Districts in a more detailed assessment. The overall output of this second stage of work will identify:

- areas where the Green Belt policy designation should remain;
- any historic anomalies in the existing boundaries or locations where development has taken place, which may therefore suggest minor amendments to Green Belt boundaries are required; and
- areas that would be least harmful in Green Belt terms for potential development purposes.

The Settlement Hierarchy Technical Paper seeks to allocate each settlement to a category, by identifying the type of services and facilities that exist in each location.

Following a period for comment and fact checking by Town and Parish Councils, a number of amendments have been made to both reports, and these are detailed in the main report below and the Appendices, which have been published as background papers for this agenda.

**Reasons for Proposed Decision:**

The Green Belt Review is a critical part of the preparation of the Local Plan, given the high proportion of Green Belt that exists in the District. If this stage of the Green Belt Review is not added to the evidence base at this point, there will be substantial further delay to the preparation of the Local Plan for Epping Forest District.

The Settlement Hierarchy Technical Paper is a further piece of evidence that will help guide the preparation of the Local Plan, and is a key evidence base document in moving forward with the next steps of the Green Belt Review.

The proposed outline methodology will provide the parameters for the next steps of the Green Belt Review, in which a more detailed analysis of refined areas of the Green Belt will be undertaken. Consultants with experience and expertise in this area of work are required to complete the Review, and it is critical to the overall timetable that an appointment is made as soon as possible.

**Other Options for Action:**

Not to add the Green Belt Review (Stage 1) or Settlement Hierarchy Technical Paper to the Local Plan evidence base.

Not to agree the proposed outline methodology for the next steps of the Green Belt Review work.

**Report:**

1. Epping Forest District sits within the Metropolitan Green Belt, and over 90% of the District area is covered by the Green Belt. In preparing the new Local Plan for the District, it is necessary to review the Green Belt against the national purposes set by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Paragraph 80 identifies that the purposes of the Green Belt are:

- 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.

2. This Green Belt Review will provide evidence to support the preparation of the Local Plan, to be considered alongside all other relevant evidence, which will eventually inform the plan making decisions to determine the extent to which new development may be accommodated on land within the District.

3. Following publication of the NPPF in March 2012, Local Plan Examination Reports have shown that where the Local Plan area includes Green Belt land, any assessment of the potential for existing Green Belt land to accommodate new development must include a full review of the extent to which that land continues to serve the purposes of the designation. In June 2014, Cabinet agreed a methodology for the Green Belt Review in the District. This initial version of the methodology was developed using the best available advice and best practice at the time. Subsequently, emerging best practice, additional Local Plan Examination Reports, and further legal advice necessitated further minor amendments to the methodology. However, these changes did not affect the principles of the methodology.

approved by Cabinet: the amendments sought only to improve the clarity and detail required to complete the assessment. The Green Belt Review is being undertaken in two stages. The first stage, which this Report addresses is strategic in nature and covers the entire Green Belt within the District. The second stage, which has yet to commence, will consider focused areas of the District in greater detail, to establish how those areas function within that part of the Green Belt.

4. The methodology for the Green Belt Review (Stage 1) is attached to this report at Appendix 1. The Landscape Character Appraisal (Chris Blandford Associates, 2010) has been used to define the strategic parcels of land for initial assessment, as this Appraisal provides a sound basis upon which land with similar characteristics may be identified. 73 parcels were originally identified for initial assessment. Following site visits and analysis on the ground, a number of these parcels were amended to ensure the basis for assessment was logical, reducing the total number of strategic parcels to 61. The Stage 1 Assessment was completed for those 61 strategic parcels, covering the entire extent of the Green Belt within Epping Forest District.

5. The Stage 1 Assessment (see Appendix 2) has shown that on the basis of a high-level strategic assessment, all 61 land parcels make a “strong” or “relatively strong” contribution to at least one purpose of the Green Belt. Due to the strategic nature of this stage of the work, it is possible that within the parcels some smaller areas make a different level of contribution to one or more of the Green Belt purposes. The second stage of Green Belt Review will therefore consider a focused area of the District in more detail. This second stage will identify:

- areas where the Green Belt policy designation should remain;
- any historic anomalies in the existing boundaries or locations where inappropriate development has taken place, which may therefore suggest minor amendments to Green Belt boundaries are required; and
- areas with potential to accommodate development by minimising Green Belt harm.

6. To inform the preparation of the Local Plan, a Settlement Hierarchy Technical Paper (see Appendix 3) has been prepared. This document seeks to identify the types of settlements that exist in Epping Forest District and how they function. This has provided a mechanism to identify the areas of the Green Belt that should be analysed in greater detail as part of the Stage 2 (Detailed) Assessment. There is no nationally recommended methodology or best practice for establishing a Settlement Hierarchy, therefore a simple approach has been taken, which seeks only to determine the level of services and facilities that currently exist within each settlement. The analysis does not make any detailed assessment of current usage levels, capacity opening hours, or the potential for expansion. These matters will be addressed in detail as part of the overall preparation of the Local Plan, and in particular the formulation of the Infrastructure Delivery Plan for the District.

7. The Settlement Hierarchy identifies four categories of settlement – Town, Large Village, Small Village and Hamlet. Broad definitions are provided within the Technical Paper, although it is important to note that the categories in themselves, and the placement of each settlement within those categories does not infer that the settlements within each category are the same, only that they share similar levels of services and facilities.

8. For the purposes of the Green Belt Review (Stage 1), the Settlement Hierarchy has been used to determine the areas of the District in which the Green Belt should be examined in further detail. The NPPF provides support for this approach, in that development should be located in the most sustainable locations. To this end, the areas highlighted in Fig. 18 of the Green Belt Review (Stage 1) Report will be considered further.

9. Town and Parish Councils were provided an opportunity to engage with the Council in the preparation of the Green Belt Review (Stage 1) and the Settlement Hierarchy Technical Paper. A presentation with opportunity for questions was given, and a six week period for fact checking and comment on the two reports was provided to the Local Councils, ending on 27 July 2015. Comments were received from 20 of the 24 Town and Parish Councils within the District, and 11 District Councillors. Those comments have been taken into account and, where appropriate, have informed changes to the draft Report and draft Technical Paper.

10. A number of comments on the draft Green Belt Review (Stage 1) Report opined that the Review should also include analysis of a number of other matters, which would determine whether land was potentially suitable for development purposes. Whilst comments made raised valid considerations in making eventual decisions on the location of development, it is not the role of the Green Belt Review to address all of these issues. The Green Belt Review is but one piece of evidence amongst many that will inform the preparation of the Local Plan. Comments received will be used in preparing the Draft Local Plan Preferred Approach. It is not within the remit of a Green Belt Review to determine whether Green Belt land should be released; the primary purpose of the Review is to provide a comprehensive assessment of the continued performance of existing Green Belt land against the purposes for its designation identified in national planning policy. This Green Belt Review will provide the robust evidence necessary to inform the Council's plan-making decisions to determine whether and to what extent it is appropriate to release land from the Green Belt to accommodate new development.

11. A number of detailed comments were provided on the individual parcel assessments. In a number of cases, the comments received provide useful information that will be taken into account as part of the Detailed (Stage 2) Assessment, and will be passed to the appointed consultants. Comments received caused changes to be made in respect of the following parcels:

- (i) DSR038 – the description of this parcel has been amended to “Southwest of M11 and the London Underground Fairlop Loop”;
- (ii) DSR039 (East of Buckhurst Hill) – in response to question 11 under purpose 3, an amendment has been included to reflect the presence of gravel extraction lakes;
- (iii) DSR042 (South of Theydon Bois and North of Loughton/Debden) – additional text has been added to reference Home Mead Local Nature Reserve. The encroachment into the Green Belt by Debden Park School has been reduced to only include the buildings, and not the playing fields, but there is no change to the overall score against purpose 3.
- (iv) DSR050 (North, East and South of Thornwood) – the score for purpose 1 has been increased to 3 in response to comments made on the function of this parcel in preventing the sprawl of Harlow; and
- (v) DSR071 (Knighton Wood) – the score for purpose 1 has been increased to 4 to reflect the proximity of this parcel to London, and its role in preventing further urban sprawl.

12. In addition, changes have been made to Chapter 5 of the Stage 1 Report to further explain the way in which Green Belt Purpose 1 has been addressed. A number of comments indicated some confusion about the way in which the relationship with London is addressed, and the amendments here will help to clarify the approach taken. Further, a series of minor amendments as a result of identification of typographic errors have been made.

13. Green Belt Purpose 4 concerns the setting of historic towns. Neither “historic” nor “town” are defined by the NPPF or supporting guidance, and it therefore requires a local definition. Essex County Council produced a Supplementary Planning Guidance document (1999) which identified the historic towns in the District. There are a number of criteria, and fundamentally the designation as a historic town hinges on whether the town was considered “urban” in the mediaeval period. There are three such settlements in the District – Chipping Ongar, Epping and Waltham Abbey. A number of comments suggested that other settlements in the District should be identified as “historic”, by virtue of the presence of historic assets. However, it is clear that the scope of the fourth Green Belt purpose is relatively narrow and is not intended to import general historic environment policy considerations into national Green Belt policy. No change to the methodology, and therefore the Stage 1 Report is proposed.

14. Extensive comments were also provided on the draft Settlement Hierarchy Technical Paper. Amendments have been made to the Technical Paper to improve the accuracy of the services and facilities identified for each settlement. This has caused the scoring attained by some settlements to be amended and consequential changes to its position in the Settlement Hierarchy.

15. A number of comments suggested amendments to the Technical Paper which seek to introduce matters relating to the capacity of a settlement to provide services and facilities for the existing population, and any potential increases to the population. Whilst such matters will be important to the overall preparation of the Local Plan, it is not the role of the Settlement Hierarchy Technical Paper to address these matters. Such issues will be investigated and addressed in detail when individual parts of the Local Plan are drafted for each settlement, and in particular, during the preparation of the draft Infrastructure Delivery Plan.

16. A number of amendments have been made to the services and facilities that are assessed as follows:

(i) Recycling facilities have been deleted – the high volume and range of doorstep waste and recycling collections now means that such facilities are less important, and individuals are less likely to travel on a regular basis to utilise them;

(ii) Youth clubs have been included within the assessment of community halls, where separate facilities exist. There are few youth services still in existence in Epping Forest District;

(iii) An amendment has been made to the “Higher Education” category, so this now includes “Higher / Further Education”;

(iv) Public transport services are key to assessing the overall sustainability of settlements, and a number of comments provided alternatives to the way in which this had been measured. There is a wide range and variety of services operating in a number of centres within, beyond and across the District. It is difficult therefore, to create a scoring system that accounts for all eventualities. It is also recognised that bus services can, and often do, change regularly. The scoring for this element has therefore been amended to include “Level 1” and “Level 2” brackets. Level 1 service is more restrictive and does not include a Sunday service. There are fewer arrivals and departures, with a moderate peak service at best. Level 2 services are more frequent, providing a good/reasonable service in both peak and off peak times;

(v) Greater recognition of the differences in the level of service provided by the

Central Line on the Epping branch, and the Fairlop Loop, where a similar approach had been taken. “Level 1” and “Level 2” categories have been added to the assessment;

(vi) The “Pub” category is now a “Pub/Restaurant” category. This recognises that many traditional pubs have had to expand and change their businesses in the relatively recent past, but still provide a local community meeting and entertainment space;

(vii) The “Leisure/Sports facilities” category has been split into two separate categories of “Leisure/sports facilities” and “recreational amenities” to draw a distinction between facilities where there is a significant element of built development, and those that are primarily open space and outside; and

(viii) Further additional categories are places of worship and Citizens Advice Bureau, both of which are valuable community assets.

17. No amendments have been made to assess the possible impact of Crossrail beginning operations in Shenfield from 2019. Comments received held varying views on the likely impact, but at this stage this cannot be quantified. The Local Plan process will keep the changing nature of rail travel in general under review.

18. The subsequent amendment to the categories has resulted in the following bands:

Category	Scoring range	Settlement
Town	21+	Buckhurst Hill, Chipping Ongar, Epping, Loughton/Debden, Waltham Abbey
Large Village	14 - 20	Chigwell, North Weald, Roydon, Theydon Bois
Small Village	7 - 13	Abridge, Chigwell Row, Coopersale, Fyfield, High Ongar, Lower Nazeing, “Matching” (incorporating Matching Green, Matching Tye and Matching), Sheering, Stapleford Abbots, Thornwood.
Hamlet	0 - 6	Abess Roding, Beauchamp Roding, Berners Roding, Bobbingworth, Broadley Common, Bumbles Green, Dobb’s Weir, Epping Green, Epping Upland, Fiddlers Hamlet, Foster Street, Hare Street, Hastingwood, High Beach, High Laver, Jacks Hatch, Lambourne End, Little Laver, Long Green, Lower Sheering, Magdalen Laver, Moreton, Newmans End, Nine Ashes, Norton Heath, Norton Mandeville, Roydon Hamlet, Sewardstone, Sewardstonebury, Stanford Rivers, Stapleford Tawney, Theydon Garnon, Theydon Mount, Tilegate Green, Toot Hill, Upper Nazeing, Upshire, Willingale.

19. Abridge and Lower Nazeing are classified as small villages (not large villages), which is due to the closure of a number of services and facilities that had previously been identified. The settlements of Matching Green, Matching Tye and Matching have been combined, as comments received identified that these three very rural settlements have an interdependent

relationship. In all other instances, individually named settlements have been assessed and categorised separately. Comments were received about the nature of some settlements, and how the historic relationship of these suggests that there should be an overt link. However, as established at the outset, the approach taken is to assess each location separately.

20. A number of comments were made relating to the identification of Buckhurst Hill as a Town, and considered this should be a Large Village. The updated scoring suggests that Buckhurst Hill is at the bottom of the scoring range for a Town, and therefore should remain as originally drafted. In addition, further consideration of the nature of Buckhurst Hill has identified the compact and urban context of the settlement, and the way in which it has developed as an extension of outer London. This further supports the identification of the settlement as a Town.

21. The next stage of the Green Belt Review will be undertaken jointly with Harlow District Council. This is in consideration of the Duty to Cooperate and the requirement that Local Planning Authorities must engage “constructively and on an ongoing basis” with neighbouring authorities where strategic matters are identified. The continued function of the Green Belt is a strategic matter, and it is clear that the detailed assessment of the Green Belt should not be undertaken in isolation for either of the two authorities. Both authorities have reached a similar stage in the preparation of strategic reviews, using comparable methodologies. It is now logical that the next stage of work is completed jointly to ensure consistency of approach in the assessment of the Green Belt, however decisions around the potential future release of Green Belt land will remain with each individual authority. Consultants are being sought in accordance with the broad methodology outlined in Appendix 1, and a further opportunity for engagement for strategic partners, and Town and Parish Councils will be included in this process. It is anticipated that the detailed assessment work will be completed in February 2016.

22. An appointment of suitably qualified consultants is expected in September, following a competitive tender exercise. It is anticipated that the overall costs for this work will be under £40,000, and this sum has been included in the recent budget update (see report to Cabinet 11 June 2015).

#### **Resource Implications:**

The Green Belt Review (Stage 1) has been completed by the wider EFDC officer team. The Green Belt Review (Detailed Assessment) will be commissioned jointly with Harlow DC, and will be funded from existing resources allocated to the Local Plan.

#### **Legal and Governance Implications:**

There is a duty on all Local Authorities to prepare an up to date Local Plan, based on robust evidence.

#### **Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

The preparation of the Local Plan will enable the Council to meet more aspirations under the Safer, Cleaner and Greener agenda.

#### **Consultation Undertaken:**

Town and Parish Councils were invited to provide comments and factual feedback on the Green Belt Review (Stage 1) and the Settlement Hierarchy Technical Paper. The broad comments, and responses made are detailed in the main report.

**Background Papers:**

As per the Appendices.

An additional background paper will be published shortly providing a detailed summary of comments received and the responses made.

**Risk Management:**

The preparation of the Local Plan is a key Council priority, and the risk of not producing a Local Plan within a reasonable timeframe has recently been the subject of Government statements. Robust evidence is being sought to support the ongoing preparation of the Local Plan.

## Due Regard Record

This page shows **which groups of people are affected** by the subject of this report. It sets out **how they are affected** and how any **unlawful discrimination** they experience can be eliminated. It also includes information about how **access to the service(s)** subject to this report can be improved for the different groups of people; and how they can be assisted to **understand each other better** as a result of the subject of this report.

S149 Equality Act 2010 requires that due regard must be paid to this information when considering the subject of this report.

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The preparation of all evidence to support the Local Plan is relevant to equality considerations, as the eventual Local Plan will be in place for the whole district, and will therefore potentially have an effect on all residents and workers in the District.

The Green Belt Review (Stage 1) and the Settlement Hierarchy Technical Paper in themselves do not raise any issues which effect protected groups, as the Reports are spatial in nature, and are equally relevant across the District.

The preparation of the Local Plan as a whole will be subject to Equality Impact Assessment in due course.