



# Planning & Transport Strategy

## TOPIC BRIEFING NOTE

#01/2015

### WIDNES & HALE GREEN BELT REVIEW (Feb15)

#### **(1) Background to the Review**

The Council is undertaking a review of the Green Belt around Widnes and Hale. The need for this review was included in the Halton Core Strategy Local Plan (adopted in April 2013).

The Core Strategy was subject to independent examination by a Government appointed Inspector between September 2011 and October 2012, who considered; objections to the Plan; whether the Plan followed Government guidance and legal requirements, and whether the Plan could be considered 'sound'.

Specifically, the Inspector had to consider whether the Plan:

- complied with the Regional Spatial Strategy;
- complied with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF);
- fully meets the housing needs of the area, and
- the distribution of housing and other development across Halton.

#### **(2) Housing Target**

The Inspector concluded that the Core Strategy had to plan for 9,930 additional dwellings over the 18 years from 2010 to 2028. This was to ensure the Plan complied with the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) requirement of 500 units per annum (2003 to 2021), including an allowance of 930 units to account for the under delivery of housing in the period 2003 to 2010.

	Halton
RSS requirement (2003-2010)	3,500
Actual Net Dwelling Gain (2003-2010)	2,570
Surplus / Deficit (2003-2010)	<b>-930</b>
RSS requirement (2010-2028)	9,000
Core Strategy (RSS + Deficit)	9,930

#### **(3) Housing Distribution**

The Inspector had to consider objections into the distribution of housing across the Borough, notably the split between Widnes / Hale and Runcorn. Objectors argued for a near 50:50 split in line with the then current population.

The Council, mindful of the availability of land, recent development trends and the need to support regeneration aspirations, argued for more of a 40:60 split in favour of Runcorn. The Inspector agreed with the Council and the Core Strategy plans for a 43:57 distribution north / south of the river.

#### **(4) The need for the Green Belt Review**

Having determined the level of housing the Core Strategy should plan for, the Inspector considered whether there was sufficient identified developable and deliverable land to meet these needs.

Objectors challenged elements of the Council's identified supply, and a number of changes were made during the Examination. The Inspector concluded that the potential housing supply in Halton was in the region of 10,855. Allowing for forecast losses and demolitions the Inspector concluded that Widnes/Hale would run out of land to meet their housing needs within the Core Strategy plan period (to 2028).

	Widnes	Runcorn
Housing Distribution	43%	57%
Housing Requirement	4,270	5,660
Identified Supply (at 2010)	2,928	7,827
Surplus / Deficit	<b>-1,342</b>	+2,167

The Government requires Councils to plan to fully meet their housing needs. As there was not enough land identified to meet the housing needs

of Widnes/Hale, the Inspector concluded that Halton would have to find additional development land and this represented the 'exceptional circumstances' that would require a review of the Green Belt around Widnes and Hale. This was included in the adopted Core Strategy.

#### **(5) The Green Belt Review (Methodology)**

Halton is not alone in the sub-region in having to review its Green Belt to find sufficient land to meet development needs. Sefton, Knowsley and West Lancashire Councils have all worked together recently to review their respective Green Belts.

West Lancashire has adopted a Plan releasing some Green Belt land, Knowsley is in the middle of its Plan's examination and is looking to allocate Green Belt land for immediate release, whilst Sefton is also proposing to release some Green Belt land and is hoping to be able to submit their Plan for Examination shortly. St. Helens is currently carrying out a review of parts of its Green Belt.

As a starting point, Halton looked to copy the methodology used by our neighbours. We took their advice on what they would do differently, and published our proposed methodology for public consultation in September 2013. This consultation included our suggestions for the study 'parcels'.

As we carried out the review, additional minor amendments were made in light of local circumstances and legal judgements elsewhere.

The review covers all of the Green Belt within Halton around Widnes and Hale and comprises of the following steps;

- Splits the Green Belt into 'parcels' based on physical boundaries, land use, site ownership etc.
- Assesses each parcel for the five purposes of including land in the Green Belt<sup>1</sup>, i.e.
  1. To prevent sprawl of large built-up areas. [Containment. Boundary Strength]
  2. To prevent neighbouring towns from merging. [Remaining Gap if parcel was released]
  3. To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. [Countryside Use, Visual Encroachment]

4. To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns. [Not applicable to Halton]
5. To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land. [Not quantifiable so not assessed in the Study]

In addition, the review has sought to;

- identify sites affected by 'prohibitive' constraints, such as flood risk, that would prevent future development.
- identify sites affected by 'restrictive' constraints such as Local Nature Reserves, that could restrict development or require mitigation measures.
- quantify the 'openness' of the study parcels
- assess how 'accessible' sites (how many 'supporting' services are within easy reach).

#### **(6) Green Belt Review (Initial Site Assessments)**

In February 2015, we published our initial Site Assessments for public consultation, detailing our initial assessment of each parcel against the categories listed above.

The consultation documents have been made available at the Council's libraries and Halton Direct Link offices as well as online;

<http://www3.halton.gov.uk/Pages/planning/policy/guidance/Widnes-and-Hale-Green-Belt-Study.aspx>

This consultation **does not** propose specific recommendations (i.e. retain as Green Belt, designate as safeguarded land for future development, or allocate for development now).

These issues require additional consideration once other necessary work has been completed, including bringing our housing requirement and housing land supply evidence up to date.

The need for the current review was identified through the Core Strategy examination using:

- Requirement – (2003 Based) Regional Strategy;
- Supply – 2010 based Strategic Land Assessment.

In order to quantify the level of land we may need in the next Local Plan, we are working with neighbours within our 'Housing Market Area' to assess the 'Objectively Assessed Need' for housing [Requirement] and to assess the quantity of deliverable and developable housing land [Supply] today.

<sup>1</sup> Para 80; [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\)](#)

