



## **Wyre Council**

**Green Belt and Strategic Areas of Separation**

**Background Paper**

September 2017

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 This background paper has been prepared to explain the approach behind the Green Belt policy and the Strategic Areas of Separation policy in the Publication Draft Wyre Local Plan which is the key planning strategy document to guide future development in the borough up to 2031.

1.2 Green Belt and Areas of Separation are separate and distinct policies but there is a common theme in that both designations prevent coalescence of settlements and seek to retain the distinctive characters of towns/villages. In addition they both operate as strategic tools to prevent urban sprawl and therefore do not necessarily have to cover only attractive landscapes. Accordingly the two designations are covered in this paper but explained separately below.

## **2. GREEN BELT**

2.1 Green Belt designation is a highly valued environmental asset especially as in Wyre Green Belt covers only approximately 2.6% (750 ha. out of total of 28,300 ha.) of land in the borough. Green Belt and housing are two of the most high profile and contentious issues associated with producing a local plan. Nationally and locally, the dilemma of meeting development needs and preserving green field sites including Green Belt land has been a recurring issue when considering proposals for future development to meet the needs of current and future residents. Determining the appropriate balance between development and preservation lies at the heart of any local plan and is crucial to the achievement of a sustainable pattern of development.

## **3. National Policy and Green Belts**

3.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was issued in March 2012 and it advises (paragraph 158) that each local planning authority should ensure that the Local Plan is based on adequate, up-to-date and relevant evidence about the economic, social and environmental characteristics and prospects of the area. The evidence base supporting the emerging Wyre Local Plan contains a wide range of information and includes the Wyre Green Belt Study (published May 2016). The application of the evidence to making balanced planning judgements is a prudently considered process which also has to be mindful of previous consultation feedback.

3.2 The government attaches great importance to Green Belts and understands that they are highly valued by communities. The NPPF advises that Local Planning Authorities with Green Belts in their area should establish Green Belt boundaries in their Local Plans which set the framework for Green Belt and settlement policy. Once established the Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances, through the preparation or review of the Local Plan. Authorities should consider the Green Belt boundaries having regard to their intended permanence in the long term so they should be capable of enduring beyond the plan period (paragraph 83) but must also take account of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development when drawing up or reviewing boundaries (paragraph 84).

3.3 The NPPF states that the Green Belt serves five purposes:

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

#### **4. Planning for Growth in Wyre**

4.1 Local Planning Authorities are now responsible for setting their own level of housing and employment provision justified by local evidence, the council commissioned a new Fylde Coast Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) in 2013 supplemented by three further appendices published in 2014, 2015 and 2017 and an update to the Employment Land Study (ELSU, published September 2015) accompanied by an Addendum in December 2015. The SHMA recommended an objectively assessed need (OAN) range for Wyre which was greatly in excess of the annual average requirement which had been previously set and utilised in the Regional Spatial Strategy.

4.2 The Wyre Local Plan has a growth focus consistent with the NPPF and the council, having considered a wide range of evidence, including the SHMA, agreed that the annual housing requirement figure should be at the upper end of the SHMA OAN range. This would require a thorough assessment of land in the borough to identify sites/locations to supply the housing land necessary whilst also taking into account the Borough's characteristics and constraints that may affect the ability to fully meet the OAN.

4.3 Whilst national guidance is clear in its intention to encourage the reuse of previously developed land (brownfield land) there is limited previously developed land available for future development in Wyre. It is therefore implicit that consideration has to be given to the potential of green field land, including countryside areas, and potentially Green Belts, to provide the land necessary to meet future housing and employment needs. Even if the development needs of an area can be met without Green Belt release, consideration would still need to be given as to whether releasing Green Belt land may produce a more sustainable planning outcome within the area.

4.4 The council decided it was necessary to review the existing Green Belt to provide the evidence to establish if it fulfilled the five purposes set out in the NPPF (listed above). If it successfully met the requirements it would establish a robust and enduring Green Belt for the future with defensible boundaries to prevent urban sprawl and protect it from unacceptable pressure by development proposals which could lead to its erosion, thereby keeping the land permanently open.

#### **5. The History of Green Belt in Wyre**

5.1 The broad location of Green Belt in the county was originally established during the preparation of the Central and North Lancashire Structure Plan (adopted 1983) which

included parcels of land on the Fylde Peninsula. The detailed location of that Green Belt was translated into precise areas of land in Wyre during the preparation of the Fleetwood, Thornton Cleveleys and Poulton-le-Fylde Local Plan which was subject to various consultation stages from 1982 until its adoption in 1987. The Fylde Peninsula Green Belt extended over the southern and western fringes of the Wyre area into the boroughs of Blackpool and Fylde. Its main purpose, according to the Structure Plan, was to check the spread of urban areas; to prevent the merging of neighbouring settlements and to protect the special character of a settlement and, in the Fylde, be located between Fleetwood and Cleveleys and Thornton, Poulton-le-Fylde and Blackpool, to the south of Poulton-le-Fylde and north of Staining.

5.2 Even in the early 1980's it was noted in the Structure Plan, that along the Fylde Coast development pressures between adjacent and hitherto distinct settlements were even more intense and proposals for Green Belt designation had to be balanced with the need to allow for release of sufficient land for peripheral urban expansion. Green Belt boundaries were tightly drawn and the area of land preventing the merging of settlements was minimal compared to large swathes of Green Belts located in other districts throughout the country.

5.3 In over three decades, with the exception of some minor amendments included in the Wyre Borough Local Plan (adopted 1999) there had been no further alterations to the boundaries in Local, Structure or Regional Plans or any review of the Green Belt in the district. Therefore a local review was considered necessary as supporting evidence for the Local Plan.

## **6. Wyre Green Belt Study 2016**

6.1 In 2015 consultants were appointed to undertake a local review considering land in the Green Belt in Wyre Borough only. The scope of the study was to consider the inner Green Belt boundary around the towns in Wyre and to consider whether land included within the defined Green Belt continued to serve the purposes defined in the NPPF. It also offered the opportunity to rationalise the boundary and address any identified anomalies from when the first boundary was formally approved in 1987 or slightly modified in 1999. It sought to determine if there were areas which no longer fulfil the functions of Green Belt and which could be considered for release from the Green Belt without affecting its integrity and long term permanency. It identified which land must be retained within the Green Belt in order to maintain its integrity and considered that an essential characteristic of the Green Belt is keeping the land open in the long term.

6.2 The study did not assess adjoining Green Belt areas in Blackpool and Fylde Borough or consider identification of any new areas of Green Belt as these were considered to be matters for a strategic review of the entire Green Belt on the Fylde Coast areas.

6.3 The Wyre Green Belt Study, including the detailed methodology and site proformas, was published in May 2016, it can be viewed on the council's website at [http://www.wyre.gov.uk/info/200460/environment/1019/green\\_belt\\_study](http://www.wyre.gov.uk/info/200460/environment/1019/green_belt_study)

6.4 The outcome of the study is a recommendation that the three parcels of land listed below are considered for removal from the Green Belt as part of the Local Plan process. The assessment of these sites in accordance with the standard methodology resulted in a scores which indicated that none of the three met any of the five purposes of Green Belt robustly.

Parcel Ref.	Location
2	Cardinal Allen School Grounds, Fleetwood.
20	Land south of Blackpool Road, Poulton-le-Fylde.
21	Land north east of Poulton Road, Poulton-le-Fylde.

6.5 The report also identified 13 minor anomalies which required boundary alterations primarily at locations where the Green Belt boundary did not follow a clear physical feature on the ground. It was considered important for the boundaries to be drawn along prominent features in the landscape that would be difficult to alter or destroy and were expected to remain in the long term, thereby restrict urban sprawl. The alterations required a minor addition of land in seven locations and a minor removal in six locations. Details of the recommended boundary modifications are listed in Appendix 3 of the Wyre Green Belt Study.

6.6 The Publication Draft Wyre Local Plan will embrace 12 of the 13 proposed amendments, however the alteration recommended for parcel 19, land east of Skippool Road will not be included. Parcel 19 is part of a field, east of Skippool Creek, which straddles the borough boundary between the boroughs of Wyre and Fylde. The western section is designated as Green Belt within Wyre Borough and the eastern section is designated as countryside area in Fylde Borough. The Green Belt boundary originally followed the borough boundary rather than any physical demarcation on the ground and the recommended alteration was to use, as an alternative, the river channel as a strong physical boundary. However it is considered that the small triangle of land in Wyre, as well as the larger tract of designated countryside area further to the east/north east in Fylde fulfils at least some of the purposes of Green Belt as defined in the NPPF, by preventing the settlements of Thornton and Poulton-le-Fylde from merging. Under such circumstances the designation of the land should be determined as part of a future strategic review of Green Belt on the Fylde Coast and that until a review is conducted parcel 19 should be retained as designated Green Belt.

## **7. Exceptional Circumstances**

7.1 The NPPF provides the parameters for defining and reviewing Green Belt boundaries. It makes it clear that the only mechanism for altering the boundaries is the review of the Local Plan but local planning authorities must also demonstrate exceptional circumstances to justify any alteration. However, there is no clear definition of what constitutes exceptional circumstances; the preparation of a Local Plan in itself does not amount to exceptional circumstances.

7.2 This issue has been considered by the courts. Judgements have been made which set out the matters which should be identified and dealt with in order to ascertain whether exceptional circumstances exist to justify altering the Green Belt boundary but these relate primarily to the release of Green Belt sites to accommodate future housing development.

7.3 In the circumstances pertaining to Wyre the recommendation to release three sites from Green Belt was made regardless of any pressure to allocate land for future development. It was made on the basis of evidence which concluded that the sites only made a limited contribution to Green Belt and therefore they did not fulfil the purposes of Green Belt as defined in the NPPF. This was considered to be the exceptional circumstance and furthermore their removal would produce a more sustainable outcome of planned development within Wyre.

7.4 The study also recommended 13 minor alterations to the Green Belt. The revised boundaries affected negligible areas of land proposing a redefined line which followed prominent physical features. This would strengthen the boundary, enable it to endure in the long term and prevent urban sprawl consistent with the NPPF if the recommendations are accepted.

## **8. Public Consultation**

8.1 Earlier Local Plan consultation exercises revealed a perception that areas of countryside/green field land, both in the urban part of the borough and around rural and semi-rural settlements, was designated Green Belt. In Wyre Green Belt is located in the urban peninsula only, the designation of new areas would require a strategic review of the entire Green Belt in the Fylde Coast area (including land in the boroughs of Blackpool and Fylde) and would need to demonstrate exceptional circumstances. However, in order to address the concerns raised, the Local Plan will include a new "Strategic Areas of Separation" designation which is explained later in this paper.

## **9. Green Belt Conclusion**

9.1 In the context of the matters set out in this paper the Council commissioned a local review of Green Belt and has accepted the recommendations of the report apart from the boundary modification to parcel 19, to assist in establishing a robust and enduring Green Belt which is compliant with the NPPF.

9.2 The future designation of the three parcels of land recommended for removal from the Green Belt has been considered carefully and has had regard to the outcome of research included in other evidence based documents. The table below indicates the proposed future designations of the three parcels. Further information on the justification for the proposed designations is set out in the Allocations Background Paper and the Green Infrastructure Open Space Sport and Recreation Background Paper.

Parcel ref.	Location	Site area approx.	Proposed designation in Publication Local Plan
2	Cardinal Allen School Grounds, Fleetwood.	5 ha.	Green infrastructure (whole parcel).
20	Land south of Blackpool Road, Poulton-le-Fylde.	60 ha.	19.54 ha. allocated for housing - site SA1/8 (part parcel) Green infrastructure (part parcel). Unallocated (part parcel).
21	Land north east of Poulton Road, Poulton-le-Fylde.	3.75 ha.	Green infrastructure (part parcel). Unallocated (part parcel).

9.3 The modified Green Belt is defined on the Local Plan Policies Map and is subject to the provisions of Policy SP3.

## 10. STRATEGIC AREAS OF SEPARATION

10.1 The Local Plan includes a policy to introduce a new local land use designation entitled “Strategic Areas of Separation” in the specific locations listed below and as identified on the Proposals Map.

- Between Knott End/Preesall and Preesall Hill
- Between Forton and Hollins Lane
- Between Garstang and Cabus
- Between Garstang and Bowgreave
- Between Bowgreave and Catterall
- Between Fleetwood and Thornton

The introduction of Strategic Areas of Separation is considered to be an important part of the spatial strategy for the borough particularly in the context of the levels of housing growth in the borough in the rural areas and the need to provide for the distinct individuality of all settlements.

## 11. Background

11.1 Planning policy in the rural areas i.e. land outside of the Fylde Coast Peninsula, has, up until the publication of the NPPF in 2012, sought to protect the countryside and restrict development in the rural towns and villages and direct it to the more accessible infrastructure and facilities of the urban areas. Since 2012 and the government’s commitment to growth and the promotion of sustainable development to meet the needs of a rising population, it is evident that more housing is needed over the local plan period and that it is necessary to employ a different approach to distributing this development.

11.2 The Local Plan now directs a proportion of development to the rural settlements to enable their long term sustainability and accommodate planned growth. Whilst the use of previously developed land would always be preferred it is inevitable that in certain towns and villages, particularly in the rural area, the majority, if not all, of the planned development has required the release of green field land on the edge of settlements.

11.3 As the council seeks to accommodate this growth, countryside and green spaces are valued more than ever before, but they too contribute to the delivery of sustainable development. They provide environmental, health and social benefits as well as providing a setting for the communities who live there.

11.4 It is important to balance growth with environmental protection. In some areas where communities are located in close proximity to each other it is necessary to protect certain areas of land from development to avoid coalescence, or even the perception of coalescence, so that urban and rural towns and villages remain separate and maintain their own unique identity.

## **12. Consultation**

12.1 During previous Local Plan consultation stages it has been made apparent to the council that some rural communities accept the need for growth but are resolute in their commitment to ensure that their town/village does not merge into an adjacent settlement with the resultant loss of their own unique identity, especially where only a small area of open countryside separates them. With a Local Plan planning for growth, in recognition of this concern and in response to previous consultation feedback, the council propose to designate six Strategic Areas of Separation to address these issues and protect land from future development which would erode the buffer.

## **13. Fleetwood and Thornton Strategic Area of Separation**

13.1 In addition to the five Strategic Areas of Separation which lie between rural towns and villages, a Strategic Area of Separation is also proposed between Fleetwood and Thornton on open grass/marshland east of the existing Green Belt. The designation of this land will support the Green Belt designation and maintain separation between industrial development in Fleetwood and Thornton.

## **14. Strategic Areas of Separation Conclusion**

14.1 In total the Strategic Areas of Separation only affect a small area of land but their designation reflects the importance of the sites in maintaining separation and supporting the distinct individual character of the neighbouring settlements all in accordance with the sustainable development principals of the NPPF.

14.2 In response to previous consultation feedback and in recognition of the value of land separating both urban and rural settlements located in close proximity to each other, the six Strategic Areas of Separation are designated as shown on the Local Plan Policies Map and will be subject to the provisions of Policy SP1. Accordingly development that would impact upon the openness of the land between settlements and potentially compromise the effectiveness of the gap in protecting the identity and distinctiveness of the two settlements, will not be permitted.