



LAND AT LITTLE STANNEY LANE,
ELLESMERE PORT, CHESHIRE
GREEN BELT REVIEW – TECHNICAL NOTE

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1.1 Following a request from The Church Commissioners for England (CCfE), Bradley Murphy Design Ltd. (BMD) has undertaken a high-level Green Belt Review in relation to land on the southern edge of Ellesmere Port. The area of study (referred to as the 'Site') is focused on the land adjacent to the southern settlement edge of Ellesmere Port, Stanney and Stanlow Oil Refinery. The Site is bound to the north by the A5117, to the south by the M56, to the east by the River Gowy and to the west by hedgerow field boundaries. The Site parcels are bisected north to south by the M53 and border the nucleated village of Stoak (within the eastern portion) and an element of ribbon development within the village of Stanney (in the western element) (as illustrated on **Figure 1: Site Location and Study Area at Appendix A**). The area of study (referred to as the 'Site') is focused on circa 258ha of land, all within single ownership, along with the surrounding Green Belt context.
- 1.1.2 This Green Belt Review was prepared by Senior Associate Landscape Architect, Joanne John CMLI, from BMD (a chartered landscape architect) and was undertaken to both inform the iterative design process, consider whether any areas of the Site are considered 'Grey Belt' (as defined by the National Planning Policy Framework / NPPF, February 2025 and National Planning Policy Guidance) and highlighting any landscape mitigation that could support Green Belt release.
- 1.1.3 The Site lies within an area of Green Belt listed in various references as the:
- Liverpool, Manchester and West Yorks Greenbelt (magic.defra.gov.uk)
 - North Cheshire Green Belt
- 1.1.4 For the purposes of this technical note, any reference to the Green Belt will be made in relation to the North Cheshire Green Belt, in the borough of Cheshire West and Chester.
- 1.1.5 BMD have reviewed the Council's existing Green Belt evidence base documents and undertaken our own review with consideration of the development Site and the potential for release from the Green Belt - to highlight any landscape mitigation that may support Green Belt release and help respond to the 'Golden Rules' set out in the NPPF.
- 1.1.6 This BMD Review splits the Site into 4 separate land parcels, to consider each separately, in terms of:
- their potential to be considered as Grey Belt
 - the potential capacity to accommodate a sustainable landscape-led development
 - consideration of each parcel's contribution to the purposes of the Green Belt
 - along with consideration of the potential for harm to the strength of the wider Green Belt (should the Site or various parcels be removed from the Green Belt).

2. GREEN BELT POLICY CONTEXT

National Green Belt Policy

- 2.1.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF¹) (updated February 2025) states that the Government attaches great importance to Green Belts, with the fundamental aim being to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open and to identify the essential characteristics of Green Belts as being their ‘openness’ and ‘permanence’. Principles of the Green Belt are set out in NPPF, Section 13: paragraphs 142-160.
- 2.1.2 It sets out the five key purposes which the Green Belt serves:
- 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
- 2.1.3 In terms of plan-making, the NPPF requires local planning authorities (with Green Belts in their area) to establish boundaries in their Local Plans. It is acknowledged that the general extent of Green Belts across the country is already established. Once in place these should only be altered in exceptional circumstances, which are fully evidenced and justified, through the preparation or updates of plans.
- 2.1.4 Paragraph 146 of the NPPF defines exceptional circumstances as (and not limited to): A Local Planning Authority not meeting housing or other development need – requiring the Local Planning Authority to review its Green Belt and make alterations (unless doing so would fundamentally undermine the Purposes of the remaining Green Belt – when considered together)
- 2.1.5 Paragraph 148 of the NPPF states that *“Where it is necessary to release Green Belt land for development, plans should give priority to previously developed land, then consider grey belt which is not previously developed, and then other Green Belt locations. However, when drawing up or reviewing Green Belt boundaries, the need to promote sustainable patterns of development should determine whether a site’s location is appropriate with particular reference to paragraphs 110 and 115 of this Framework. Strategic policy-making authorities should consider the consequences for sustainable development of channelling development towards urban areas*

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>

inside the Green Belt boundary, towards towns and villages inset within the Green Belt or towards locations beyond the outer Green Belt boundary”.

- 2.1.6 Paragraph 151 of the NPPF states that *“Once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance their beneficial use, such as looking for opportunities to provide access; to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation; to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or to improve damaged and derelict land. Where Green Belt land is released for development through plan preparation or review, the ‘Golden Rules’ in paragraph 156 below should apply”.*
- 2.1.7 Paragraph 156 of the NPPF sets out the Government’s **‘Golden Rules’** in relation to Green Belt, stating *“Where major development involving the provision of housing is proposed on land released from the Green Belt through plan preparation or review, or on sites in the Green Belt subject to a planning application, the following contributions (‘Golden Rules’) should be made:*
- a. affordable housing...;*
 - b. necessary improvements to local or national infrastructure; and*
 - c. the provision of new, or improvements to existing, green spaces that are accessible to the public. New residents should be able to access good quality green spaces within a short walk of their home, whether through onsite provision or through access to offsite spaces”.*
- 2.1.8 Paragraph 158 of the NPPF states *“a development which complies with the Golden Rules should be given significant weight in favour of the grant of permission”.*
- 2.1.9 Paragraph 159 of the NPPF sets requirements for green space improvements, as part of the ‘Golden Rules’ - where there are no local standards, national standards will be default, including Natural England standards on accessible green space, urban greening factor / UGF and Green Flag criteria – plus positive contribution to development’s landscape setting and Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

2.2 Local Green Belt Policy

- 2.2.1 The Site is located within Cheshire West and Chester, a borough with unitary authority status in Cheshire. Cheshire West and Chester adopted development plan consists of Local Plan Strategic Policies (Part One – adopted 29 January 2015) and Local Plan Land Allocations and Detailed Policies (Part Two – adopted 18 July 2019)².

² <https://maps.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/cwac/localplan>.

- 2.2.2 Forty-two percent of the Cheshire West and Chester borough is classified as Green Belt with Chester, Ellesmere Port and Northwich either encompassed within or adjoining the Green Belt. The whole of the Site and wider countryside beyond the settlement edge of Ellesmere Port, to the south, is designated Green Belt. A key focus of the adopted Local Plan, that guides development up to 2030, is to channel the majority of new development towards the main urban areas. The extent of the Green Belt is considered a strategic matter and is defined in Local Plan (Part One).
- 2.2.3 Strategic Policy '**Green Belt and Countryside (STRAT 9)**' states *"the intrinsic character and beauty of the Cheshire countryside will be protected by restricting development to that which requires a countryside location and cannot be accommodated within identified settlements."*
- 2.2.4 One of the Local Plan (Part One) strategic objectives is to protect the environmental quality and character of the borough through maintaining the general extent and character of the North Cheshire Green Belt and Cheshire countryside. **Policy STRAT 9** of the Local Plan (Part One) acknowledges that the rural area of the borough and the high quality of its landscape is a key asset and is highly valued by residents. The diversity of landscapes, including a range of hard and soft landscape characteristics such as open fields and pastures, woodland or farmed land as well as built form and features, contribute to the intrinsic character and distinctiveness of the borough's countryside.
- 2.2.5 Detailed Policy '**Protection of the Landscape (GBC 2)**' states 'the borough's countryside to be protected in line with Local Plan (Part One) policy **STRAT 9**. Where development requires a countryside location, it must satisfy Local Plan (Part One) policy **ENV 2** and:
- protect and, wherever possible, enhance landscape character and distinctiveness;
 - integrate into the landscape character of the area; and
 - be designed to take account of guidance in the Landscape Strategy.
- 2.2.6 The above will be achieved through appropriate siting, scale, layout, density, design and landscape treatment.
- 2.2.7 The key diagram within the adopted Local Plan (illustrated in **Figure A** below) highlights the city of Chester and towns of Ellesmere Port, Northwich and Winsford (as urban areas) are the main focus for development, currently within the borough.
- 2.2.8 Since its designation, the North Cheshire Green Belt has played an important role in protecting the character of the north of the borough, where development pressures are the greatest. At both a regional and local scale the designation has assisted urban regeneration, checked urban sprawl, protected the identity of settlements and safeguarded the countryside.
- 2.2.9 The current focus of the adopted Local Plan for Cheshire West and Chester, for growth up to 2030, seeks to maintain the general extent of the North Cheshire Green Belt and Green Belt release was only considered around the edges of Chester. Key factors in the approach to the

location of development was to maintain the strategic gap between Chester and Ellesmere Port, maintain the separation and distinct character between Chester and the surrounding villages and ensure that Green Belt boundary change respects the need to safeguard the setting and special character of the city.

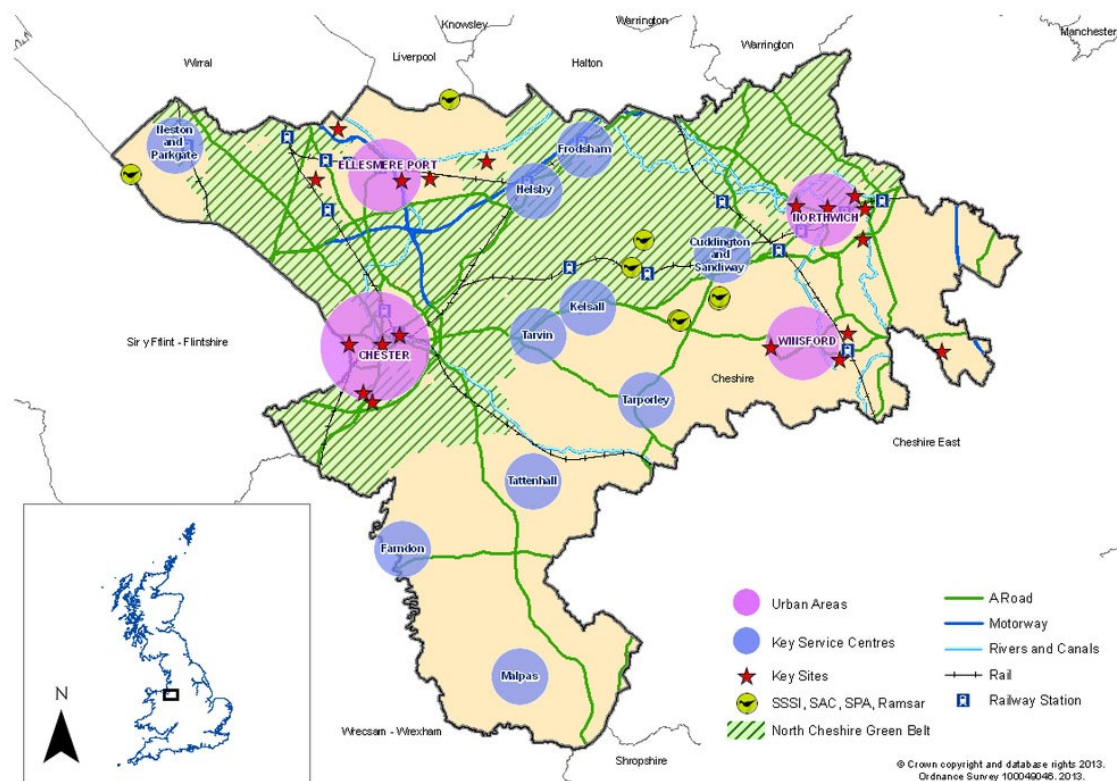


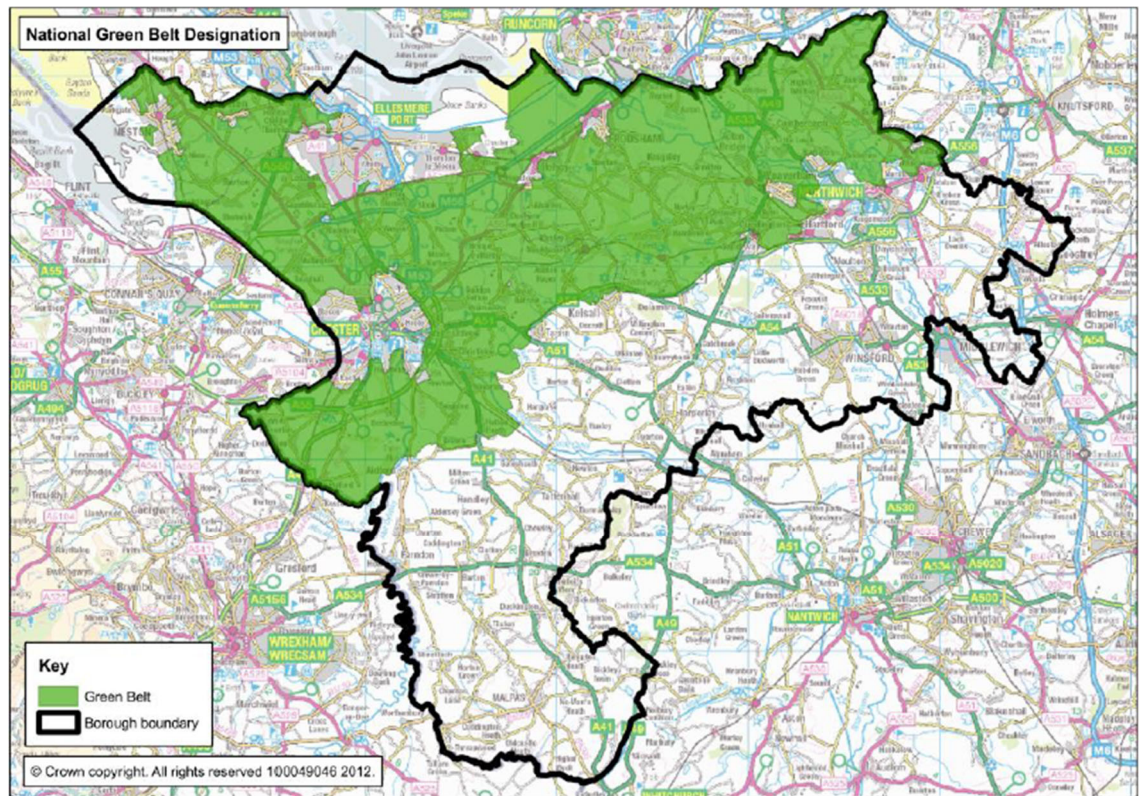
Figure A - Key Strategic Diagram for Cheshire West and Chester
(Source: Cheshire West and Chester adopted Local Plan)

Local Plan Green Belt Studies

- 2.2.10 The Local Plan (Part One) is supported by a wide range of background documents including:
- Cheshire West and Chester Green Belt Study – Part One
 - Stage Two of the Chester Green Belt Study: Technical Site Assessment (2013)
- 2.2.11 The current evidence and background documents supporting the adopted Local Plan focus the review of the Green Belt in the borough around Chester and the land around the edge of Chester, to identify whether or not this land meets the purposes of the NPPF. There is currently no Green Belt study, by the LPA, of the land designated Green Belt surrounding Ellesmere Port, including the Site.
- 2.2.12 The Site is located within the North Cheshire Green Belt as illustrated in Figure B below. The Cheshire West and Chester Green Belt Study – Part One states “one of the objectives of the

Cheshire Green Belt in the area around Chester is to maintain the strategic gap between the urban settlements of Chester and Ellesmere Port to the north.”

2.2.13 The Chester District Local Plan (2006) identified the importance of restricting development to the north of the city to retain the ‘strategic gap’ between Chester and Ellesmere Port, on ecological



and environmental grounds.

Figure B - North Cheshire Green Belt Designation
(Source: Cheshire West and Chester Green Belt Study – Part One)

3. GUIDANCE ON GREEN & GREY BELT

3.1.1 On 27th February 2025, the UK Government published new guidance entitled, **Green Belt: Advice on the Role of the Green Belt in the Planning System**, (“the new Green Belt guidance”) which forms part of National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG)³. The new guidance explains how the Government expects local authorities to assess Green Belt “*to identify grey belt land*”⁴. It also explains how the contribution that land makes to the relevant Green Belt purposes should be assessed and provides further guidance on:

- how Green Belt assessments can be used in the development management process;
- in what circumstances proposals on grey belt land should be approved;
- how authorities should establish whether Green Belt land is in sustainable locations;
- the Golden Rules; and
- how to assess the potential impact of development on the openness of the Green Belt.

3.1.2 The guidance is relevant to:

- a) authorities performing a review of Green Belt boundaries to meet housing or other development needs (either prior to or as part of the plan making process);
- b) those authorities otherwise required to determine whether land constitutes grey belt in decision making; and
- c) others seeking to identify grey belt land.

3.1.3 The new Green Belt guidance makes clear that: “*Where grey belt is identified, it does not automatically follow that it should be allocated for development, released from the Green Belt or for development proposals to be approved in all circumstances.*” And that this is because “*...The contribution Green Belt land makes to Green Belt purposes is one consideration in making decisions about Green Belt land. Such decisions should also be informed by an overall application of the relevant policies in the National Planning Policy Framework.*”

3.1.4 The new Green Belt guidance sets out how each of the three relevant purposes (set out in the NPPF at paragraph 143): (a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas, (b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another, and (d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns) should be assessed.

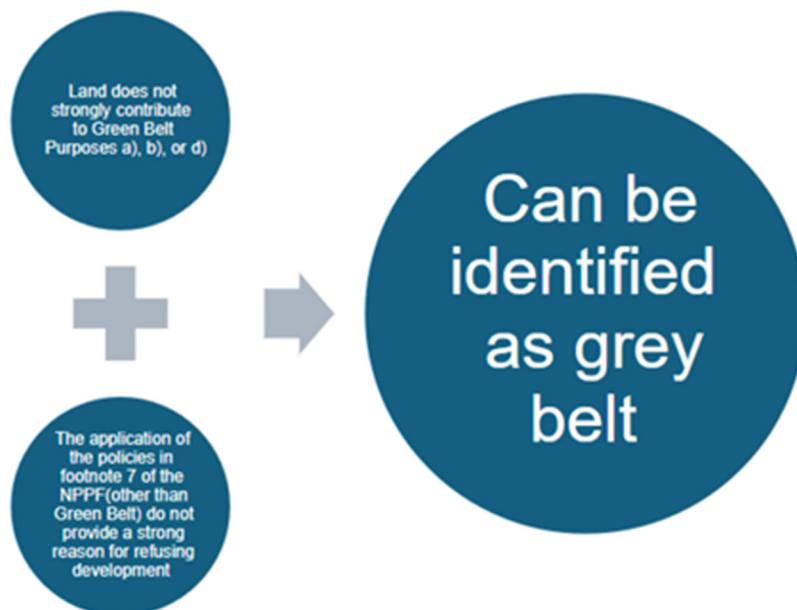
3.1.5 Against each of the purposes, a table is set out which defines “**contribution**” at three levels:

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/planning-practice-guidance>

⁴ See the 2nd main heading in the guidance

- Strong
- Moderate
- Weak or none

- 3.1.6 The guidance confirms that the assessment of these contributions is a **matter of judgment**, but that considerations for making these judgments should be informed by a set of suggested **“illustrative features.”**
- 3.1.7 After consideration of the above criteria, any assessment area that is not judged to strongly contribute to any one of purposes a, b, or d can be identified as grey belt land, subject to the exclusion of land where the application of the policies relating to the areas or assets in footnote 7 to the NPPF (other than Green Belt) would provide a strong reason for refusing or restricting development.
- 3.1.8 The new Green Belt guidance includes a summary diagram for when land can be identified as Grey Belt:



4. GREY BELT ASSESSMENT

4.1.1 The Site is located on the southern settlement edge of Ellesmere Port, Stanney and Stanlow Oil Refinery. The Site is bound to the north by the A5117, to the south by the M56, to the east by the River Gowy and to the west by hedgerow field boundaries. The Site parcels are bisected north to south by the M53 and border the nucleated village of Stoak, within the eastern portion, and an element of ribbon development within the village of Stanney in the western element (as illustrated on **Figure 1: Site Location and Study Area at Appendix A**). The Site comprises a series of land parcels, currently under arable and pastoral land use, separated by hedgerow field boundaries and highway infrastructure, as shown in the map extract below (refer to **Figure C**):

4.1.2 For this Grey Belt Assessment the Site has been split into four distinct parcels, as shown in **Figure C** below:

- Site Parcel A – Land to the west of Stanney and Rake Lane
- Site Parcel B – Land to the east of Rake Lane and west of M53
- Site Parcel C – Land to the east of M53 and west of the Shropshire Union Canal
- Site Parcel D – Land to the east of the Shropshire Union Canal

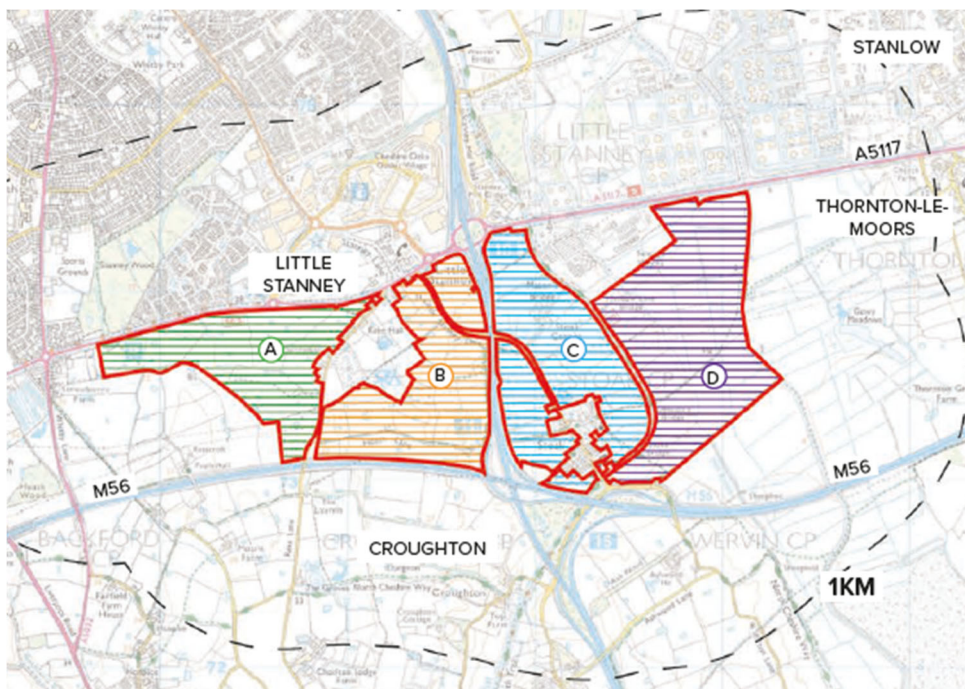


Figure C: Site context and Parcels

Stage 1 – is the Site Grey Belt?

Purpose A - To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas	
This purpose relates to the sprawl of large built-up areas. Villages should not be considered large built up areas.	
Contribution	Illustrative Features
Strong	<p>Assessment areas that contribute strongly are likely to be free of existing development, and lack physical feature(s) in reasonable proximity that could restrict and contain development. They are also likely to include all of the following features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - be adjacent or near to a large built up area - if developed, result in an incongruous pattern of development (such as an extended “finger” of development into the Green Belt)
Moderate	<p>Assessment areas that contribute moderately are likely to be adjacent or near to a large built up area, but include one or more features that weaken the land’s contribution to this purpose a, such as (but not limited to):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - having physical feature(s) in reasonable proximity that could restrict and contain development - be partially enclosed by existing development, such that new development would not result in an incongruous pattern of development - contain existing development - being subject to other urbanising influences
Weak	<p>Assessment areas that make only a weak or no contribution are likely to include those that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - are not adjacent to or near to a large built up area - are adjacent to or near to a large built up area, but containing or being largely enclosed by significant existing development
SITE PARCEL A	
<p>Site Parcel A adjoins the large built-up area of Ellesmere Port, lying directly adjacent to the southern residential and commercial settlement edge, beyond the A5117. The Site features strong, defined, durable and permanent boundaries - particularly the M56 motorway in the south, along with hedgerow and tree field boundaries in the west, to the east along Rake Lane and internally within the Site, which provide a strong degree of visual enclosure in views from the surrounding landscape. These physical features could be reinforced to restrict and contain future development of the Site.</p> <p>Prominent landscape features within Site Parcel A, include small to medium sized strong field boundaries characterised by thick bushy hedgerows, hedgerow field oaks, small woodland copse in corners of fields and an extensive network of small field ponds which are inconspicuous in the landscape and defined by trees or scrub. Retaining those landscape features and boundaries of value, as part of future development, would minimise the perception of sprawl as development would be well contained, with Parcel A characterised by the existing landscape</p>	

features, field enclosure and structure, breaking the development up to ensure it does not physically or perceptually form a single mass of development or a substantial expansion to Ellesmere Port.

Parcel A features enclosed arable farmland bound to the north by Stanney Woods LNR, the residential and commercial settlement edge of Ellesmere Port, Cheshire Oaks car dealerships, and the A5117 which features tree and hedgerow vegetation to each side, providing a strong sense of visual enclosure. The parcel is bound to the east by Rake Lane, which has already encroached the Green Belt as it features scattered, ribbon residential development and is enclosed by hedgerow and tree field boundaries along its length. The presence of existing ribbon residential development along Rake Lane, the Chester Fair Oaks Caravan and Motorhome Club Campsite to the immediate east, the M56 adjacent to the southern boundary and the residential and commercial settlement edge of Ellesmere Port, Cheshire Oaks car dealerships, and the A5117 to the north are all urbanising influences over Site Parcel A.

Due to the presence of these urban influences, this parcel has an urban fringe character, rather than open countryside, with the parcel being influenced by the surrounding urban area of Ellesmere Port.

Therefore, in this context it is considered Site Parcel A makes no more than ‘moderate’ contribution to Purpose A

SITE PARCEL B

Site Parcel B adjoins the large built-up area of Ellesmere Port, lying directly adjacent to the southern commercial settlement edge (featuring Cheshire Oaks retail park), beyond the A5117. The Site features strong, defined, durable and permanent boundaries - particularly the M53 motorway to the east and the M56 motorway to the south, along with hedgerow and tree field boundaries in the west along Rake Lane and internally within the Site (including historic Heath Lane), which provide a strong degree of visual enclosure in views from the surrounding landscape. These physical features could restrict and contain future development of the Site.

There is scattered linear residential development along Rake Lane, which has already compromised the Green Belt and creates an urban fringe influence on the Parcel, when combined with the urbanising physical and perceptual influences of the M56, M53 and A5117 infrastructure corridors and overhead electricity pylons (which impact on tranquillity of the Site).

Due to the presence of these urban influences, this parcel has an urban fringe character, rather than open countryside, with the parcel being influenced by the surrounding urban area of Ellesmere Port.

Therefore, in this context it is considered Site Parcel B makes no more than ‘moderate’ contribution to Purpose A

SITE PARCEL C

Site Parcel C adjoins the large built-up area of Ellesmere Port, lying directly adjacent to the southern commercial / industrial settlement edge, beyond the A5117. The Site features strong, defined, durable and permanent boundaries - particularly the M53 motorway to the west, the A5117 and existing settlement of Ellesmere Port in the north, the Shropshire Union Canal in the east and the M53 / M56 junction in the south, all which provide a strong degree of visual enclosure in views from the surrounding landscape. These physical features could restrict and contain future development of the Site.

Electricity pylons are visually detracting vertical features running centrally across Site Parcel C. The Church of St Lawrence (Grade II*) within the village of Stoak is a prominent visual landmark in views from the east and the Shropshire Union Canal. The motorways are a more prominent detracting / urbanising feature of this parcel.

The northern part of Parcel C is open farmland and visually more open compared to the southern part, physically adjacent and sharing intervisibility with the highway infrastructure of the M53, A5117, Ellesmere Port Effluent Treatment Works and electricity pylons (which provide a substantial impact on tranquillity of the Site).

The southern part of Parcel C features the nucleated village of Stoak which includes several listed buildings and a Scheduled Monument. The combination of landform, curtilage vegetation, small field enclosures and boundaries and vegetation along the highway infrastructure corridors visually screens and encloses the village to the north, south and west. There is less vegetation coverage to the east, due to the open pastures, providing a visual connection between the village and the Shropshire Union Canal.

Parcel C features strong urban influences to the north (A5117 and settlement edge of Ellesmere Port), with durable boundaries to the east (Shropshire Union Canal), south (M56) and west (M53).

Due to the presence of these urban influences, this parcel has an urban fringe character, rather than open countryside, with the parcel being influenced by the surrounding urban area and industrial activities of Ellesmere Port.

Therefore, in this context it is considered Site Parcel B makes no more than ‘moderate’ contribution to Purpose A

THE SITE - PARCEL D

Site Parcel D is open grazing marshland situated between the Shropshire Union Canal to the west, the River Gowy to the east, the A5117 and Stanlow Oil refinery to the north and the M56 to the south.

This part of the Site is open and rural in nature, featuring large open fields, limited hedgerow and tree cover and a network of drainage ditches contributing to field pattern. Whilst the parcel lacks any built development, there are urbanising and industrial elements associated with the nearby Ellesmere Port Effluent Treatment Works and Stanlow Oil Refinery adjacent to the northern boundary (that form visual detractors in views, as do the electricity pylons that run centrally across the parcel)

Site Parcel D is located adjacent to Gowy Meadows and Ditches LWS and Nature Reserve and features coastal and floodplain grazing marsh priority habitat, of ecological value. This part of the Site is undeveloped, rural in character, open and visually sensitive to views from Gowy Meadows.

Whilst the northern part of Parcel D does border the built up area of Ellesmere Port’s commercial and industrial uses, extensive development across the entirety of Parcel D would have a substantial impact on the character of the landscape and the perception of a sprawling expansion to the Ellesmere Port industrial area. The open and rural nature of Parcel D, with limited tree and hedgerow cover, would result in an obvious perceived sprawl of the urban area of Ellesmere Port into the neighbouring countryside.

Therefore, in this context it is considered Site Parcel D makes a ‘strong’ contribution to Purpose A

Purpose B - to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another	
This purpose relates to the merging of towns, not villages.	
Contribution	Illustrative Features
Strong	<p>Assessment areas that contribute strongly are likely to be free of existing development and include all of the following features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - forming a substantial part of a gap between towns - the development of which would be likely to result in the loss of visual separation of towns
Moderate	<p>Assessment areas that contribute moderately are likely to be located in a gap between towns, but include one or more features that weaken their contribution to this purpose, such as (but not limited to):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - forming a small part of the gap between towns - being able to be developed without the loss of visual separation between towns. This could be (but is not limited to) due to the presence or the close proximity of structures, natural landscape elements or topography that preserve visual separation
Weak or None	<p>Assessment areas that contribute weakly are likely to include those that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - do not form part of a gap between towns, or - form part of a gap between towns, but only a very small part of this gap, without making a contribution to visual separation
<p>All the Site Parcels are located within the North Cheshire Green Belt ‘strategic gap between Chester and Ellesmere Port’ and form a small part of the wider gap between Ellesmere Port and Chester, due the significant separation which exists between these two towns.</p>	
SITE PARCEL A	
<p>From Parcel A there is currently c. 4km Green Belt ‘strategic gap’ between the southern settlement edge of Ellesmere Port and the northern settlement edge of Chester in this location. Development of the whole of Parcel A would decrease the strategic gap between Chester and Ellesmere Port by c. 800m (c. 0.5 miles), leaving c. 3.2km Green Belt strategic gap. The presence of the M56 motorway corridor and strong hedgerow field boundaries along the southern boundary of Parcel A contains any future development and the extent of landscape to the south of the M56 prevents any perception of Ellesmere Port and Chester merging into one another.</p> <p>Development of Parcel A, as an extension to Ellesmere Port and set within a strong landscape framework, could retain a substantial physical gap and a strong perception of separation between the settlements of Ellesmere Port and Chester. The reduction in this strategic gap would be imperceptible, with the existing gap of sufficient scale, that the removal of the Site would not result in physical or perceptual merging between these neighbouring built-up areas.</p> <p>Therefore, in this context it is considered the contribution of Site Parcel A to Purpose B is <u>‘Weak’</u></p>	

SITE PARCEL B

From Parcel B there is currently c. 4.1km Green Belt 'strategic gap' between the southern settlement edge of Ellesmere Port and the northern settlement edge of Chester in this location.

Development of the whole of Parcel B would decrease the strategic gap between Chester and Ellesmere Port by c. 1.1km (c. 0.6 miles), leaving c. 3km Green Belt strategic gap.

The presence of the M56 motorway corridor, strong hedgerow field boundaries and Heath Lane (vegetated historic track, along the southern boundary of Parcel B) contains any future development and the extent of intervening landscape prevents any perception of Ellesmere Port and Chester merging into one another.

Development of Parcel B, as an extension to Ellesmere Port and set within a strong landscape framework could retain a substantial physical gap and a strong perception of separation between the settlements of Ellesmere Port and Chester. The reduction in this strategic gap would be imperceptible, with the existing gap of sufficient scale, that the removal of the Site would not result in physical or perceptual merging between these neighbouring built-up town areas.

Therefore, in this context it is considered the contribution of Site Parcel B to Purpose B is 'Weak'

SITE PARCEL C

From Parcel C there is currently c. 4.2km Green Belt 'strategic gap' between the southern settlement edge of Ellesmere Port and the northern settlement edge of Chester in this location.

Development of the whole of Parcel C would decrease the strategic gap between Chester and Ellesmere Port by c. 1.5km (c. 0.9 miles), leaving c. 2.7km Green Belt strategic gap.

This part of the Site plays a role in resisting coalescence of neighbouring settlements, between Ellesmere Port in the north and Stoak village in the south (albeit Purpose B relates to the coalescence and merging of towns, not villages). The reduction in this strategic gap between towns would be imperceptible, with the existing gap of sufficient scale, that the removal of the Site would not result in physical or perceptual merging between these neighbouring built-up town areas.

Therefore, in this context it is considered the contribution of Site Parcel B to Purpose B is 'Weak'

SITE PARCEL D

From Parcel D there is currently c. 4.5km Green Belt 'strategic gap' between the southern settlement edge of Ellesmere Port and the northern settlement edge of Chester in this location.

Development of the whole of Parcel D would decrease the strategic gap between Chester and Ellesmere Port by c. 1.7km (c. 1 mile), leaving c. 2.8km Green Belt strategic gap.

The presence of the M56 motorway and extent of landscape to the south, River Gowy to the east and canal to the west could retain a substantial physical gap and a strong perception of separation between the settlements of Ellesmere Port and Chester. The reduction in this strategic gap would be imperceptible, with the existing gap of sufficient scale, that the removal of the Site would not result in physical or perceptual merging between these neighbouring built-up town areas.

Therefore, in this context it is considered the contribution of Site Parcel B to Purpose B is 'Weak'

Purpose D - to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns	
This purpose relates to historic towns, not villages. Where there are no historic towns in the plan area, it may not be necessary to provide detailed assessments against this purpose.	
Contribution	Illustrative Features
Strong	<p>Assessment areas that contribute strongly are likely be free of existing development and to include all of the following features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - form part of the setting of the historic town - make a considerable contribution to the special character of a historic town. This could be (but is not limited to) as a result of being within, adjacent to, or of significant visual importance to the historic aspects of the town
Moderate	<p>Assessment areas that perform moderately are likely to form part of the setting and/or contribute to the special character of a historic town but include one or more features that weaken their contribution to this purpose, such as (but not limited to):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - being separated to some extent from historic aspects of the town by existing development or topography - containing existing development - not having an important visual, physical, or experiential relationship to historic aspects of the town
Weak or None	<p>Assessment areas that make no or only a weak contribution are likely to include those that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - do not form part of the setting of a historic town - have no visual, physical, or experiential connection to the historic aspects of the town
SITE PARCELS A & B	
<p>Parcels A & B are visually enclosed and physically contained by existing field boundary vegetation and the M56 motorway along the southern boundary. There are no views into or out of Parcels A & B to Chester (nearest historic town) or its historic core, or the nearby village of Stoak (albeit this purpose relates to the setting of historic towns, not villages).</p> <p>There are no cultural heritage designations on the Site and those in the surrounding area contribute to the wider landscape but have a negligible influence on the Site.</p> <p>Parcels A & B do not feature adjacent settlements in the nearby area that would be considered 'historical towns' – regardless of the presence of Rake Hall (Grade II) on Rake Lane and a number of listed buildings in Little Stanney.</p> <p>Therefore, in this context it is considered the contribution of the Site to Purpose D is <u>'weak or none'</u></p>	
SITE PARCEL C	
<p>Parcel C is visually contained by the strong defined linear boundaries of the M56, M53, Shropshire Union Canal, A5117, settlement edge of Ellesmere Port and field boundary vegetation. There are no views into or out of Parcel C to Chester (nearest historic town) or its historic core and it is not considered to contribute to the historic character and setting of Chester.</p>	

The southern part of Parcel C does include the village of Stoak, which contains several listed buildings, a Scheduled Monument and a prominent historic landmark - The Church of St Lawrence (Grade II*). The village of Stoak does not constitute a 'historic town' nor is it designated a Conservation Area, however the Church of St Lawrence (Grade II*) forms a visual landmark in views from the east and the Shropshire Union Canal, therefore the LVA considered the southern part of Parcel C as more sensitive due to the heritage sensitivities in Stoak.

However, given Chester is the nearest historic town, removal of the Site from the Green Belt would have **No Impact** on this purpose.

Therefore, in this context it is considered the contribution of the Site to Purpose D is 'weak or none'

SITE PARCEL D

Site Parcel D is open grazing marshland, situated between the Shropshire Union Canal to the west and the River Gowy to the east. This part of the Site is open and rural in nature, featuring large open fields, limited hedgerow and tree cover and a network of drainage ditch field pattern.

There are no views into or out of Parcel D to Chester or its historic core and this Parcel is not considered to contribute to the historic character and setting of Chester.

Thornton-le-Moors is a designated Conservation Area, featuring a number of listed buildings – located approximately 850m to the east of Site Parcel D. The village is flanked and enclosed on its edges by existing vegetation and highway infrastructure. Confirmed through testing during LVA field work, there is no intervisibility between any of the Site parcels and Thornton-le-Moors Conservation Area and listed buildings - due to the enclosure created by existing vegetation on its edges. This village is also not a historic town.

Therefore, in this context it is considered the contribution of the Site to Purpose D is 'weak or none'

Addressing footnote 7 Constraints

As defined in the NPPF, grey belt excludes land where the application of policies relating to the areas or assets in footnote 7 to the NPPF (other than Green Belt) would provide a strong reason for refusing or restricting development.

SITE PARCELS A & B

These parcels of the Site are predominantly arable farmland and not subject to any ecological designations, nor do they feature any heritage designations or significant areas at risk of flooding. These parcels do feature mature hedgerow and tree field boundary vegetation and a group of vegetation subject to Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) - however it is considered these assets could be safeguarded and incorporated in future development proposals.

Therefore, in this context it is considered these parcels are not subject to constraints set out in footnote 7 of the NPPF.

SITE PARCEL C

This parcel is a combination of arable and pastoral farmland and not subject to any ecological designations nor does it feature any significant areas at risk of flooding. Whilst the parcel itself is not subject to any heritage designations, it does lie directly adjacent to the village of Stoak, which contains several listed buildings, a Scheduled Monument and a prominent historic landmark - The Church of St Lawrence (Grade II*). The eastern boundary of the Site also lies directly adjacent to Shropshire Union Canal, which is designated a Conservation Area, featuring several listed

bridge structures. A sensitive design response and mitigation, as part of future development proposals, could safeguard these existing heritage assets that lie outside / beyond the Site.

The Site contains Previously Developed Land (PDL) (as defined by the NPPF) in the form of Stoak Grange farm, which features lawfully developed, permanent structures (farm house, storage barns and sheds and outbuildings), that could be considered to contribute to its definition as Grey Belt.

Therefore, in this context it is considered this parcel is not covered by constraints highlighted in footnote 7 of the NPPF.

SITE PARCEL D

This parcel of the Site is open grazing marshland, with a large proportion (c.80%) designated 'Coastal and Floodplain' priority habitat which, whilst not automatically considered an 'irreplaceable habitat', are identified as being particularly important, threatened and a material consideration in planning decisions. A large proportion of this parcel (c.75% – all the land to the east of Mill Brook) is within Flood Zones 2 and 3 and considered at significant risk of flooding.

Therefore, in this context it is considered this parcel is covered by constraints highlighted in footnote 7 of the NPPF.

CONCLUSION OF STAGE 1

Is the Site Grey Belt?

SITE PARCELS A, B & C

YES – Site can be identified as Grey Belt

Site does not strongly contribute to Green Belt purposes a, b and d

√

Free from footnote 7 constraints, or harm would not provide strong reason to restrict development

√

If site is grey belt, the assessment needs to consider if the Proposed Development is “not inappropriate” in the Green Belt

Stage 2

SITE PARCEL D

NO – Site cannot be identified as Grey Belt

Site does not strongly contribute to Green Belt purposes a, b and d

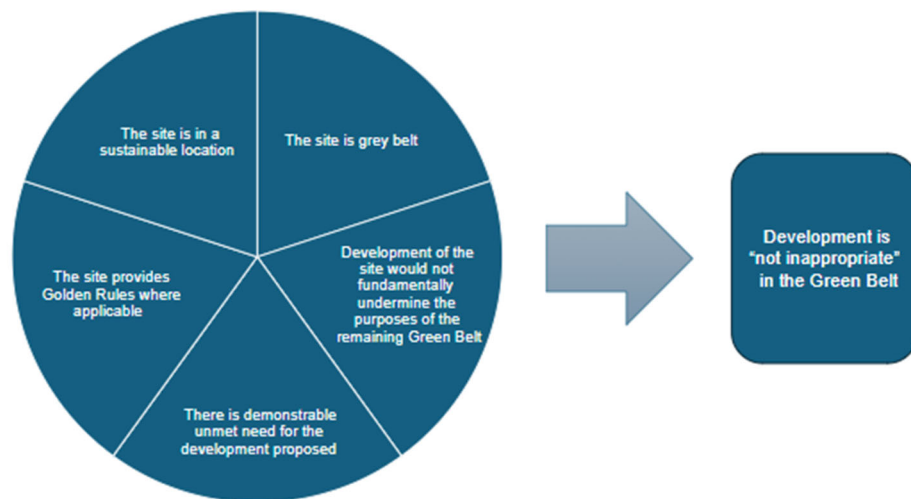
X

Free from footnote 7 constraints, or harm would not provide strong reason to restrict development

X

Stage 2 – can development amount to “Not Inappropriate” Development?

- 4.1.3 If the Site is considered ‘grey belt’ after stage 1, the stage 2 assessment considers if the Proposed Development in the Green Belt is “not inappropriate” under paragraph 155 of the NPPF. All four of the other elements of this stage must be satisfied.
- 4.1.4 Following the Stage 1 assessment it is considered Site Parcels A, B & C can be identified as ‘Grey Belt’.
- 4.1.5 For the Stage 2 assessment these parcels are considered as a whole.



Development of parcels A, B & C would not fundamentally undermine the purposes of the remaining Green Belt: YES APPROPRIATE

This Green Belt Review concludes development of the Site Parcels A, B & C would not undermine the following purposes of the wider Green Belt:

- checking unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas
- preventing neighbouring towns from merging into one another
- safeguarding countryside from encroachment
- preserving the setting and special character of historic towns
- assisting in urban regeneration, by encouraging recycling of derelict and other urban land

There is demonstrable unmet need for development proposed: YES APPROPRIATE

Cheshire West and Chester faces a need for more housing, particularly affordable and diverse options, as outlined in the council's Housing Strategy 2025 – 2035.

The new Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan must plan to meet the government's housing target which was revised in December 2024.

The figure for Cheshire West and Chester (at 1 April 2025) is a minimum of 1,914 new homes each year, and for a plan covering a 15-year period, this equates to a total figure of 28,710 new homes.

The higher figure does not take account of constraints, such as designated areas of environmental and heritage value, Green Belt and flood risk. Nor does it consider the impact on infrastructure provision e.g. transport capacity, school places and GP surgeries.

The Site provides Golden Rules where applicable: YES APPROPRIATE

To accord with the Government's 'Golden Rules' for release of land from the Green Belt, for major development, there is an opportunity to provide the following as part of a sustainable, landscape and community led development on the Site:

- A high percentage of affordable housing, at a rate to be agreed with Cheshire West and Chester Council, whilst also increasing the volume of aspirational homes as part of a suitable balance of tenures and housing mix.
- Improvements to local and community green infrastructure facilities on this edge of the town.
- Development of the Site has potential to bring substantial benefits to this edge of the existing settlement, including the delivery of extensive Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) as part of a framework of over 50% of the Site as green and blue infrastructure.
- New residents and the wider public will be able to access good quality green spaces, including a substantial area of parkland across the Site, featuring areas of meadow grassland, woodland, trees, informal pathways, allotments and sports pitches.

- The provision of high quality accessible green open spaces, integrating active travel and recreational routes: within a 15 min walk of all homes on the Site and connecting with existing and emerging adjacent green corridors.
- Making on-site formal and informal recreational facilities available to the existing and new communities.
- The retention and enhancement of the hedgerow, tree and woodland network across the Site, in collaboration & partnership with Mersey Forest, seeking opportunities for new tree / woodland community planting.
- Opportunities to provide public access on land currently private and inaccessible. A new active travel network could be provided – connecting with the existing PRow network and the canal towpath, encouraging walking and cycling over the use of cars.
- The Ellesmere Port Site offers multiple opportunities for ecological enhancement that align with the objectives, principles and thematic priorities of the Cheshire and Warrington Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), including the six key habitat themes, including woodland, watercourses, hedgerows, and grassland restoration.
- The Site lies within and adjacent to several Nature Recovery Opportunity Areas and ecological corridors identified in LNRS mapping, which can be leveraged as part of the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) strategy.

Whilst Parcel D is not considered Grey Belt (Stage 1), there is the potential for this part of the Site to be included as part of the Proposed Development, albeit remaining Green Belt - taking opportunities to enhance the overall biodiversity of this Site Parcel, through collaboration & partnership with Cheshire Wildlife Trust, to extend Goway Meadows nature reserve and create a c.50ha new publicly accessible open space (with access controlled to limit impact on ecological sensitivities) that transforms farmland pastures into a biodiverse wetland habitat mosaic. This part of the Site falls within the hydrological influence of floodplain habitats that are of strategic importance to the Cheshire and Warrington Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).

The Site is in a sustainable Location: **YES APPROPRIATE**

- The Site is in a sustainable location, lying directly adjacent to the large residential and commercial urban settlement edge of Ellesmere Port, with safe access to the existing bus network and access to the Site from the A5117, Little Stanney Lane and Rake Lane, which is considered to create a sustainable pattern of development, providing a logical extension to the existing urban edge of Ellesmere Port.
- The A5117 runs along the northern boundary and represents a key constraint to north-south active travel permeability from Ellesmere Port, which future proposals could address. The Shropshire Union Canal also runs through Site Parcels C & D, with a 1.5m wide towpath and associated cycle paths (NCR 6) running alongside. There is potential to improve the accessibility of this route and for development to provide positive interaction with the canal.
- Proposed Development on the Site could facilitate the growth of a permeable neighbourhood, with active travel routes threading through green corridors and connecting with the existing PRow network, Heath Lane and the canal towpath, encouraging walking and cycling over the use of private cars.

- Proposed Development on the Site could facilitate reparation to the severance of strategic infrastructure, also a key aim, focusing on providing safe pedestrian crossings over the A5117 to create coherent placemaking.
- The Site is subject to urbanising influences from: existing built form on the adjacent southern settlement edge of Ellesmere Port; existing utilities in the form of overhead pylons; the surrounding motorway (M56 and M56) & highway infrastructure (A5117); and part of the Site features PDL (Stoak Grange farm).

CONCLUSION OF STAGE 2

The development amounts to “not inappropriate” in the Green Belt

- It will not fundamentally undermine remaining Green Belt	√
- Unmet housing need	√
- Meets the Golden Rules	√
- Sustainable location	√

5. IMPACT ON THE WIDER GREEN BELT FROM REMOVAL OF SITE FOR DEVELOPMENT

- 5.1.1 The Site is located on the southern settlement edge of Ellesmere Port, Stanney and Stanlow Oil Refinery. The Site is bound to the north by the A5117, to the south by the M56, to the east by the River Gowy and to the west by mature hedgerow field boundaries.
- 5.1.2 Following the Grey Belt Assessment in Section 4, it is considered that Site Parcels A, B & C could be considered Grey Belt and removed from the Green Belt, with Site Parcel D to remain in the Green Belt (albeit forming part of the Proposed Development to provide green infrastructure and public open space improvements, which accord with the Golden Rules of the NPPF).
- 5.1.3 The outer Green Belt boundaries could be reinforced, to provide durable and robust structural landscape features that are readily recognisable as permanent edges to the Green Belt, particularly along the boundaries with the existing motorway infrastructure corridor of the M56 and along the Shropshire Union Canal.
- 5.1.4 Removal of the Site from the Green Belt, for built development (in Site Parcels A, B & C), would roll back the Green Belt to the M56 motorway to the south and to the Shropshire Union Canal in the east, creating a strong and robust defensible boundary and Green Belt edge that would prevent perception of unrestricted sprawl from Ellesmere Port, particularly into the ‘strategic gap’ between the M56 and the northern edge of Chester. This would have no impact on the strength of the wider Green Belt and its ability to continue to serve the five purposes defined in the NPPF.
- 5.1.5 It is recommended that Parcel D is retained within the Green Belt, albeit with enhancements to accord with the Golden Rules of the NPPF (in collaboration & partnership with Cheshire Wildlife Trust), to extend Gowy Meadows nature reserve, with the Shropshire Union Canal forming a defensible boundary between the two land uses. This would provide ecological and environmental enhancements to the Green Belt, whilst improving access to new residents and the existing community (controlled to limit impact on ecological sensitivities) but would also have no impact on the strength of this parcel or the wider Green Belt and its ability to continue to serve the five purposes defined in the NPPF.
- 5.1.6 Sensitive landscape-led masterplanning of the Site would enable the implementation of a strong Landscape Framework, to form the basis of any development on the Site. This could include:
- retention and reinforcement of existing hedgerow, woodland and trees along the Site’s boundaries, providing a strong edge to the Green Belt, preventing any negative urban influence or weakening of the Green Belt beyond
 - hedgerow restoration and creation within the Site, including hedgerow trees, to provide visual and ecological links between existing and proposed woodland areas
 - retention and conservation of existing woodland and ponds on the Site and extension of the tree and woodland cover on the Site’s boundaries, to improve the setting and integration of any development on the Site into the landscape

- enhanced foot and cycle connections, to provide improved accessibility between the Site, the existing settlement edge and the wider rights of way network in the Green Belt and along the canal network
- a more sensitive transition from urban to rural character – using height, materials, density and landscaping to create a permeable edge to the south and east. Strengthening of the physical landscape structure on the Site boundaries and internally through tree, woodland and hedgerow planting to assist with visual assimilation and habitat connectivity

6. ENHANCEMENTS & POTENTIAL FOR REDEFINITION OF GREEN BELT

6.1.1 The NPPF stipulates that altering the boundaries of the existing Green Belt must only be done through new or updated Local Plans and “*exceptional circumstances*” are required.

6.1.2 NPPF paragraph 151 states:

“Once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance their beneficial use, such as looking for opportunities to provide access; to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation; to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or to improve damaged and derelict land.”

6.1.3 The most common reasons given by inspectors⁵ for deciding that “*exceptional circumstances*” exist to justify the release of Green Belt in a local plan include:

- Unmet need for development – housing need within an area
- The release is the most sustainable option
- Lack of contribution to Green Belt purposes
- Creation of defensible boundaries
- Limited visual impact
- Provision of Infrastructure

6.1.4 In relation to the last point ‘provision of infrastructure’, larger developments play a role in providing and improving transport or social infrastructure for the benefit of new and surrounding existing communities. In some cases, allocation and release of Green Belt land is judged to be the only possible way of enabling a scale of development sufficient to fund new provision and avoiding strain on existing facilities.

Existing Site Context

6.1.5 The Site is wholly designated Green Belt and forms the northern part of a gap between Chester and Ellesmere Port.

6.1.6 The land use within the Site’s Green Belt is predominantly agricultural farmland which is private and inaccessible, situated and land locked between the Ellesmere Port urban area and strategic highway infrastructure corridors. Most of the Site lacks any recreational and amenity value, except for Site Parcel D. There are significant barriers to access the Green Belt of the Site, which affect the north / south and east / west connectivity across the landscape - including road infrastructure (A5117, M56 and M53). A couple of east / west public footpaths cross Parcels B and C of the

⁵ <https://www.planningresource.co.uk/article/1682501/five-circumstances-exceptional-enough-justify-green-belt-release-local-plans>

Site, however they lack legibility, are narrow and often overgrown in places. Contrary to the national policy aspirations of improved accessibility to the Green Belt, these issues all combine to provide a Green Belt with very limited benefits for the adjacent communities of Ellesmere Port.

6.1.7 Sensitive landscape-led masterplanning of the Site, as described above, would enable the implementation of a new defensible Green Belt boundary, extending the existing strong durable boundaries, as described in Section 5 above.

6.1.8 There is an opportunity to redefine the Ellesmere Port settlement boundaries with the Green Belt, as described above, whilst also ensuring release for development will:

- Provide the existing surrounding communities with a range of publicly accessible recreational facilities, including a network of open spaces throughout the Site, that provide the opportunity for allotments, community gardens, amenity green spaces and children's play.
- Provide new green infrastructure corridors which connect Stanney Wood in the west to Gowy Meadows in the east. This east / west link would reduce the barrier effect of the motorway infrastructure and bridge the gap between existing corridors for both biodiversity and recreational value - realising the concept of linear parkland (GI Corridor) between Stanney Wood and Gowy Meadows, as part of a transitional landscape from woodlands to wetland, improving public access, amenity, biodiversity and connectivity.
- Further enhance the strong network of hedgerows, woodlands and defensible boundary features contributing to Green Belt enclosure.
- Improve connectivity between the settlement edge of Ellesmere Port out to the countryside in the south, via green corridors and links through the Site, which have the potential to connect into the existing PRoW network beyond.
- Contribute to achieving and optimising a Biodiversity Net Gain on Site, facilitating safe movement of wildlife through a mosaic of new and improved habitats.
- Create new public open space which supports the new and existing community, providing opportunities for: outdoor sport and recreation for the local community; accessible footpaths / cycleways; local food production; enhancement of biodiversity value through habitat creation; and improvement of overall amenity value of the landscape.
- Provide a new defensible edge to the Green Belt, combined with features within the Green Belt, to reduce the perception of coalescence and sprawl, whilst improving connectivity between communities.
- There is an opportunity to reduce the existing urban influences to the north and north west of Site Parcel D, to improve the perception of open countryside, whilst improving this area as an ecological resource and improving public access to the Green Belt as an extension to Gowy Meadows Nature Reserve. Measures could include additional landscape buffer

planting on the boundaries, to reduce the visual intrusion and urban influence of Ellesmere Port, the Effluent Treatment Works and Stanlow Oil refinery.

- There is an opportunity as part of Proposed Development of the Site, to expand Gowy Meadows and Ditches LWS and Nature Reserve in Site Parcel D. It is recommended that this area of the Site is retained as Green Belt and has the potential to be enhanced, reconnecting characteristic floodplain habitats that contribute to the distinctive and natural character of the floodplain. This landscape could be managed for biodiversity and recreational use - conserving and enhancing the grassland and wetland habitat mosaic and improving the movement of wildlife / people.

6.1.9 Our Grey Belt Assessment (Section 4) considers that Parcels A, B & C could be considered Grey Belt, with these Site Parcels being well contained visually, with strong defensible boundaries of the M56, M53, strong field boundary vegetation and the Shropshire Union Canal to the east. Proposed built development of the Site on Parcels A, B & C is considered to amount to “not inappropriate” in the Green Belt.

6.1.10 Overall, it is considered, that sensitive landscape-led development of the whole Site could be achieved without resulting in a negative impact on, or weakening of, the purposes or strength of the wider Green Belt beyond the boundaries of the Site.

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