

# **A Response by the Wirral Green Space Alliance**

## **To Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Wirral Local Plan 2020-2035 Issues and Options Local Plan (Regulation 18) Consultation**



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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 About Us

The Wirral Green Space Alliance (WGSA) is a consortium of some 32 local societies, including:

Barnston Village Conservation Society,  
Bebington Residents,  
Bidston Village Conservation Area  
Bromborough Society,  
Campaign to Protect Rural England, both Cheshire and Lancashire, Liverpool City Region &  
Greater Manchester  
Claremont Group  
Conservation Areas Wirral,  
Defend Wirral's Green Open Spaces,  
Eastham Village Preservation Association,  
Frankby Conservation Area Advisory Committee,  
Friends of Birkenhead Park  
Greasby Community Association,  
Hamilton Square Conservation Area,  
Heswall Society,  
Irby Cricket Club,  
Irby Thurstaston and Pensby Amenity Society (ITPAS),  
Kings Gap Conservation Area,  
Meols Drive Conservation Area,  
Mountwood Residents,  
Oxton Society  
Saughall Massie Conservation Area,  
Stop Hoylake Golf Resort Action Group,  
Storeton Residents Association  
The Caldby Society,  
The Ramblers Wirral Group.  
The Wirral Society (CPRE Wirral),  
Thornton Hough Community Trust Ltd,

Thornton Hough Conservation Area Society,  
Wirral and Chester Wildlife,  
Wirral Footpaths and Open Spaces Preservation Society.

Our members share an ambition for Wirral's greenspace to be best protected and enhanced by the emerging Local Plan when planning for new development requirements. We acknowledge the recent progress made by officers in drafting the Local Plan and refreshing the evidence base in recent months. We remain grateful for opportunities to meet with officers to discuss constructively our concerns for our environment.

## **1.2 Overview**

We provide our answers to the Issues and Options questions below. We make the case that environmental and planning designations that protect valued local assets should endure in the future for the benefit of all. Our overriding issue relates to correcting the scale of development quantum for both housing and jobs downwards. Currently housing is wrongly specified at three to four times what it should be (using the standard method and ONS 2014 derived data). This needlessly threatens the environment, when translating into the all-important 5 year housing land supply, land which is deemed special, and underpins Wirral distinct landscape character. In our endeavour, we are keen for an improved Local Plan to be adopted without delay, containing the right mix of policies and allocations to look after our greenspaces, whilst delivering enough jobs and houses, including affordable ones.

Crucially the Local Plan should address the problem of vacant and underused former industrial brownfield sites in our existing urban areas. This will support both the Government's national planning policies and Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council's (the Council) declared ambitions to effectively use the land resources by encouraging as much suitable brownfield land as possible to be regenerated. We applaud Pat Hackett (the Leader) and Paul Satoor (Chief Executive of the Council's) for their recent commitment to revitalising Birkenhead, and promoting a place on the Left Bank of the Mersey that is digitally connected and smart, sustainable and designed to inspire with the establishment of a New Development Corporation. Wirral should be a place of innovation and

entrepreneurship, where the community thrives and visitors are offered a distinctive cultural experience along with protecting and enhancing our beloved greenspace.

We understand that high level negotiations are currently taking place with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Council to strike a deal that ensures strategic housing delivery and targeted investment and regeneration. This is a good use of public money, as most people agree that we ought not bulldoze our greenfield land in advance of available previously developed sites. We believe that more sites can be identified for inclusion on the brownfield register.

Other areas for improvement include the Council having proper regard for air quality and we show why to date we think it has failed to do this in the Local Plan. Likewise, we think there is more work to be done to ensure the Local Plan properly plans for development in the context of the area's heritage assets, especially development that although not directly within, is located next to conservation areas.

We are concerned that the Council should have proper regard to the sequential test for planning retail policy and retail allocations. The same is true for applying the sequential test for flood risk. The recent flooding events across several counties are a timely reminder of the harm to communities and threat posed by unsustainable development in the flood plain. Flood alleviation and mitigation are important topics for the policies and allocations of the Local Plan.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) recently beefed up the requirements for authorities to progress statements of common ground to improve their responsibilities under the duty to co-operate. Although Wirral shares a single land boundary with Cheshire West and Cheshire, its physical linkage to Liverpool and the wider Liverpool City Region must not be forgotten. The requirements of Government to demonstrate effective working with neighbours must be discharged properly, and we do note deficiencies, that should be addressed. This is a binary issue when it comes to the examination, a pass or a fail. Sevenoaks, Wealden and St Albans have all experienced delays due to failure to evidence Duty to Cooperate.

Recently, Harrogate's Local Plan was found sound after its housing target was cut by the Examiner, leading to some 24 proposed site allocations being dropped from the adopted Local Plan. There are

other examples of this, and we hope the Council will progress a Local Plan that closely reflects local requirements, which it can reasonably meet when performance checked in the future against the Housing Delivery Test.

We do wish to hold the Council to account on the Local Plan having proper regard for environmental impacts, including the cumulative impacts of development. In our view, there are environmental issues that have not been adequately addressed. The Local Plan should ensure environmental harm is avoided, and properly mitigated and compensated to the appropriate level, reflecting the Government Guidance for in excess of +10% Biodiversity Net Gain targets for new development. The Local Plan needs effectively policy enshrined within the Local Plan and appropriate allocations.

The health and well-being of Wirral's people is at stake when the Local Plan is prepared. We must plan in a more sustainable way in the future and make sure our air, land, and water are free of pollutants, and that we have enough green infrastructure, including trees and hedgerows to filter contaminants and make the area a healthy place to live, work and visit. Housing should be located close to employment to minimise commuting and pollution, and to encourage cycling and walking.

WGSA makes constructive criticism, in the hope the information will enable the Council to progress a more acceptable Local Plan to the Regulation 19 stage. Although the consultation period was extended, and again so due to Coronavirus, WGSA remain concerned that responding to the 90 or so questions of the Issues and Options document, and considering the 54 supporting evidence base documents, was daunting and not all issues may have been picked up, so reserves the right to raise issues moving forward. The online system with 300 word limit (plus attachments) may for many people have been off-putting. This might limit the level of response to the consultation.

In summary, WGSA recognises that our rural areas and greenspace are incredibly vulnerable without up to date policies in place. We hope the planning team listens to our comments and improves the next Local Plan draft for submission to the Secretary of State for examination accordingly. This overarching submission does not preclude individual comment by constituent groups or individuals. This is particularly so for individual sites identified for allocation, which we have not provided comment to keep the response to a reasonable scale.

### **1.3 Appointment of an independent consultant planner**

The Wirral Green Space Alliance (WGSA) has commissioned Jackie Copley a chartered town and country planner to provide independent planning advice in respect of the Wirral Local Plan 2020-2035 Issues and Options Local Plan (Regulation 18) Consultation. A concise summary of her qualification and experience is set out below.

### **1.4 Jackie Copley, MRTPI MA BA (Hons) PgCert - Experience and qualification**

Jackie Copley, MRTPI MA BA (Hons) PgCert, is a chartered town and country planner with more than 25 years professional experience working in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Jackie has a wide range of specialisms including delivery of brownfield regeneration projects in Hulme, Manchester and The Quays, Salford. In consultancy for Tymes, Atkins and independent she prepared a number of brownfield regeneration strategies, strategic housing and employment studies, and she contributed to a number of Green Belt reviews, retail centre health checks, transport studies, and undertook a variety of evaluation and monitoring commissions.

Since 2012, she has worked for the Campaign to Protect Rural England, Lancashire and Cheshire Branches. During this time she has developed a good track record in rural planning, in particular in the area of planning policy progression in the context of the NPPF, including at examination. She has prepared responses to more than 30 Local Plans across Cheshire and Lancashire, including strategic planning documents at the Liverpool City Region and Greater Manchester level. Areas of where she has expertise are climate change, rural housing, brownfield regeneration, and the protection of best and most versatile land, rural landscape character and Green Belt policy.

The comments in this document, and associated papers, are true to the best of her knowledge and have been prepared, and are given, in accordance with the Code of Professional Conduct of the Royal Town Planning Institute and their Guidance on Ethics and Professional Standards. She confirms that the comments expressed are her true and professional opinion.

## 2 Context and Evidence

**Question 2.1** Do you agree with the Council's calculations using the standard method set out in national Guidance? No

**If not please explain why?**

Wirral Green Space Alliance understands that the NPPF Section 5 requires a sufficient supply of homes to be planned over the life time of the Local Plan. We understand that the standard method should be applied, unless exceptional circumstances justify an alternative approach, refer to National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) Paragraph 60.

The housing requirement set out in the Issues and Options Local Plan it is considered grossly over-inflated, by in excess of three times what it should be. Professor Gregg in his Housing Report concludes a total 3,400 housing requirement over 15 years, after current uplift.

Professor Gregg used the Government's standard method, and relied on the corrected ONS 2014 population data, based on published Wirral official administrative data, plus the latest Office of National Statistics (ONS) recommendations on household size trends, plus demographic projections from the 2016 SHMA, plus ONS own variants, plus the University of Manchester work. If the 15 scenarios are representative, which show a range of -400 to +7,100 dwellings , then the probability of needing more than 7,000 homes is approximately 2.5%, but the chance of needing 12,000 or more, is effectively zero.

Please also refer to the March 2020 update of Professor Gregg. There is further evidence provided for WGSA in Reports by Graham Stevens' Reports. What is important to WGSA case for a reduction in housing requirement is that both Professor Gregg and Mr Stevens form the same conclusion by employing different forensic statistical approaches.

The Manchester University Report finds 'effective demand' ranges between +3,750 and +4,280 houses after current uplift over 15 years. Professor Simpson, the author, has carefully considered

all recent Government/ONS population projections based on 2012, 2014 and 2016 data, and several scenarios in coming to this conclusion.

The Housing Delivery Test as set out in NPPF, Annex 1: Implementation will render the Local Plan quickly out of date, with all the harmful consequences that follow. Therefore, WGSA recommends that the data and calculations be corrected, and the total housing requirement accordingly adjusted downwards as the current housing requirement is unreasonably high.

The Queen's Speech 2019 (see page 48, bullet point six) "To deliver on the homes this country needs, the Government is committed to building at least a million more homes over this Parliament. In the coming months we will set out further steps to achieve this, including an ambitious Planning White Paper and funding for critical infrastructure." The one million figure represents a substantial reduction to the national annual housing requirement of 300,000 homes per annum previously announced.

Furthermore, on the 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020 the Office of National Statistics published the 2018 based data. This shows in 2018 the total population of Wirral was 323,235 and that in 2035 it will be 331, 724, which is an increase of 8,489 people. These figures should inform the Local Plan. It is Government's own best practice to use up to date data when progressing evidence bases. WGSA recommends the Council follows best practice.

Please refer to the report by the Campaign to Protect Rural England, which shows that too frequently housing assessments produced by local authorities (SHMAs) are inaccurate, inflated and unreliable. The housing figures produced by SHMAs are not being balanced with sensible planning for infrastructure, consideration of environmental constraints, and realistic assessments of what housebuilders will be able to deliver. The full report is also available: Smarter SHMAs: A Review of Objectively Assessed Need in England. <https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/set-up-to-fail-why-housing-targets-based-on-flawed-numbers-threaten-our-countryside/>

**Question 2.2 Do you think there are exceptional local circumstances to deviate from the standard method for calculating local housing need? Yes**

**If you believe there are exceptional local circumstances, please let us know what they are.**



As set out in answer to 2.1 the standard method results in a figure that is between three and four times higher than is average for what has been the past trend. This scale of difference between the 12,000 formula figure, and Wirral's actual need, which is nearer 3,000, is considered to be by WGSA an exceptional circumstance in itself, sufficient enough to trigger the challenge and to base the Local Plan on a lower figure.

The 3,400 figure comes from the Council's own statistics and other official public records. The 3,400 figure is validated by independent experts employed by the Council (Liverpool and Manchester Universities) and by two local highly qualified experts who are members of the WGSA. As set out in answer to 2.1, the background papers to the Queen's Speech refer to 33% lower national level annual requirements. The Council could articulate on this and seek a lower figure.

Wirral's population has been static, or has had a flat-line for a number of years. Demographic data does not support a higher growth figure. WGSA considers the 12,000 requirement as unachievable and unrealistic. We understand the Council's own members and officers do not believe in this high requirement.

Wirral is a peninsular with a long coastline stretching around three of its sides with associated environmental designations, some of international importance, relating to protected species, particularly migratory birds. Much of the area is designated Green Belt, land serving important Green Belt purposes that would be harmed if allowed for development.

The Green Belt of Wirral was purposefully drawn tightly to respond to threats posed to the countryside from unrestricted growth and the need to revitalise previously built areas. Regeneration has been a long standing ambition of the Council, and other tiers of Government. The Merseyside County Council policy, agreed by all constituent Local Authorities, was to use Green Belt designation, now reinforced by National Planning Policy Framework, Paragraph 134 purpose e), to steer investment to areas in need of regeneration. WGSA believes this ambition is unchanged. The brownfield first focus of the NPPF, emerging Liverpool City Region Spatial Development Strategy and the Local Plan remains clearly stated.

The Council has repeatedly made declarations and passed motions to protect Green Belt land, no release of farmland for development and the increase in tree planting.

Wirral has heritage assets, which have the potential to support a vibrant visitor economy. WGSA want the heritage assets to be thoroughly assessed and in planning for future land use, best protected. There is intelligence that heritage assets are located within the parts of Green Belt, which is proposed for release. The Council has statutory obligations to protect the area's heritage assets commensurate with their status. This is an important part of the local plan making process and it is a matter that WGSA will strongly articulate on at the Examination.

Wirral's economy has declined significantly and regeneration will take a long time to help its recovery. The visitor economy is a growth sector, with tourism, recreation and leisure dependent upon the continued protection and enhancement of the rural parts of the Borough.

This combination leads to exceptional circumstances for the Council to seek to adopt an alternative housing method. If the Council wrongly proceeds with the high housing requirement it will fail to properly have regard for environmental impacts, including the cumulative impacts of development. Please refer to Professor Gregg's Housing Report. Please also refer to the March 2020 update of Professor Gregg. Also refer to Mr Stevens' Reports

**Question 2.3 Can you suggest an alternative approach that would also comply with national policy?** As set out in answers to questions Question 2.1 and 2.2, please refer to Professor Gregg's and Mr Steven's Housing Report documents. Please also refer to the March 2020 update of Professor Gregg.

**Question 2.4 Do you agree with the proposed settlement hierarchy set out in Table 2.2 and an approach based towards focusing investment and regeneration toward the Urban Conurbation to the east of the M53 Motorway? If not, what alternative approach would you consider and why?**

Yes, we agree that the Wirral Local Plan should steer investment and regeneration towards the vast quantity of previously developed brownfield sites that exist in the urban conurbation to the east of the M53 Motorway. Merseyside County Council's aim, supported by constituent authorities (including Wirral) was to use Green Belt, especially Purpose e) to forcibly direct development for regeneration purposes to the north and east of Wirral. It is still vitally important to prioritise urban development in existing settlements. By doing so, Wirral's greenspace in the countryside, and at the urban/rural fringe areas will be better protected. This aim has consistently been the over-arching

strategic objective of previous spatial plans (as evidenced by ARUP in Evidence Base GB1.1 Green Belt Wirral Borough Council Green Belt Review Full Report, November 2019). However, Wirral's regeneration ambitions have not been successful, and speculative housing developments have been allowed in greenfield areas, adversely impacting the market for brownfield land. We hope the new Local Plan will more effectively steer sustainable development. A Local Plan will help to guard against the most harmful piecemeal, speculative, housing.

There are issues with the categories of townships. There are many small towns/villages that function as dormitory suburbs in the area to the west of the M53 Motorway. Irby, Pensby and Thingwall are small towns/villages and should not be classed as Urban Settlements 5-7, but shown lower in the township as a large village. Again, Caldby is a very low density development of large family housing in large garden plots dating back to 1702. Also, it is unclear what the area of 'Urban Barston' implies – if this is the area of housing including Low Wood Grove, to the north of Barston Village, then it is considered miscategorised as an Urban Settlement.

**Question 2.5 Do you agree with the settlement definitions and groupings, and if not, what changes would you wish to see and why?** No

We agree with the proposed hierarchy set out in 2.2 ranging from Urban Conurbation to Hamlet, but not the way the settlements have been classified into 'Townships'. Evidence Base reference PP1 Borough Spatial Portrait 2020 more correctly refers to Irby, Thingwall, Pensby, Heswall and Gayton as dormitory settlements, which is more accurate as they have characteristics of small villages with limited community facilities.

NPPF Paragraph 134 (b) is clear that one of the purposes of Green Belt is to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another'. The Issues and Options Local Plan treats several neighbouring towns as a single large settlement, without offering a rationale or justification, in the evidence base. This is clearly contrary to NPPF policy, which seeks to keep towns from merging, as opposed to coalescing together and seeking to narrow the gaps keeping them distinct. This point is of immense importance for the Local Plan. The Council's flawed interpretations and approach are demonstrated in its selection of Green Belt Sites in especially Option 2A.

**Question 2.6 Do you agree that the Council should calculate the need for employment land based on the Past Completions approach? If not please provide your reasons. No.**

The Local Plan Issues and Options Paragraph 2.41 refers to a 'full market cycle' but this is in fact not the case. In October 2018 we responded to the Local Plan Development Options, and again in July 2019 we responded to the Wirral Land Availability consultation. In both cases, we raised concerns with the evidence base and the data, analysis and assumptions applied when calculating the scale of development identified leading to unnecessary inflation. This is because the Liverpool City Region Strategic Housing and Employment Land Market Assessment (SHELMA) relies on data, analysis and assumptions that are flawed, focused narrowly on past take up during a strong economic cycle, and that was unreasonable to assume would be repeated in the future, due to the economic recession that occurred following the banking crisis, and related global economic downturn. Brexit has led, and will continue, to cause economic uncertainty, with trade deals yet to be confirmed with the US, China or European Union. So in reality the economic land figures ought to be more modest. Coronavirus impacts are yet to be fully understood. Councils can only plan for what they have a reasonable prospect of delivering and being absorbed by the market. Aspirational growth assumptions of the recent past have proved to be unfounded.

We considered the Liverpool City Region Local Industrial Strategy: Statement of Emerging Strategic Priorities. Modern warehouses are reliant on automated robots and do not require a large workforce, job density is very low. The LIS Strategy shows that mental health disorders are high across the city-region, above 20% in Wirral. It is evidenced that spending time in natural environments reduces stress and improves health and well-being. Wirral's natural assets, including its countryside and coastline, enhance the City Region's attractiveness and health and well-being. The publication of the final LIS is anticipated early in 2020.

The Wirral Employment Land and Premises Study 2017 recommends 59.5 hectares would be able to accommodate future needs.

**Question 2.7 If the Council were to calculate the need for employment land based on the lower Baseline or Growth scenarios, do you believe that potentially surplus employment land should be re-designated for alternative uses, including, where suitable, new housing development?**

Yes, it would be logical to allow surplus employment land to be used for other suitable land uses, such as housing, depending on factors such as public open space deficiency and biodiversity. We agree an additional margin should be added for flexibility, but recommend this is capped at 20 hectares.

**Question 2.8 Do you agree that densities should be increased whilst maintaining good design to ensure the maximum use of suitable urban land? Are there any particular sites or areas where you believe that this would be most or least appropriate? Please give your reasons**

Yes, densities should be increased whilst maintaining good design to maximise the contribution of sites to housing delivery. Higher density development guards against greenfield release for development by removing exceptional circumstance for Green Belt release.

Previously, from a precursory investigation we identified a further 59.16 hectares of brownfield land on 6 sites that had not been included as 'suitable' sites on the Council's Brownfield Register. We think the Council should have an accurate and up to date record of suitable brownfield sites to make the best use of land.

We understand Council resources are under pressure and would help by trying to locate additional suitable sites for inclusion on the Brownfield Register to reduce further the justification for releasing Green Belt land. Based on our rudimentary search we believe there will be sites that are overlooked.

**Question 2.9 Are there any particular sites or areas where you believe that this would be most or least appropriate? Please give your reasons.**

The only location where high density is less appropriate is in Caldy, where the landscape character is defined by the low density development. To retain the local character Caldy should have a policy aimed at the prevention of 'garden grabbing' developments, refer to NPPF Paragraph 122 "Planning policies and decisions should support development that makes efficient use of land, taking into account: d) the desirability of maintaining an area's prevailing character and setting (including residential gardens), or of promoting regeneration and change."

We note there are no questions relating to retail and leisure needs in the Local Plan Issues and Options. The Council appear to have failed to have proper regard to the sequential test, in the context of retail development. We recommend for the Regulation 19 Consultation that this issue is picked up upon.

**Question 2.10 Do you agree with the findings of the Economic Viability Baseline Update 2018? If not, please give your reasons.** Yes, broadly. Wirral's Local Plan should yield a good standard of infrastructure, as when community facilities are operating at over-capacity it can seriously erode the quality of life of local communities. Developer contributions should be appropriate to the quantum of development outlined in applications. The Figure 2.1 legend only shows four colours, whereas the map shows seven. We would question whether Zone 1 should be entirely free of developer contributions. This is as Wirral Waters has been designated both an Employment Zone up to 2037, with Enhanced Capital Allowances; and also a Housing Zone and has been awarded over £6 million of Housing Investment Fund (HIF) to support the abnormal costs of remediating the Northbank East and West areas. As the significant public investment effectively has removed the abnormal costs of development, so WGSA considers that there should be developer contribution for important social infrastructure, such as affordable housing. Public benefit must be realised from the significant public investment.

The Government sets out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) Paragraphs 34, 57 and 62 that Councils should ensure all new development is sustainable in the long term by guaranteeing an adequate level of developer contribution. This relies on the Council setting out the minimum requirements for infrastructure and planning contributions expected from developers when applications are submitted. Note that off-site provision is not the normal position. The normal position is on-site and this point needs to be highlighted and reiterated in the Local Plan. As the NPPF is focused on developer viability, it is therefore very important that Local Plan policies clarify the position and tighten up the wording on what is expected as a minimum contribution.

Developers are required to deliver housing types and tenures specified in Local Development Plans. The legal judgment in case of [2018] EWHC 991 (Admin) established that land value must be informed by policy, and consequently, it is not acceptable for the Council to grant permission for an application that is deficient in developer contribution. Therefore the Local Plan policy must be

correctly worded, otherwise places may be deficient in amenities ruining the quality of life for Wirral communities.

**Question 2.11 Are you aware of any other ways that potential gaps in viability could be addressed in the Local Plan, to bring more urban brownfield sites forward for development?**

The Government has negotiated various powers with the newly devolved Combined Authorities. It is important that the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, and its constituent Local Planning authorities better understand the available powers to raise capital for remediation and land assembly, including the compulsory purchase of land as appropriate. Locally Peel is a major strategic land owning interest. We are aware of a partnership approach between the Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham, Trafford Council and Peel Holdings in the regeneration of Pomona Dock. This may well be an exemplar.

**Question 2.12 Do you agree with our proposed approach to enable the positive regeneration and development of Birkenhead to maximise its potential to accommodate a significant proportion of the borough's development needs?**

Yes. WGSA is supportive of the Birkenhead Regeneration Framework and concept of an 'Urban Garden Village'. However it is considered that the numbers set out in Table 2.8 are rather low in the context of Peel having outline consent for 13,571 dwellings. In a letter to Councillor Phil Davies dated 10<sup>th</sup> September 2018, Richard Mawdsley Development Director of Peel confirmed it would build 6,450 dwellings during the life of the Local Plan. We query why the figures in the Issues and Options Local Plan are not more positive and ambitious. We recommend increasing the committed figures accordingly, in order to reduce the need to look for some much land elsewhere and take the threat of unnecessary greenfield, indeed Green Belt, loss away. Given Local Plans are subject to regular reviews, any delay can be shown in the refreshed Local Plan, but there is no justification to be pessimistic at this stage. After all, the NPPF soundness test requires Local Plans to be positively prepared.

**Question 2.13 Do you agree with the preferred approach for delivering the strategic sites/development areas through the Local Plan as set out in ?**

Yes. We recommend Green Infrastructure is specifically referred to with regards to Wirral Waters in the Local Plan.

**Question 2.14 Do you support the establishment of a dedicated delivery model for the Regeneration of Birkenhead?** Yes. WGSA is supportive of a dedicated delivery model for the regeneration of Birkenhead, such as an Urban Development Corporation. Without targeted strategic action there will be limited chance of success in revitalising Wirral.

**Question 2.15 Do you have any alternative ideas for the regeneration of Birkenhead?** No.

**Question 2.16 Do you agree with the classification of sites set out within the 2019 Green Belt Review? If not, please state your reasons** No.

The Merseyside Green Belt has performed its nationally significant planning role well, pretty much unchanged from designation in 1983. It keeps land permanently open and performing five key purposes as set out in NPPF Paragraph 134: “a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas; b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another; c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment; d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.”

Sir Patrick Abercrombie, renowned architect and town planner at the University of Liverpool in 1915. He lived in Wirral, and he established the Wirral Society, a forerunner of what was to become the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE). His legacy has kept Wirral’s beloved countryside protected and the public is united in wanting to protect greenspace, sensing sacrilege to allow Green Belt to be lost too easily.

The Government reiterates promise to protect Green Belt. The NPPF Paragraph 136 states, “Once established Green Belt boundaries should **only be altered where exceptional circumstances are fully evidenced and justified, through the preparation or updating of plans**. Consequently, it is believed that the Council has failed to provide sufficient evidence that the three tests for exceptional circumstances are met. This is over and above the point that the proposed housing requirement is incorrect, and should be less than three times the identified figure. We believe much more can, and should, be done, including:



- identify all the 'suitable' brownfield sites, (as defined as deliverable and developable, see Annex 2 Glossary of NPPF, 2019), and planning that with effectively help to unlock identified constraints, so more brownfield land can be used for development during the Local Plan period. The impact of successful reuse of long term empty homes needs factoring in (see answer to Question 5.4). Allocating yet more greenfield will only hamper brownfield regeneration, against Paragraph 134. purpose e), as set out above.
- Optimise the density of development, including setting out policies which promote uplift in density in town centres and locations well served by public transport.
- Maximise potential for neighbours to accommodate some of the local housing requirement to support urban regeneration and housing growth ambitions of Liverpool and Sefton. There are requirements under the Duty to Cooperate that need to be better evidenced, including the preparation of comprehensive Statements of Common Ground to show the Council is sharing a joint approach with other local authorities within the Liverpool City Region functioning housing market area and land bounding neighbours, such as Cheshire West and Chester. Over planning houses in Wirral would jeopardise the Local Plans of neighbouring authorities, especially that of Liverpool.

Once the need for changes to Green Belt boundaries has been established through strategic policies, detailed amendments to those boundaries may be made through non-strategic policies. But, Paragraph 137 sets out that the **local authority must show it has examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting its identified need for development.**

By increasing the use of brownfield, having appropriate density of development and by improved coordination with neighbours, NPPF Section 11 Making more effective use of land is more likely to be complied with and the need to release any Green Belt land is eradicated, certainly the case there is an exceptional circumstance is eroded.

The Green Belt must be subject to a thorough strategic review to understand the purposes served and the robustness of each parcel in terms of keeping land permanently open. You have to have a robust method. Although the NPPF and PPG does not provide specific guidance on how Green Belt Reviews should be undertaken, the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) has released guidance on how to

review Green Belts and this is supplemented by Inspectors decisions and national policy. These provide additional context and guidance for undertaking a study of the Green Belt. We therefore recommend a systematic methodology that focuses first on the five purposes of the Green Belt and then considers the other constraints to development is required so like for like comparison of relative value can be made.

The Initial Review of Green Belt in September 2018 as part of the Development Options Review consultation considered both defined land parcels and SHLAA sites. However, the Planning Officers Society peer review made a number of recommendations in relation to the methodology. An inconsistent approach to classifying the level of site containment or enclosure, and that there was flaws in the way the strength of existing boundaries had been judged. Furthermore, the 'experience' of separation, in both landscape and visual separation terms should have been undertaken. Information to define historic towns could be drawn from the Merseyside Historic Characterisation Project, Wirral Report 2011 and the Cheshire Historic Characterisation 2007 and the Wirral Landscape Character Assessment. This would have helped understand Green Belt purpose d). These above mentioned issues combine to undermine the robustness of the 2018 study.

We have considered the 2019 Interim report findings. Unfortunately the shading for no contribution and weak contribution is difficult to distinguish on the Figure 8 Chloropleth map of Green Belt parcel assessment as the base layer is of a similar tone. This makes the information difficult to interpret.

There are a number of other issues with the robustness of the Green Belt Review. WGSA in particular highlights the significance of NPPF Paragraph 134 bullet e) to Wirral. No weighting, scoring or ranking is offered in the Green Belt Review for site/area selection. This removes the justification for exceptional circumstances.

It is considered that the Green Belt Review is significantly flawed, and leads to 'weakly performing parcel' conclusions that are simply wrong. The assessment process appears to rely on a number of subjective judgements, which are then scored and weighted. The judgements do not appear to be objective based on defined criteria. Therefore the finding of so many Green Belt parcels as 'weakly performing' and suitable for release is misinformed. There is public concern that the publication of the Green Belt Review has impacted landowner and tenant aspirations and that land is not being managed for the production of food as it was previously, as there is now a hope value for residential

development. The Council has previously agreed that agricultural land in production should not be considered for release from Green Belt (Oct 2019).

It is considered that all sites perform well against Green Belt purpose. The fact Wirral is a peninsular, and therefore 'exceptional circumstances' do not apply, leading to inappropriate and unsound conclusions. We recommend that the study is improved in advance of the Regulation 19 stage of the local plan to correct the interpretation the five purposes of Green Belt as set out in NPPF Paragraph 134.

**Question 2.17 Do you agree with our analysis of the key messages from the evidence we have collected so far? If not, please state what you disagree with and why**

As justified in our answers to Questions 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 it is considered that the Local Plan housing requirement should not exceed 4,000 net new dwellings. In addition, the Local Plan should plan for a reduced amount of employment land, consistent with our answer to 2.6 and 2.7.

The Local Plan should seek to maximise the effective use of land as prescribed by policy in Section 11 of the NPPF. The contribution from 'suitable' brownfield sites and through optimising development densities on sites will help in this regard. In conjunction with a more strategic approach to planning with neighbouring authorities we believe the tests cannot be met for 'exceptional circumstances' to release Green Belt land as set out in NPPF Paragraphs 136 and 137. Below are three reasons why 'exceptional circumstances' have failed to be met:

- Identifying as much 'suitable', defined as both 'deliverable' and 'developable', brownfield land as possible for inclusion of the Brownfield Register is of paramount importance. We forwarded information on roughly 60 hectares of land from a rudimentary glance at Wirral's former industrial sites. When left vacant and neglected former factory sites have a blighting effect and it has been a long term ambition to revitalise areas with previously developed land. Moreover, the Birkenhead Regeneration Framework is widely supported and it is yet to be published, let alone had the opportunity to be delivered. Until this approach is proven to have failed to deliver sufficient brownfield development then any exceptional circumstance cannot exist.

- the Council states in paragraph 2.7.4 that it has commissioned a new study of development density, to ensure that it can support the most sustainable patterns of development across Wirral. The study is yet to identify the most appropriate broad locations for increasing density, by focusing higher density development around locations where sustainable travel, such as walking, cycling and public transport can most easily be supported. Until the results of this study are known, and the success of density policies considered, then any exceptional circumstances cannot exist.
- by the council's own admission there is incomplete evidence from discussions with neighbouring authorities in accordance with the duty to co-operate that prove that they cannot accommodate some of Wirral's housing needs. Until such time that the Council is able to evidence properly that it has worked with neighbouring authorities to show housing and employment development cannot be more suitably located on existing brownfield sites in need of regeneration and in locations where there is existing infrastructure to cope, such as integrated transport and schools and hospitals, then exceptional circumstances do not exist. Wirral's Local Plan should not threaten to harm the sustainable development ambitions of neighbouring authorities

In conclusion, in accordance with NPPF there are no exceptional circumstances that exist, or at least evidenced, which justify the inclusion of Green Belt development options in this Local Plan.

There is provision for Local Plans to be reviewed every 5 years and of course it isn't necessary to review or alter all the policies in the plan. If regeneration efforts, and the brownfield land supply, fail to deliver the required rate of housing development then the first review of the plan could introduce some 'limited' Green Belt alterations to provide for future housing needs. Exceptional circumstances (as required by the NPPF) for changes to the Green Belt may exist sometime in the future, but it is considered that these certainly don't exist at present.

It is true that the reasons for the existing Green Belt boundary are as relevant in the context of NPPF policy today as they were when established. Green Belt land should be retained where it performs any one, or more, of the important Green Belt purposes.

Viability must not be assessed incorrectly as it has an impact on the amount of developer contributions. There should not be artificial capping of developer contributions as this will mean social housing and other important local infrastructure are not forth coming.

### 3 Our Vision and Objectives for Wirral

**Question 3.1 Do you agree with our proposed vision?** Yes. The vision is good.

**Question 3.2. Do you agree with our proposed objectives?** Yes, all twelve are good, but they could do with reordering in line with the NPPF, so that sustainable development to respond to the threat posed by climate change is dominant, and then a reduction of the 53 bullet points, to remove overlap, particularly concerning climate change.

**Question 3.3 Are there any additional objectives you want to include?** No additional objective, but the inclusion of a bullet under the strategic objective one, to enable more localism, by encouraging local communities to embrace Neighbourhood Planning, to ensure local character and distinctiveness, including heritage and natural capital is better protected by the operation of this third tier of planning power. Rural characteristics, such as, tranquillity could be better protected, by progressing Neighbourhood Planning as appropriate to ensure there are places where people can enjoy peace and quiet and natural wonders such as dark skies and other countryside characteristics. The Local Plan ought to promote good health and well-being.

### 4 Strategic Spatial Options

**Question 4.1 Is there anything else that you think the Council could do to ensure that a sufficient urban land supply capable of meeting the Borough's development needs is identified?**

Yes, we think that there are other vacant and underused previously developed sites that have either been wrongly classed as 'unsuitable', or are yet to be identified, and thus are missing from the Brownfield Register.

We need to better understand the reasons for some sites being considered 'unsuitable' and reassess whether they are in fact suitable, particularly given the Government and Councils joint partnership approach with Peel to urban regeneration at Wirral Waters.

The Government has strengthened national policy by inclusion of Section 11 Making effective use of land. With NPPF Paragraph 117 stating that "Strategic policies should set out a clear strategy for accommodating objectively assessed needs, in a way that makes as much use as possible of previously-developed or 'brownfield' land".

In our previous Wirral Local Plan Development Options Review, October 2018 we referred to "*Judge Lindblom, October 2017 (East Riding v St Modwen) that is relevant to progressing the housing land supply*" This led to the assertion that "*In effect, Wirral has enough housing land at Wirral Waters to cater for the housing land supply.*" Since this time the NPPF was revised in July 2019 with the definitions of 'Deliverable' and 'Developable' updated to provide greater clarity, in Annex 2 Glossary. We recommend a review of land surveys to check whether more land is actually deliverable and developable.

It could be considered that the sites in Appendix 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 have been identified prematurely, given that the housing and employment numbers are excessive, and therefore the justification to plan development on greenfields, and Green Belt protected land is not robust. The WGSA believes that some of the proposed allocations could be deleted and removed from future consideration, particularly Green Belt sites as identified in Appendices, particularly in Irby, Pensby, Thinwall and Heswall.

**Question 4.2 Do you have any comments on the proposed urban housing allocations set out in Appendix 4.1? Are they deliverable or developable? Please note when viewing this document on the consultation portal that you can use the separate 'sites' consultation event to view more information about individual sites and make comments there.**

On the basis of the answer set out to 4.1, no comment on individual sites. There is concern that the local housing need is excessive and that there should be a stepped approach to the first, second and third five years to provide Wirral the possibility of significantly ramping up delivery. It is perverse to expect 40% of the total housing to be delivered in the first five year phase of the plan.

There is a genuine capacity issue, relating to the supply of labour and materials associated with the construction sector, particularly during the transitional phase of Brexit, and more recently Coronavirus which has impacted on Chinese production of construction related goods. Therefore WGSA considers a more modest development quantum is adopted with an early review of the housing and employment figures based on performance review of actual completions and market absorption.

**Question 4.3 Do you have any comments on the potential additional urban housing allocations set out in Appendix 4.2? Will they also be deliverable or developable? Please note when viewing this document on the consultation portal that you can use the separate 'sites' consultation event to view more information about individual sites and make comments there.**

On the whole the sites appear to be located on the east of the M53 Motorway in already built areas, which WGSA welcomes.

The Birkenhead Regeneration Framework, which is supported by the Government, the Council, strategic landowner Peel ought to be allowed the chance to succeed. It is considered the over-allocation of Green Belt land would negatively compromise the chances of success.

**Question 4.4 Do you have any comments on the other suitable but currently uncertain sites set out in Appendix 4.3? Are they also deliverable or developable within the Plan period? Please note when viewing this document on the consultation portal that you can use the separate 'sites' consultation event to view more information about individual sites and make comments there.**

When considering other suitable but currently uncertain sites, it is important to understand when planning permission was sought. If an application was submitted in the last ten years, WGSA thinks that this positively shows that the applicant considered the site as a viable market option. WGSA is concerned that landowning and developer interests are 'gaming' the planning system by declaring sites with permission as 'unviable' specifically to trigger the allocation of other sites in their portfolio, which otherwise would not receive consent as the Council did not previously intend for such land to be developed. The higher land value from farmland being granted permission to build houses appears to be what many developers seek, rather than the completion of houses. WGSA

believes that the Council, or indeed the Planning Inspectorate when it comes to the examination, should not allow the Local Plan system be 'gamed' in this way.

**Question 4.4 Do you have any comments on the other suitable but currently uncertain sites set out in Appendix 4.3? Are they also deliverable or developable within the Plan period? Please note when viewing this document on the consultation portal that you can use the separate 'sites' consultation event to view more information about individual sites and make comments there.**

From considering Figure 4.3, it appears the sites are predominately within the existing urban areas, which WGSA in principle supports.

**Question 4.5 Do you agree with the Preferred Approach to identify Broad Locations for growth based on regeneration opportunities and priorities in the Local Plan?** Yes, this seems like a sustainable approach to ensure wasted land is reused, and that land assembly enables an adequate economy of scale to benefit from developer contributions being used to pay for needed sustainable transport and other community infrastructure and for master-planning to ensure high quality design to make the best use of space in the future.

**Question 4.6 Are there any other areas which should be identified as Broad Locations for Growth?**

All existing areas that are built should be considered for revitalisation, investment and delivery of housing, and or a mix of housing and jobs.

In terms of broad areas for growth, and addressing Local Plan Issues and Options Paragraph 4.26 concerning Government Planning Practice Guidance (Paragraph 018 Reference ID 3-018-20190722) other factors should be assessed when assessing the suitability of broad locations, including among other things landscape impacts and heritage conservation. We need to be sure the Council's assessments are robust. Local landscape, heritage and environmental asset must be valued properly. Currently, it is considered that the Council has not progressed the respective evidence bases adequate, and even though we understand the need to refresh the information available, we do not understand how certain decisions concerning allocations can be made without having the full set of evidence before the Council. We do not think it is a robust approach to allocated sites based



on 'draft' or 'interim' evidence bases, that are still in need of further refinement. The analysis and findings must lead to the 'best' sites being allocated, when considered against relevant 'sustainable development criteria'. If not, land in the wrong, or least sustainable locations will be proposed as allocations and this is what WGSA believes to have occurred with the allocations proposed in the Issues and Options Local Plan (Regulation 18).

WGSA does recommend urban areas with a notable greenspace gap have new greenspace provided to promote the health and well-being of communities, and for biodiversity, and enhancement of ecosystems. Greater Manchester Combined Authorities planning team have partnered Natural England and Ordnance Survey to progress a useful open space and green infrastructure layers on the mapping that supports decisions on the allocation of strategic sites as part of the Greater Manchester Strategic Framework. We recommend the Wirral planning team adopts a similar approach. See <https://mappinggm.org.uk/gmodin/>.

**Question 4.7 Are there any other sites within the urban area that you think should be considered for future housing development? Please identify each site and say why you think they would be suitable. Please also submit these sites through the separate 'Call for Sites' Consultation event and tell us how many homes these sites will deliver and when?**

We will respond to the call for sites consultation, however the capacity of the group to survey all of Wirral for additional sites is limited. We do want more sites to be added to the Brownfield Register to reflect the real situation of former industrial and port economic activity. We must not allow sites to be unjustly referred to as 'unsuitable', in light of the deal being achieved between Government and the Council to regenerate brownfield sites at Wirral Waters.

WGSA received comments from local people that It is difficult to read Appendix 4.5 due to the small print of the table in Wirral local housing trajectory.

**Question 4.8 Do you have any comments on proposed urban employment allocations set out in Appendix 4.6? Are they deliverable and developable? Please note when viewing this document on the consultation portal that you can use the separate 'sites' consultation event to view more information about individual sites and make comments there.**

From considering Figure 4.5, it appears the sites are predominately within the existing urban areas, which WGSA in principle supports. We do want more sites to be added to the Brownfield Register to reflect the real situation of former industrial and port economic activity. We must not allow sites to be unjustly referred to as 'unsuitable', in light of the deal being achieved between Government and the Council to regenerate brownfield sites at Wirral Waters.

**Question 4.9 Are there any other urban sites which you think should be allocated for future employment development? Please identify each site and say why you think they would be suitable.**

We will respond to the call for sites consultation, however the capacity of the group to survey all of Wirral for additional sites is limited.

WGSA is concerned that the Liverpool City Strategic Housing and Employment Land Market Assessment (SHELMA), 2018 has been relied upon to identify the amount of employment land (see Issues and Options Paragraph 4.35 footnote 50.) An important point is that the SHELMA document produced by GL Hearn has not been independently tested, and only recently updated. There has been evidence from independent experts who have critically reviewed the SHELMA in association with the preparation of St Helens and West Lancashire Local Plans that the SHELMA is flawed.

In the case of St Helens, expert demographer Mr Piers Elias, (commissioned by St Helens Green Belt Association) showed rather than the Submission Local Plan identifying a need for 9,234 new dwellings (at an average of at least 486 new dwellings per year), it should be reduced to a minimum of 7,245 dwellings within the Plan period from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2035. And, on the opinion of expert economist Dr Athey, the employment projections should be further adjusted downwards to reflect up to date data and realistic assumptions, relating to the current economic realities, then it follows the housing requirement also needs to be adjusted downwards. Both of these pieces of independent reports evidence serious flaws in the data, analysis, assumptions, which lead to conclusions that inflated beyond reality. In short the SHELMA is flawed as the growth rates are much too high. When considering the reality, the aspirational growth assumptions used in the SHELMA, as data from the recent past prove them to be unfounded

**Question 4.10 Do you agree with our assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of the Urban Intensification Option? Are there any other advantages or disadvantages that you believe we should take into account?** Yes, but in addition, in terms of advantages of urban intensification, the carbon footprint of a development per capita is lower, when compared to dispersed development. For example rural fringe development needs investment in the extension of utilities and other infrastructure. As Table 4.4 states dispersed development leads to the promotion of more unsustainable travel patterns reliant on motor vehicles and it is true that building homes on centrally located sites promotes more active travel, including walking and cycling and supports the delivery of more public transport services through achieving higher densities. What is more urban intensification supports NPPF Section 11 and this strategic objective and local benefit should be more prominently mentioned throughout the Local Plan. Another advantage of urban intensification is it protects our greenspace, and the associated rural farming sectors, and also the visitor economy that relies on access to greenfield land and natural habitat to support agricultural jobs and recreation and leisure activities, such as bird watching. The special biodiversity supports incoming spend in tourism related businesses.

We are not aware of any extra disadvantages. We refute the claim that urban intensification would lead to an over concentration of cars, in fact, we argue this is not the case as more people will use public transport and be able to cycle or walk to work or local services. The Combined Authorities of Liverpool and Greater Manchester City-Regions are progressing proactive policies of urban concentration, in accordance with Section 11 of NPPF. The Local Plan needs to be progressed in compliance with the NPPF to be found sound. In any case, the Local Plan should include policies for park and ride facilities to manage traffic congestion in a more sustainable way, and also ensure for more sound engineering such as use of sound bund solutions, and green infrastructure, such as trees and hedgerows, to absorb noise and air pollution. Moreover, this options allocates the highest number of individual sites at a range of sizes, which would add choice to the market. The Campaign to Protect Rural England commissioned report 'Brownfield comes first', March 2016, investigated the extent to which brownfield is a viable option for development. Construction analysts Glenigan compare the speed of residential development on brownfield sites with development on greenfield, once these sites have been granted planning permission. The findings showed developing brownfield sites is quicker compared to greenfield, debunking a myth perpetuated by development interests and landowning lobbyists. Find the report here:

<https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/brownfield-comes-first-2/>

**Question 4.11 Do you believe that a ‘stepped approach’ would be appropriate to apply, to reflect the complicated nature of many of the proposed sites for development and their longer lead in times, provided that this is made up in the later years of the plan period to take account of the need to bring forward brownfield sites?**

Yes. Due to the scale of transformational change at Wirral Waters a stepped approach would be entirely reasonable and appropriate to the national and local policies for more effective use of land. We support a stepped approach.

**Question 4.12 Do you have any views on the sites that have been currently identified under the Dispersed Green Belt Release option, shown in Table 4.5 and on Figure 4.6? Please note that when viewing this document on the consultation portal you can use the separate 'sites' consultation event to view more information about individual sites identified under Option 2A and make comments there.**

Yes, the sites identified in Option 2A Dispersed Green Belt release threatens the five Green Belt purposes at twelve separate locations, and harms the overarching aim of keeping land permanently open. Nibbling of the Green Belt in this fashion is in our view contrary to the NPPF policies set out in Section 13 Protecting Green Belt Land. The pressure from Government and threat of special measures may have led to the Council jumping straight to allocating Green Belt sites, but if NPPF Paragraph 138 is followed correctly a staged approach of first, justify the need for any Green Belt release to achieve a required level of development, which WGSA disputes (see answers to Qu2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.6, 2.7, 2.16 and 2.17), second alternative sites not adequately considered, and third duty to cooperate gaps exist.

Furthermore, the Wirral Green Belt Review 2019 lacks a consistent application of the identification and scoring of individual parcels. The clumping of parcels into large geographic areas is also problematic. Finally, WGSA believe it was premature to list Green Belt sites without public comment and progression of important issues such as the impact of developing the particular parcels and impacts on heritage assets, leading to misleading conclusions about ‘weakly performing’ Green Belt land. Green Belt parcels only need to provide one or more purpose to be of value. The Review needs either major corrections or, more simply, redoing.

**Question 4.13 Do you think that any of the other weakly performing land identified in the Green Belt Review should be considered for release to meet any residual housing or employment requirements?**

No.

**Question 4.14 Do you agree with our assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of a dispersed approach to releasing sites from the Green Belt under Option 2A? Are there any other advantages or disadvantages that you believe we should take into account?** No. The use of the term 'weaker' under advantages depends on the robustness of the Green Belt Review 2019, which is disputed (see answer to Question 4.12). The use of 'rounding-off' is excessive in some cases. The Option is in WGSA view not strategic.

In terms of disadvantage this Option 2A is the least sustainable, therefore least preferred option. The small bundles of land are relatively remote from the M53 motorway, would be opposed by the many residents and groups who would have their local amenity harmed. The sites lack the scale to support a master planned approach. And even if this was the case, WGSA is concerned that the planning team couldn't adequately oversee twelve separate masterplans for these areas during the Local Plan period? With pressure on resources and limits to capacity we encourage the Council to stay focused on the Wirral Waters and Left Bank regeneration masterplans.

**Question 4.15 Do you have any views on the areas that have been currently identified for the single large scale urban extension, shown in Table 4.7 and on Figure 4.7? Please note that when viewing this document on the consultation portal you can use the separate 'sites' consultation event to view more information about individual sites identified under Option 2B and make comments there.** Yes, this is not a sustainable location for development and the harm to Wirral's Green Belt would be profoundly against the national interest of Green Belt designation. We are confident that this option would be found unsound at examination.

**Question 4.16 Are there any other areas that you think should be considered for a single large scale urban extension to meet any residual housing or employment requirements?** No.

**Question 4.17 Do you agree with our assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of a more concentrated approach to releasing a single urban extension from the Green Belt under Option 2B? Are there any other advantages or disadvantages that you believe we should take into account?** In addition to WGSA comments in answer to Question 4. 15, other disadvantages of Option 2B are that there are land assembly challenges and it yields the least number of houses. In WGSA opinion it limits the choice of sites and location of development sites to the market. This lack of choice is particularly true of small and medium sized builders, contrary to NPPF Paragraph 68 that states

“Small and medium sized sites can make an important contribution to meeting the housing requirement of an area, and are often built-out relatively quickly. To promote the development of a good mix of sites Local Planning authorities should: a) identify, through the development plan and brownfield registers, land to accommodate at least 10% of their housing requirement on sites no larger than one hectare; unless it can be shown, through the preparation of relevant plan policies, that there are strong reasons why this 10% target cannot be achieved;” WGSA believes that +10% of housing could be brought forward on smaller non-Green Belt sites.

**Question 4.18 Do you agree with our preferred approach to meeting demands in Wirral through Urban Intensification?** Yes, urban intensification is supported by WGSA. But to be clear the Option 1B that employs a stepped approach to delivery to ensure the Council does not fail the stringent 85% target of the Housing Delivery Test introduced when the NPPF was revised in July 2019. Otherwise the Local Plan will be quickly rendered out of date, with all the harmful consequence that flows. Please refer to NPPF Annex 1 Implementation.

**Question 4.19 If it was necessary to supplement urban intensification by releasing land from the Green Belt, would you prefer to see a dispersed release of land, a single larger urban extension, or a hybrid of the two options, and why?** As previously stated we do not think exceptional circumstances exist to justify Green Belt release, (see answers to Qu2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.6, 2.7, 2.16 and 2.17) therefore WGSA believes it should not comment on a preferred approach at this stage, as it would be unhelpful to ambitions associated with regeneration aims, thus entirely premature to do so. .

**Question 4.20 Do you have an alternative option you would like to propose that would also meet the housing and employment land requirements for Wirral over the Plan period?** Yes, as reiterated throughout our answers to earlier questions, the alternative option is to plan for reality, which means a significantly lower development quantum, and that all suitable previously used land utilised, before considering development of greenfield land, especially that with environmental and planning designation to protect them for the benefit of future generations.

The summary diagram shown in paragraph 4.82 is useful, but should have the figures reduced in accordance with our recommendations. Up to 6,450 homes could be delivered at Wirral Waters

during the Local Plan period and +7,000 thereafter. The text in the box should be amended to “Only if urban housing land falls below 4,000 dwellings”.

## 5 Our Homes

**Question 5.1 Do you agree with our preferred approach to seeking to ensure an appropriate mix of dwelling type and size by requiring developers to take account of the proportions set out, while taking account of any site-specific opportunities or constraints, which could also include the need for a higher density of development on appropriate sites? If not, what alternative approach would you suggest and why?**

No. We agree that an appropriate mix of size and type should be sought, but we think more smaller properties should be built to support more households being able to afford a home. If the quality of homes is good, then larger homes are likely to be freed up by older households relocating to smaller units and freeing up larger family homes. Therefore we suggest: 1 bedroomed (15%), 2 bedroomed (35%), 3 bedroomed (30%) and 4/+4 bedroomed (20%), and for type 50% houses, 25% flats and 25% bungalows.

**Question 5.2 Do you agree with our preferred approach of seeking to achieve up to 30% affordable housing from all new developments of 10 dwellings or over, subject to viability, based on the mix of size and tenure recommended in the Draft SHMA 2020? If not, what alternative approach would you suggest and why?**

Yes. WGSA agrees that 64% of the affordable housing provision should be two bedroomed or less, as it is important to reflect the demographic structure and this identifies a large proportion of elderly households. If older occupants of affordable housing have quality smaller homes to relocate into it would help to free up larger family homes for those that need them.

The Local Plan policies for viability need to be in accordance with NPPF Paragraphs 34, 57 and 62 so that the contributions expected from developers are clearly set out, and that “*planning applications that comply with them should be assumed to be viable*”, and importantly affordable homes of the size and type required are delivered on site. It is more difficult to achieve affordable homes

completed by developer contributions for off-site provision due to the lack of land availability and the fact most Councils are not geared up to build homes themselves, even if the Government may allow Councils to raise funds for this purpose.

Of note, the legal judgment in case of [2018] EWHC 991 (Admin) established that land value must be informed by policy, and consequently, it is not acceptable for the Council to grant permission for an application that is deficient in developer contribution. Therefore the policy must be right. If not, it would be contrary to the principle of plan-led sustainable development, and it would set a worrying precedent for Wirral's communities.

**Question 5.3 Do you agree with our approach to the provision of specialist housing for older people and ensuring that a proportion of all new homes meet optional accessibility standards? If not, what alternative approach would you suggest could be adopted?**

Yes, we agree with the approach. Given the aging demographic it is recommended that more properties are built for wheelchair use than just 6% and adaptable properties at 20%.

**Question 5.4 Do you have any views on our preferred approach for promoting the re-use of empty homes and buildings to provide for additional housing within the Plan period?**

We welcome the inclusion of an allowance for the return of empty homes, but query why only 90 dwellings per annum, when the figure of 238 dwellings has been successfully achieved in 2016/17 and 2017/18, as shown in Table 5.2. This Council success ought to be better celebrated and we see no reason why this past trend would change. In fact with emerging powers for Council's to acquire finance to deliver homes, more action may occur over the next 15 years to boost the supply of housing. Therefore we encourage an increase in this figure from 1,350 to 3,450 dwellings over the plan period. This would also reduce the case for 'exceptional circumstances', need would save our greenfields from having to be allocated for development.

**Question 5.5 Do you think there is anything else that the Council could do to promote the reuse of empty homes within the Local Plan?**



Wirral has an exemplar record and programme for returning 'Empty Homes' back into use which should be built upon, and certainly not minimised as appears to be the case. The Green Belt Review shows insufficient understanding of this aspect of the planning of a large scale of empty properties being reused, and consequently falsely assumes 'exceptional circumstances', without proper justification. WGSA believe the Case Studies don't adequately match Wirral, and are therefore all inappropriate for drawing parallels. We think these needs to be addressed or the Inspector at Examination will find the evidence assumptions to be unsound.

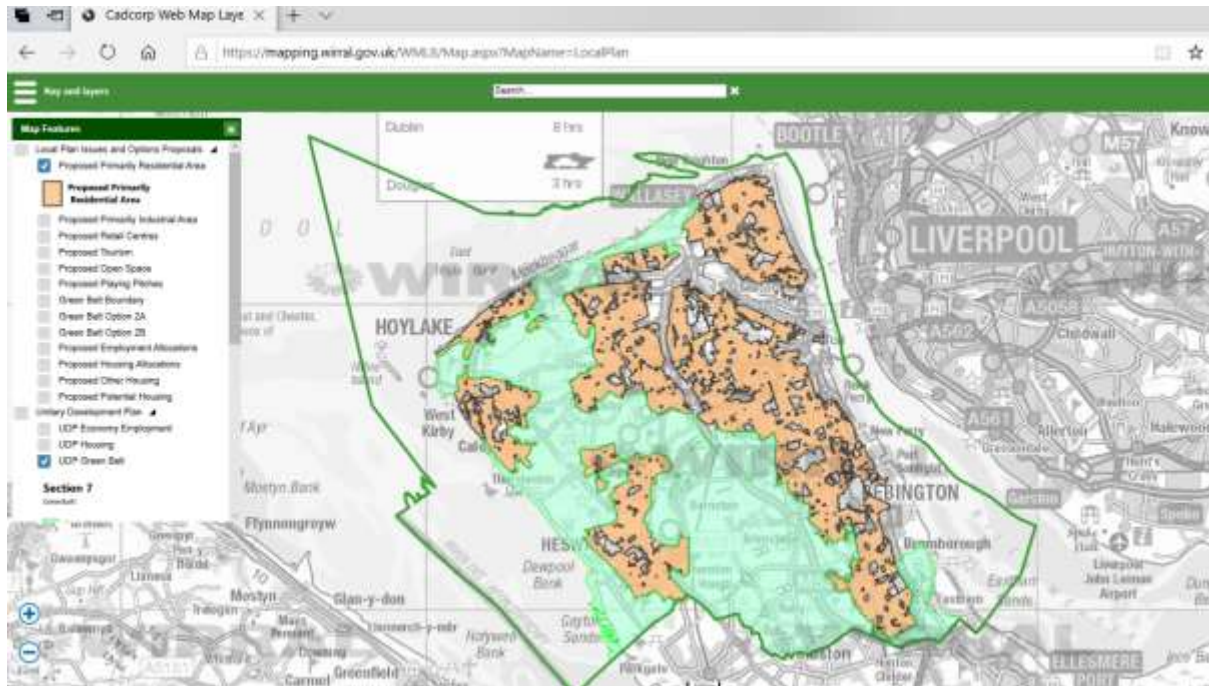
As stated in answer to Question 5.4, Councils can now raise funds to deliver homes, and this may enable more empty properties to be brought back into use for homes. We also considered whether employment premises can be reallocated to residential use and deliver more housing.

**Question 5.6 Do you agree with our preferred approach to meeting any future housing needs for Gypsies and Travellers, if they arise during the Plan period? If not, what alternative approach do you think we should follow?**

Yes. Like everyone else, travellers should have the chance of a home, but like everyone else the location of traveller site allocations should not elevate this community into a position of privilege above other local residents.

**Question 5.7 Do you agree with the boundaries to the Primarily Residential Areas that the Council proposes to include on the new Local Plan Policy Map? If not, please say where they should be revised and why?**

Yes, WGSA agrees with the boundaries to the Primarily Residential Areas that the Council proposes to include on the new Local Plan Policy Map, as there appears to be no discernible changes to the UDP Green Belt boundary, as shown on the map extract below with the two layers switched on.



**Question 5.8** Do you agree with the Draft Policy for Houses in Multiple Occupation, which the Council propose to use in the determination of planning applications as set out in Appendix 5.1? If not, please say how it should be revised and why?

Yes. However, WGSA is concerned that the figures quoted represent out-of-date allowances, and discontinued standards, such as 10.21 m<sup>2</sup> for a single bedroom is too small to achieve a proper quality of life for the end occupant. We believe the minimum standard ought to be 12 m<sup>2</sup>, or preferably 14 m<sup>2</sup> per person. Likewise, a two-person bedroom should be not 16-18m<sup>2</sup>, rather than 14m<sup>2</sup>. Additional space ought to be added for ensuite facilities.

We understand that a new-build homeless residence in Seaforth, provided individual en-suite bedrooms of 14 to 16 sq.m each plus en-suite shower rooms of 4 to 5 sq.m.. And, larger provision was provided for ambulant and wheelchair disabled persons. In addition, there are shared Bathrooms, living rooms, dining room, Gym, training rooms, gardens and much more.

WGSA hopes that the standard of all our homes are raised through the delivery of the Local Plan in the future.

## 6 Our Economy

### **Question 6.1 Do you agree with our preferred or the alternative approach to meet current and future employment demands in Wirral for everyone in our community?**

WGSA agrees with the Council's Preferred Approach, as this is closely aligned with the Government's NPPF, Section 6 for building a strong, competitive economy, Paragraphs 80 to 84. However, the jobs requirement is still too high, and overly 'aspirational' due to excessive jobs identified based on very high growth rates, as are the housing numbers, both of which will set the Council up to fail.

Economic shocks associated with the Coronavirus and Brexit must be addressed. We recommend the evidence is revisited and more realistic targets that the Council has a reasonable chance of achieving. It would be demoralising for planning staff to have their performance checked against unreasonable targets. Achievable target setting is an important aspect of local plan making as successful delivery will inspire successful regeneration and vitalisation of the Wirral economy.

However, the quantum should be 60 hectares, as set out in our answer to Question 2.6. We refer to past trends forming only part of the baseline, and a need for additional robust research, analysis and use of reasonable assumptions to lead to a realistic employment requirement and allocation of land.

The findings of Liverpool City Region Strategic Housing and Employment Land Market Assessment (SHELMA) are evidently flawed (see our answer to Question 4.9), and have not yet been subject to an independent examination. We considered the Liverpool City Region Local Industrial Strategy: Statement of Emerging Strategic Priorities. We endorse much of this, but query the value of modern warehouses that are very land hungry, are increasingly reliant on automated robots, thus do not require a large workforce, and some operators have headquarters based elsewhere, so they avoid having to pay a fair share of tax to the UK Government. We highlight that the LIS Strategy shows that mental health disorders are high across the city-region, above 20% in Wirral. Access to quality natural environments is a good antidote to stress and there are job sectors that are also reliant on Wirral's natural assets, including its countryside and coastline, should be protected.

It is considered that the Avison Young Employment Land Options Study Draft Final, December 2019 does not adequately refer to Wirral's future 'rural' economy. It comments in Paragraph 2.68 that "West Wirral and Rural Areas of Hoylake, Heswall and West Kirby and the surrounding rural areas of west and Mid-Wirral. As with Mid-Wirral, this market area is predominantly a residential area rather than an employment area. The ELOS has not considered any sites within this market area and therefore no further summary or conclusions are considered to be relevant / required." More comment could have been made about Wirral's visitor economy, especially related to bird watching and coastline and in line with NPPF Paragraph 83 c) "sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments which respect the character of the countryside."

**Question 6.2 Do you agree with the proposed release of some employment land in Bromborough for housing (as set out in paragraphs 6.21 to 6.24)?**

Yes. However, the extent of development should be in line with the existing built edge to prevent countryside encroachment or urban sprawl to the south and south west. WGSA considers that no Green Belt land should be released.

**Question 6.3 Do you agree that strategic employment land at Wirral Waters should be made available for general employment use?**

Yes, so long as there is a justification that the land is no longer required for port related use, then it would seem reasonable to allow general employment use in the future.

**Question 6.4 Do you agree with the boundaries to the Primarily Industrial Areas that the Council proposes to include on the new Local Plan Policy Map? If not, please say where they should be revised and why?**

Yes, WGSA agrees with the boundaries to the Primarily Industrial Areas, but only if there is no encroachment on Green Belt and open spaces are provided.

**Question 6.5 What is your view of providing for a wider range of uses within these areas and which uses do you think should be included?**

The brownfield areas, and other previously developed sites should be positively 'greened up' to provide a higher quality environment for business, but they ought to include a sustainable mix of land uses, notably housing close to employment, with a full range of community services, including local retail, health, education and leisure facilities, parks and open spaces, walking and cycling routes reducing car usage and linking up to the existing network.

**Question 6.6 Do you agree with the Council's preferred approach to protect all sites currently in use, or allocated, for employment and resist development change of use to ensure continuation of employment uses for those sites? Or Do you think that the alternative approach whereby the Council will not take forward a policy to protect existing employment land and will let the market determine future use, taking account of tests for sustainable development should be adopted?**

WGSA is concerned that there is a bias in this question, as it should not be the case of either extreme, of no action, or uncontrolled speculation by developers. The Council should retain powers, in the context of permitted development, to determine the suitable location of land use across Wirral. When determining general land use zones, as commented in our answer to Q6.5, and elsewhere, appropriate mixed use should be encouraged. In our democratic society, ultimately it is the market which provides, and Government, including the local authority, which steers through planning policy to ensure investment is enabled in the right location to ensure enough new development, as identified as required, is brought forward. The Local Plan should support regeneration as stated in the Strategic Aims and Objectives.

The Council has a good record of protecting employment land , but as there is little prospect of industrial or port use returning the opportunities for residential use should be realised. This is a win/win situation as blighted land is revitalised in accordance with the Strategic Regeneration Framework and land in the Green Belt is protected in line with the Government's stated objectives and public opinion.

**Question 6.7 Do you agree with our Preferred Approach to meet retail demands in Wirral for everyone in our community? Would you suggest an alternative approach?**

We are concerned that the Council's Local Plan policies should revitalise Birkenhead Town Centre and accordingly have a proper regard to the sequential test for planning retail policy and retail

allocations as set out in NPPF, Section 7 Ensuring the vitality of town centres. This relates to the issue of settlement definitions and groupings we identified in our answer to Question 2.5 and the way settlements have been classified into 'Townships'. Evidence Base reference PP1 Borough Spatial Portrait 2020 more correctly refers to Irby, Thingwall, Pensby, Heswall and Gayton as dormitory settlements, which is more accurate as they have characteristics of small villages with limited community facilities. NPPF Paragraph 134 (b) is clear that one of the purposes of Green Belt is to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another'. The Issues and Options Local Plan treats several neighbouring towns as a single large settlement, without offering a rationale or justification, in the evidence base. This is clearly contrary to NPPF, Section 13 policies, which seeks to keep towns from merging, as opposed to coalescing together and seeking to narrow the gaps keeping them distinct. This point is of immense importance for the Local Plan. A legal opinion sought by WGSA supports this view.

**Question 6.8 Do you agree with our preferred approach to seek to maximise the potential of town centres' vitality and viability including residential development? Would you suggest an alternative approach?**

Yes, but see our comments in answer to Question 6.7 and 2.5, as the Council must demonstrate a sequential approach to support the existing centres for retail allocations in line with NPPF, Section 7 policies.

**Question 6.9 Do you agree with our preferred approach to defining a locally set threshold for retail impact assessments? Would you suggest an alternative approach?**

Yes, WGSA agrees with the preferred option as it is a sensible approach.

**Question 6.10 Do you agree with the boundaries to the town centres shown on the Council's website? If not, please say how they should be amended and why?**

Yes. Town centre boundaries should be maintained. Settlement extension can only be justified if there is robust data to support a growth conclusion, which as repeated under questions elsewhere in this consultation WGSA evidence does not exist. Green Belt policy should be upheld until the Local

Plan has had an opportunity to effectively reuse all the previously developed land that exists in plentiful supply.

**Question 6.11 Do you agree with our preferred approach for planning for tourism within Wirral?**

Yes. A key concern for WGSA is that the natural capital and greenspaces across Wirral is best protected to support the rural tourism sector. We acknowledge Wirral has made progress and applaud the awards for its beaches, green flag parks and heritage attractions. The peninsula is indeed an outstanding destination and WGSA wishes it to remain so. This is why we want the Council to be bold in its protection of Green Belt land.

## **7 Our Physical and Social Infrastructure**

**Question 7.1 Do you agree with our preferred approach for planning for infrastructure within Wirral? Do you have a suggested alternative approach?**

Yes, broadly. The Infrastructure Development Plan must provide for Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) requirements that arise from the quantum of new development identified in the Local Plan. We applaud inclusion of Green and Blue Infrastructure to support our natural environment.

Please see the WGSA answer to Question 2.8 and note the legal judgment in case of [2018] EWHC 991 (Admin) that established that land value must be informed by policy, and consequently, it is not acceptable for the Council to grant permission for an application that is deficient in developer contribution. The Local Plan policies must be tightly written so developers have little wiggle room to renege on agreed commitments. In our view there should be no zero CIL charge areas.

Infrastructure should include all points, bus service, tram system and improved mid-Wirral rail network. Also, schools, hospitals, GP services, retail, social and leisure facilities, etc., should be considered and developers contribute appropriately and extensively. New roads across Green Belt should be resisted.

Furthermore, WGSA recommends that, consideration could be given to a financial mechanism which provides the Council with ongoing receipts (not just one-off Commuted Sums) separate from Council Tax and Business Rates, say, similar to terms enjoyed by private equity and venture capital companies – having a stake in the future.

**Question 7.2 Do you agree with our approach to prioritise public and active transport improvements and electric vehicle charging infrastructure provision in new development, and to support the construction of major new roads only where they are related to achieving sustainable development, environmental enhancement, public transport or road safety benefits?**

Yes and No. WGSA agrees with improvements to public transport of all forms, but not to facilitate new housing in Green Belt, rather within and between existing and regenerated urban areas. This should include the extension of the Heritage Tramway from the Hamilton Quarter to ‘Wirral Waters’ and on to the ‘Eureka’ Children’s Museum due to open in 2022 in place of the closed ‘Spaceport’ at Seacombe.

YES, we agree with new developments having electric vehicle charging infrastructure, but an understanding of the limited benefits of electric vehicles should be considered, as whilst they do reduce NO<sup>2</sup>, they do not reduce harmful Particle Matter (PMs) pollution, which invade the lungs and bloodstream and cause, or worsen, illness and disease. Wirral has only one (yes one) PM detector and that is located in a park. Despite this, Wirral’s PM levels are just within legal limits. WGSA hopes the Local Plan will vastly reduce vehicular movements, by building homes near to employment locations to promote active travel and remove the need to journey across the Peninsula and beyond for daily commutes and to access other daily and weekly services. Please also refer to the report submitted by Professor Gregg on Air Quality and Pollution.

WGSA is opposed to major new roads across Green Belt as this would merely open up new ‘hard boundaries’ and encourage house-building away from existing urban areas. New roads are proven to induce more traffic as they encourage more road travel which has generally been acknowledged as undesirable, polluting and harmful to sustainability. Please refer to the report by, CPRE commissioned consultants, Transport for Quality of Life Community Interest Company (TfLQ) that examines the impacts of road schemes on traffic, the environment, the economy, road safety and land use.



This study draws upon evidence of short-term impacts (between one and five years after scheme completion) from over 80 road schemes, published by Highways England through its Post-Opening Project Evaluation (POPE) process. This is supplemented by long-term evidence from four road schemes that were completed between 13 and 20 years ago: the A34 Newbury Bypass, M65 Blackburn Southern Bypass, A46 Newark – Lincoln dualling and A120 Stansted to Braintree dualling.

CPRE's summary report, *The End of the Road?*, is available here.

<https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/the-impact-of-road-projects-in-england/>

**Question 7.3 Do you agree with our approach to consider the cumulative impact of development on the utilities networks to ensure resilience, where possible reduce reliance on fossil fuels, improve water efficiency and sustainable drainage and to monitor and respond to future technological advances?**

Yes

**Question 7.4 Do you agree with our approach to support a choice of digital infrastructure providers for new developments and to support the expansion of electronic communications networks?**

Yes, although the impact of new digital infrastructure should be sensitive to local character and not harm rural landscapes, or heritage that are otherwise free of built intrusions.

**Question 7.5 Do you agree with our approach to work with our partners to undertake capacity assessments of existing social infrastructure, identify needs arising from growth and the opportunity for potential expansion or new provision as appropriate?**

Yes, and to support climate change policies there should be some policy hooks so applicants should demonstrate how their proposal will support the Council's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

## 8 Our Environment

### **Question 8.1 Do you have any views on our preferred approach to plan for Climate Change in Wirral?**

WGSA supports the Council's endeavour in meeting local climate change goals to support the Government achieve international commitments, and its own statutory responsibilities, as set out in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act and the Climate Change Act 2018. We are keen to see the Council develop a Climate Emergency Action Plan to help this effort. The Local Plan must support climate change ambitions and give officers useful planning policy when determining future planning applications.

We said in answer to Question 3.2 that Climate Change aims should be more dominant in the Local Plan and policies ought to provide decision takers with a helpful steer when assessing incoming applications. Policies need to interpret NPPF policies and enable developers to design new development to best respond to climate change issues. It should be clear when applications do adhere to national or Local Planning policy on climate change that planning permission, (subject to compliance with other national and Local Planning policy and material considerations), will be approved, and when not they would ordinarily be refused. We have one planet and there is no alternative to this approach

### **Question 8.2 Would you support including additional measures within the Local Plan to plan for Climate Change, including allocating sites for renewable energy or including additional requirements on housing, employment, retail, leisure and tourism developments to meet higher standards of energy efficiency?**

Yes. As stated in 8.1 WGSA appreciates there is only one planet, so the Local Plan ought to look after it.

**Question 8.3 Do you think there is anything else that the Council could do to address or plan for Climate Change within the Local Plan?**

We note the reference to the Committee on Climate Change in paragraph 8.7, which is good as this independent body has considerable information of use to the Council when drafting Local Plan policy to achieve our climate change goals. The Council should set ambitious targets, and adequately monitor performance in the Local Plan. <https://www.theccc.org.uk/tackling-climate-change/reducing-carbon-emissions/>

The majority of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions arise from our production and consumption of energy – whether that's driving cars, manufacturing goods or simply boiling a kettle. Emissions can be lowered by becoming energy efficient and by switching to low-carbon fuels. Both will be necessary to meet UK carbon targets, along with action to tackle non-energy emissions.

Being energy efficient doesn't mean going without a warm and well-lit home or making big sacrifices. Many energy efficiency measures are low cost and even save money. Whether on a large-scale, or at the individual level, there are many opportunities to save energy through better insulation, more efficient boilers and appliances, using low carbon affordable heating solutions, such as heat pumps, in a way that addresses fuel poverty and delivers better comfort and heating outcomes for residents.

But even the most efficient modern economy will need to contend with significant energy demand. So it's essential to progress towards an energy system based on fuels with low, or no-carbon, content (de-carbonisation). This means moving away from using conventional coal and gas-fired power to electricity generated from nuclear power, renewable sources, and new technologies such as carbon capture and storage.

More information on how the Local Plan can progress carbon budgets and establish appropriate targets for monitoring is set out here: <https://www.theccc.org.uk/tackling-climate-change/reducing-carbon-emissions/carbon-budgets-and-targets/> .

In addition, the Council along with activity under the 'Cool Wirral Partnership' should work together with the Liverpool City Region wide, Local Nature Partnership called Nature Connect, to understand

what partners such as the Environment Agency, Natural England are doing and how it can be a good partner. Steve Rotherham, Metro Mayor held a Year of the Environment 2019 Summit where many pledges were made to address climate change issues. It is important for the Local Plan to contain policies that support climate change action, urgently.

The Liverpool City Region Ecological Network, prepared by the Merseyside Environmental Advisory Service (MEAS), comprises ecological and biodiversity information on the City Region's ecological network, identifying opportunities to enable better protection and management of those natural assets and describing opportunities to create new natural assets. This includes defining the City Region's core biodiversity assets and identifying a series of Nature Improvement Areas, which will be taken into account in the preparation of the Wirral Local Plan.

The Council should only include Local Plan policy and allocations that will embed what is truly sustainable development in the Submission Version Local Plan, in line with it declaring the Environment and Climate Emergency in July 2019, and so that it may be found sound at examination.

**Question 8.4 Do you have any views on our preferred approach for planning for Green and Blue Infrastructure within Wirral?**

WGSA does hope the Local Plan achieves enough Green and Blue Infrastructure. In Question 4.6 we referred to the approach of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in the progression of its Strategic Framework as an exemplar. We recommend the Wirral planning team adopts a similar approach. See <https://mappinggm.org.uk/gmodin/>.

WGSA appreciates that the evidence base includes the Wirral Landscape Character Assessment 2019, the Draft Wirral Open Space Assessment 2019 and the Wirral Strategic Flood Risk Assessment 2019.

**Question 8.5 Do you have any views as to how the Local Plan should promote tree planting**

The emerging Wirral Tree Strategy sets out the ambitions and overarching strategic guidance of how to manage trees in the Borough up to 2030 in accordance with the Government's long-term

ambition for achieving an average of 12% tree cover across England by 2060 and the 25 year Environmental Plan (December 2018).

**Question 8.6 Do you have any ideas as to where the Council should promote new tree planting as part of its Tree Planting strategy?**

The Wirral Landscape Character Assessment notes within Cheshire West and Chester, adjacent to Wirral, the aspiration is to increase woodland cover to 10- 30%, through the creation of small woodlands. Wirral Council is not a contributing partner to the Mersey Forest. Is it possible for Wirral to consider increasing its ambitions on new woodland cover? There may be exciting opportunities being presented through the Northern Forest initiative.

**Question 8.7 Do you have any views on the Council's proposed approach to the provision of open space and sport and recreation facilities?**

We are supportive of more open space and sport and recreation facilities, particularly in areas that are deficient.

**Question 8.8 Do you agree with the list of open spaces identified for protection from development set out in Appendix 8.1 and the boundaries shown on the Council's website? If not, please state how they should be revised and why?**

We support the list of spaces identified and encourage the WGSA groups to comment separately on local open space to limit the length of this group submission. It is noted that the report has some errors, including Irby Park information is not up-to-date. For example the Pavilion is not adequate as it was burned down, and cleared. The playing surface and surrounds of the football pitches are not fit for purpose, as they are unusable for most of the season. More is required in terms of drainage solutions and improved maintenance.

**Question 8.9 Do you support the designation of 'the glebeland' at West Kirby as a Local Green Space?**

Yes. We think designation of Local Green Space is an important function of Local Plans.

**Question 8.10 Are there any other sites which you think should be considered for designation as a Local Green Space? Please provide a map with a proposed boundary marked on it or provide a clear description of the location of the site so that we can identify it and tell us how you think it meets the criteria set out in paragraph 100 of the National Planning Policy Framework.**

WGSA groups will comment separately on Local Green space to limit the length of this group submission.

**Question 8.11 Do you have any views on our preferred approach for protecting and conserving landscapes within Wirral through the Local Plan?**

We applaud the approach of the Council's preferred approach for protecting and conserving the landscapes within Wirral through the Local Plan. It is important that the findings of the revised Landscape Character Assessment 2019 are accurate, to properly inform the policies so that new development and land management is sympathetic to the local character, particularly rural and natural open spaces, with special qualities across the Borough.

Already the majority of Wirral is subject to development that has reduced the levels of tranquillity and impacted on rural character, such as night-light pollution. Humans and wildlife are adversely impacted by a loss of quiet space. Populations of birds, mammals and insects can be disturbed by the loss of tranquillity, with some species unable to breed if the conditions are not conducive. The sensitivity of the landscape and capacity of the landscape to receive further development and intrusion must be very carefully considered. Local Plan policies should encourage the protection and enhancement of valued landscapes in accordance with the NPPF Section 15 for Conserving and enhancing the natural environment, Paragraph 170 states that "Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:

a) protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan);

- b) recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland;
- c) maintaining the character of the undeveloped coast, while improving public access to it where appropriate;
- d) minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures;
- e) preventing new and existing development from contributing to, being put at unacceptable risk from, or being adversely affected by, unacceptable levels of soil, air, water or noise pollution or land instability. Development should, wherever possible, help to improve local environmental conditions such as air and water quality, taking into account relevant information such as river basin management plans; and
- f) remediating and mitigating despoiled, degraded, derelict, contaminated and unstable land, where appropriate.

Strategic Objective 8 refers to landscape character and WGSA is concerned that the evidence base is robust so the findings enable Local Plan policies and allocations to protect and enhance local landscapes, particularly rural ones that are otherwise free from built intrusion. Unacceptable levels of air, water or noise pollution should be avoided. Please refer to the extensive report by Prof Gregg (provided to Council) on Air Quality & Health issues.

**Question 8.12 What are your views on the Council using a sequential risk-based approach to direct development to areas at lowest risk of flooding?**

It is right that the Council's preferred approach should have proper regard to the sequential test for flood risk. The recent flooding events across several counties are a timely reminder of the harm to communities and threat posed by unsustainable development in the flood plain. Flood avoidance and guidance for good design for alleviation and mitigation are important topics for the Local Plan.

**Question 8.13 Do you think there is anything else that the Council could do to address or plan for flood risk and coastal change within the Local Plan?**

The Council should avoid over development and locating new development in the floodplain. Local Plan policies should seek to ensure that the design of development to mitigate flooding through sustainable urban drainage. There are many ways to slow the flow of rainwater run off to prevent local and downstream flooding.

**Question 8.14 Do you have any views on the Council's approach to ensuring biodiversity is properly addressed within the Local Plan and that important species and habitats are protected?**

We agree with the Council that 'Biodiversity is one of Wirral's greatest assets'. The aims and objectives of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan are laudable, but they can only be realised if the Local Plan contains robust policies that support it. Both incentives and deterrents are needed to encourage developers to bring forward proposals with a biodiversity net gain of +10%, which is the Government's recommended figure. The Environment Bill is currently going through Parliament, but the Council could set its own local targets based on the uniqueness and value of Wirral's biodiversity.

The wording of policy need to be clearer, such as: "the Council will protect and enhance the natural environmental assets by all means within its power."

This would reflect the NPPF paragraph 170 that states all development should: "provide net gains for biodiversity." The wording of the Local Plan policy should be strengthened to read "net biodiversity gain will be expected from all developments in accordance with the NPPF". Ecological networks: wording should be that "existing ecological networks will be protected, and developments expected to contribute to new networks where appropriate."

The State of Nature report 2019 showed the challenges facing our natural habitats and the Local Plan should contain policies that respond to this problem and effectively protects and enhances our natural environments across the peninsula. There should be no *weasel words*, such as "as far as is reasonably practical". Many groups within WGSA are fearful that biodiversity off-setting would be specifically harmful to areas of local biodiversity value and would result in a degradation of



biodiversity. Where proposals do not achieve stated biodiversity net gain targets on-site there should be policy to help officers to show grounds for refusal. There should be no ability of developers making a case they should not address this important issue.

WGSA is pleased to note that the Council has preferred approaches for both local and international important wildlife sites. We recommend that an approach similar to that carried out in North Wales is undertaken by the Council to identify areas that are functionally-linked acting as “Supporting Habitats to the European Sites”, as identified in the Wetland Birds Survey (WeBS) counts, and in records of many knowledgeable ornithologists working in Wirral. A Local Plan map layer identifying main known areas would be helpful to planners when taking decisions. This would remove delay of planning application decisions as surveys have to wait for the correct time of year, with costs involved. If Sites of Biological Importance were shown on the Local Plan, applicants may stop seeking permission in areas where development is significantly harmful. Protecting SBIs and supporting habitats to European Sites is beneficial to all in the future. There are economic and social benefits for protecting and enhancing Wirral’s biodiversity.

**Question 8.15 Do you have any views on the Council’s approach to ensuring that new development will take account of health and wellbeing through the Local Plan?**

WGSA is pleased to learn that health and well-being is a cross-cutting theme for the Local Plan, and it urges the Council to stop needless development of greenspace, farm fields, especially protected Green Belt land due to the inherent benefits to health and well-being enjoyed by people. Green Belt land is where it needs to be, in proximity to the large populations who live in our urban settlements, towns and cities.

There is ever increasing research papers considering the benefits of access to nature for recreation and leisure and the positive impact to health and well-being. The more recreational routes, and Public Rights of Way, that can be created and protected, so that people may enjoy our natural environment, the better. We need a Local Plan to ensure more people can take advantage of improved health and well-being.

Please refer to the extensive report provided separately by Prof Gregg (provided directly to the Council) on Air Quality & Health issues.

**Question 8.16 Do you think there is anything else that the Council could do to address health and wellbeing within the Local Plan?**

No. Please refer to the extensive Report by Prof Gregg (provided to Council) on Air Quality & Health issues. WGSA recommends that the Council does not allocated Green Belt sites for development, due to the absence of a justification to plan for 12,000 over the life of the Local Plan. We believe the Council should focus on further on regeneration. The health blight caused by vacant and derelict sites will be resolved and the greenspace, which has a range of positive health and well-being benefits, protected for the enjoyment of all in the future.

Please also refer to the extensive report provided separately by Prof Gregg (provided directly to the Council) on Air Quality & Health issues.

**Question 8.17 Do you agree with the Council's approach to how Heritage is dealt within the Local Plan?**

WGSA think there is more work to be done to ensure the Local Plan properly plans for development in the context of the NPPF Section 16 Conserving and enhancing the historic environment, Local Plan policy should ensure that the area's heritage assets are best protected when development is planned, particularly in the context of each conservation area.

It is noted from the detailed policy list in Appendix 9.1 that there will be 32 policies relating to heritage, so we will interrogate the policies in due course at the Regulation 19 stage when more information is forthcoming.

Please refer to the extensive Report by Prof Gregg (provided direct to the Council) on Heritage.

WGSA acknowledges that the Council has responded to submissions from Wirral Archaeology and Professor David Gregg on Brunanburh, and has commissioned experts to compile further evidence of

local heritage assets. We hope the full assessments will help to identify assets of value and for future protection for the benefit of all in the future.

**Question 8.18 Do you agree with the Council's approach to ensuring heritage assets are preserved or enhanced?**

Yes, broadly WGSA is content with the Council's approach. We note more studies need to be completed to inform the policy and hope there will be more comprehensive policy text to guide what is acceptable and unacceptable from a decision takers point of view, in order to encourage developments in the right locations, and correctly designed to suit the receiving environment.

WGSA believes it is paramount for the Council to have complete, and full, heritage assessments in front of it to consider as part of site appraisals, in advance of proposing Green Belt sites in the Options.

**Question 8.19 Do you have any views on our preferred approach for planning for minerals within Wirral?**

Please note that the Government was forced to remove paragraph 209 a) from the NPPF following the TalkFracking ruling, that ruled it unlawful. Shale gas exploration and production cannot be assumed to be compatible with climate change goals; therefore assessments of greenhouse gas emissions over the lifetime of projects are required with applications concerning shale oil and gas exploration.

Similarly peat extractions ought to be prohibited in line with the national planning policy for climate change and encouragement of the conservation of peat is crucial due to its important carbon sequestering ability. Degraded peat can release carbon into the atmosphere, so it is important to have Local Plan policies that are effective at avoiding greenhouse gas emissions. Development on peat should also be discouraged. Developer contributions to restore peat where it exists should be encouraged.

**Question 8.20 Do you have any views on our preferred approach for planning for waste within Wirral as part of a wider City Region partnership?**

WGSA acknowledges the role of the Joint Waste Local Plan for Merseyside and Halton. It does, however, recommend that Local Plan policies support sustainable development based on the waste hierarchy to avoid, reuse and recycle waste, to avoid landfilling, which is ultimately an unsustainable land use. The previous approach of sending our waste overseas is no longer an option, and plastic is causing serious harm to our marine and land environments. Consequently, the Council should ensure that effective policies aimed at waste reduction at the design, delivery and operation phases of development are included in the Local Plan. Good waste management policies should not be an afterthought, or it will lead to potentially high costs to the environment and to Council and to residents and businesses through Council Tax and Business Tax.

## **9 Detailed Local Plan Policies**

**Question 9.1 Do you have any comments on any of the detailed Policy subjects set out in Appendix 9.1?**

Although the list of policy subjects appears to be comprehensive, WGSA wishes to see a policy for brownfield regeneration. We think a detailed policy on this topic should be a trajectory for performance monitoring of the Birkenhead Regeneration Strategy.

**Question 9.2 Are there any additional detailed development management policies you suggest are included?**

As per the answer to 9.1, WGSA wishes to see a policy for brownfield regeneration. We think a detailed policy on this topic should be a trajectory for performance monitoring of the Birkenhead Regeneration Strategy.

**Question 9.3 Are there any of the detailed development management Local Plan policies you do not think are needed in the Wirral Local Plan?**

No.

## **10 Other Comments or Questions**

**Question 10.1 What section or subject would you like to make a comment on? What is your comment?**

There should be a dedicated policy on Landscape Character protection as there appears to be no detailed policy, even though it is referred to within Strategic Objective 8 and elsewhere. See our answer to Question 8.11.

## **11 Next Steps**

WGSA endeavours to best support the Council to progress a new Wirral Local Plan for 2020 to 2035, which responds to local consultation responses on development quantum, urban intensification, in order to best protect and enhance Wirral's greenspace assets in order for the area to prosper in regards to its economy, society and environment. We will review the draft final Local Plan (Regulation 19), the Sustainability Appraisal and Habitats Regulation Assessment together with any further evidence documents. We will make representations at the Examination in Public, in order to achieve a sound Wirral Local Plan 2020-2035 to be formally adopted without delay to best protect Wirral's greenspace.