

Three Rivers District Council

Sub Committee Report

7 August 2025

LOCAL PLAN SUB COMMITTEE – 7 August 2025

PART I

Green Belt Topic Paper (DoF)

1 Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the draft Green Belt Topic Paper (Appendix 1) prepared to assist with the formulation of the Local Plan.
- 1.2 The officer recommendation is for Members of the Local Plan Sub-Committee to note the contents of this report and the associated Topic Paper.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Green Belt Topic Paper (Appendix 1) provides a holistic overview of the important subject of Green Belt, an integral element of the emerging Local Plan, including summarising past local Green Belt evidence studies as well as discussing current national policy and the inter-relationship between Green Belt policy and provision of housing (and other forms of growth) within the District.
- 2.2 Over three quarters (76%) of the District is designated as Green Belt. The remainder of the District is made up by the existing urban area consisting of small and medium sized settlements, with relatively little development potential within the urban area.
- 2.3 The NPPF sets out that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered where exceptional circumstances are fully evidenced and justified, through the preparation and updating of Local Plans. The Council's Local Housing Needs Assessment (2024) analyses the needs for different types and tenures of housing, highlighting an acute need for affordable housing across the District. This need, together with the needs for future generations, specialist accommodation and the delivery of much needed infrastructure, is considered to constitute the exceptional circumstances required for alteration of Green Belt boundaries.

3 Summary of Green Belt Reviews

Stage 1 Green Belt Study

- 3.1 A Stage 1 Green Belt study (August 2017) was undertaken jointly with Watford which strategically reviewed the Green Belt purposes, looking at 83 strategic parcels. It also considered the character and role of villages within the Green Belt to assess the suitability of continued and potential in-setting of villages within the Green Belt.
- 3.2 The Stage 1 study found the District's Green Belt to be fulfilling its intended strategic purpose, that is maintaining a sense of openness through its permanence and application of development restraint. There were only 4 parcels that had a limited contribution to the overall purpose but many more had more than one significant contribution, which according to the report creates a complex picture on the context of growth and removal of Green Belt land at a strategic level.

Stage 2 Green Belt Study

- 3.3 The Stage 2 Green Belt study (October 2019) considered the effect of releasing Green Belt land for development purposes. A total of 152 parcels of land were assessed.
- 3.4 The Stage 2 study involved an assessment of the potential harm to the Green Belt associated with the release of specific areas of land. The harm assessment considered the extent to which the release of different areas of land would reduce contribution to Green Belt purposes, through both the loss of openness of the released land and the resulting impact that this could have on the strength of the adjacent Green Belt. Ratings and supporting analysis were provided in relation to each assessed Green Belt purpose, and considered in combination to arrive at a single overall harm rating. The harm rating was expressed via a sliding scale comprising of the following categories; very high, high, moderate-high, moderate, low moderate, low and very low.
- 3.5 In terms of overall harm, there were no parcels found to have very low levels of harm associated with them, and only 8 parcels or 2% being of low harm. The largest area of Green Belt by category was moderate high, which made up 31.8% of the total area, with high making up 27% of the total Green Belt area. The report concludes that there are other factors that should be considered (not just overall Green Belt harm), such as overall sustainability (as some higher harm Green Belt may be located in sustainable locations) and consideration of potential measures to mitigate harm to the Green Belt, as well as potential opportunities to enhance the beneficial use of the Green Belt.

Stage 3 Green Belt Study

- 3.6 The Stage 3 Green Belt study analysed variations in harm to Green Belt purposes that could result from the creation of a new inset settlement, distinct from any existing inset areas.
- 3.7 In order to be relatively self-sustaining, a figure of a minimum of 3,000 dwellings was chosen for a new settlement, with a 100ha minimum search size. Across the district, seven areas were identified for a potential new settlement. However, the 100ha releases of land in all the search areas were found to cause high or very high harm in all cases and therefore the creation of a new settlement was not considered to be an appropriate growth strategy.

Ongoing Green Belt Review

- 3.8 Following the update to the NPPF in December 2024, we are in the process of undertaking a further Green Belt Review. This Green Belt review will identify Grey Belt land within the District and will provide evidence as to whether altering Green Belt boundaries (as a result of proposed development) would “fundamentally undermine the purposes (taken together) of the remaining Green Belt, when considered across the area of the plan”, as set out in paragraph 146 of the NPPF.
- 3.9 At the time of writing, the findings of the ongoing Green Belt review have not been made available to officers, however, officers will fully update Members of the Local Plan Sub Committee at the earliest opportunity. Members will also be briefed during the Part 2 section of the 7th August Local Plan Sub-Committee.

4 Policy/Budget Reference and Implications

4.1 The recommendations in this report are within the Council's agreed policy and budgets.

5 **Financial, Legal, Staffing, Equal Opportunities, Environmental, Community Safety, Public Health, Customer Services Centre, Communications & Website, Risk Management and Health & Safety Implications**

5.1 None specific.

6 **Recommendation**

6.1 That the Local Plan Sub-Committee:

- Note the contents of this report and the associated Topic Paper.

7 **Background Papers**

National Planning Policy Framework (2024)

Planning Practice Guidance (2024)

Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended by the Localism Act 2011)

8 **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Draft Green Belt Topic Paper

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