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## **Three Rivers Part 5 Local Plan Regulation 18 Newly Submitted Sites and New Policies (July 2025)**

### **CPRE Hertfordshire response to the consultation**

#### **Introduction**

CPRE Hertfordshire has undertaken a review of the Three Rivers District Council Local Plan Regulation 18 Newly Submitted Sites and New Policies July 2025 and is pleased to submit the following representation for consideration in the next stage of the Local Plan preparation process. We note that this consultation is limited to re-introducing certain sites for consideration plus additional site proposals which were not allocated in previous Reg 18 documents, and the introduction of new policies in general terms on mainly environmental issues.

#### **General concerns**

Accordingly, it is not a comprehensive consultation and inevitably there is a concern that previous representations have not been taken into account and it is not possible to determine whether our concerns have been considered due to the partial nature of this consultation.

CPRE Hertfordshire was broadly supportive of the Reg 18 Part 4 consultation on proposals for site allocations which took account of the Green Belt. The present consultation constitutes a reversion to the previous position adopted by the Council with regard to the potential use of Green Belt for development and CPRE Hertfordshire regrets that the Council has not proceeded with the Lower Housing Growth Option approach in line with extensive local community responses.

#### **Changing context**

The context for the preparation of Local Plans has changed very considerably since the publication of the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in December 2024 which has introduced a new method of calculating housing requirement based on existing housing stock rather than forecasts based on household and population projections, as previously. An additional factor has been added to the formula for local planning authorities where housing values are highest.

This has placed huge additional pressures on Hertfordshire councils which now have to allocate significant areas of designated protected land for development. In addition to the housing requirements, the Government has also indicated that further greenfield land will

be required for major transport infrastructure and large-scale commercial development such as gigafactories, data centres and warehouses.

### **Grey belt**

The revised NPPF introduced the concept of grey belt which is proving massively prejudicial to the principle of designated protected land, particularly Green Belt. Increasingly, planning appeals and Council decision-making are constituting a full-frontal attack on the countryside as grey belt is being used as the primary justification for proposed developments and it is inevitable that this will be reflected in future plan-making.

The definition of grey belt is leading to the inability of local planning authorities to refuse any planning application on Green Belt. CPRE Hertfordshire is leading a national campaign seeking to amend the definition of grey belt to redress the imbalance that has occurred since the publication of the revised NPPF. Further details may be found on the website: <https://www.cpreherts.org.uk/news/save-our-green-belt-our-campaign-for-amendment-of-grey-belt-definition/>

### **Present position of Three Rivers District Council**

Until the present consultation, Three Rivers District Council had taken a fuller account of the importance of the Green Belt and limited the allocation of designated sites in the emerging Local Plan. CPRE Hertfordshire welcomed this position and notes with concern the potential re-introduction of sites previously dismissed and the introduction of new sites.

Three Rivers District Council has announced previously that it would undertake a full Green Belt Review prior to the submission of the draft Local Plan. CPRE Hertfordshire supported this approach which should provide a robust criteria-based foundation for maintaining the appropriate level of protection. It is regrettable that the Council has not undertaken this Review prior to this partial Regulation 18 consultation.

### **Impact of local government reorganisation**

The Government's local government reorganisation proposals are well advanced and will mean the disappearance of all the County's Borough and District Councils into two or more unitary authorities within the next few years. It is highly unlikely that the emerging Local Plan will complete its Examination in Public and Adoption stages prior to the introduction of the new council structure.

Accordingly, CPRE Hertfordshire believes that existing local planning authorities have the opportunity to reflect the concerns of local communities in the erosion of the Green Belt and promote the benefits of the countryside which is under increasing stress. We believe that it is entirely appropriate for local planning authorities to challenge the Government in the light of the results of the recent changes to the NPPF, and indeed the increasing related concerns being raised with regard to nature and wildlife proposals in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, presently being consulted.

## **Newly submitted sites**

The new Regulation 18 Local Plan consultation considers 34 sites as potential allocations, of which 30 are in the Green Belt. For 19 of these sites, the Council identifies what it terms “Significant concerns” which relate to their suitability for development.

The explanations provided in the information for each site are mainly concerned with sustainability, ecological or related matters and flood risk, all of which are intrinsic to the functions and enjoyment of the land as open countryside. It is clear that these sites, at least, should remain undeveloped and considerable further investigation should take place of those seven sites which are identified as “Some concern” on the site information.

Over 50% of the newly submitted sites are also identified as “Greenfield” or “Mainly greenfield” and we would urge the Council to undertake a thorough review of potential brownfield and previously developed land in the District Council area. Previous surveys dependent on land-owners providing information are entirely inadequate to gauge the full potential for the re-use of land in built-up areas including town and village centres, or previously developed land in the Green Belt.

It is clear that the Council should remain committed to conducting a full and rigorous Green Belt Review prior to any further land allocation proposals. Preferably such a review should be undertaken at a sub-regional scale with criteria which reflect the crucial characteristics of the open countryside to be protected.

## **New Policies**

The New Policies cover four main areas: biodiversity, the Chilterns Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation, net zero policies, and the Northwood Headquarters Ministry of Defence. CPRE Hertfordshire comments relate to the first three areas as follows.

### **Biodiversity**

Significant legislation regarding nature, wildlife and biodiversity has been introduced in recent years, starting with the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and including the Environment Act 2021 and subsequent measures, including provisions of the NPPF. The requirements of this legislation have been largely ignored in practice and this is increasingly unacceptable.

Local planning authorities introduce statements of intent through policies which are meaningless when they are not accompanied by detailed programmes and projects to implement the requirements of legislation. In common with local authorities throughout the country, the emerging Local Plan re-states the Council’s intention to promote biodiversity and Local Nature Recovery Strategies which are unobjectionable but irrelevant when not accompanied by detailed policies and enforcement.

Notwithstanding the statutory requirements for Biodiversity Net Gain it is inevitable that development on sites in the Green Belt will be injurious to many aspects of existing fauna and flora. Without specifying the biodiversity requirements for each site allocation, general policy statements remain as objectives which are highly unlikely to be achieved.

### **Chiltern Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation (SAC)**

The Three Rivers District Council area includes land which is within the “Zone of influence” that Natural England has designated as requiring a Habitats Regulations Assessment for large developments of over 100 dwellings and the provision of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) to reduce public over-use of the Chilterns Beechwoods SAC. The information provided in the survey is unhelpful and inadequate to elicit a public response.

### **Net zero policies**

Similarly to the treatment of the Chiltern Beechwoods SAC, the survey offers no meaningful information or opportunity for a public response. As with policies affecting biodiversity, well-intentioned legislation is promoted at a national and regional scale without indicating the implications for local environmental conditions which are significant for local communities.

Local planning authorities should take the opportunity in Local Plans to identify both the benefits and impacts of net zero policies at a local level. Three Rivers District Council is neither better nor worse than councils throughout the country in ignoring the implications of achieving net zero development.

### **CPRE Hertfordshire additional concerns**

In addition to the concerns already noted above, a very significant omission in this emerging Local Plan is the appropriate treatment of the Green Belt as a primary policy designation within the Three Rivers District Council area. It is effectively the defining land use outside the built-up areas and a critical characteristic which is highly valued, performing a wide range of functions which are under constant threat.

CPRE Hertfordshire urges the Council to take much fuller account of the vital functions performed by the Green Belt in Three Rivers. Whereas previously this appeared to be understood, the inclusion of significant areas of Green Belt for development allocations is a retrograde step.

### **Next steps**

CPRE Hertfordshire urges the Council to challenge the Government’s inappropriate promotion of designated protected land for development. The present Government’s position with regard to the inevitably greater use of Green Belt and the weakening of potential protections afforded to wildlife and nature in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill add up to a full frontal assault on the English countryside which should be resisted.