



Best and Most Versatile Briefing Note

Newcastle-under Lyme – Local Plan (at
Submission Stage)

December 2024

Briefing Note

Newcastle-under-Lyme Local Plan Best and Most Versatile Land (“BMV”) Required for Housing and Employment in the Local Plan

Introduction

1. Natural England in their response to the Newcastle-under-Lyme Final Draft Local Plan (at Regulation 19 stage), have asked for more information on how NUL has produced its evidence base and options assessment to inform the strategic site allocations regarding the justification for the loss of Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land and the cumulative impact of this loss, both locally and nationally in the Newcastle-under-Lyme Local Plan.
2. This briefing note directly addresses these concerns, providing a clear and transparent justification for the Council's approach to BMV land and demonstrating its soundness and legal compliance within the context of the Local Plan's overall strategy for sustainable development.
3. The Council recognises the value of BMV agricultural land as a finite resource and the need to minimise its loss. However, the Council also, through its Local Plan has to balance this consideration against also meeting identified development requirements of 8,000 dwellings (a minimum of 400 dwellings per year) and 63 hectares of employment land over the plan period (2020-2040).
4. The Council has adopted a selection strategy which prioritises brownfield sites in the first instance. This is in line with requirements set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), regarding making as much use as possible of previously developed/brownfield land and prioritising sites within or adjacent to existing settlements. The Council has adopted an approach to protect and conserve BMV land wherever possible.

Context: BMV Land Availability

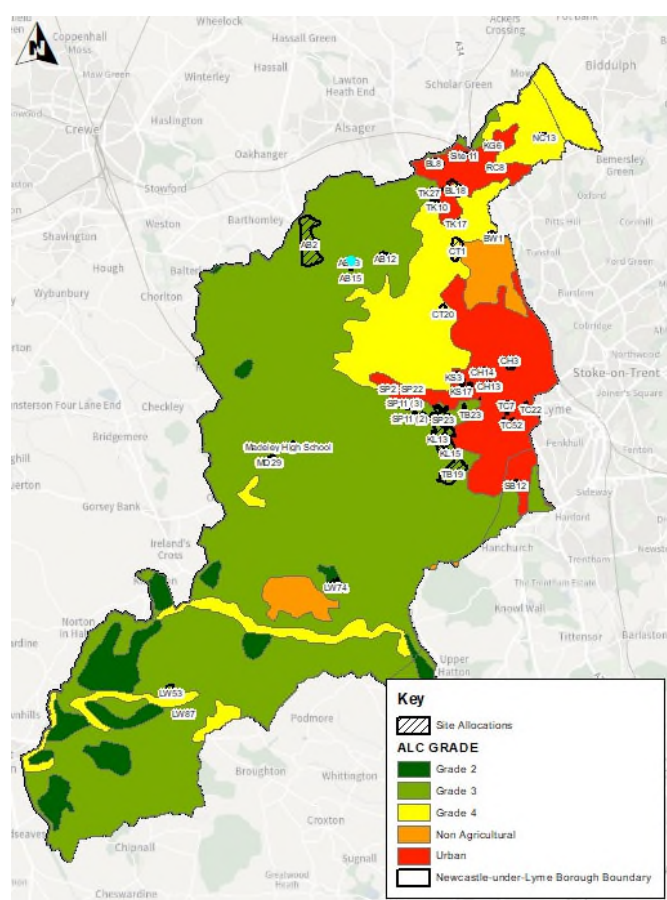
5. Newcastle-under-Lyme has a varied landscape of urban areas, smaller settlements, and more open countryside, which comprises a mix of land of varying degrees of agricultural quality and versatility. Preserving this agricultural character and the rural economy it supports is a key objective of the Local Plan. Whilst Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) is graded from 1 to 5, Natural England recognises BMV agricultural land as those within grades 1 to 3a, and therefore does not include any ALC graded 3b to 5 as being BMV. The Council has followed this example and considered ALC with a classification of 1-3 when calculating BMV land within the Borough.
6. BMV land makes up a total of 14,909.29 hectares or 70.67% of the Borough's total area (21,095.305 ha, per the Council's GIS data), forming a significant component of the local landscape. This high proportion of BMV land inherently limits development options and necessitates a balanced approach to meeting housing and employment needs while

protecting this valuable resource. The following table, and borough map, set out the distribution of agricultural land within the borough, classified by Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) grades.

Table 1: Agricultural Land Classification Grade

ALC Grade	Size (Hectares)
Grade 1	0
Grade 2	1145.64
Grade 3	13763.64
Total BMV (Grades 1, 2, and 3)	14909.29
Total Size of the Borough in Hectares	21095.31
Percentage of Borough (BMV) land	70.67%

Table 2: Agricultural Land Classification Borough Wide



Site Selection Process

- The Council followed a robust, multi-stage site selection process, as detailed in the Site Selection Report (ED029), to identify the most appropriate sites for allocation in the Local

Plan. This process ensured that all reasonable alternatives were evaluated systematically against a range of relevant criteria, including their impact on BMV agricultural land, and that allocations are made strategically to best meet the needs of the borough while minimising environmental impact. The approach taken is in line with national policy set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), to consider the sequential approach and to identify and assess sites based on a range of factors, including economic considerations, environmental impact and any mitigating actions needed to ensure acceptable development.

8. The Council has adopted a brownfield first approach to site selection, seeking to allocate previously developed sites or those within the existing urban area before considering the release of sites in the open countryside, or within the Green Belt. The Council began a 'Call for Sites' exercise in 2021, including a dedicated brownfield land call for sites. This gave an opportunity for landowners, developers, local stakeholders, and the wider community to put forward sites with development potential both inside and outside existing settlement limits, including both brownfield and greenfield sites.
9. This call for sites exercise enabled the council to establish a pool of sites to consider through the Strategic Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (SHELAA). The council then undertook an initial site sift to generate a list of sites for further consideration. This analysis included assessments of sites in regard to their suitability, availability and achievability, along with an initial assessment of site constraints which could render any site undevelopable.
10. Once this initial analysis had been completed the Council was able to determine if there was a need to continue with the site selection process based on alignment with the distribution of development and relationship to the settlement hierarchy of centres.
11. Once the Council determined that further site analysis was required, sites were further assessed using a Sustainability Appraisal and Habitats Regulation Assessment, and other appropriate evidence base documents.
12. The next stage of the process involved an evaluation of sites and initial recommendations for potential allocations. Included in this evaluation was an assessment of whether the Council had identified enough brownfield and non-Green Belt sites to adequately meet the identified housing and employment need. If the Council's identified development needs have not been met through the allocation of non-Green Belt sites or discussions with neighbouring authorities, then greenfield and Green Belt sites would be considered for allocation.
13. Following this assessment the Council undertook public consultation and invited input from statutory consultees in line with the requirements of the NPPF and the Councils Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). Once this consultation exercise had been undertaken the Council considered all representations, conducted a final site sift and determined which sites it would propose for allocation.
14. All the above elements have contributed to a robust site selection methodology and ensured that local requirements have been prioritised and met while respecting the importance of national policy and guidance relating to issues including, but not limited to, BMV land conservation, landscape and biodiversity management and protection, and to the

development of sustainable communities. Further detail of the Council's site selection approach is detailed within the Site Selection document (ED029).

Justification for BMV Loss

15. The Local Plan's proposed allocations include sites that contain a total of 259.39 hectares of BMV land, according to data provided by the Council's GIS team. Natural England, in their consultation response, cited a figure of 263 ha of potential BMV land loss. This 263 ha figure was first presented in the Sustainability Appraisal (SA) prepared by Lepus Consulting. Whilst this figure is 3.61 ha larger than the Council's calculation, this difference is considered negligible, and likely arises out of methodological variations between the two or the use of different mapping tools.
16. Information contained within the Site Selection Report highlights and expands upon the constraints associated with alternative development sites and demonstrates that they offer a far less advantageous position compared to the proposed allocations. This in turn provides a further, site specific, justification for development on BMV land. The following table presents the proportion of land that has been classified as BMV land within all proposed site allocations.

Table 3: BMV Land Within Allocations as a Proportion of Total Borough BMV

ALC Grade	Size in Hectares
Grade 1	0
Grade 2	9.89
Grade 3	249.50
Total	259.39
Total of allocations compared to total BMV	1.74%

17. The proposed loss of 259.39 ha represents 1.74% of the total BMV land within the Borough. Whilst the Council acknowledges the inherent value of BMV land as a productive agricultural resource and contributor to local character, the relatively small proportion of BMV impacted in comparison with the overall quantum within the Borough, when taken alongside the limited availability of suitable alternative locations, justifies those allocations necessitating the use of some BMV land as set out within the Site Selection report and Local Plan.

Site Allocations Impacting BMV Land

18. The following table provides a site-specific justification for the development of BMV land within each allocation, for those allocations which comprise an element of BMV land, demonstrating how the benefits of each proposal outweigh the identified impact on this valuable agricultural resource. The justifications are based on the Council's detailed site assessments, the sequential approach, and the supporting evidence base, as documented in the Site Selection Report (ED029) and other relevant Local Plan documents.

Site Reference	BMV Area (ha)	Justification for BMV Development	BMV Mitigation and Enhancement Measures
AB2	80.94	Strategic employment site delivering significant economic growth for the Borough and sub-region. Location offers access to the M6 connectivity	Extensive landscaping, habitat creation/restoration, and sustainable drainage systems

		and fulfils a strategic need for a logistics hub.	(SuDS) to offset BMV loss and enhance biodiversity.
KL13	26.13	Supports Keele University expansion, supporting a key strategic objective (SO-10) and delivering wider educational and economic benefits that significantly outweigh limited BMV impact.	Landscape buffer, tree planting, and integration with existing green infrastructure to minimise visual impact.
KL15	15.92	Directly supports Keele University's strategic growth (SO-10), providing essential employment land (13 ha) and student accommodation. Limited alternatives available within the growth corridor.	Strategic landscaping to minimise visual impact and enhance biodiversity, prioritising habitat creation where possible.
AB12	6.35	Site required to meet local housing need. Minimal BMV impact is mitigated through site design, ecological mitigation and other measures contained within policy AB12.	Landscape buffer, native species planting, and integration with existing hedgerows.
AB15	1.55	Small scale, and limited incursion of development onto BMV land is justified by the site's location for a sensitive extension of Audley, preventing sprawl. Pre-development ecological assessments required.	Retention of existing trees and hedgerows, creation of a landscape buffer along the western boundary to provide screening and create a soft edge.
AB33	2.74	Site accessibility and proximity to services in Audley outweigh BMV impact, supporting sustainable development principles.	Landscape-led development, sustainable drainage, and biodiversity enhancements to minimise and offset BMV impact.
TK10	3.56	Addresses local housing need in a sustainable location.	Strategic tree planting enhanced green infrastructure, and sustainable drainage systems to mitigate BMV loss and provide ecological benefits.
SP11	26.23	Contributes to the borough's economic and housing needs. Masterplan, design code, and phased development promote high-quality design and minimise landscape and ecological impacts.	Country Park creation, ecological mitigation areas, and integration with surrounding green infrastructure to minimise overall BMV impact.
SP23	9.21	Contributes to housing supply with opportunities for transport links and connectivity to SP11 and Silverdale. Location offers a range of services and facilities, justifying the relatively small impact on BMV resources.	Strategic landscaping and GI enhancements to mitigate visual impact and provide ecological benefits.
TB23	4.37	Development within the existing settlement will meet a need for local housing and enable sustainable	Landscape-led design and biodiversity enhancements to offset BMV impact.

		development within Thistleberry, minimising the impact on BMV resources.	
TB19	45.44	Significant contribution to housing supply in a sustainable location, offsetting impact on BMV land.	Comprehensive green infrastructure plan including tree planting, habitat creation/restoration, and sustainable drainage.
LW53	7.54	The substantial housing provision (circa 130 dwellings) supports housing delivery in Loggerheads where potential for development sites is limited. Landscape and ecological mitigation required for impacts near site's boundary.	Landscape-led development with emphasis on native species and local distinctiveness, creation of an ecological buffer along the site's perimeter to mitigate potential impacts.
LW87	0.19	Efficiently utilises underused brownfield land in Loggerheads, providing circa 12 apartments and meeting a local housing need. Minimal BMV impact.	Sensitive site design and integration with existing landscape features.
G&T 8	1.09	Contributes to meeting the identified need for Gypsy and Traveller accommodation within the Borough.	The small scale minimises landscape impact. Conditions will ensure appropriate site design, waste management, and ecological mitigation.
MD29	9.72	Located in the rural centre of Madeley and Betley, the site could accommodate up to 150 new homes to support local housing needs. Its position allows for a sensitive residential development near to Madeley, and access and connectivity improvements will enhance links to the existing village.	Mitigation measures include a landscape-led design approach, prioritising retention of existing hedgerows and trees, particularly along the access road to Moor Hall Farm, and the integration of green infrastructure to soften the development's visual impact within its countryside setting, thereby enhancing the overall character of the area. In addition, a thorough Flood Risk Assessment and a sequential approach will mitigate the risks of surface water flooding on parts of the site and ensure proposed developments do not adversely affect local drainage capacity or increase flood risk elsewhere. Existing ecological networks, which the borough wishes to protect and enhance, will also be considered as part of this development.

Madeley High School	3.29	Supports needed expansion of Madeley High School, essential social infrastructure contributing to SO-5. The allocation, while located in the Green Belt, enhances community facilities, and supports long-term sustainability of a rural centre. The relatively small impact on BMV land is justified by the significant social benefits for the local community and aligns with national policy regarding educational provision.	Sensitive design approach and landscape mitigation measures to minimise visual impact within the Green Belt. Consideration of existing ecological networks and sustainable drainage solutions within site layout to enhance biodiversity and manage surface water runoff.
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Cumulative Impact Assessment

19. The total BMV land proposed for allocation within the Local Plan amounts to 259.39 ha. This loss, when spread over the plan period (2020-2040 inclusive), equates to an annual loss of approximately 12.97 ha.
20. To assess the significance of this loss in a national context, the Council has considered recent trends in agricultural land conversion nationally using the best available national statistics. It should be noted that analysis of national land use change uses aggregate figures for a range of different land uses including, for example, commercial and residential development. Therefore, whilst change from agriculture to 'other uses' is recorded, there is no available national figure that specifically records the loss of BMV agricultural land alone, hence it has been necessary to apply an alternative methodology to generate the figures used in this assessment.
21. According to Table LUCS1 "Land use change by previous use, England" within the '*Land use change statistics – hectareage 2019-20 to 2021-22 statistical release*' (DLUHC, 24 August 2023), the average annual change from "Agriculture" to "Other Developed" use for the three-year period 2019-20 to 2021-22 is 16,167 hectares. Applying Natural England's estimated 42% national BMV baseline to this figure suggests a national BMV loss of approximately 6,790 ha per year. This methodology is considered appropriate in the absence of any other national data recording the loss of BMV land.
22. The proposed annual BMV loss in Newcastle-under-Lyme (12.97 ha) therefore represents a 0.19% of England's expected BMV loss over the plan period. This is significantly below the IEMA guidelines' suggested 1% significance threshold for cumulative impact, as outlined in Annex H of "*A New Perspective on Land and Soils in EIA*" (IEMA, February 2022), demonstrating that the Local Plan's impact on BMV agricultural land is not significant in the national context.

Conclusion

23. In response to Natural England's comments on the Final Draft Local Plan, this briefing note provides a robust justification for the limited BMV loss proposed within the allocations, emphasising the Council's commitment to minimising the impact on this valuable resource. The Council's robust, transparent, and plan-led methodology, as detailed in the Site Selection Report (ED029), has prioritised brownfield land and other non-BMV sites, aligning with the

sequential approach set out in the NPPF. Where limited alternatives exist for meeting the Borough's objectively assessed housing and employment needs (8,000 dwellings and 63 ha of employment land during the plan period), a small amount of BMV land has been strategically allocated following rigorous site assessments informed by the Strategic Housing and Employment Land Availability Assessment, Sustainability Appraisal, Habitats Regulations Assessment, and other relevant evidence. The proposed BMV loss (259.39 ha representing 1.73% of the Borough's total), spread over the 20-year plan period, results in a low annual loss (12.97 ha, or 0.19% of England's BMV from 2020-2040) and is well below the IEMA significance threshold for cumulative impact of individual developments. Policy SE13, requiring mitigation for sites impacting BMV land, further demonstrates the Council's commitment to minimising and offsetting losses through measures such as strategic landscaping, habitat creation, and sustainable drainage. The Local Plan also contains a number of other policies designed to protect and enhance the borough's important natural features, such as SE7 (Biodiversity Net Gain), SE8 (Biodiversity and Geodiversity), and SE14 (Green and Blue Infrastructure). The Council is confident that, through this approach, the Local Plan successfully balances meeting development needs with protecting valuable agricultural land and delivering wider social, economic, and environmental benefits for the borough, whilst adhering to all relevant national policy, guidance, and regulations.