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1. Introduction

- 1.1. The purpose of this paper is to set out how the Council has considered the location and quality of agricultural land in developing the Pre-submission Regulation 19 Local Plan 2026 – 2041. It explains how, through the assessment of potential sites, regard has been given to national policy and the requirement to consider the economic and other benefits of Best and Most Versatile Land (BMV).
- 1.2. Soils will be lost when housing, commercial, industrial and infrastructure development takes place. Pressures of erosion, compaction and organic matter decline and the impacts of development also include sealing and increased run-off and pollution. These soil deterioration issues are likely to be exacerbated by climate change.
- 1.3. The Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system was first introduced in 1966 and provided a framework for classifying land according to the extent to which the physical or chemical characteristics impose long-term limitations on agricultural use. The ALC provides a method for assessing the quality of farmland to enable informed choices to be made about its future within the planning system. The ALC classifies land into five grades, with Grade 3 subdivided into subgrades 3a and 3b. Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land is defined as land which falls within Grades 1, 2 and 3a with grades 3b, 4 and 5 of a moderate to poor quality. BMV agricultural land is considered likely to be the most flexible, productive and efficient for potentially best delivering future crops for food and non-food uses, if farmed.
- 1.4. This paper provides the context and justification for inclusion of the Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land policy, DP53, in the local plan. With agricultural land an important natural resource, it is important to consider its protection wherever possible to achieve sustainable development.



2. National Planning Policy and Guidance

National Planning Policy Framework

- 2.1 The NPPF makes reference to agricultural land at paragraph 187. It 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.’
- 2.2 Paragraph 188 then states that ‘Plans should: distinguish between the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites; allocate land with the least environmental or amenity value, where consistent with other policies in this Framework’⁶⁵. Footnote 65 says ‘Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality’.

Planning Practice Guidance

How can planning take account of the quality of agricultural land?

- 2.3 The Agricultural Land Classification 1988¹ dataset assesses the quality of farmland to enable informed choices to be made about its future use within the planning system.
- 2.4 In the circumstances set out in Schedule 4 paragraph (y) of the Development Management Procedure Order 2015, Natural England is a statutory consultee: and a local planning authority must consult Natural England before granting

¹ Agricultural land classification of England and Wales:
<https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6257050620264448>



planning permission for large-scale non-agricultural development on best and most versatile land that is not in accord with the development plan.

How can planning safeguard soils?

- 2.5 Soil is an essential natural capital asset that provides important ecosystem services – for instance, as a growing medium for food, timber and other crops, as a store for carbon and water, as a reservoir of biodiversity and as a buffer against pollution.

Natural England guidance

- 2.6 The key aim is to protect the best and most versatile (BMV) agricultural land from significant, inappropriate or unsustainable development proposals and that all soil should be managed in a sustainable way wherever possible.
- 2.7 Natural England has produced guidance for assessing development proposals on agricultural land, both for local authorities and for developers.² They reference the Agricultural Land Classification magic maps, which detail which agricultural land grade each site is, from Grade 1 to Grade 5. The map does not, however, include the subcategories 3a and 3b. This subgrade information is not readily available which makes it difficult to assess which land, if any, would be grade 3a and thus should be safeguarded where possible.
- 2.8 As required by the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure (England) Order) 2015, Natural England must be consulted on all non-agricultural applications that could result in the loss of more than 20 hectares of BMV land if the application is speculative and the land is not included as an allocation in a development plan document such as the Local Plan. This includes the likely cumulative loss of BMV from proposed development if it is part of a phased development. This position recognises that it may be appropriate for local authorities to allocate BMV agricultural land for development in circumstances where other sustainability credentials, such as proximity to the relatively most sustainable towns and villages and

² Guide to assessing development proposals on agricultural land (Feb 2021)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-land-assess-proposals-for-development/guide-to-assessing-development-proposals-on-agricultural-land>



good access to public and active transport modes, outweigh the loss of its agricultural land status.

Written Ministerial Statement – solar and BMV (2024)

- 2.9 A Written Ministerial Statement (WMS) ‘Solar and protecting our Food Security and Best and Most Versatile (BMV) Land’³ was made in 2024 under the previous Government. The statement made clear that food security is important to our wider national security and so the UK should maintain the current level of food we produce domestically. It states that that it is more important than ever that our best agricultural land is protected and our food production prioritised.
- 2.10 Solar power is a key part of the Government’s strategy for energy security, net zero and clean growth. But in some instances, solar projects can affect local environments which may lead to unacceptable impacts for some local communities. The planning system is designed to balance these considerations against the need to deliver a secure, clean, green energy system for the future.

Protecting the Best Agricultural Land from inappropriate use

- 2.11 A National Policy Statement published in January 2024 makes clear that ‘applicants should, where possible, utilise suitable previously developed land, brownfield land, contaminated land and industrial land. Where the proposed use of any agricultural land has been shown to be necessary, poorer quality land should be preferred to higher quality land avoiding the use of “Best and Most Versatile” agricultural land where possible. The Government in Powering Up Britain: Energy Security Plan clarified that while “solar and farming can be complementary” developers must also have “consideration for ongoing food production.”
- 2.12 A National Policy Statement can be a material consideration in determining planning applications. Due weight must be given to the proposed use of BMV land when considering whether planning consent should be granted for solar developments. The highest quality agricultural land is least appropriate for

³ Solar and protecting our Food Security and Best and Most Versatile (BMV) Land', 15 May 2024: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-05-15/hcws466>



solar development and as the land grade increases, there is a greater onus on developers to show that the use of higher quality land is necessary.

- 2.13 The local plan policy states that 'For some uses it may be possible to return the land to productive agricultural use without any loss of quality, should the proposed use no longer be required. For example, solar farms or similar. Suitable measures will be put in place to ensure this could be achieved'.

Addressing Cumulative Impacts of Solar Developments

- 2.14 The total area of agricultural land used for solar in the UK is very small, and even in the most ambitious scenarios would still occupy less than 1% of the UK's agricultural land. However, there is some geographical clustering of proposed solar developments in some rural areas. When considering whether planning consent should be granted for solar development it is important to consider not just the impacts of individual proposals, but also whether there are cumulative impacts where several proposals come forward in the same locality.

Improving Soil Surveys

- 2.15 The WMS raises the issue of perceived inaccuracy of soil surveys. It says that independent certification by an appropriate certifying body may take place to ensure Agricultural Land Classification Soil Surveys are of a high standard, consistent, authoritative and objective.

Supporting solar on rooftops and brownfield sites

- 2.16 The statement highlights that increasing the deployment of rooftop solar remains a priority for Government. Permitted development rights (PDR) now apply for large-scale commercial rooftop solar, including on farm buildings, through changes to the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. In addition, a new PDR for the installation of solar canopies in non-domestic car parks has been recently introduced.



3. Local Plan policy

3.1. Local planning authorities are required to give consideration to the Best and Most Versatile agricultural land in plan preparation and in determining planning applications. Natural England suggests that local authorities ensure that sufficient detailed site-specific Agricultural Land Classification survey data is available to inform decision making. However, this is not always currently possible in terms of differentiating between subgrades 3a and 3b as there is no existing comprehensive dataset.

3.2. Policy DP53 is a detailed and specific policy to address the use of Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land. This policy states:

‘When assessing proposals for development on unallocated sites on agricultural land its agricultural land classification (ALC) will be taken into account. Where the land classification is uncertain or classified as grade 3 without further subdivision, a full survey will be required to establish its quality. The best and most versatile (BMV) land (grades 1, 2 and 3a) will be protected from significant, inappropriate and unsustainable proposals as follows:

Grade 1 and 2 BMV land

This finite resource will be safeguarded from development to ensure its long-term potential for food production and to protect the soil resource.

Development will not be permitted unless it is for:

- *Infrastructure or community uses that require that specific location; or*
- *Outdoor recreational use; or*
- *A limited temporary use where the land and soil could be returned to its former quality and plans for its reinstatement are secured; or*
- *Is necessary for the associated agriculture or forestry use.’*

Grade 3a BMV land

Where development is proposed on sites of one hectare or greater on Grade 3a BMV agricultural land, development will only be permitted if:

- *It is one of the exceptions listed under Grades 1 and 2; or*
- *It is to be used for renewable energy production where the land could be returned to agriculture without a loss of quality; or*
- *Is for affordable housing; or*
- *The sustainability benefits of the proposal clearly outweigh the long-term loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land.*



Where development for residential use is proposed both on allocated and unallocated sites layouts should, as part of an overall sustainable development, include proposals to preserve the better-quality land for gardens, allotments, community orchards or similar schemes which support local food production.

On all sites soil resources should be conserved and proposals for the reuse of soil and its protection during construction should be made clear in any planning application.'

- 3.3. National guidance aims to protect BMV agricultural land from unplanned significant, inappropriate or unsustainable development proposals and protect soils by managing them in a sustainable way. Where residential use is permitted, proposals should be put in place to encourage local food growing.



4. Agricultural Land Classification in North Somerset

- 4.1. High quality Grade 1 agricultural land is a secondary constraint in the site selection process. A 'secondary constraint' is where development may be appropriate subject to local circumstances and when taking account of wider sustainability principles such as location, and the spatial strategy that seeks to locate most development around towns, urban areas and the relatively more sustainable larger villages.
- 4.2. The table below shows the various agricultural land classification grades for land in North Somerset. This is reproduced from nationally provided data, with no definitive split between grades 3a and 3b.

Classification	Description	Area (hectares)	Proportion of North Somerset
Grade 1	Excellent quality agricultural land	2,522	7%
Grade 2	Very good quality agricultural land	3,842	10%
Grade 3	Good to moderate quality agricultural land	22,469	60%
Grade 4	Poor quality agricultural land	4,060	11%
Grade 5	Very poor quality agricultural land	322	1%
Non agricultural	Land which is not in agricultural use, but could be returned to it in future	1,529	4%
Urban	Areas within an urban area with very little potential to return to agricultural land	2,451	7%



- 4.3 The next table lists each of the proposed residential allocations in the Local Plan 2041 by area, setting out the agricultural land classification according to the national dataset. Notes have been added to any sites that have an agricultural land classification of Grades 1 and 2, justifying their inclusion as allocations in the Local Plan. Where sites have planning permission in place this is already deemed to have been considered and is not addressed further.

Site location	Area	ALC	Notes
Grove Farm	Backwell	Grades 1 and 2	Resolution to grant consent.
Land at Farleigh Farm	Backwell	Grade 1	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
Land west of Rodney Road	Backwell	Grade 2	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
Dark Lane, Backwell	Backwell	Grade 1	Site has planning consent.
Land east of Backwell	Backwell	Grade 1	The allocation of this large site, as part of a wider package of strategic allocations around Nailsea and Backwell is considered justified on the basis that without it the development of key infrastructure in the form of a new link road connecting Nailsea and Backwell would not be deliverable. This wider sustainability benefit outweighs the loss of BMV land in this location.
Land south of Knightcott Gardens	Banwell	Grade 2	Site has planning consent.
Bleadon Quarry	Bleadon	Grade 4	N/A
Pudding Pie Lane (West)	Churchill	Grade 2	Allocation carried forward.
Land south of Bristol Road and north of Bath Road	Churchill	Grade 2	Site has planning consent.
Land at Dinghurst Road	Churchill	Grade 1	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
Land at Hilliers Lane	Churchill	Grade 2	Site has planning consent.
Land east of Ladymead Lane	Churchill	Grades 2 and 3	Site adjacent to the settlement boundary of Churchill, well related to services and facilities and surrounded by other proposed or existing residential development. This is considered to outweigh the loss of a small area of BMV.
Land north of Pudding Pie Lane	Churchill	Grade 2	Site adjacent to the settlement boundary of Churchill, well related to services and facilities and surrounded by other proposed or existing residential development.



Site location	Area	ALC	Notes
			This is considered to outweigh the loss of a small area of BMV.
Land south of Jubilee Lane	Churchill	Grade 2	Site adjacent to the settlement boundary of Churchill, well related to services and facilities and surrounded by other proposed or existing residential development. This is considered to outweigh the loss of a small area of BMV.
2-6 Bay Road	Clevedon	Urban	N/A
Land off Millcross	Clevedon	Grade 3	N/A
Land north of Churchill Avenue	Clevedon	Urban	N/A
Great Western Road	Clevedon	Urban	N/A
Castlewood	Clevedon	Urban	N/A
Land south of Station Road	Congresbury	Grade 3	N/A
Pineapple Farm, land north of Mulberry Road	Congresbury	Grade 2	Site has planning consent.
Woodhill Nurseries	Congresbury	Grade 1	Site already in use for non-agricultural purposes.
Windfall allowance	District wide	Various	Small sites across the district – large proportion within urban areas
Unit C, Estune Business Park, Long Ashton	Long Ashton	Grade 2	Previously developed site, with consent.
Unit A, Estune Business Park, Long Ashton	Long Ashton	Grade 2	Previously developed site, with consent.
Youngwood Lane	Nailsea	Grade 2	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
West of Engine Lane	Nailsea	Grade 2	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
North West Nailsea	Nailsea	Grade 3	N/A
Land south of The Uplands	Nailsea	Grade 2	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
Weston College Site, Somerset Square	Nailsea	Urban	N/A
Trendlewood Way	Nailsea	Urban	N/A
7 Clevedon Walk	Nailsea	Urban	N/A
Poplar Farm, Nailsea	Nailsea	Grade 3	N/A
Land south of Nailsea	Nailsea	Grade 2	This site is part of a wider package of strategic allocations around Nailsea and Backwell is considered justified on the basis that without it the development of key infrastructure in the form of a new link road connecting Nailsea and Backwell would not be deliverable.



Site location	Area	ALC	Notes
			This wider sustainability benefit outweighs the loss of BMV land in this location.
Land north of Nailsea	Nailsea	Grade 3	N/A
Land off Pound Lane, Nailsea	Nailsea	Grade 3	N/A
Barrow Hospital (1), Barrow Gurney	Other areas and countryside	Grade 3	N/A
Barrow Hospital (2), Barrow Gurney	Other areas and countryside	Grade 3	N/A
Gatcombe Farm, Wrington	Other areas and countryside	Grade 4	N/A
Land at Blagdon Water Garden Centre, Langford	Other areas and countryside	Grade 1	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
Cambridge Batch Garage, Weston Road, Long Ashton	Other areas and countryside	Grade 2	Site has planning consent.
Monaghan Mushroom Farm, Stock Lane, Langford	Other areas and countryside	Grade 2	Site has planning consent.
Monaghan Mushroom Farm Broad Location	Other areas and countryside	Grade 2	Previously developed land, currently in operational use for production of mushrooms. Policy requirement for business to relocate within North Somerset, releasing this site for housing in a sustainable location, securing benefits for the local community.
Woodspring	Other areas and countryside	Grade 3	N/A
Land north of Colliter's Way	Other areas and countryside	Grade 3	N/A
The Inn at Yanley	Other areas and countryside	Grade 3	N/A
Land at Lodway Farm	Pill and Easton-in-Gordano	Grades 2 and 3	Site allocated as part of Pill and Easton-in-Gordano strategic location. Loss of BMV land considered to be outweighed by other sustainability factors, such as the opportunity to secure significant levels of affordable housing, active and sustainable travel measures



Site location	Area	ALC	Notes
			and other benefits as required by Local Plan policy LP4.
Land east of Gordano Services	Pill and Easton-in-Gordano	Grades 1 and 2	Site allocated as part of Pill and Easton-in-Gordano strategic location. Loss of BMV land considered to be outweighed by other sustainability factors, such as the opportunity to secure significant levels of affordable housing, active and sustainable travel measures and other benefits as required by Local Plan policy LP4.
Pill Green	Pill and Easton-in-Gordano	Grade 2	Site allocated as part of Pill and Easton-in-Gordano strategic location. Loss of BMV land considered to be outweighed by other sustainability factors, such as the opportunity to secure significant levels of affordable housing, active and sustainable travel measures and other benefits as required by Local Plan policy LP4.
Land at Pill Road	Pill and Easton-in-Gordano	Grades 2 and 3	Site allocated as part of Pill and Easton-in-Gordano strategic location. Loss of BMV land considered to be outweighed by other sustainability factors, such as the opportunity to secure significant levels of affordable housing, active and sustainable travel measures and other benefits as required by Local Plan policy LP4.
Land at Ham Green	Pill and Easton-in-Gordano	Grade 2	Previously developed site, suitable for housing.
Petersfield, Church Road South	Portishead	Urban	N/A
Downside	Portishead	Urban	N/A
Wyndham Way Broad Location	Portishead	Urban	N/A
Black Rock, North of Clevedon Road	Portishead	Grade 3	N/A
Land at Tower Farm	Portishead	Grade 3	N/A
Land at Mead Farm	Sandford	Grade 3	N/A
Land south of Greenhill Lane	Sandford	Grade 3	N/A



Site location	Area	ALC	Notes
Parklands Village	Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
Winterstoke Village	Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
Locking Road Car Park	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Weston Rugby Club	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Land west of Winterstoke Road	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Sunnyside Road	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Gas Works	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Dolphin Square	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Land west of Trenchard Road	Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	N/A
Police Station/Magistrates Court/Roselawn	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Anson Road	Weston-super-Mare	Grade 2	Site has planning consent.
Land at Bridgwater Road	Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	N/A
Former Bournville School site	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Former Sweat FA site, Winterstoke Road	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Nightingale Close, Mead Vale	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Former TJ Hughes, High Street	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Land at Atlantic Road South	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Land to the rear of Locking Road	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Land adjacent to Woodside Avenue	Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	N/A
Land north of Lyefield Road and Lower Norton Lane	Weston-super-Mare	Grade 2	Site has a resolution to grant consent.
69-71 Locking Road	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
London Inn, Weston-super-Mare	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Former Leisuredome site/Parklands Site B (phase E)	Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	N/A
Woodspring Stadium, Winterstoke Road	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A



Site location	Area	ALC	Notes
Former Police Depot, Winterstoke Road	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Knightstone Road Hotels	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Former Grand Central Hotel, Weston-super-Mare	Weston-super-Mare	Urban	N/A
Land south of Manor Farm, north of Lyefield Road	Weston-super-Mare	Grade 2	This site is adjacent to the settlement boundary of Weston-super-Mare, and development in this location will contribute towards active and sustainable travel in the wider area. This is considered to outweigh the loss of BMV land.
Greenways Farm, Lyefield Road	Weston-super-Mare	Grade 2	This site is adjacent to the settlement boundary of Weston-super-Mare, and development in this location will contribute towards active and sustainable travel in the wider area. This is considered to outweigh the loss of BMV land.
Land at Leighton Crescent	Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	N/A
Uphill Grange, Uphill	Wider Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	N/A
Land west of Hutton	Wider Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	N/A
Elm Grove Locking	Wider Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	N/A
Land north of Locking	Wider Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	N/A
Land to the west of Elborough	Wider Weston-super-Mare	Grade 2	This site is considered to be well related to the district's highest order settlement of Weston-super-Mare, and development in this location will contribute towards active and sustainable travel in the wider area. This is considered to outweigh the loss of BMV land.
Land north of Banwell Road Locking/Elborough	Wider Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	N/A
Wolvershill (north of Banwell)	Wider Weston-super-Mare	Grade 3	N/A
Woodborough Farm	Winscombe	Grade 3	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
Broadleaze Farm	Winscombe	Grades 1 and 2	Allocation carried forward.
Land at Coombe Farm and Shipham Lane	Winscombe	Grades 2 and 3	Site has a resolution to grant consent.



Site location	Area	ALC	Notes
Former Mooseheart Lodge	Winscombe	Grade 2	Site has planning consent.
West of Hill Road	Winscombe	Grade 1	Small parcel of land, adjoining extant allocation at Broadleaze Farm. Benefit of delivering housing in a relatively sustainable location at one of the larger villages considered to outweigh the loss of BMV.
Moor Road, Yatton	Yatton/Claverham	Grade 2	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
North Field, Claverham Works, Claverham	Yatton/Claverham	Grade 1	Site has planning consent and is under construction.
Rectory Farm, Yatton	Yatton/Claverham	Grade 3	N/A
Oxford Plasma, Yatton	Yatton/Claverham	Grades 2 and 3	Previously developed site within settlement limits.
Yatton Rugby Football Club, North End Road, Yatton	Yatton/Claverham	Grade 2	Site has planning consent.



5. Conclusions

- 5.1 Whilst the loss of any BMV land for residential development is regrettable, justification has been provided for those sites allocated for residential use in Grades 1 and 2. The identification of these sites is further supported by the Sustainability Assessment, and Policy DP53 requires site layouts to preserve the better quality land for gardens, allotments, community orchards or similar schemes which support local food production. Furthermore, soil resources are expected to be conserved and proposals for the reuse of soil and its protection during construction is a matter that must be addressed through any future planning applications.
- 5.2 Coupled with a policy approach that protects the remaining BMV from significant, inappropriate and sustainable development proposals on unallocated sites, this is considered to be a proportionate approach to national policy requirements.

