Summary
This report outlines the basis for the Joint Green Belt Review, the methodology used to produce it and its broad findings. It is emphasised that the Study will not be used to inform the current set of Development Plan Documents.

Recommendation
That the Joint Green Belt Review be received as evidence to inform the preparation of any future review of the Core Strategy.

1 Background

1.1 Following a joint decision of all sub-regional planning authorities, Land Use Consultants (LUC) were appointed to undertake a comprehensive assessment of Green Belt land within Coventry City, North Warwickshire Borough, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough, Rugby Borough, Stratford-on-Avon District and Warwick District.

1.2 The study assessed the Green Belt against the five purposes of Green Belts, as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Its purpose was not to identify land for removal from or addition to the Green Belt. Such decisions will need to be taken in the context of wider evidence relating to exceptional circumstances for removing land from the Green Belt (or adding land to it) and the wider assessment of spatial development options. The relative performance of Green Belt parcels may form part of such an assessment.

1.3 The Green Belt study was undertaken in two stages. Stage 1 assessed the Green Belt within Coventry City, Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough, Rugby Borough and Warwick District. Stage 2 has assessed the Green Belt within North Warwickshire Borough and Stratford-on-Avon District.

1.4 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) takes forward the previous national Green Belt policy set out in PPG2 (Green Belts). Paragraph 79 of the NPPF states that 'the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence'.
1.5 This is elaborated in NPPF paragraph 80, which states that Green Belts serve five purposes:

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas.
- To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another.
- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.
- To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns.
- To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

1.6 The NPPF emphasises that local planning authorities should establish Green Belt boundaries in their Local Plans which set the framework for Green Belt and settlement policy. It goes on to state that ‘once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances, through the preparation or review of the Local Plan. At that time, authorities should consider the Green Belt boundaries having regard to their intended permanence in the long term, so that they should be capable of enduring beyond the plan period’. [paragraph 83]

1.7 The NPPF advises that ‘when drawing up or reviewing Green Belt boundaries local planning authorities should take account of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development. They should consider the consequences for sustainable development of channelling development towards urban areas inside the Green Belt boundary, towards towns and villages inset within the Green Belt or towards locations beyond the outer Green Belt boundary’. [paragraph 84]

1.8 National guidance makes it clear that the Green Belt is a strategic planning tool designed primarily to prevent the spread of development and the coalescence of urban areas. To this end, land should be designated because of its position rather than, for example, its landscape quality or recreational use.

2 Methodology

2.1 The Green Belt Study drew on good practice across England. The method sought to be:

- **Objective** – assessment criteria were based on national planning policy and the performance of parcels of land against these criteria was objectively assessed, ensuring that the justification of each score is clear and as free from value judgements as possible.

- **Simple and Consistent** – the methodology was applied consistently across the six local authority areas covered. No Green Belt purpose is considered more important than any other in the NPPF so no weighting has been applied in the process.

- **Focussed** – it concentrates on the purposes of Green Belt and does not consider the relative values of parcels of land as ecological or landscape assets. While it is important to consider the wider benefits of Green Belt as countryside, these benefits are not an explicit policy objective of Green Belt designation and should only be considered once Green Belt has been defined.
2.2 The study considered all existing Green Belt within the Coventry and Warwickshire sub-region but it was undertaken in two stages according to the situation each Council was at in the production of their respective Local Plans/Core Strategies.

2.3 Green Belt land adjacent to the main settlements was divided into parcels for assessment. For the specific purposes of this study, the main settlements within and adjacent to Stratford-on-Avon District were defined as being Alcester, Astwood Bank, Henley-in-Arden, Redditch, Stratford-upon-Avon and Studley.

2.4 The remaining areas of Green Belt in the District were defined as ‘broad areas’. As such, the detailed criteria-based assessment applied to the Green Belt parcels adjacent to the main settlements was not used. Instead, a broader descriptive assessment was undertaken, outlining why these larger, more strategic areas of the Green Belt fundamentally fulfil the purposes of this designation in the West Midlands.

3 Assessment of Findings

3.1 The map attached at Appendix 1 illustrates the parcels and broad areas that were defined as the basis for the Study.

3.2 The three broad areas represent the largely open and undeveloped countryside between the large built-up areas and main rural villages within the Green Belt in Stratford-on-Avon District. As the ‘main body’ of the Green Belt (as opposed to the edges), they were considered to make a significant contribution to Green Belt purposes.

3.3 The map also illustrates the combined scores for each parcel against all the Green Belt purposes to give an impression of each parcel’s overall contribution to the Green Belt purposes. It should be noted, however, that an overall score can mask the significant contribution of a parcel to a single Green Belt purpose, or a relatively poor performance across a number of purposes.

3.4 This Study has demonstrated that the majority of the Green Belt in Stratford-on-Avon District continues to serve its purposes very well. In particular it helps to maintain the identity of this part of the West Midlands and to provide opportunities for residents to enjoy the countryside close at hand.

3.5 The NPPF requires changes to the Green Belt to be made through the Local Plan process. This should include:

   i. demonstration of exceptional circumstances, such as unmet housing or employment land needs, that cannot be met elsewhere; and

   ii. consideration of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development, considering a range of local, regional and national issues such as economic growth, health and wellbeing, accessibility and biodiversity, cultural heritage and climate change resilience, as well as an assessment against Green Belt purposes.
3.6 A common interpretation of the policy position is that Local Plans should identify the most sustainable locations for development, unless this is outweighed by adverse effects on the overall integrity of the Green Belt according to an assessment of the whole of the Green Belt based around its five purposes.

3.7 In other words, the relatively poor performance of the land against Green Belt purposes is not, of itself, an exceptional circumstance that would justify release of the land from the Green Belt. Other factors, such as landscape sensitivity, flood risk, environmental designations and accessibility to services, should all be taken into account.

3.8 Overall, the Study will provide the basis for considering the appropriateness of releasing land from the Green Belt through the process of reviewing the Core Strategy. It is not applicable to the current Core Strategy nor, as a consequence, to the preparation of the Site Allocations Plan or Neighbourhood Plans.

3.9 When the District Council comes to review the Core Strategy, it may be appropriate to carry out a more detailed, fine grained assessment of land in the Green Belt, including smaller settlements that were only covered by the Broad Areas in this Study.

4 Options Available to The Cabinet

4.1 The following options are available to The Cabinet to consider:

Option 1:
• To receive the Joint Green Belt Review as evidence to inform any review of the Core Strategy.

Option 2:
• Not to receive the Joint Green Belt Review as part of its evidence base.

5 Implications of the Proposal

5.1 Legal/Human Rights Implications
5.1.1 None identified at this stage.

5.2 Financial
5.2.1 None identified at this stage.

5.3 Environmental
5.3.1 None identified at this stage.

5.4 Corporate Strategy
5.4.1 None identified at this stage.

5.5 Analysis of the effects on Equality
5.5.1 None identified at this stage.

6 Risk Assessment
6.1 None identified at this stage.
7 Conclusion

7.1 The study provides an initial assessment of the manner in which land within the Green Belt in Stratford-on-Avon District performs against the five purposes of the Green Belt identified in the NPPF. It will eventually be used as a basis for considering whether it would be appropriate to remove any land from the Green Belt to facilitate development in a future review of the Core Strategy. However, such decisions will also be dependent on other factors being rigorously assessed, including the spatial options available for locating development and a wide range of environmental criteria.

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