

Draft Widnes and Hale Green Belt Study

Site Assessments
Consultation Draft
February 2015



Halton Borough Council

Draft Widnes and Hale Green Belt Study

Site Assessment Consultation Document [Version 2]

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Disclaimer

This Green Belt Review has been undertaken solely for the purposes of informing the local plan making process. It does not constitute planning policy and it does not allocate land for development.

The Green Belt designation carries significant weight as a material consideration in planning policy and development management. Government policy is explicit that changes to Green Belt designations should be made through the Local Plan process, in the context of promoting sustainable development as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework.

The main purpose of the study is to undertake a strategic review of all Green Belt land in Widnes and Hale to identify the contribution of the Green Belt towards national Green Belt purposes as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This will identify the primary functions of the Green Belt, which deliver the national purposes, and identify areas of Green Belt land which are considered to contribute least towards national purposes.

The outcome of this study provides only one piece of evidence among a wide range of considerations that must be taken into account before deciding on any changes to Green Belt boundaries.

Version Control

Version	Date	Notes
v1	05/02/15	Initial Publication version
v2	16/02/15	Error correction: Maps 7a and 7b pg58 & 59 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Red and green colours transposed to match corresponding maps on page 29 Key corrected (strong and weak transposed)

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I Introduction

- I.1 This Green Belt Study is required to be undertaken to inform the future planning strategy for Halton Borough.
- I.2 This is in line with the Core Strategy (adopted April 2013), which committed the Council to undertaking a partial review of the Green Belt around Widnes and Hale in accordance with the recommendations of the Inspector's Report on the Core Strategy.
- I.3 The Localism Act introduced a Duty to Co-operate on planning matters of strategic importance, i.e. affecting more than one Local Planning Authority area. Green Belt is a strategic issue and the Council has sought co-operation from our neighbouring authorities, to work in partnership to ensure that a co-ordinated and strategic approach is taken. Knowsley Council, Sefton Council and West Lancashire Council have already conducted Green Belt Studies to inform their Core Strategy Local Plans. We have adopted a methodology closely aligned to those used by these neighbouring authorities to ensure a consistent approach, making minor alterations informed by their experiences and to accord with recent examination/legal judgements. The draft methodology was subject to public consultation between 5th September 2013 and 9th October 2013, the results of which are set out in the Statement of Consultation available on the Council website (www.halton.gov.uk).
- I.4 It should be noted that in addition to carrying out this strategic Green Belt Study, the Council will also undertake a detailed review of the existing Green Belt boundaries to ensure that the boundaries are consistently and robustly defined (partially as a result of the greater accuracy required by the move to digital mapping). This will be carried out and consulted upon as part of the production of the Local Plan Policies Map.

Merseyside Green Belt

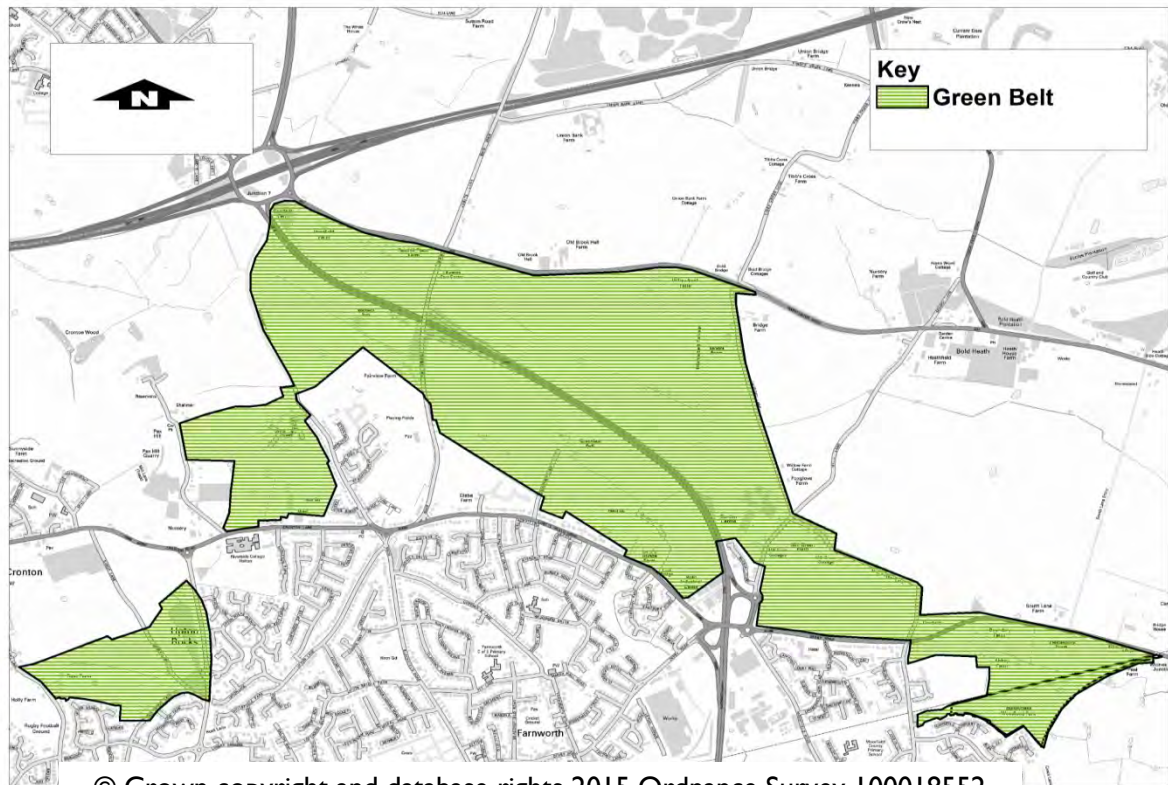
- I.5 The Merseyside Green Belt was approved in 1983. Its key purposes were to channel development into the existing urban areas and assist urban regeneration of the urban core. Since its creation, the Merseyside Green Belt has not been reviewed at a sub-regional level, although minor changes have been approved in the constituent local authorities' individual Unitary Development Plans (UDPs). Map I shows the current Merseyside Green belt.
- I.6 It should be noted that Knowsley Borough Council are currently proposing to release land from the Green Belt to meet immediate development needs through their Core Strategy Local Plan (currently at Examination). More information about the proposed

changes to the Green Belt around Knowsley can be found at <http://www.knowsley.gov.uk/residents/building-and-planning/local-plan.aspx>

Map 1: Merseyside Green Belt



Map 2a: (Halton Borough) Green Belt – North Widnes



Map2b: (Halton Borough) Green Belt - South Widnes / Hale



Format of this Study

- 1.7 The Green Belt Study – Site Assessment comprises this summary document and the Compendium of Individual Site Records which contains detailed assessment information for each study ‘parcel’.
- 1.8 This document introduces the Green Belt Review, and sets out the Policy Context under which it is being undertaken. It goes on to explain how the review and assessment of individual parcels has been undertaken. Within each stage of the review, the assessment criteria are explained and a map is provided showing the results of the assessment with a written description of key points.
- 1.9 It is recognised that the maps within the main section of this document are necessarily of a small size and it may be difficult to pick out details for individual sites, however larger scale versions of the map are provided at the end of the document for clarity.
- 1.10 The following two pages (5 & 6) explain the layout of the Individual Site Records within the compendium that accompanies this document.
- 1.11 Following on from the Review, the Key Findings are set out highlighting the important factors that have been drawn from the Review. The document then concludes with the Next Steps section, which sets out what the Council will do next.

Consultation

- 1.12 To ensure that this Study is robust we are publishing details of the initial site assessments for a period of public consultation. We would welcome your comments on the information in this document and the accompanying Compendium of Individual Site Records, by **5pm on Thursday 19th March 2015**.

Figure 1: Format of the Compendium of Individual Site Records

Parcel Reference: a unique number for each parcel

Parcel location: OS Map and Aerial Photo showing Boundary Strengths


Parcel Description: this describes the parcel and sets out the current uses on the site

Stage 2: Constraints: This section identifies any Prohibitive 'Show Stopping' Constraints such as the parcel being within an Inner Zone of a COMAH site, where development could not take place, and any restrictive constraints that development would need to take into account, such as the presence of a Listed Building.

Stage 2: Accessibility: This identifies how accessible certain facilities are from the parcel such as public transport, shops and schools.

Parcel Ref: GB001

Area (ha) 1.291Land to the north of Old Upton Lane



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Description

The site is in residential use being predominately occupied by two dwellings, a 1970's bungalow an older substantial two storey house set in extensive gardens. There are a number of smaller cottages fronting Old Upton Lane to the south western corner of the site.

Stage 2: Prohibitive / Show Stopping Constraints

Flood Risk (Zones 3A and 3B)	No	Sites of Special Scientific Importance	No
COMAH / Airport Public Safety Zone (PSZ)	No	Ancient Woodland	No
Known Remediation or Contamination	No		

Stage 2: Restrictive Constraints

Conservation Area	No	PADHI	No
Local Geological Importance	No	Local Nature Reserve / Wildlife Site	No
Listed Building / Ancient Monument	No	Area of Landscape Value	No
Flood Risk Zone 2	No	Pollution	No
Agricultural Land Classification	Grade 2		

Stage 2: Accessibility Scoring

Within 400m of Bus Stop	Yes	5	Within 800m of a Town / District Centre	No	0
Within 800m of Rail Station	No	0	Within 600m of a Local Centre	No	0
Within 600m of Primary School	No	0	Within 800m of a Leisure Centre	No	0
Within 600m of Secondary School	No	0	Within 800m of a Post Office	No	0
Within 600m of Further Education	No	0	Within 1km of a GP / Health Centre	No	0
Within 2km of primary employment area or allocated employment site	Yes	5	Within 800m of Public Park / Play Area	Yes	5
Total Score				15	

This site has average accessibility, with access to at least two of the listed facilities.

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Stage 3: Assessment against Green Belt Purposes: this section looks at each of the Green Belt purposes in turn and assesses the parcel against the relevant criteria

Purpose 1: Unrestricted Sprawl: this assesses the parcels containment and boundary strength

Photographs: These show the boundaries and key features of the parcel.

Purpose 2: Prevent Merging: This assesses the gap between neighbouring towns and other settlements.

Purpose 3: Safeguarding the countryside from encroachment: This section looks at the land use of the site and the levels of visual encroachment.

Purposes 4 & 5: Individual parcels have not been assessed against these criteria at this time.

Overall Summary: this summarises the assessment of the parcel against each of the Green Belt purposes.

Stage 4: Provides additional information in relation to the parcel that may be of interest, such as the openness of the parcel (proportion of development) and the potential residential capacity of the site.

Parcel Ref: 1

Stage 3: Assessment Against The Purposes Of Including Land In The Green Belt

Purpose 1:

To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built up areas

How well contained by the urban area is the parcel?
Boundary Strength?

Partially Contained

Old Upton Lane (the existing Green Belt boundary) forms the site's southern boundary and provides a strong edge to the current urban area, whilst the northern and eastern boundaries are to open countryside uses. The western boundary is to the undeveloped area of site H002, this edge is considered moderate with extensive (unprotected) trees forming the boundary.

Containment Text

The site is adjacent to the urban area and only partially contained with urban development (189m / 37%) to the south-eastern boundary (Old Upton Lane) and a adjacent residential plot within the Green Belt to the south-west (109m). To the north and west lie open countryside uses, though these are well screened in places with mature trees / vegetation



Field boundary looking South East to the rear of 113 Old Upton Lane



Built development looking north to the rear of 113 Old Upton Lane



Field boundary looking south to the rear of 113 Old Upton Lane



Built development looking north to the rear of 113 Old Upton Lane

Purpose 2:

To prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another

The width of the strategic open gap between urban areas?

The site lies between the northern edge of Widnes and the settlement of Cronton. The gap between these settlements is less than 500m in places. Release of this parcel would reduce the gap in this location to around 680m.

Parcel Ref: 1

Purpose 3:

To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment

Land Use?

Non Country Use

Field Crops, Improved pasture, Residential, Residential - Large detached houses (Sixties / Seventies 1964-1979), Residential - Smaller detached houses (Early and Middle Victorian 1837-1870), Residential - Standard size semis (Late Victorian / Edwardian 1870-1914), Roads.

Visual Encroachment:

Partial Visual Encroach - Overall this parcel has partial visual Encroachment and makes a limited contribution to preserving the character of the countryside.

Purpose 4:

To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns

Does the parcel help to preserve the setting of an historic town, village or park?

The revised methodology is quite clear that no parcels should be ruled out based on this purpose and further consideration should be given to this issue if required at a later stage, i.e. in the design of any development

Purpose 5:

To assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land

Individual sites have not been assessed against this function, as no measureable criteria were identified in the study methodology

Overall Summary of Purpose

Limited - The parcel makes a strong contribution to preventing settlements merging (Cronton and Widnes) and limited contribution to each of the remaining purposes of including land within the green belt.

Stage 4: Assessment of how the parcel contributes to meeting the Core Strategy Local Plans identified need, together with an indicative housing capacity

What percentage of the parcel is covered in development?

10-25%

Assumed Total

100%

Net deliverable area?

<= 0.4ha

90%

>0.4ha <= 2ha

80%

>2ha <= 5ha

75%

>5ha

Notional site capacity @ 30dph (of assumed developable area)

34

2 Policy Context

National Policy Context

- 2.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), published in March 2012, sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied. The purpose of the NPPF is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, which has three dimensions; an economic role, a social role and an environmental role.
- 2.2 Section 9 of the NPPF sets out the national policy for Green Belt. The opening sentence states that *'the Government places great importance on the Green Belt'*. It defines the essential characteristics of the Green Belts as their *'openness'* and *'permanence'* and reiterates from previous guidance the five *purposes* which they perform.
- 2.3 The five purposes of including land in Green Belts, as set out in paragraph 80 of the NPPF, are:
- to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
 - to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another;
 - to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
 - to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
 - to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.
- 2.4 Paragraph 83 of the NPPF identifies 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.
- 2.5 Paragraph 84 of the NPPF states 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."*
- 2.6 The NPPF in paragraph 85 provides that when defining boundaries, local planning authorities should:
- ensure consistency with the Local Plan strategy for meeting identified requirements for sustainable development;
 - not include land which it is unnecessary to keep permanently open;

- where necessary, identify in their plans areas of ‘safeguarded land’ between the urban area and the Green Belt, in order to meet longer term development needs stretching well beyond the plan period;
- make clear that the safeguarded land is not allocated for development at the present time. Planning permission for the permanent development of safeguarded land should only be granted following a local plan review which proposes the development;
- satisfy themselves that Green Belt boundaries will not need to be altered at the end of the development plan period; and
- define boundaries clearly, using physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent.

Local Policy Context

- 2.7 The Core Strategy Local Plan was adopted in April 2013. Policy CS6 sets out that a partial review will be necessary during the early part of the plan period to ensure sufficient ongoing supply of deliverable development land to meet the requirements of the Borough’s communities. It highlights that the review will be limited to meeting the identified needs of Widnes / Hale with the release of land strictly phased in accordance with the prioritisation of urban regeneration as set out elsewhere within the Core Strategy.
- 2.8 The Examination into the Core Strategy concluded that there was sufficient identified development land within Runcorn to meet its needs to 2028, and as such there were no exceptional circumstances to require a review of the Green Belt around Runcorn at this time.

The current review

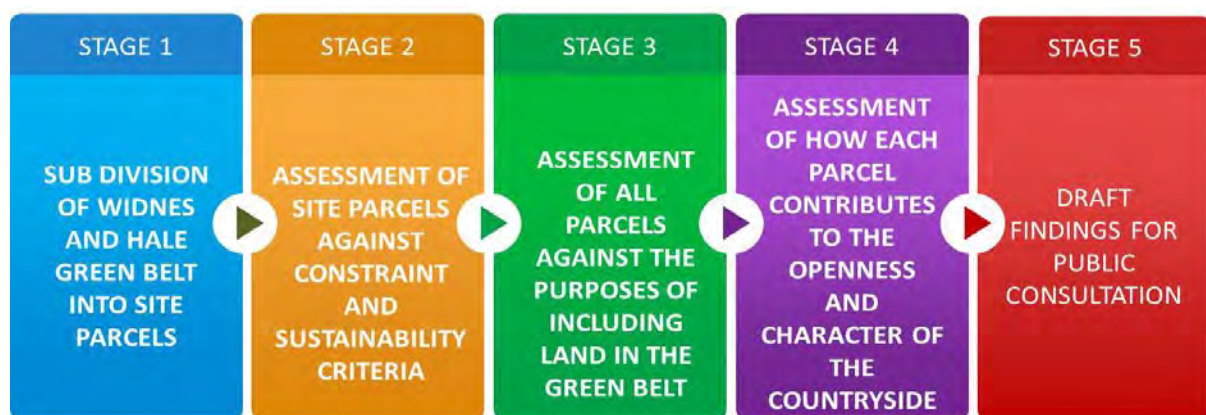
- 2.9 This Green Belt review current review is being undertaken in compliance with the commitment in the Core Strategy. This will form one part of the evidence base for the next Halton Local Plan. The Council is currently undertaking additional work to quantify the (urban) land supply position and with working with neighbouring authorities to address the need for an ‘Objectively Assessed Housing Need’ figure. Together, these additional pieces of work will allow the Council to quantify the shortfall of development land that may have to be found from within the current Green Belt.

3 Green Belt Review

3.1 The Green Belt Review is has been triggered by a need to identify additional development land to meet the future needs of Widnes and Hale. The review has to determine the relative performance of different areas of the existing Green Belt against the five purposes of including land in the Green Belt to determine the relative importance of differing areas and to identify “land which it is unnecessary to keep permanently open”. [see 2.3 and 2.6 above]

3.2 The stages of the Review are as set out in the figure below.

Figure 2: Widnes and Hale Green Belt Study Methodology

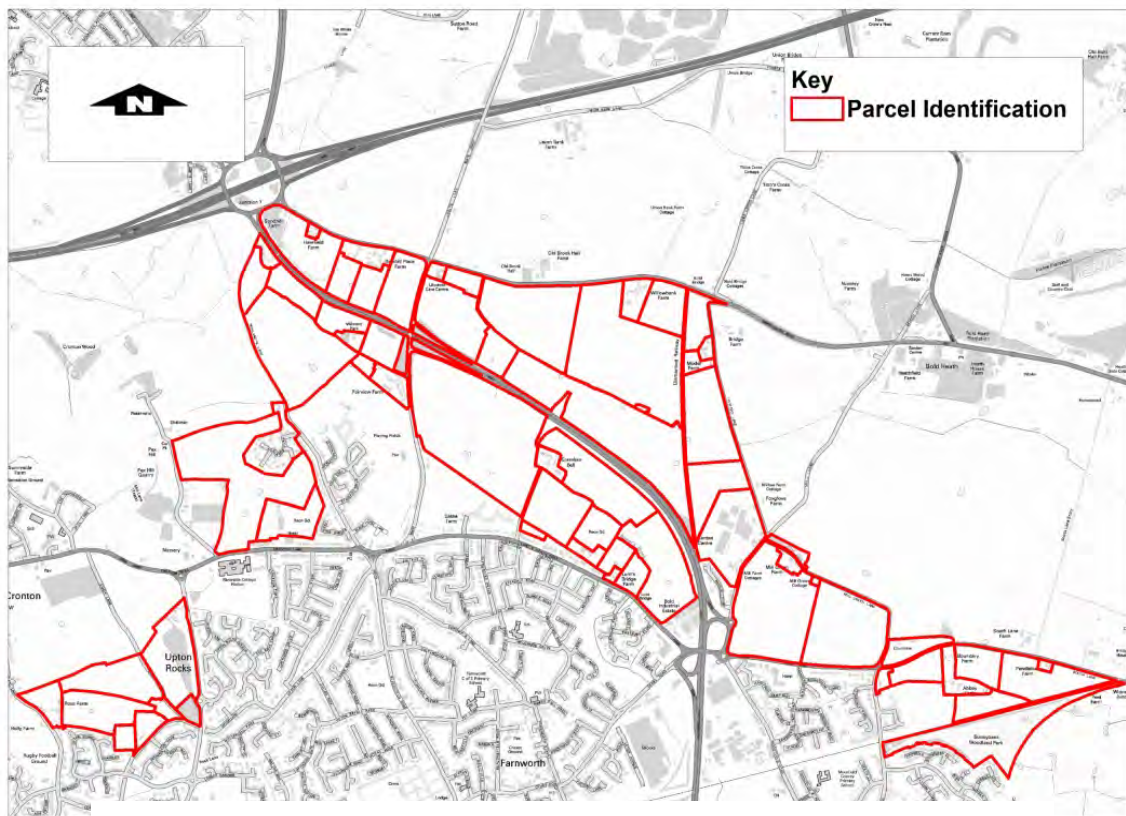


3.3 Changes to the initial draft Methodology were made as the Review has been undertaken; these are explained within the text at the relevant stage.

STAGE I – Defining Study Parcels

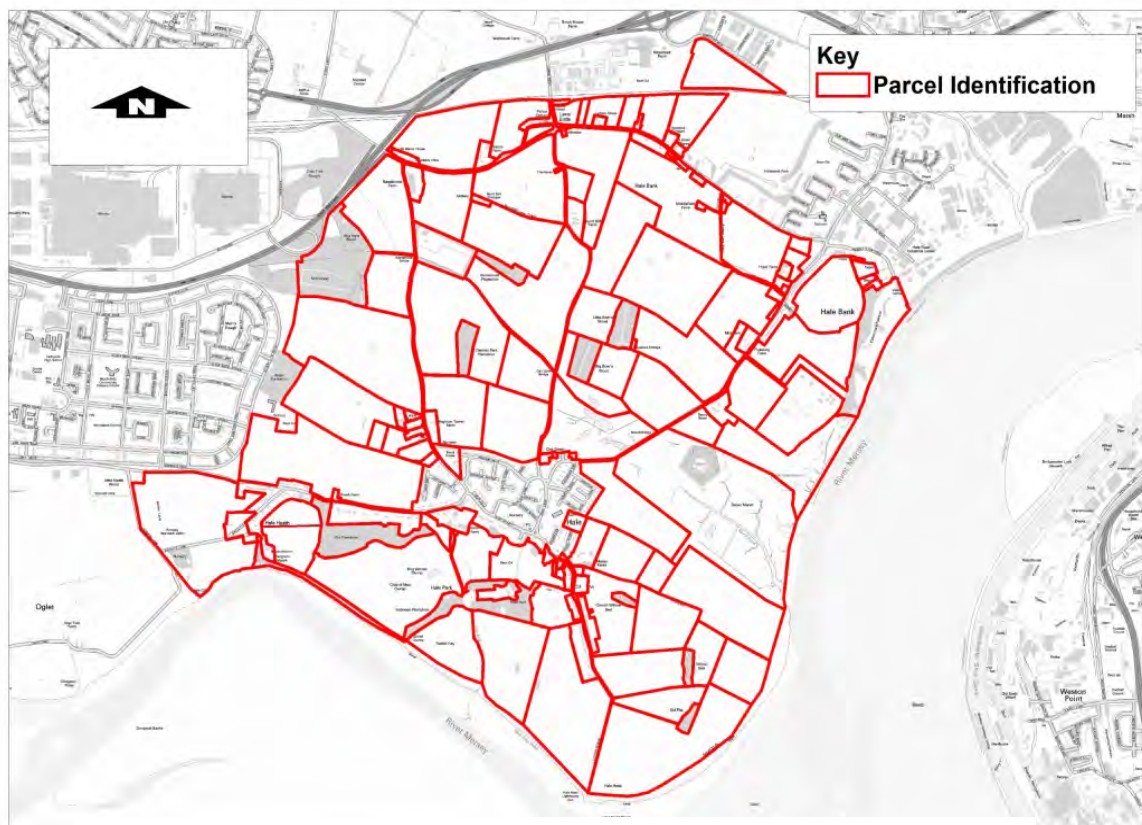
- 3.4 The first stage was to split the Green Belt into manageable, ‘assessable’, parcels. Given the limited nature of the Green Belt around North Widnes and Hale the review has not been limited to particular areas, but has comprehensively assessed the Green Belt in its entirety to the borough boundary.
- 3.5 This ‘parcelisation’ exercise was initially completed as a desk-based exercise, using electronic mapping and aerial photography. The criterion applied was that parcels should:
- form one land use,
 - exhibit a single character and;
 - not contain any physical features on the ground.
- 3.6 The desk-based review initially identified 216 study parcels. Information obtained subsequently through the public ‘call for sites’ and methodology consultation highlighted a number of amendments that would improve the Review. Site visits and analysis of constraints data (see para 3.11) resulted in further refinements to boundaries in order to better reflect conditions on the ground. This has resulted in a total of 233 study parcels.
- 3.7 During the consultation on the Methodology and Call for Sites representations were made concerning a number of sites within neighbouring authorities. These were notified to their respective Local Planning Authority and initial discussions as to issues raised have been undertaken resulting in some additional assessment work.
- 3.8 Maps 3a and 3b below illustrate the boundaries of the 233 parcels in North Widnes and Hale that have been assessed as part of this Green Belt Study.

Map 3a: Parcel Identification



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Map 3b: Parcel Identification



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STAGE 2 – Constraint and Sustainability Criteria

3.9 The second stage was to assess the parcels, using Geographical Information Systems [GIS] mapping, against a set of identified constraints that would prevent or restrict development and accessibility criteria. The constraints were subdivided into two categories –

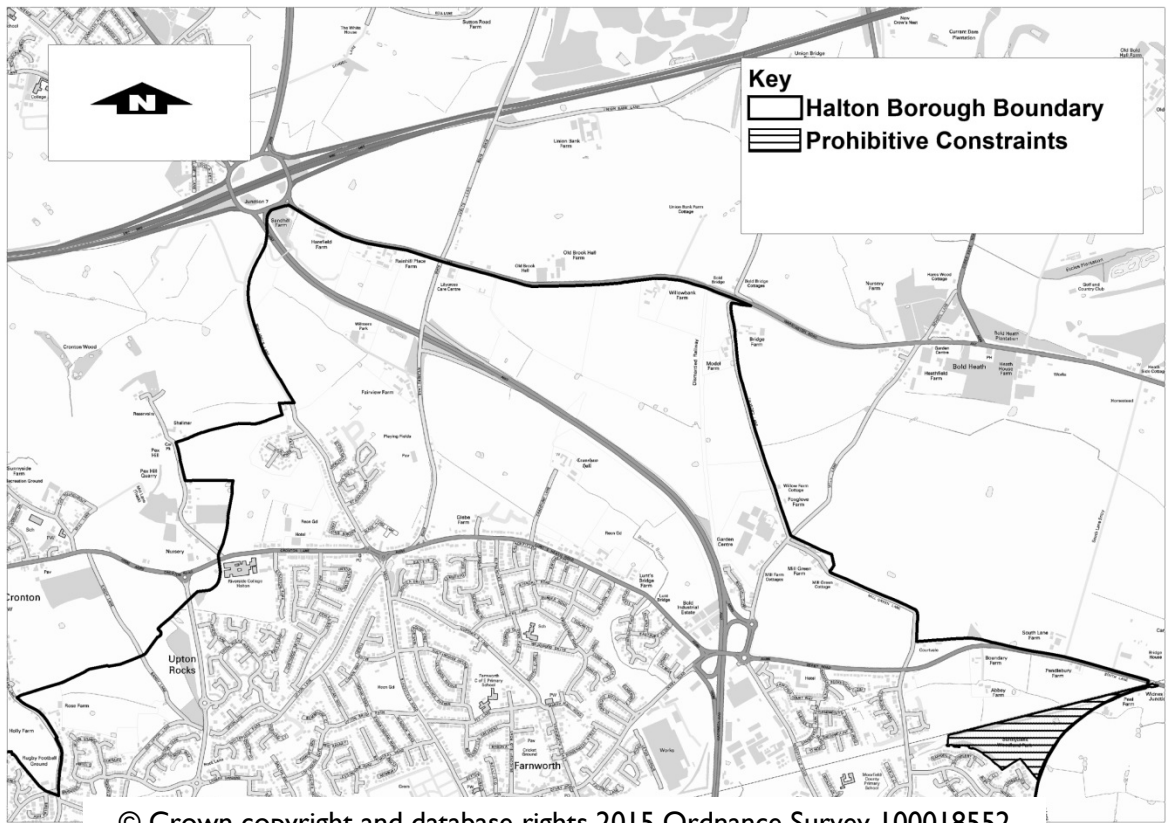
1. Prohibitive ('show stopping') constraints which are those constraints that are so important that they would prohibit development. For example, a site that is subject to the greatest risk of flooding or a site that is designated for its nature conservation value such as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).
2. Restrictive constraints are constraints that could severely restrict but not necessarily prevent new development; that would place restrictions on the types of development that could be accommodated; or constraints that may be capable of being overcome by some form of mitigation.

3.10 This exercise identified sites that were unlikely to be developed for reasons other than just their location in the Green Belt.

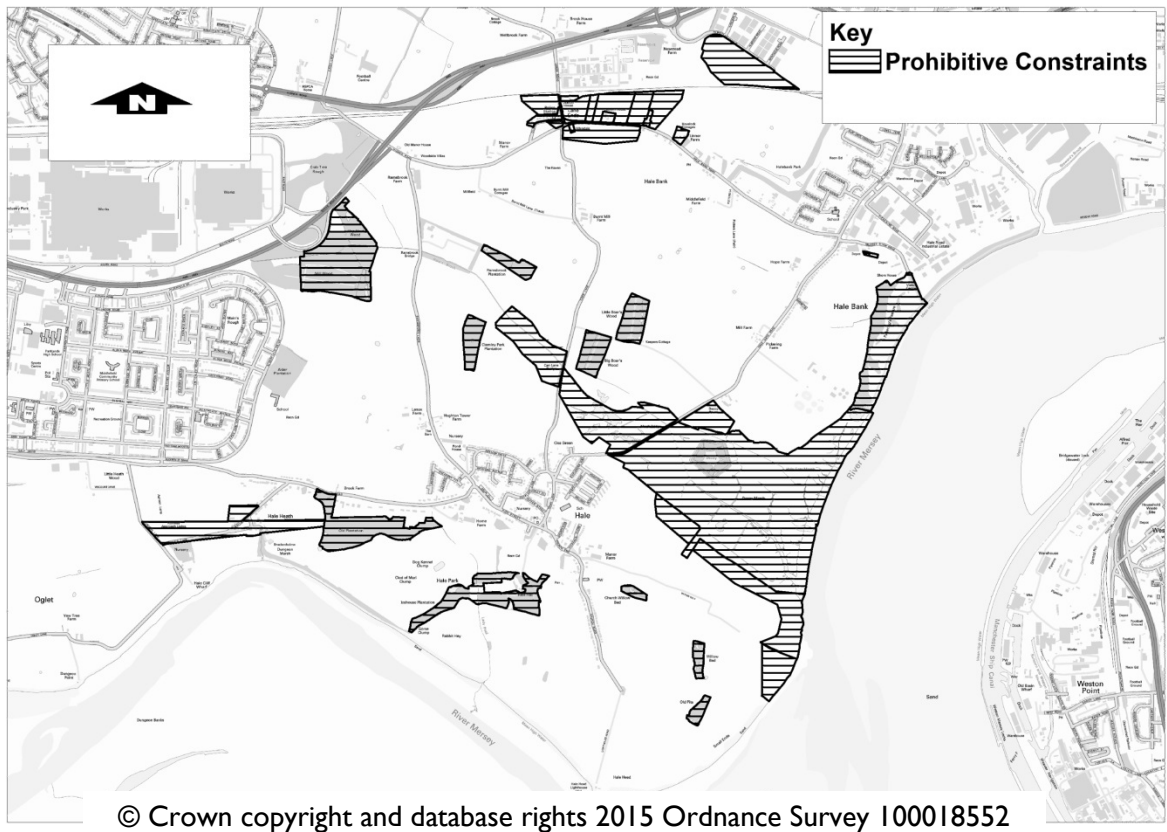
Prohibitive Constraints

3.11 A number of initial study parcels were split to remove areas covered by a prohibitive constraint. The remaining areas retained the original parcel references and the constrained areas were given new parcel references. Maps 4a and 4b identify the location of the 39 parcels that are considered undevelopable due to a prohibitive 'show stopping' constraint. These parcels are included in the subsequent review, for completeness, and to provide evidence to inform future Local Plans.

Map 4a: Prohibitive Constraints



Map 4b: Prohibitive Constraints



3.12 Map 4a and 4b illustrate those parcels that are currently considered to be undevelopable due to being affected by a prohibitive constraint.

- Parcels 176, 226, 228, 229, 230, and 231, are within **Flood Zone 3a and 3b** (the highest risk) and are not considered appropriate for development.
- Parcels 176, 228 and 229 176 are also **Sites of Special Scientific** (SSSI) Importance; they are not considered appropriate for development due to their nature conservation importance.
- Parcels 75, 76, 95, 96, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 137, 146, 224, 225, and 232 are within the '**Inner Zone**' of a **COMAH** site. The Health and Safety Executive identifies sites and installations under the Control of Major Accident Hazards regulations. Inner, Middle and Outer zones are defined representing differing levels of 'risk' within each zone. New development that would increase the population within an Inner Zone is generally considered inappropriate.
- Parcels 86, 121, 130, 141, 153, 154, 185, 188, 198, 206, and 217 are **Ancient Woodland** and are not considered appropriate for development due to their importance to the local environment and landscape.
- Parcels 41 and 88 are areas of **contaminated land** that have been reclaimed for a 'green end use' and not considered appropriate for development.
- Parcel 229 is the area of land affected by John Lennon **Airport Public Safety Zone** (PSZ) as defined by the Civil Aviation Authority and is therefore not considered developable.

Restrictive Constraints

3.13 There are a number of parcels that contain restrictive constraints which could affect the deliverability of the site or indeed the type of development the site could accommodate. For example sites that are affected by flood risk grade 2 could not accommodate a residential care home or sites that contain a pipeline or is subject to planning advice for development near hazardous installations (PADHI) would restrict the end use of the site. The restrictive constraints for each site are identified in the Compendium of Individual Site Records (Appendix A).

3.14 The restrictive constraint used in the assessment are as follows:

Constraint
• Conservation Area
• Sites of Local Geological Importance
• Listed buildings/Ancient Monuments
• Food Risk Zone 2
• Agricultural Land Classification (all grades)
• PADHI pipelines and sites
• Local Nature Reserve / Local Wildlife Sites
• Area of Landscape Value
• Pollution

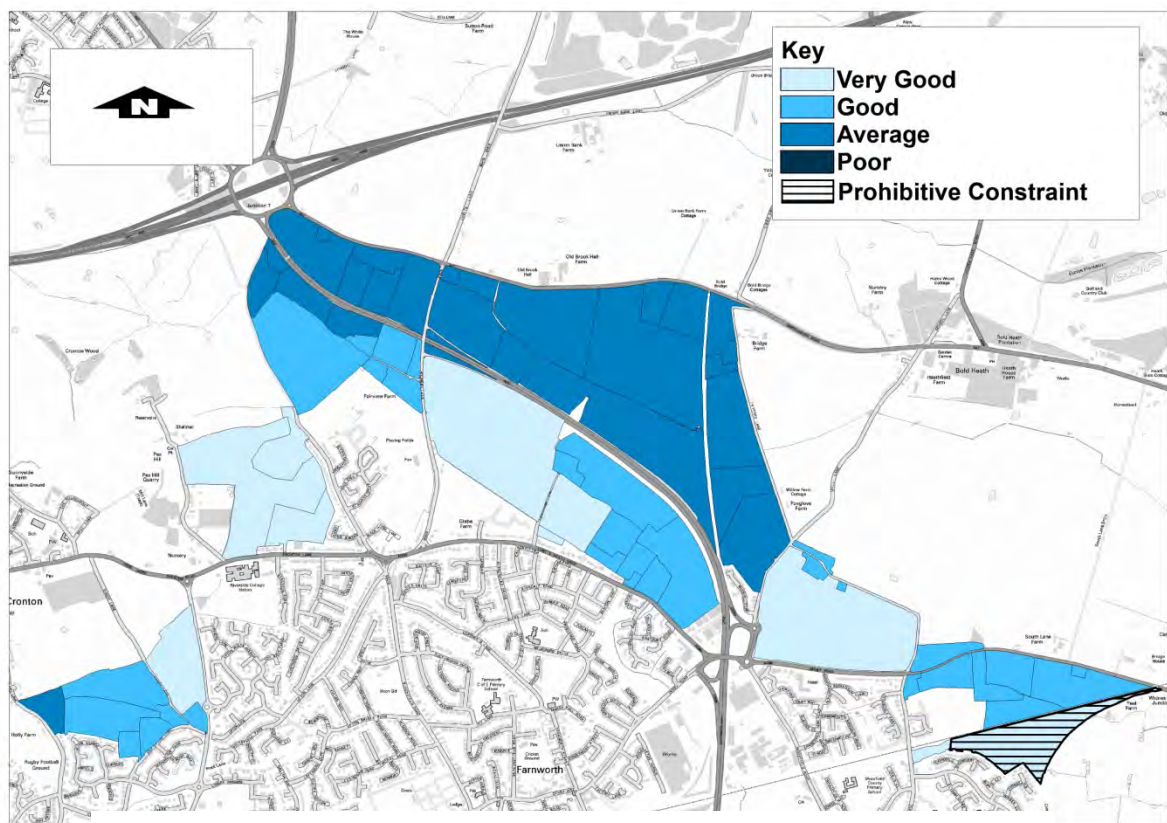
Accessibility

3.15 Parcels were then assessed to ascertain how accessible they are to a range of supporting services/facilities, as follows;

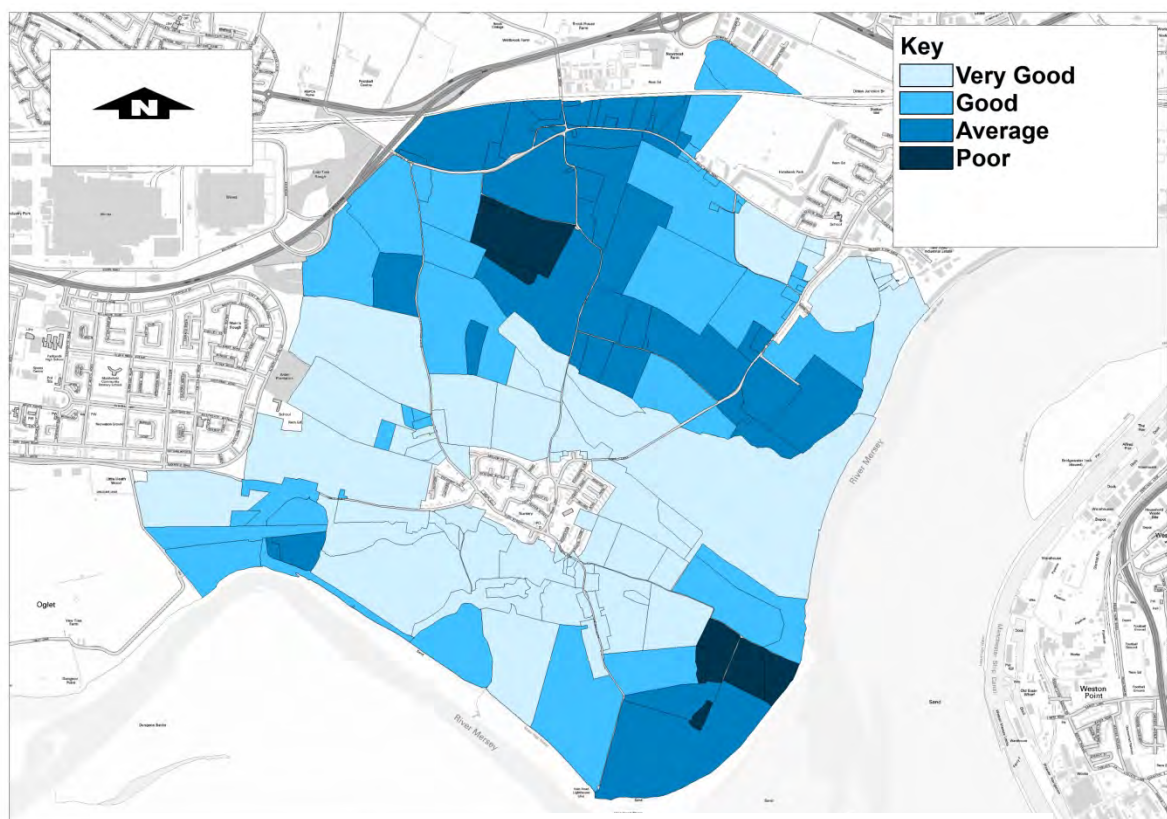
Within 400m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bus Stop;
Within 600m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary School; • Secondary School; • Further Education Establishment; • Local Centre
Within 800m	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rail Station; • Town or District Centre; • Leisure Centre; • Post Office; • Public Park / Play Area
Within 1km	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GP / Health Centre
Within 2km	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary Employment Area or Allocated Employment Site

3.16 The accessibility of the site to the above supporting facilities was then deemed to be either 'Poor', 'Average', 'Good' or 'Very Good' depending on how many of these facilities the site had access to; with poor sites only having access to one facility, and very good sites having access to five or more facilities.

Map 5a: Accessibility (to key services)



Map 5b: Accessibility (to key services)



- 3.17 As could be expected, Maps 5a and 5b show that the sites that are closest to an urban area have the best access to supporting services with accessibility falling off with distance.
- 3.18 There is a stark difference in accessibility of sites in the north of Widnes (Map 5a) to either side of Watkinson Way, with those sites to the north clearly showing limited accessibility to services, and those to the south mostly enjoying good or very good access. The majority of sites to the north of Watkinson Way only have average access (with access to two of the listed services). The areas with the highest levels of accessibility include those along Cronton Lane and Norland's Lane where they have access to the Sixth Form College, shops and public open space.
- 3.19 Map 5b shows sites immediately to the south of Halebank and around Hale village (which provides many of the facilities within the assessment) enjoying very good access to services. There is an arc of sites between Hale and Halebank, together with sites along the Mersey coast for example Sites 185, 186, 187 and 233 to the south east of Hale and Sites 220 and 234 located to the south east of Speke, south of Bailey's Lane having only average or poor accessibility.

STAGE 3 – Assessment against Green Belt Purposes

- 3.20 The third stage was to assess the parcels against each of the five purposes of the Green Belt as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). [see para 2.3]
- 3.21 The NPPF does not suggest that any of the five purposes are more, or less, important than the others. The Study therefore sets out to assess each parcel against each of the five purposes in a balanced manner. However, it is acknowledged that in some instances, one function or purpose of the Green Belt may be so important in a given locality; a parcel should retain Green Belt status and be protected from development regardless of how it performs in relation to the other functions.

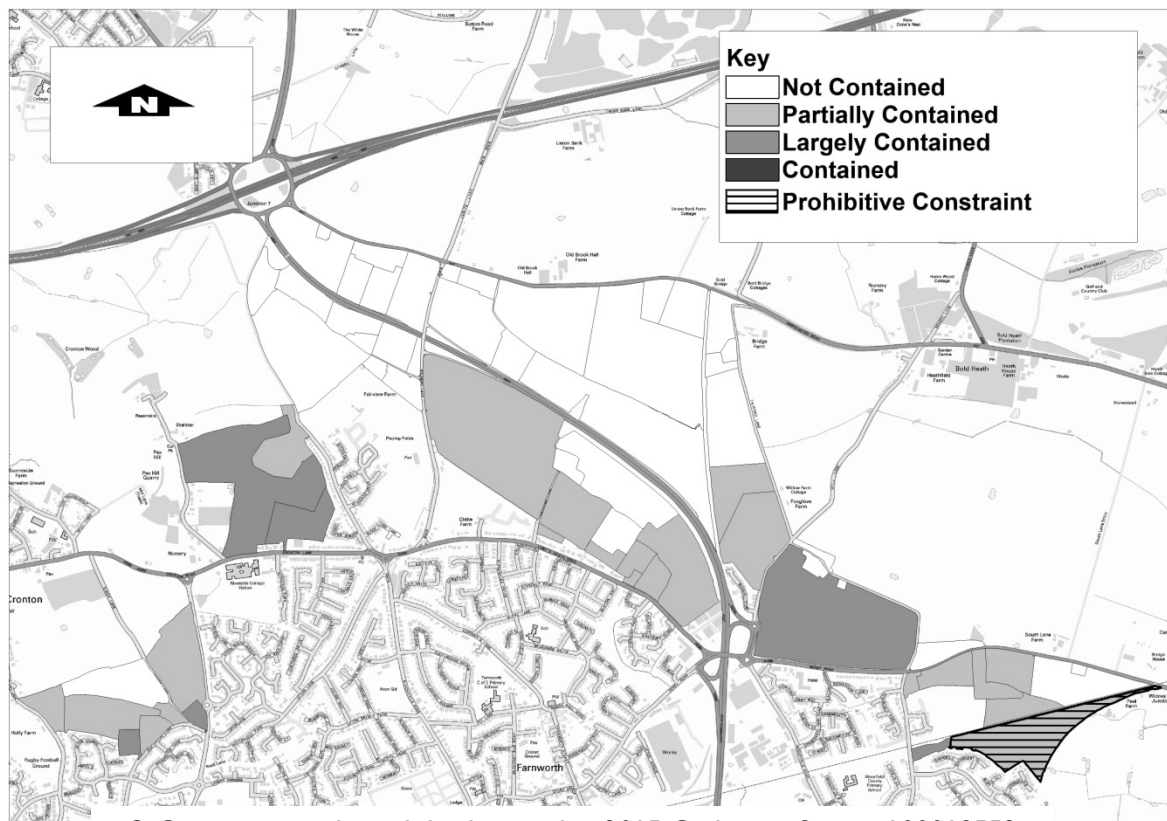
Purpose 1: To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas

- 3.22 The first purpose performs a *barrier role*. This purpose is assessed at the strategic level whereby it underpins the establishment of the Merseyside Green Belt in the sense that the original strategic purpose was to check sprawl from Liverpool.
- 3.23 This was assessed by considering the parcels proximity to, and containment by, the urban area and by evaluating the strength and durability of the current and potential Green Belt boundaries.

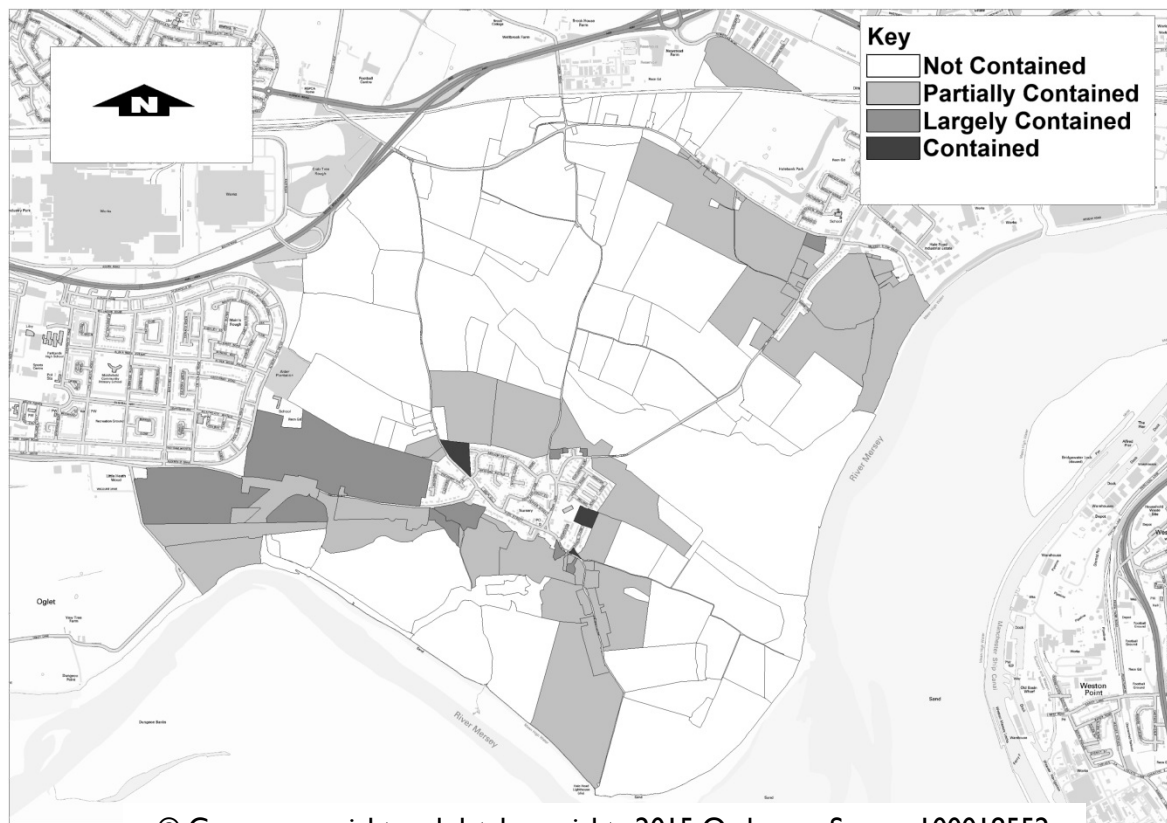
Containment

- 3.24 Each parcel was assessed for its level of containment. This is the level to which it shares boundaries with the urban area or is surrounded by built form.
- 3.25 The following definitions have been used:
- Not Contained - Parcel is detached from the urban;
 - Partially Contained - Parcel is adjacent to the urban area, but with less than 50% of the boundary adjacent to development;
 - Largely Contained - It is adjacent to the urban area, with approximately 50% to 75% of the boundary adjacent to development and is considered to be largely contained;
 - Contained - Parcel is adjacent to the urban area with the 75% or more of the of the boundary enclosed by development.
- 3.26 This is a slight amendment from the previously consulted upon methodology allowing for greater differences between the sites that are adjacent to the urban area but not contained and those that are detached from the urban area.

Map 6a: Containment



Map 6b: Containment



- 3.27 Maps 6a and 6b show the level of containment of each of the Green Belt parcels. The areas that are not adjacent to the urban areas are clearly shown as being 'not contained' and are shaded white on the map, with darker tones indicating increasing levels of containment.
- 3.28 To the north of Widnes (Map 6a) there are a few parcels that are considered to be largely contained, where there has been ribbon development along roads out of Widnes and where previously developed sites in the Green Belt have been converted, but the parcels are mainly only partially contained. To the south of Widnes (Map 6b) at Halebank again there are a few parcels that are considered to be largely contained with the majority being only partially.
- 3.29 Around Hale (Map 6b) there is a small selection of sites that are considered 'contained', where there is urban development enclosing approximately 75% of the parcel. These include a parcel of land off Ramsbrook Lane, the school playing field and a small parcel between Vicarage Close and Church End (Parcels 110, 179 and 209). There also a few additional sites that are considered to be largely contained to the south of the village and to the north east. There are also sites that are considered to be partially contained between Hale and Speke where, mainly, the ribbon development out of the west of Hale creates a developed edge to these parcels.

Boundary Strength

- 3.30 In order to assess boundary strength and (potential) durability the following boundaries were considered to be 'strong':
- Landform – valley ridge, river, stream or depression
 - Vegetation – protected woodland, copse, greenway
 - Constructed – motorway, adopted highway/roads, railway, canal, buildings with long established line, or parcels directly adjacent to the urban area.

Figure 3: Example of a strong boundary: the River Mersey.



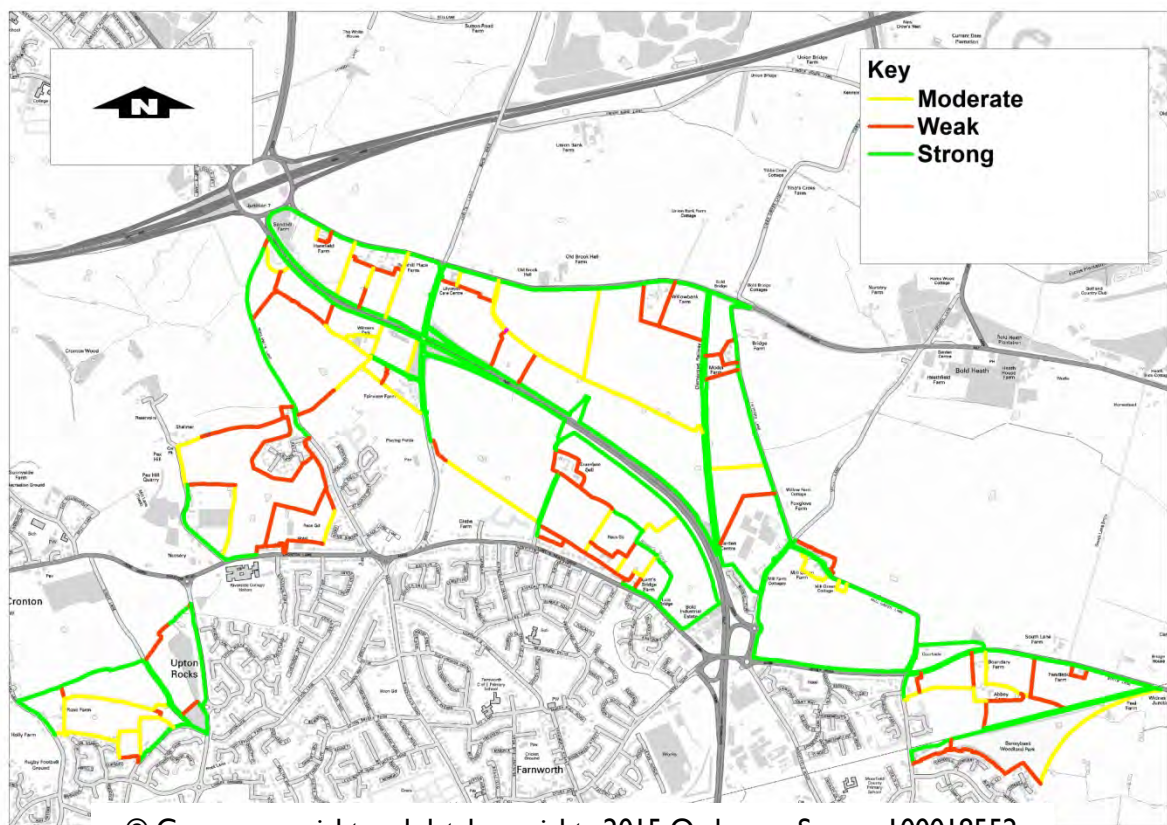
- 3.31 Less durable boundary features were considered to field boundaries such as intermittent hedges, fences and individual trees or constructed elements such as field ditches, access tracks, or buildings with an intermittent or weak building line. Consideration was also given to whether the urban area had a good strong existing boundary separating the Green Belt parcel from the urban area and increasing the potential for the development of the parcel to be considered sprawl by encroachment into the countryside.

Figure 4: Example of a weak boundary: a field margin, followed by an intermittent hedge and individual trees.

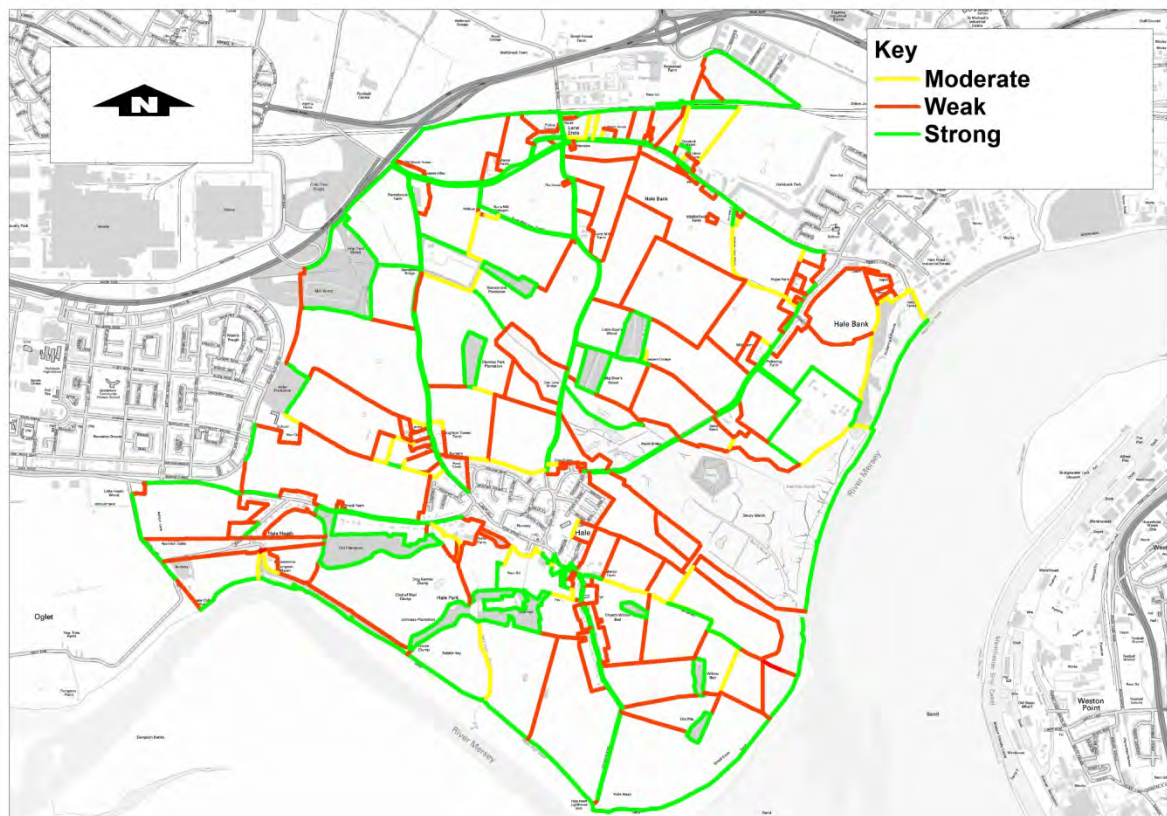


- 3.32 Maps 7a and 7b below show the strength of each of the assessed boundaries. As set out above it shows that there are strong boundaries created by the road network around the Borough, including for example Watkinson Way in north Widnes (Map 7a) or Hale Gate Road to the south (Map 7b). The River Mersey also creates a strong boundary to the south of Hale, as do other watercourses that cross the Green Belt. There are also areas of strong boundaries created by the protected woodland areas within the Green Belt.

Map 7a: Boundary Strength



Map 7b: Boundary Strength

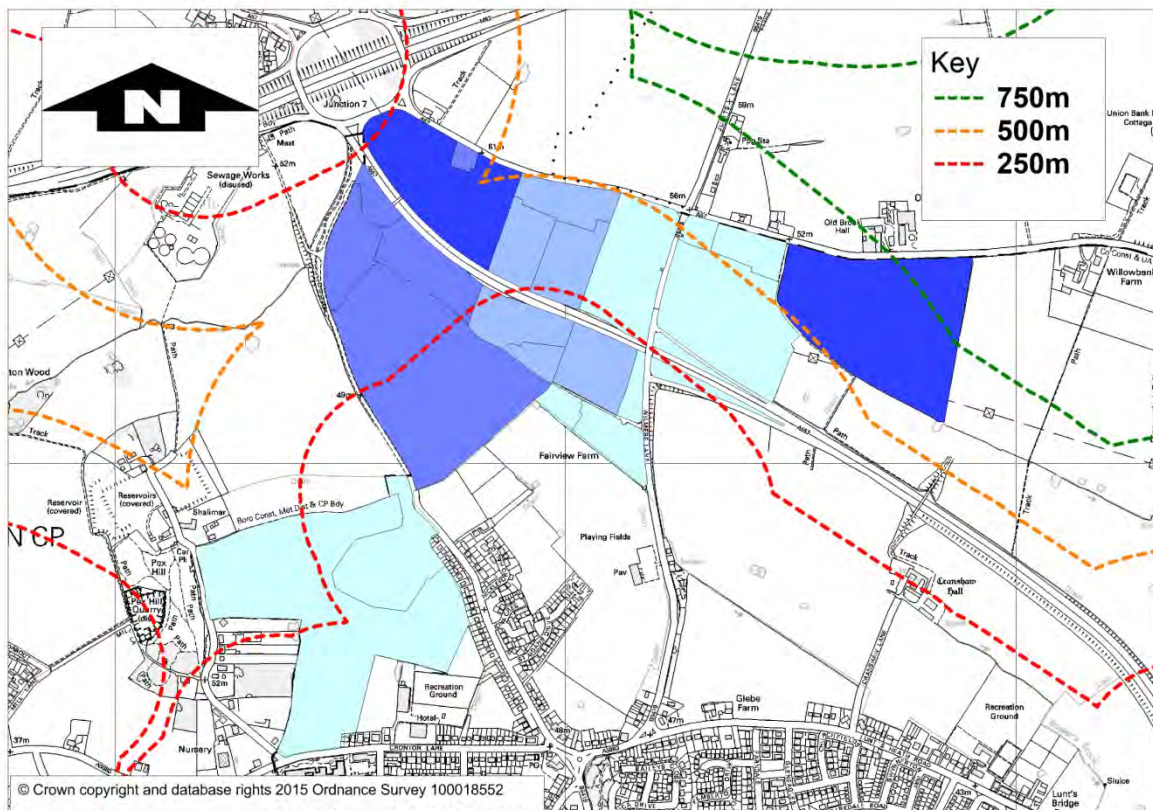


- 3.33 There are a significant number of weak boundaries within the Green Belt area these are mainly agricultural land, where the boundaries are similar to that shown in Figure 4, with only an ill-defined margin separating the fields or intermittent hedges, individual trees or post fencing.
- 3.34 The parcels with a moderate boundary are those where there are consistent tree lines of unprotected trees or where there is a continuous hedge, or where there are a number of features such as a hedge, trees, vegetation, paths or ditches that come together to create something more than a weak boundary. These are more common around the urban areas and surrounding residential development.
- 3.35 The Compendium of Individual Site Records contains larger scale maps for each site with the boundary strengths shown against an aerial photograph.

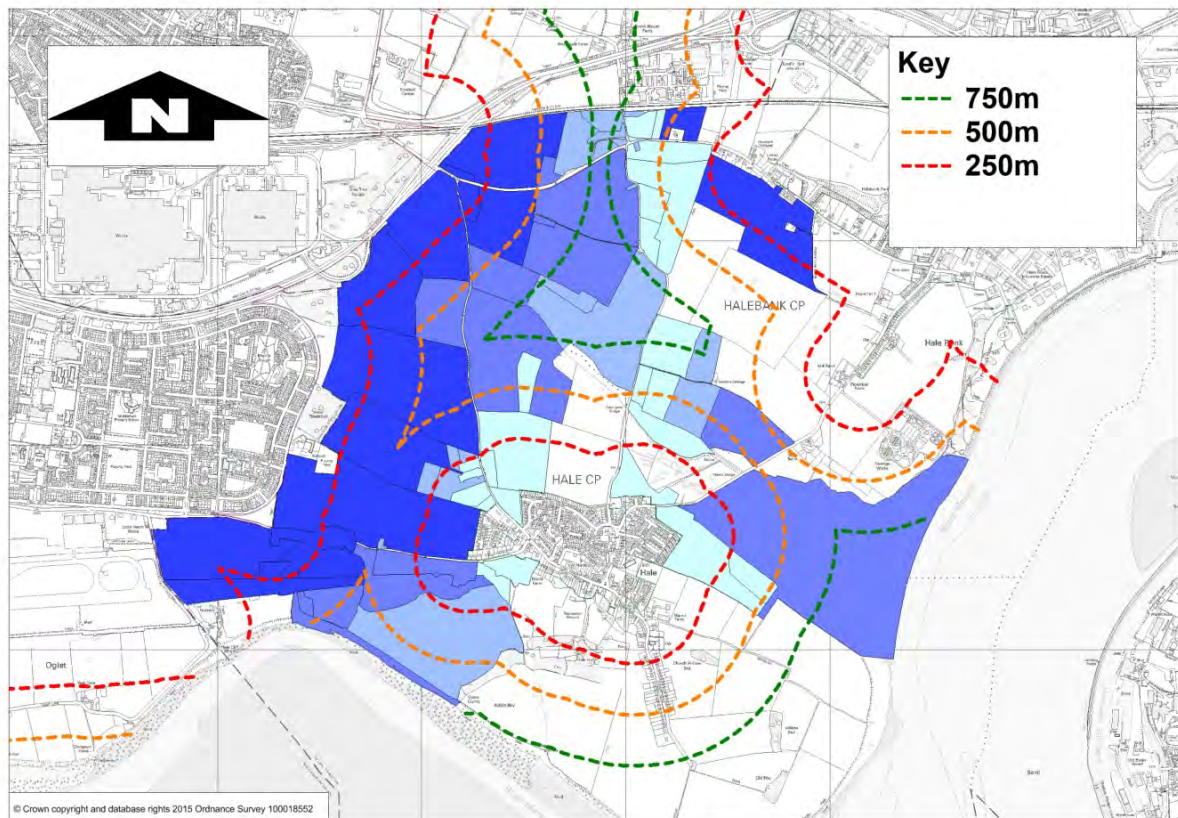
Purpose 2: To prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another

- 3.36 The second purpose of including land in the Green Belt seeks to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another. This helps maintain the existing settlement pattern of towns and helps settlements retain their individual identity.
- 3.37 Government guidance suggests that Green Belts should ideally be ‘several miles’ wide. Given the heavily urbanised nature of the Liverpool City Region [see map 1], this is already often not the case, and the necessity to meet future development needs can only put further pressure on the gaps that remain.
- 3.38 Physical distance is only one part of this purpose, as the ‘perception’ of the gap between settlements can also be significant. Permanent features such as rivers and roads, and elements of landscape such as trees, hedges and topography can all add to the perception of whether settlements are merging. Runcorn and Widnes are a little less than 500m apart at their closest point, yet the River Mersey presents a significant barrier, both physical and perceived allowing both settlements to retain their identity.
- 3.39 The physical gap between the urban areas was measured and consideration given the gap that would remain, should a given parcel be developed. Due to the heavily urbanised nature of the area particular attention was paid to the narrowest gaps, with 250m intervals used instead of the 1km intervals proposed in the original draft methodology.

Map 8a: Green Belt Width and Remaining 'Gap' should Parcels be Released



Map 8b: Green Belt Width and Remaining 'Gap' should Parcels be Released



- 3.40 Maps 8a and 8b highlight the distances between Widnes and the surrounding towns and settlements in the neighbouring authorities of Liverpool, Knowsley St Helens and to a lesser extent Warrington. The maps show 'buffers' around the principal towns and settlements excluded from the Green Belt at 250m (red), 500m (orange) and 750m (green) intervals. This provides a visual guide to the existing width of the Green Belt between Widnes, Hale and surrounding settlements and the 'gaps' that would remain if parcels were to be developed.
- 3.41 It is evident from the map that there are some parcels sit within already very narrow gaps and are therefore are important to preventing neighbouring settlements from merging, for example Site 74 spans the gap between Speke and Hale (Map 8b) and would fill a key part of the gap between Widnes and Liverpool. There are also a number of parcels that will be important in maintaining a gap of more than 500m between towns for example site 119, located to the east of Speke and the Alder Plantation and to the west of Lennox Farm at Hale, which would again reduce the gap between Speke and Hale or Sites 17, 18 and 23 to the north of Widnes (Map 8a), which would reduce the gap between Widnes and Rainhill.
- 3.42 The parcels within the narrowest gaps were assessed for the gap that would remain should they be developed with the parcels leaving the smallest residual gap shaded darkest. The lighter shades represent larger, though not large, residual gaps.

Purpose 3: To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment

- 3.43 The third purpose performs a protective role, to safeguard the countryside. The 'countryside' is defined as open land with an absence of built development and urbanising influences and is characterised by rural, open land uses including agriculture, forestry and some forms of recreation. It is, therefore, closely connected to the assessment of the level of openness which is similarly defined as an absence of built development and urbanising influences.
- 3.44 It is important to note that some urban fringe land uses which are acceptable under Green Belt policy (e.g. outdoor recreational activities) may include elements of built development that have an urbanising influence and reduce openness, such as playing field changing rooms or pavilions. Certain topographies and natural screening provide a sense of being in the countryside, despite the area being adjacent to an urban boundary.

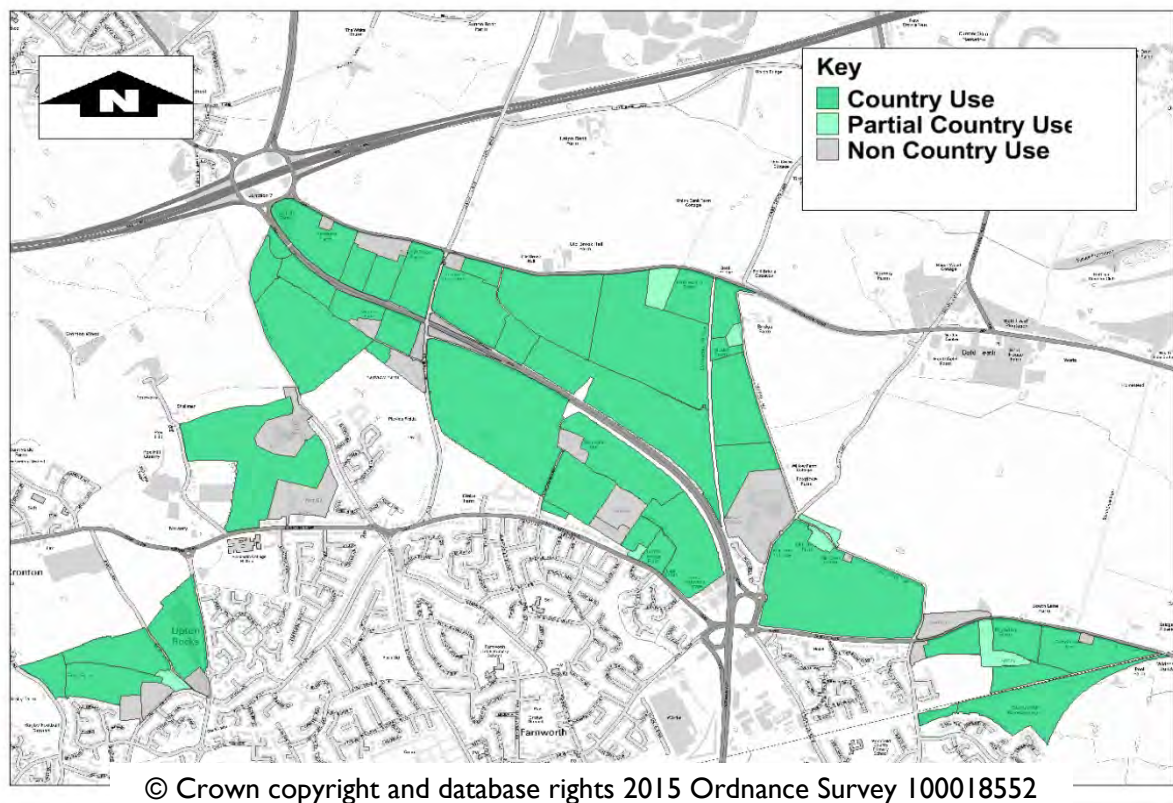
Countryside Uses

- 3.45 As part of the assessment, the level of encroachment was measured by considering existing development and what the development was used for. Land use within each of the parcels has been considered and categorised as being in one of three categories these being:

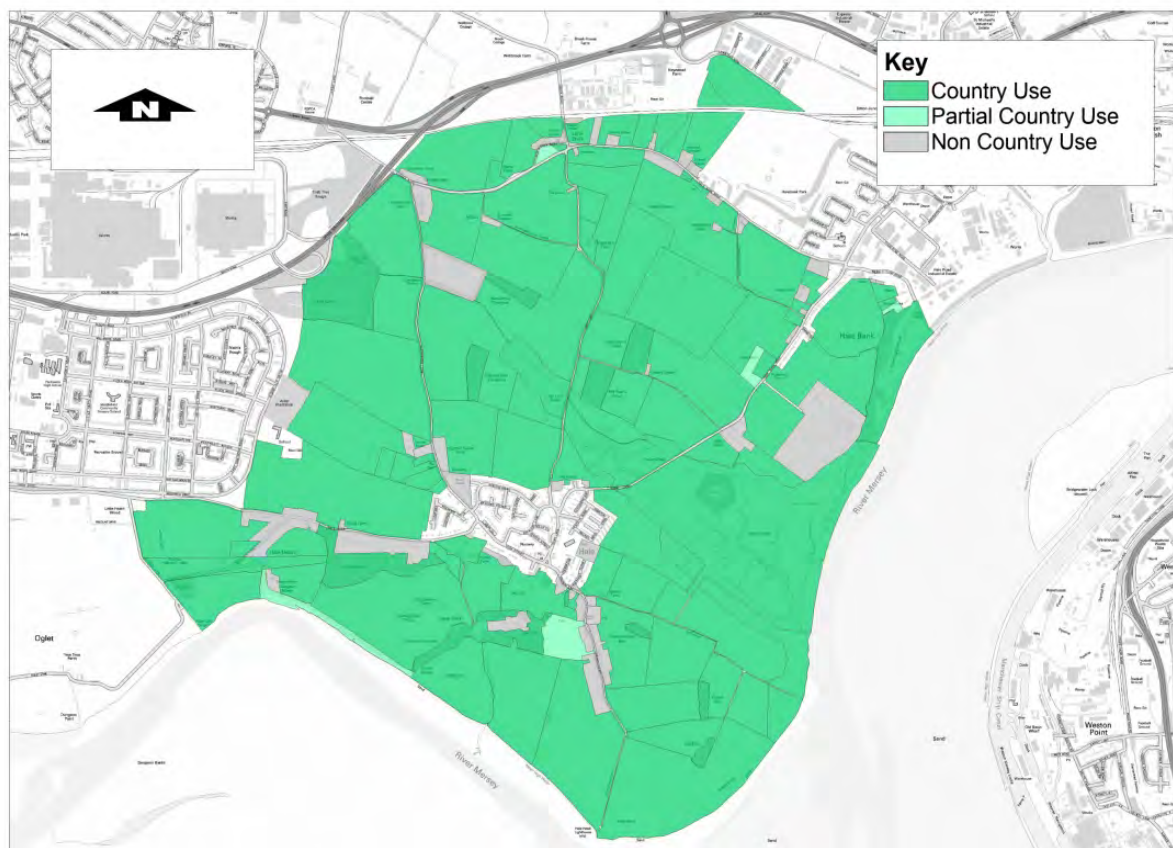
- 'Countryside Use' - include agriculture, equestrian uses, nature, areas used for sport and recreation, amenity space, woodland, parkland, cemeteries and former landfill sites where used for agriculture or recreational uses.
- 'Partial Countryside Use' – include sites with mixed uses either containing one or more 'countryside uses' in addition to non-countryside uses which include garden centres, office development, sewerage works, sport and recreational club houses.
- 'Non Countryside Use' being remaining land uses not described under 'countryside use' or 'partial countryside use' above.

3.46 Other infrastructure and development considered to be 'appropriate' in the Green Belt for the purposes of this assessment included land used for highways infrastructure and former landfill sites.

Map 9a: Countryside Use



Map 9b: Countryside Use



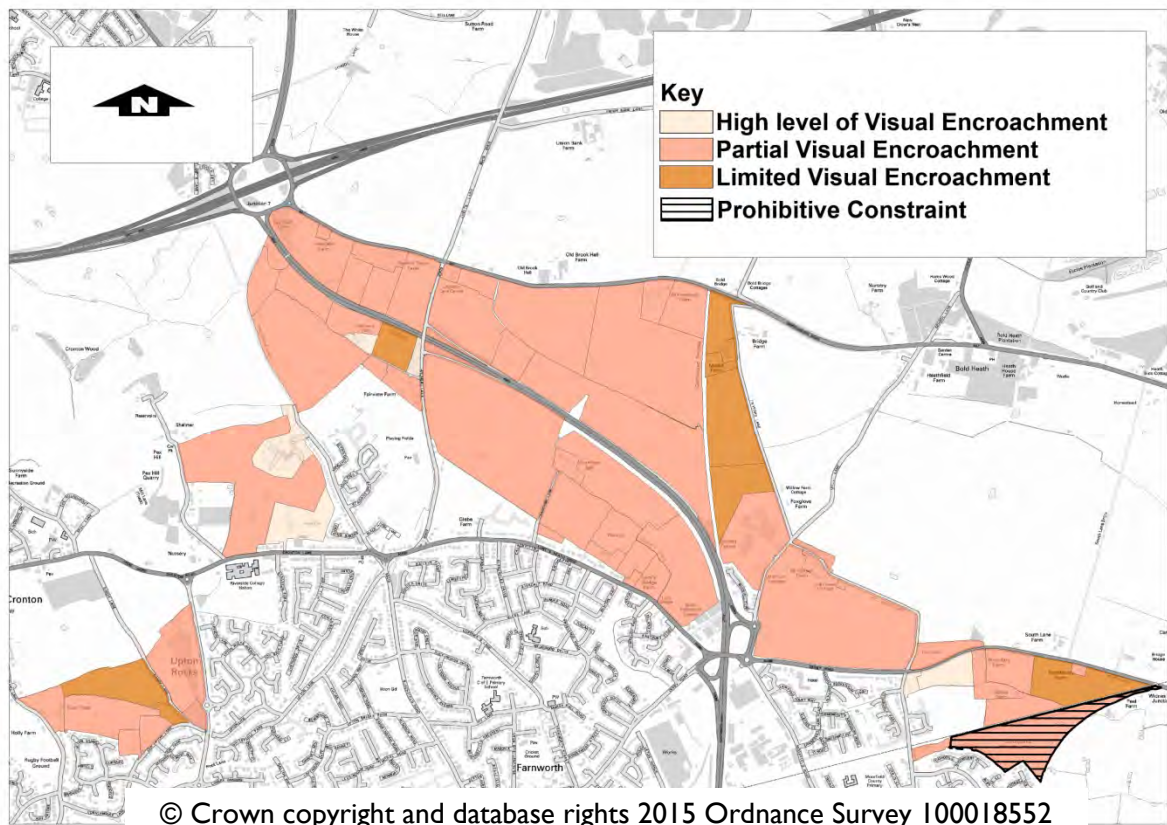
- 3.47 As can be seen on Maps 9a and 9b, much of the Widnes and Hale Green Belt is in Countryside Use, this is to be expected. There are some parcels that are scattered across the Green Belt that are not within Countryside Uses this includes the Sewage Treatment Works (Sites 90 and 126), and residential development, such as that along Church Road and Bailey's Lane. There are also a small number of parcels in partial countryside uses, including Site 43 Abbey Farm, South Lane, where part of the development of the site is residential and part of it is considered to be farm development.

Visual Encroachment

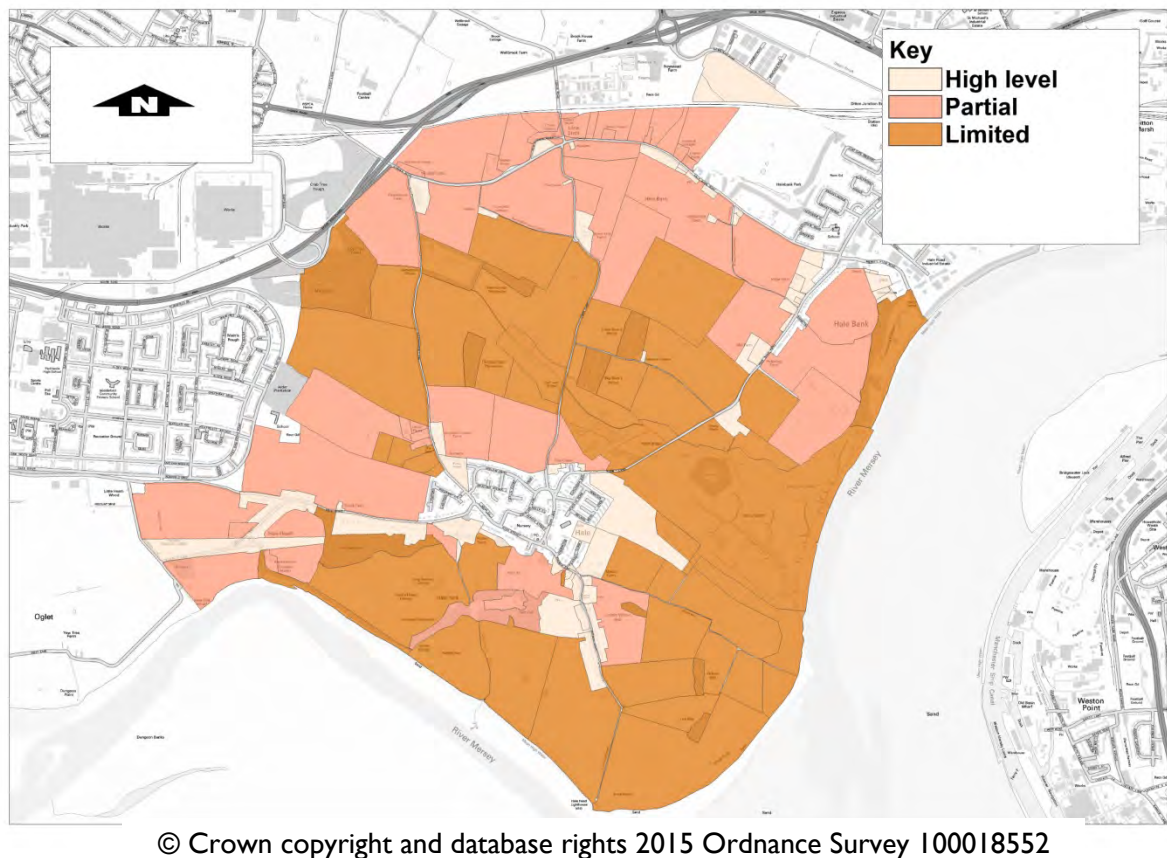
- 3.48 An assessment of the degree to which a parcel is affected by visual encroachment was also undertaken. By its very nature, this has to be a subjective judgement, as it is not simply a measure of how many urban features can be seen from a particular site. Indeed, due to the urban nature of the area there are few locations in the Borough where you cannot see substantial 'urban' features such as Fiddlers Ferry Power Station or the Silver Jubilee Bridge.
- 3.49 Visual encroachment includes the views across a parcel, how open those views are and how much they are interrupted by, or lead on to, urban development and how much any urban development affects the 'countryside feel' of a parcel. These are important considerations.
- 3.50 Parcels were assessed as making a limited, partial or high level of visual encroachment in addition to a strong, moderate or limited contribution to preserving the openness and character of the countryside.
- 3.51 Additional existing evidential assessments in the form of Halton's Landscape Character Assessment¹ were also used to inform the study at this stage.

¹ TEP (2009) Halton Landscape Character Assessment

Map 10a: Visual Encroachment



Map 10b: Visual Encroachment



- 3.52 Maps 10a and 10b show the visual encroachment assessment of each of the Green Belt parcels. As can be seen the majority of the parcels adjacent to the urban area have partial visual encroachment and are coloured pink. This can be expected and is typical of urban fringe development where urban development fringes at least one side of the site.
- 3.53 The parcels with the highest visual encroachment are those sites coloured the lightest shade (beige) and are parcels that are predominately fully developed or where existing urban development adjoins and overlooks the parcel. This includes the residential development along Church Road, Hale Road, Bailey's Lane and Ramsbrook Lane around Hale, the residential development along Hale Gate Road and Halebank Road around Halebank and the residential development and the Sports Ground along Norland's Lane to the north of Widnes, which are predominantly developed and adjacent to development. Whilst Sites 42 and 45 to the north are adjacent to new residential development off Barrow's Green Lane and Sites 91 and 226 are adjacent to employment development on Newstead Road all of which are considered to be visually encroached by their surrounding development.
- 3.54 The parcels demonstrating the least visual encroachment are those sites coloured the darkest shade (orange). The majority of which are located adjacent to Twyford Lane to the north of Widnes, and almost in a circle around Hale to the south. Sites adjacent to the River Mersey and south east of Hale have the least visual encroachment as the absence of built form in combination with natural vegetated screening of existing development results in limited or no visual encroachment.

Purpose 4: To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns

- 3.55 This purpose aims to preserve the character of historic towns such as Chester or Cambridge. Neither Halton nor the surrounding urban areas contain nationally recognised 'historic towns'. This is not to say that there are no locally important historic features that should be respected.
- 3.56 The second aim of the Merseyside Green Belt, was to ensure that towns and villages retain their individual character. Whilst this can be partly achieved by ensuring that individual settlements are not allowed to merge (Purpose 2), the setting of many towns and historic buildings located in the Green Belt also forms part of their character, particularly if they are designated as Conservation Areas, Ancient Woodlands, Scheduled Monuments, historic parks and gardens and Listed Building designations or have some other heritage designation.
- 3.57 The given the lack of nationally recognised 'historic towns' affecting the study area, the methodology concluded that no specific 'parcel by parcel' assessment was required. Heritage issues are included within Stage 2, Restrictive Constraints.

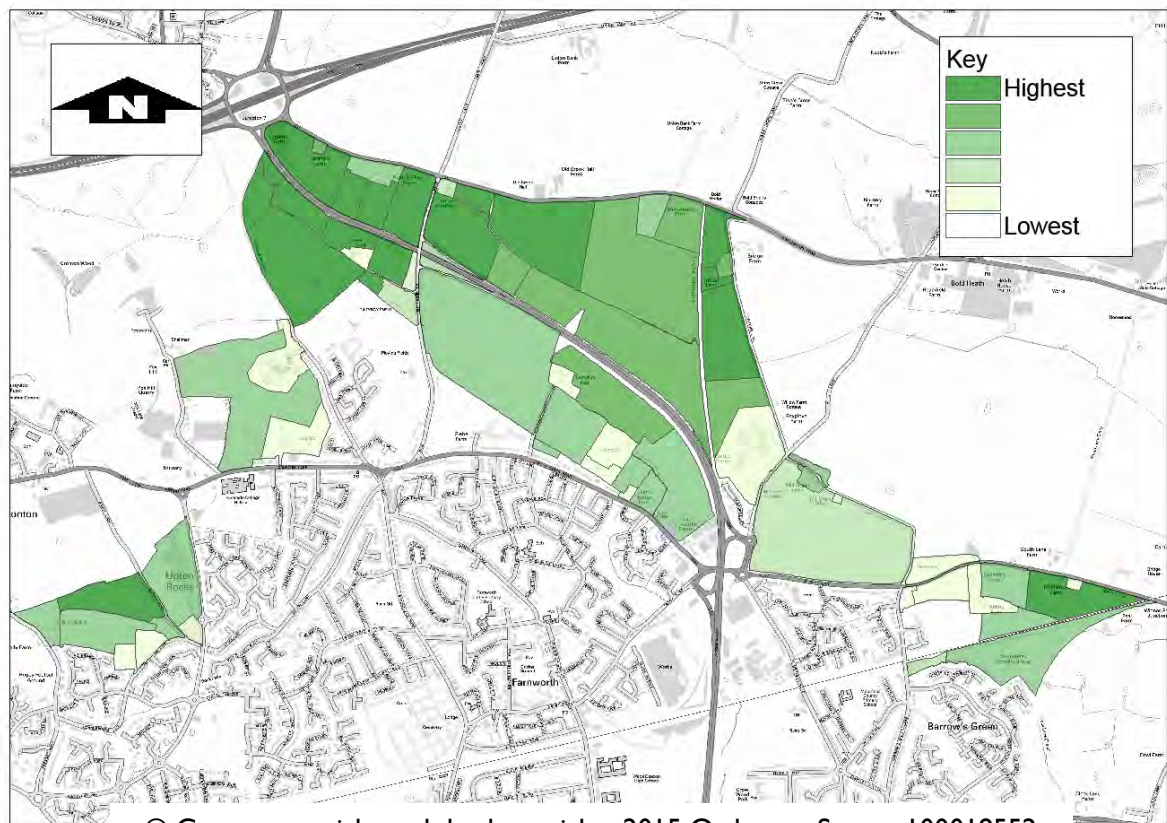
Purpose 5: To assist urban regeneration

- 3.58 This purpose is generally recognised as creating an urban focus for development. The Merseyside Green Belt was approved in 1983. Its key purposes were to channel development into the existing urban areas and assist urban regeneration of the urban core. Therefore it is considered that all areas within the Green Belt by their nature and designation should contribute to the recycling of derelict and urban land; as Green Belt is generally a prohibitive designation where development is rarely acceptable, thus urban development becomes the focus for development.
- 3.59 This purpose has been screened out, as it is felt that development of any of the sites in the Green Belt around Widnes and Hale would be likely to have the same level of impact on urban regeneration.

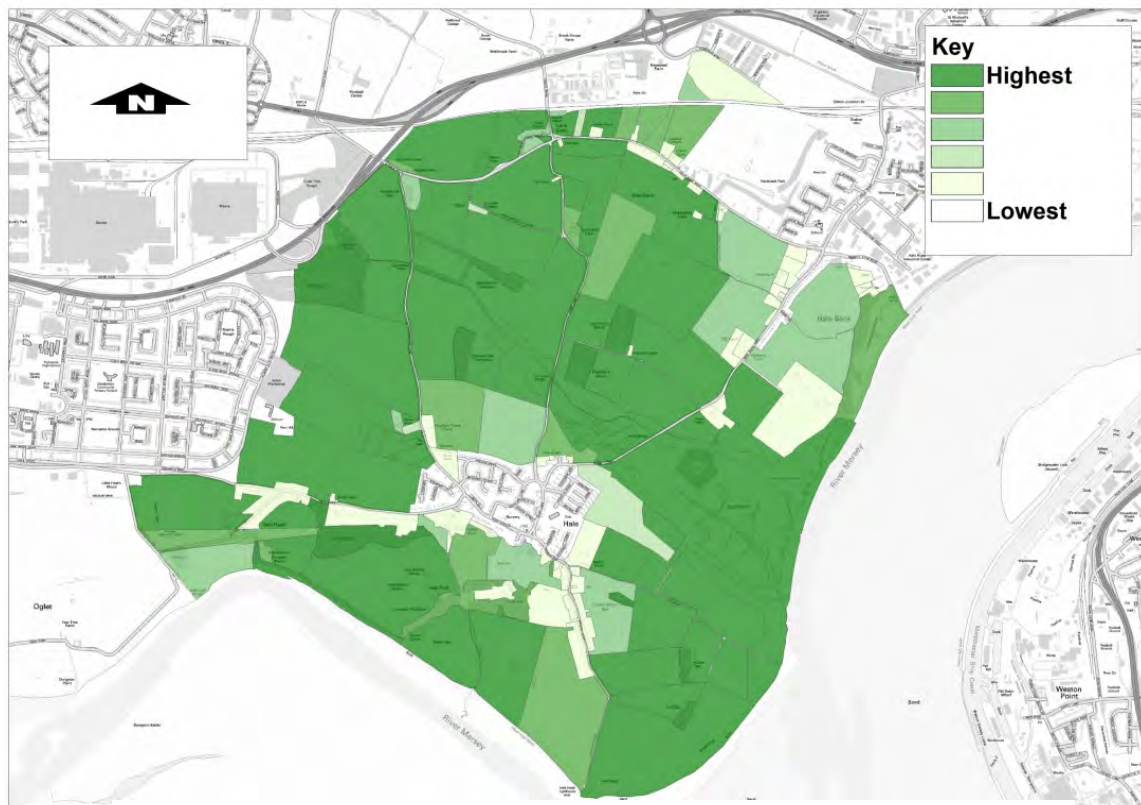
Summary of Green Belt Function

- 3.60 This third stage has assessed each of the parcels against each of the purposes of the Green Belt, this final section brings together each of the purposes into one overall assessment. Although the NPPF does not suggest that any of the purposes are more or less important than the others, this study has considered that in some areas within the Borough one purpose of the Green Belt is so important that a parcel should remain in the Green Belt, even if it has not performed as well in relation to other purposes. For example, where there are parcels that are performing a critical role in maintaining the gap between towns.

Map 11a: Overall Green Belt Function



Map 11b: Overall Green Belt Function



- 3.61 This Green Belt Study shows that all the land within the Green Belt around Widnes and Hale provides some contribution to the purposes of including land in the Green Belt. However, Maps 11a and 11b help to identify the parcels that are serving a Green Belt function but to a greater or lesser extent than other parcels around Widnes and Hale. The parcels that are contributing most to the Green Belt purposes are identified in the darkest green, whilst those that are performing the least Green Belt functions are identified in the lightest shades.
- 3.62 The palest shades are often found where there is already existing development washed over by the Green Belt, and therefore the contribution that the parcel now provides is limited, such as the residential development at Norland's Lane or the sites that create ribbon development out of Hale along Church Road and Hale Road. They also include sites that are already so contained by development that it could be argued that development of those parcels would help to 'round off' the settlement pattern, for example Site 110 The Pond House, in Hale.
- 3.63 However, there are also sites where the Green Belt function is particularly strong. These are sites that are generally open in character, with weak boundaries, used for countryside purposes and generally not encroached or contained by development. In the north of Widnes, they are predominantly located close to Junction 7 of the M62 and along Twyford Lane. Around Hale and south Widnes they are predominantly located to the east of Liverpool and round in an arc between Hale and Halebank down towards the River Mersey and stretching from just south of Pickering's Pasture all the way to Hale Lighthouse.
- 3.64 There are also parcels where the contribution to maintaining the gap is such that it is essential to protect the site for example Site 74, on Hale Road, where its development would remove any gap between Liverpool and Hale. There are also parcels to the north of Widnes that if developed would be adjoining Junction 7 of the M62, which is already adjacent to Rainhill, St Helens to the north, thereby potentially joining Widnes and Rainhill or alternatively if the gap is retained to the south, then drawing the urban area of Rainhill closer to Widnes (these sites include 17, 18 and 23).
- 3.65 To the north of Widnes there are a significant proportion of sites within the intermediate categories. Those in the lightest intermediate shades are often those that are adjacent to the urban area and are therefore considered largely or partially contained and are subject to visual encroachment due to their proximity to the urban area. This includes the Site 21 at Norlands Lane / Cronton Lane, and the sites to the east of Barrow's Green Lane and north of the new residential development.
- 3.66 Around Hale and South Widnes, the intermediate categories are commonly located around the urban areas. Those in the lightest intermediate shades are located along Hale Gate Road to the south of Halebank where visual encroachment and containment are likely to have been key factors, to the east of Hale where its

proximity to the urban area, visual encroachment and limited influence on the gap are likely to be considerations and a selection of sites along Higher Road, where their developed nature is likely to be a main contributor.

- 3.67 The remaining sites are all subject to a mix of visual encroachment, partial containment and gap influences, with some having a mid-ground for each and some being greatly affected by one factor only.
- 3.68 More detail on each parcel can be found within the Compendium of Individual Site Records, with Map 3 of this report identifying the Parcel Identification Number for each site.

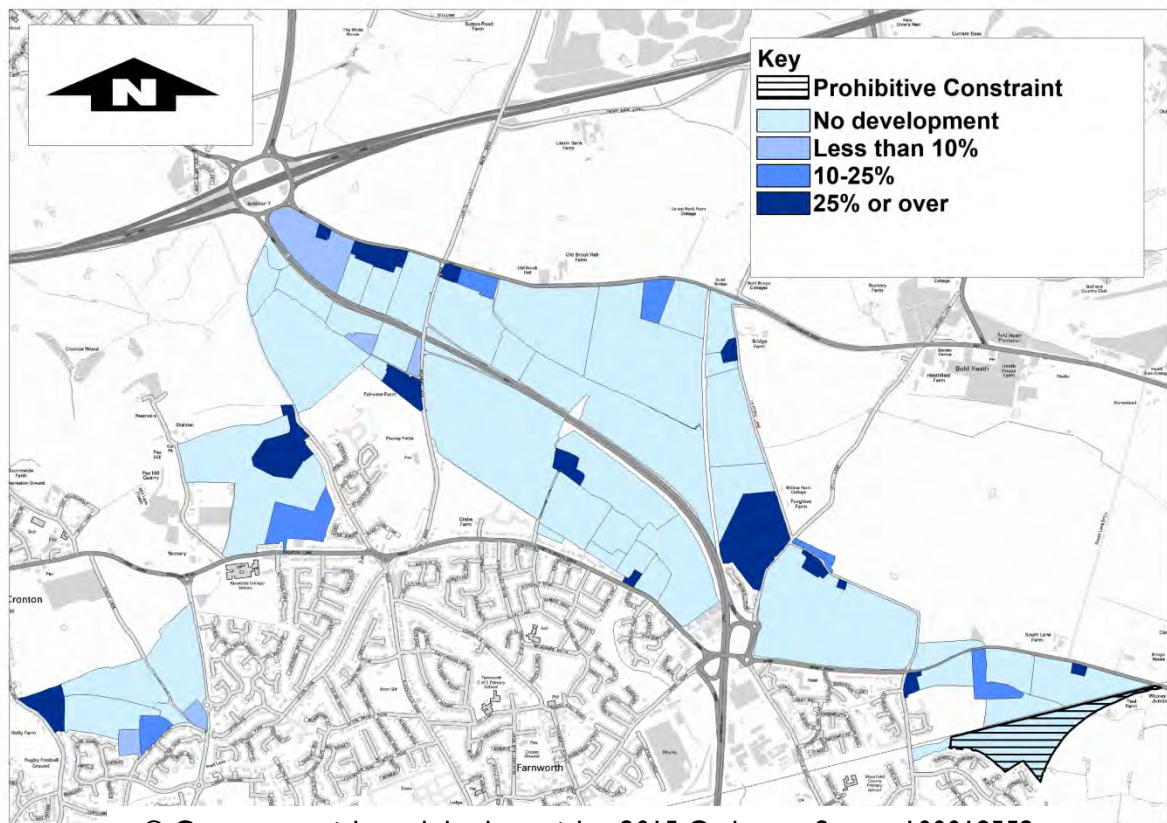
STAGE 4 – Assessment of Openness and Countryside Character

Openness

- 3.69 The National Planning Policy Framework (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. There is however, no specific definition of 'openness' in the NPPF.
- 3.70 This final stage of the assessment has considered the openness of each of the parcels at the current time. The issue of openness has, recently been considered in the Courts² where it has been defined that openness is a concept which equates to the 'absence of buildings'; i.e. it is land that is not built upon.
- 3.71 Openness is therefore a lack of buildings. A site with buildings that are unobtrusive, camouflaged or screened in some way is not open.

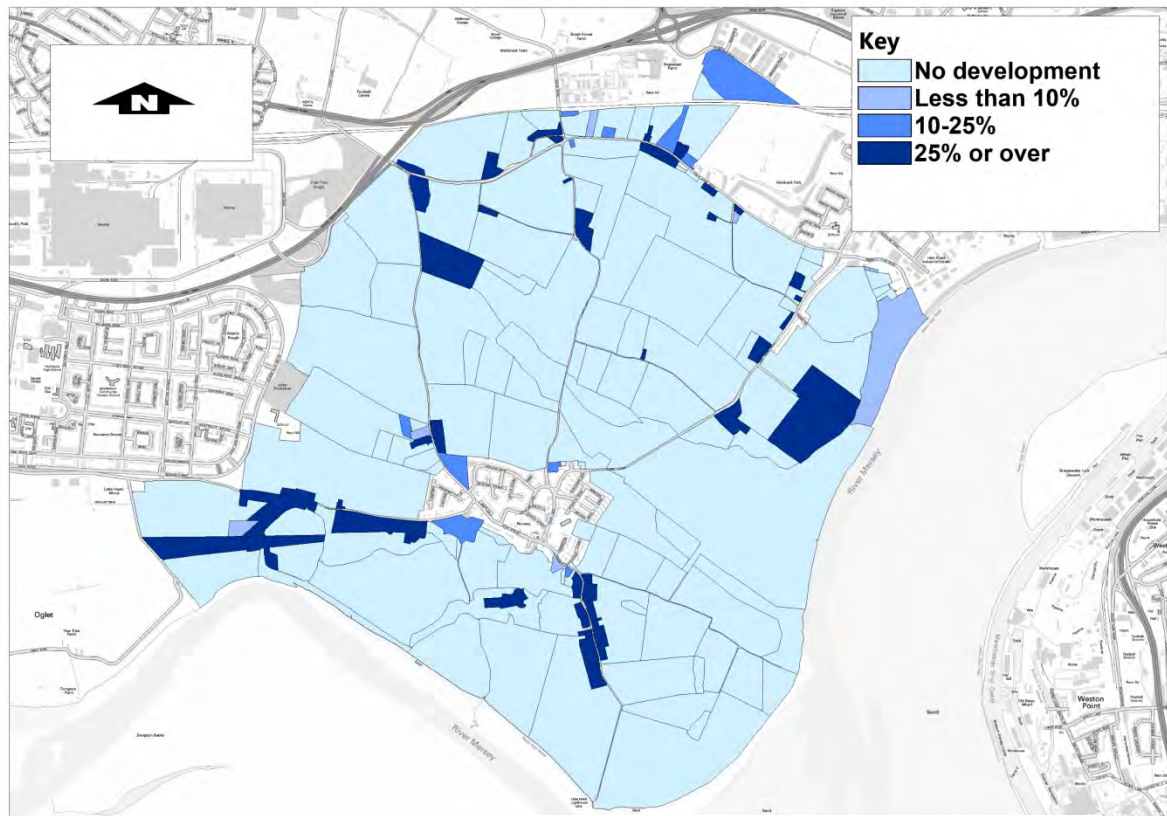
² Heath & Hampstead Society v London Borough of Camden (3rd April 2007))([2007]EWHC977(Admin)) and Mrs Jean Timmins & AW Lymn (The Family Funeral Service) Ltd vs Gedling Borough Council (11/03/2014) ([2014] EWHC 654 (Admin))

Map 12a: Openness



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Map 12b: Openness



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- 3.72 As would be expected, much of the existing Green Belt is considered open, with areas of development clearly shown in green. The sites with the highest proportion of development and therefore least open include the residential development that ribbons along the roads out of Hale at Church Road and Hale Road. There are also other parcels where there is substantial unscreened residential development that results in an interruption to the openness of those areas. In addition a number of commercial developments such as Rivendell Garden Centre and Fords Sports and Social Club also have this interruption to the openness of those areas.
- 3.73 Where there is only a small proportion of development on the site the parcels are shaded in the intermediate range, for example at Pickering's Pasture where there is only a Visitor Centre on the site and no other development (Less than 10% development). Where there is a greater proportion of development for example a terrace of housing that occupies a whole parcel or where the parcel boundary has been drawn tightly around a development, as seen at Rivendell Garden Centre, the parcel is coloured in the darkest shades of blue (25% or over).

Site Capacity

- 3.74 The Individual Site Assessment for each parcel contains information in relation to the potential number of houses it could accommodate, the 'notional site capacity'. These figures have been calculated using a standard formula, including the following standard assumptions about how much of any site (based on site size) is 'developable'.

Site Size	Developable Area: Gross to Net Ratio	Density
Less than 0.4ha	100%	30dph
0.4ha to 2ha	90%	30dph
2ha to 5ha	80%	30dph
Over 5ha	75%	30dph

- 3.75 These gross to net ratios have been calculated based on evidence from existing developments across the Borough.

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{Site Area} & & \text{Percentage of site} & & \text{Average Dwellings} & & \\ \text{(Hectares)} & \times & \text{assumed to be} & \times & \text{per Hectare} & = & \text{Notional} \\ & & \text{developable} & & \text{(dph)} & & \text{Capacity} \end{array}$$

Worked example – Site GB001

$$\mathbf{1.29 \text{ Ha.} \quad \times \quad 90\% \quad \times \quad 30 \text{ dph} \quad = \quad 34}$$

- 3.76 The site capacities are only for information and have not taken into account all the details of the site, including existing development, physical constraints (e.g.

topography, ponds, woodland), restrictive constraints (e.g. flooding or ground conditions) or the deliverability or viability of the site.

- 3.77 It is also important to note that at this stage the sites have not been subject to the level of testing that would be required were they to be removed from the Green Belt and allocated for development in future planning policy or granted planning permission for development. This testing could include, amongst others, Sustainability Appraisals (SA), Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA), Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA), Environment Impact Assessment (EIA), Traffic Impact Assessment (TIA), Health Impact Assessment (HIA) and Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA).
- 3.78 It should also be noted that the Green Belt Study, will not be the only piece of evidence supporting the Local Plan that is considered in determining sites to be removed from the Green Belt and in considering future land uses.

4 Key Survey Findings

4.1 Key findings:

Prohibitive Constraint

- 39 sites were excluded due to a prohibitive constraint.

Restrictive Constraint

- 43 sites were identified as having a restrictive constraint

Accessibility

- 74 sites have very good accessibility, with access to 5 or more facilities.
- 75 sites have good accessibility, with access to at least four of the listed facilities.
- 76 sites have average accessibility, with access to at least two of the listed facilities
- 8 sites have poor accessibility

Containment

- 3 parcels were assessed as being contained
- 17 parcels were assessed as being largely contained
- 75 parcels were assessed as being partially contained
- 138 parcels were assessed as being not contained

Gap

- 18 sites were identified providing an essential role in preventing neighbouring towns from merging with a gap of less than 250m.
- 19 sites were identified providing an important role in preventing neighbouring towns from merging with a gap of 500m
- 24 sites were identified as reducing the gap between neighbouring towns but would not lead to the merging of neighbouring towns with a gap of 750m
- 35 sites were identified that would have a limited impact on the resultant gap between settlements with a gap of more than or equal to 1,000m

Countryside Use

- 150 parcels were identified as being in countryside use
- 12 parcels were identified as being in partial countryside use
- 71 parcels were identified as being in non-countryside use

Visual Encroachment

- 62 parcels were assessed as having limited visual encroachment
- 107 parcels were assessed as having partial visual encroachment
- 64 parcels were assessed as having a high level of visual encroachment

Green Belt Purpose

- 43 parcels were assessed as making a limited or very limited contribution to the purposes of including land within the green belt
- 100 parcels were assessed as making a partial contribution to the purposes of including land within the green belt.
- 90 parcels were assessed as making a major or significant contribution to the purposes of including land within the green belt.

5 Next Steps – Findings and Consultation

Consultation

- 5.1 This document will be subject to consultation between **Thursday 5th February and 5pm on Thursday 19th March 2015**.
- 5.2 The Council would encourage you to submit your comments electronically via email to forward.planning@halton.gov.uk or by post to
Planning and Policy Division,
Halton Borough Council,
Municipal Building,
Kingsway,
Widnes,
WA8 7QF.
- 5.3 You will find a copy of each of the relevant documents online at www.halton.gov.uk/planningpolicy or you can view a paper copy at the Halton Direct Links (HDLs) at Halton Lea, Runcorn; Brook Street, Widnes; and Granville Street, Runcorn or at the Libraries at Runcorn Shopping Centre (formerly known as Halton Lea), Runcorn; Granville Street, Runcorn; Kingsway, Widnes and Ditton, Widnes.

Next Steps

- 5.4 Once this consultation has completed the Council will consider any comments received. This Green Belt Study will then be reviewed and amended as appropriate in light of any issues raised. The findings of this Green Belt Study will then be used as part of the evidence base for preparing future planning policy.

Map I: Merseyside Green Belt



BLACKPOOL

PRESTON

BLACKBURN

Southport

Formby

St Helens

Ormskirk

Skelmersdale

Maghull

Kirkby

Liverpool

Birkenhead

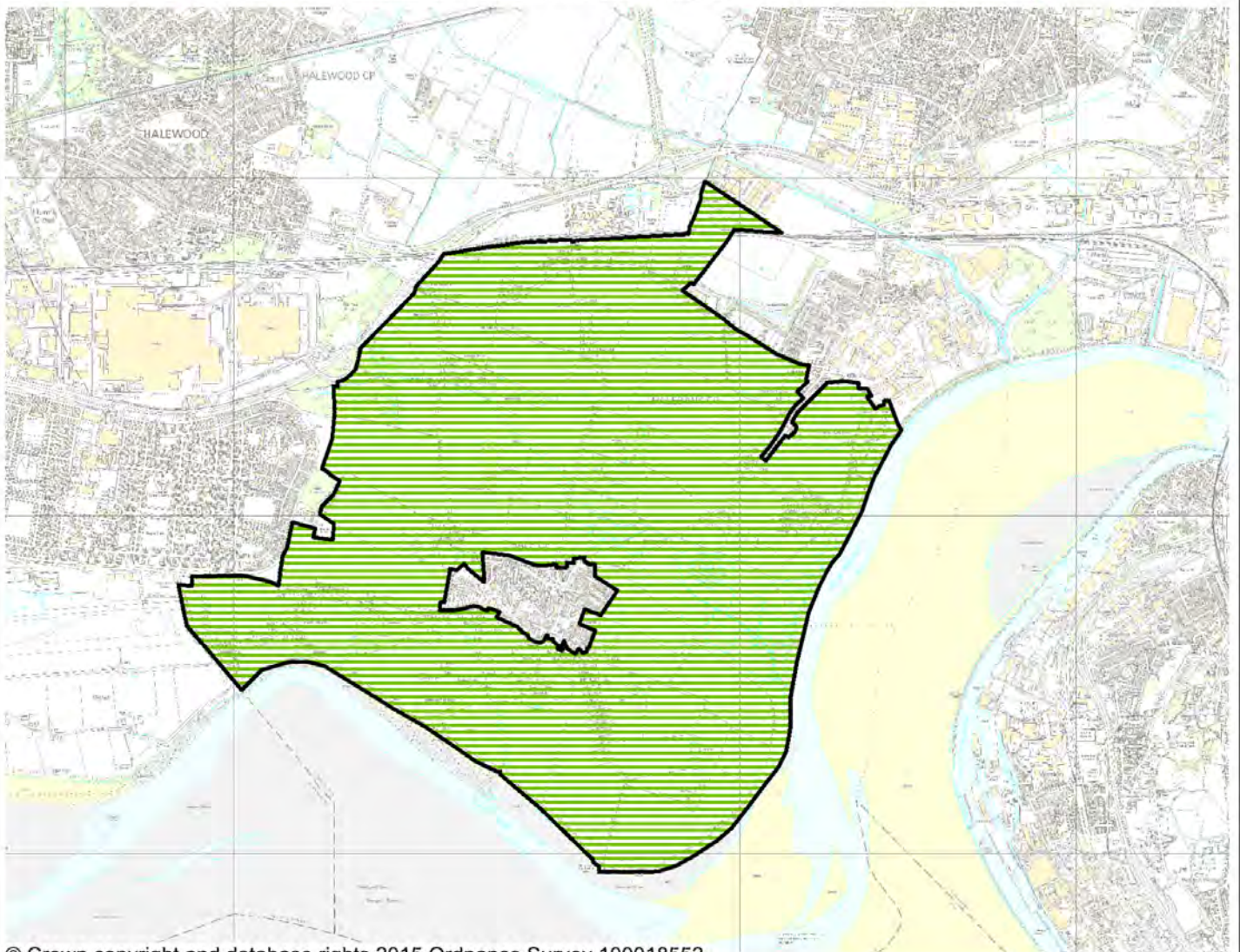
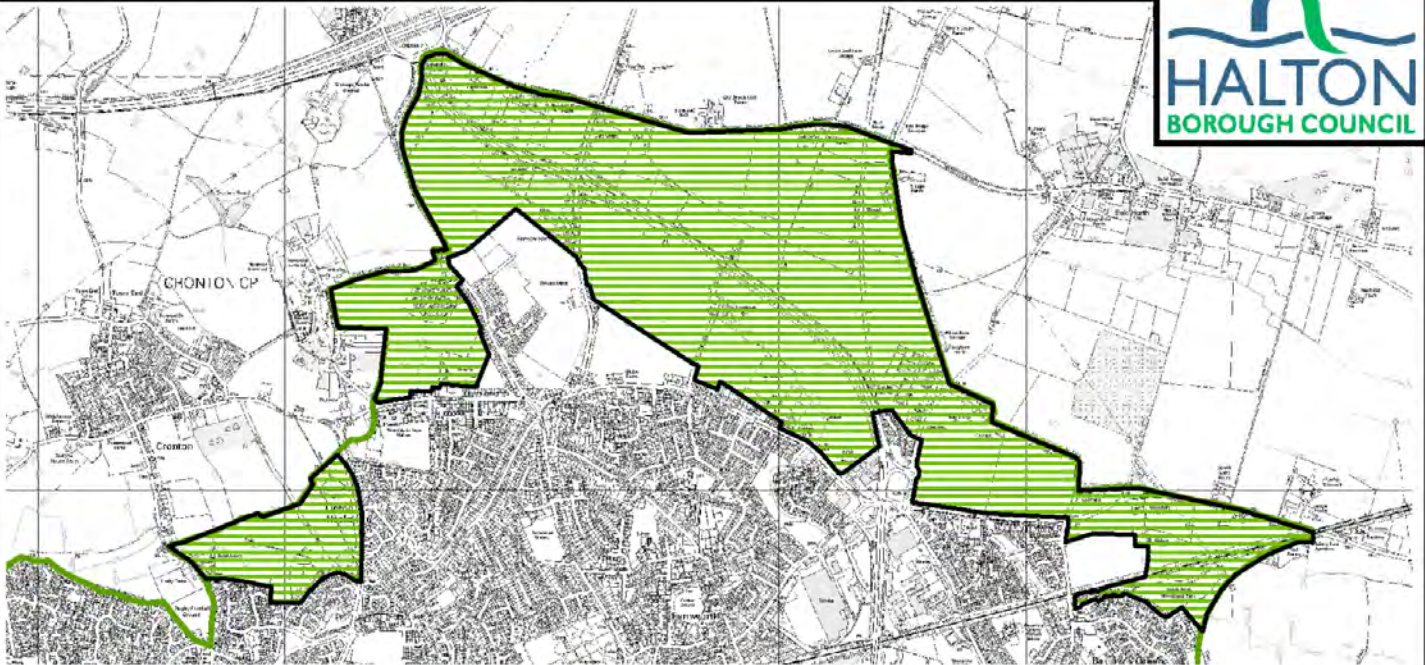
Warrington

Widnes

Runcorn

Map 2: Widnes and Hale Green Belt

Map 2: Halton Green Belt



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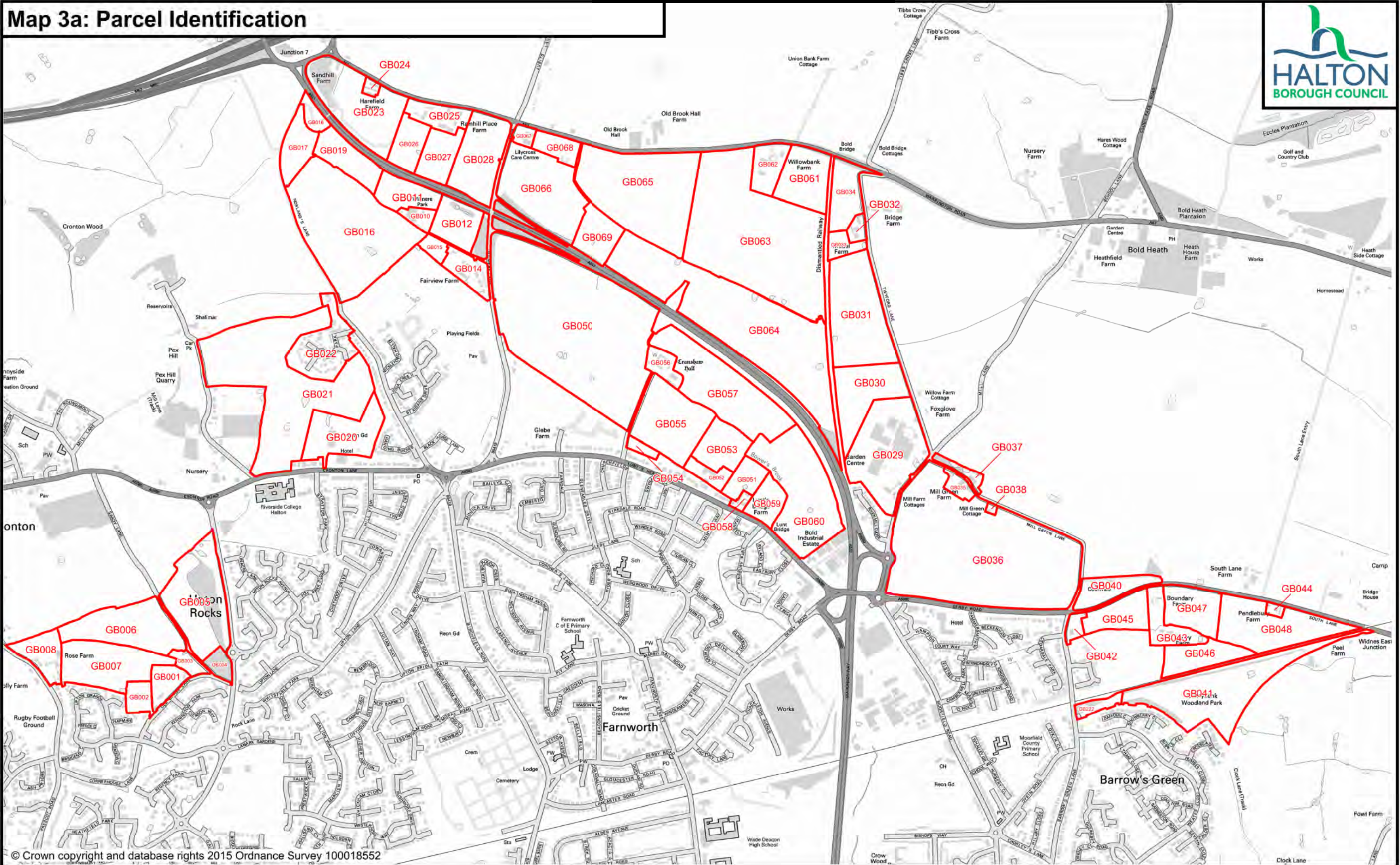
Key

 Halton Green Belt

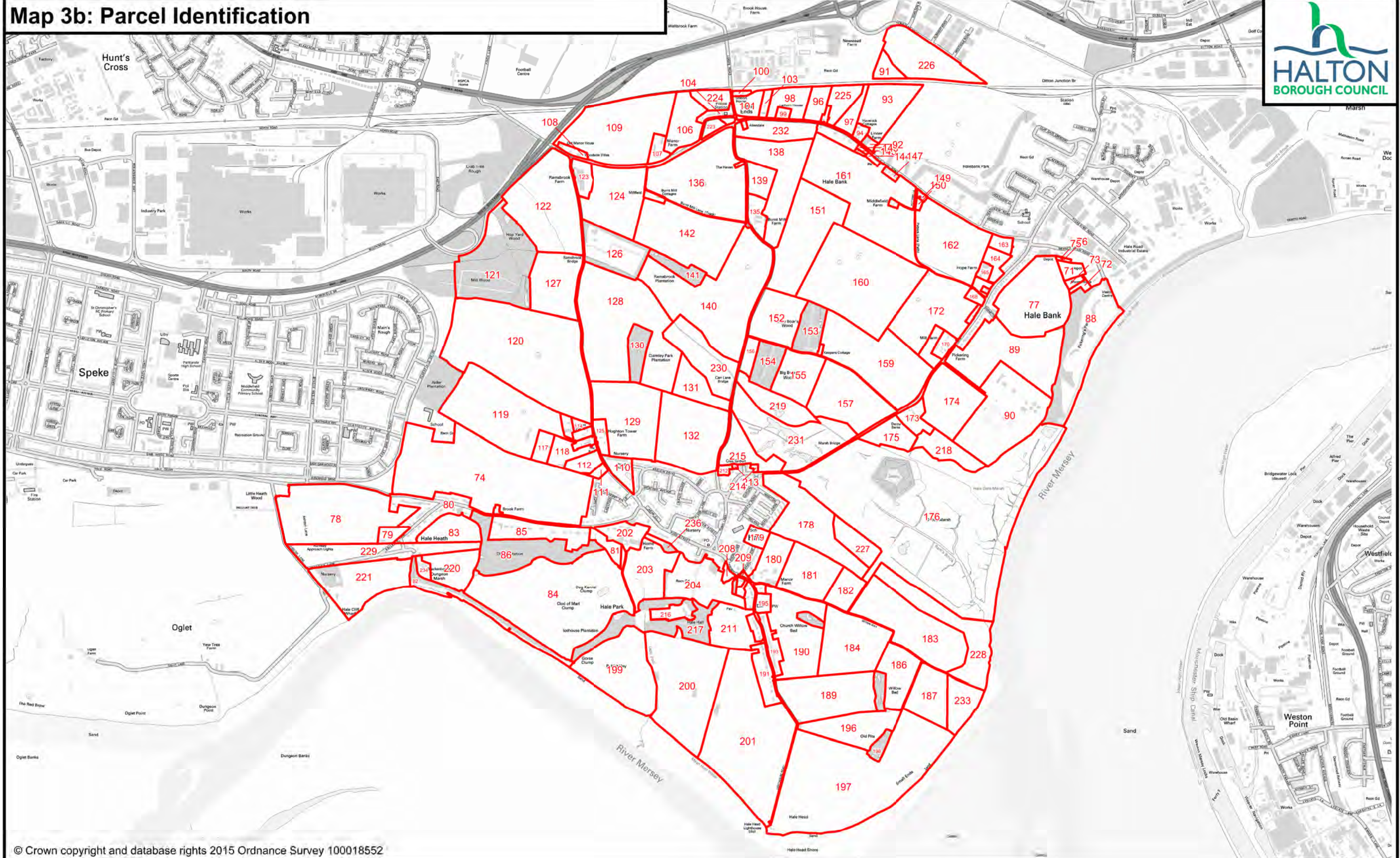


Map 3: Parcel Identification

Map 3a: Parcel Identification



Map 3b: Parcel Identification

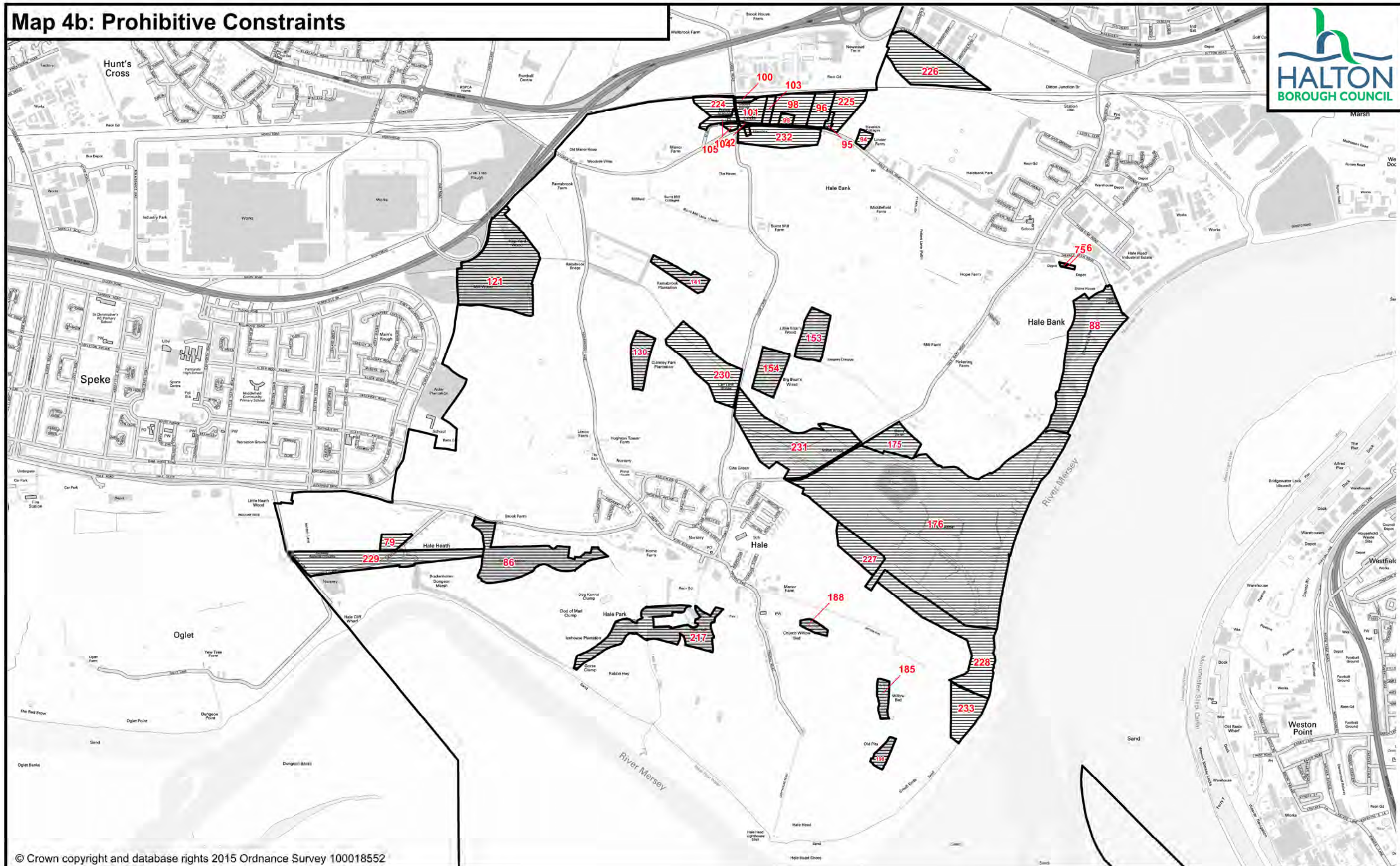


Map 4: Prohibitive Constraints

Map 4a: Prohibitive Constraints

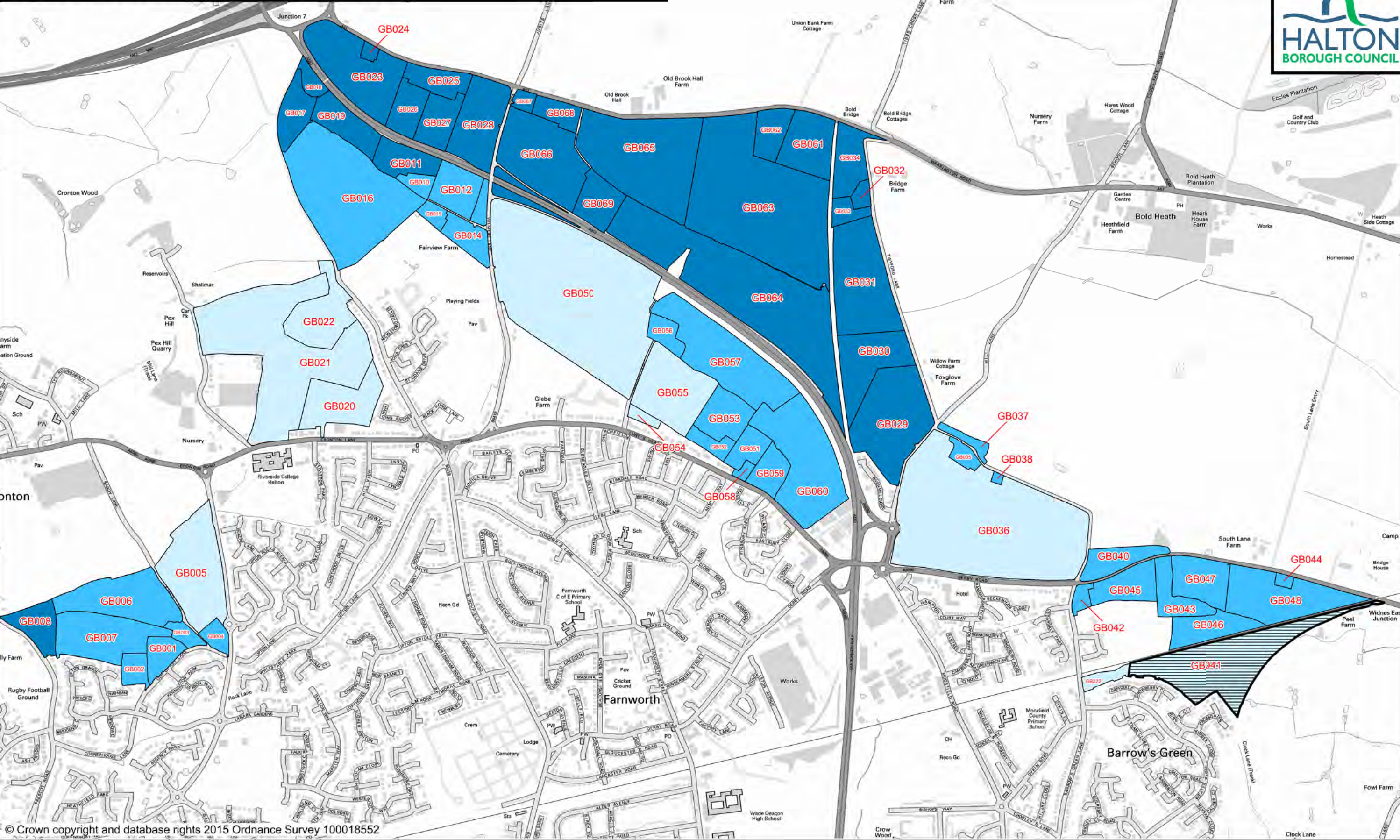


Map 4b: Prohibitive Constraints



Map 5: Accessibility

Map 5a: Accessibility (to key services)



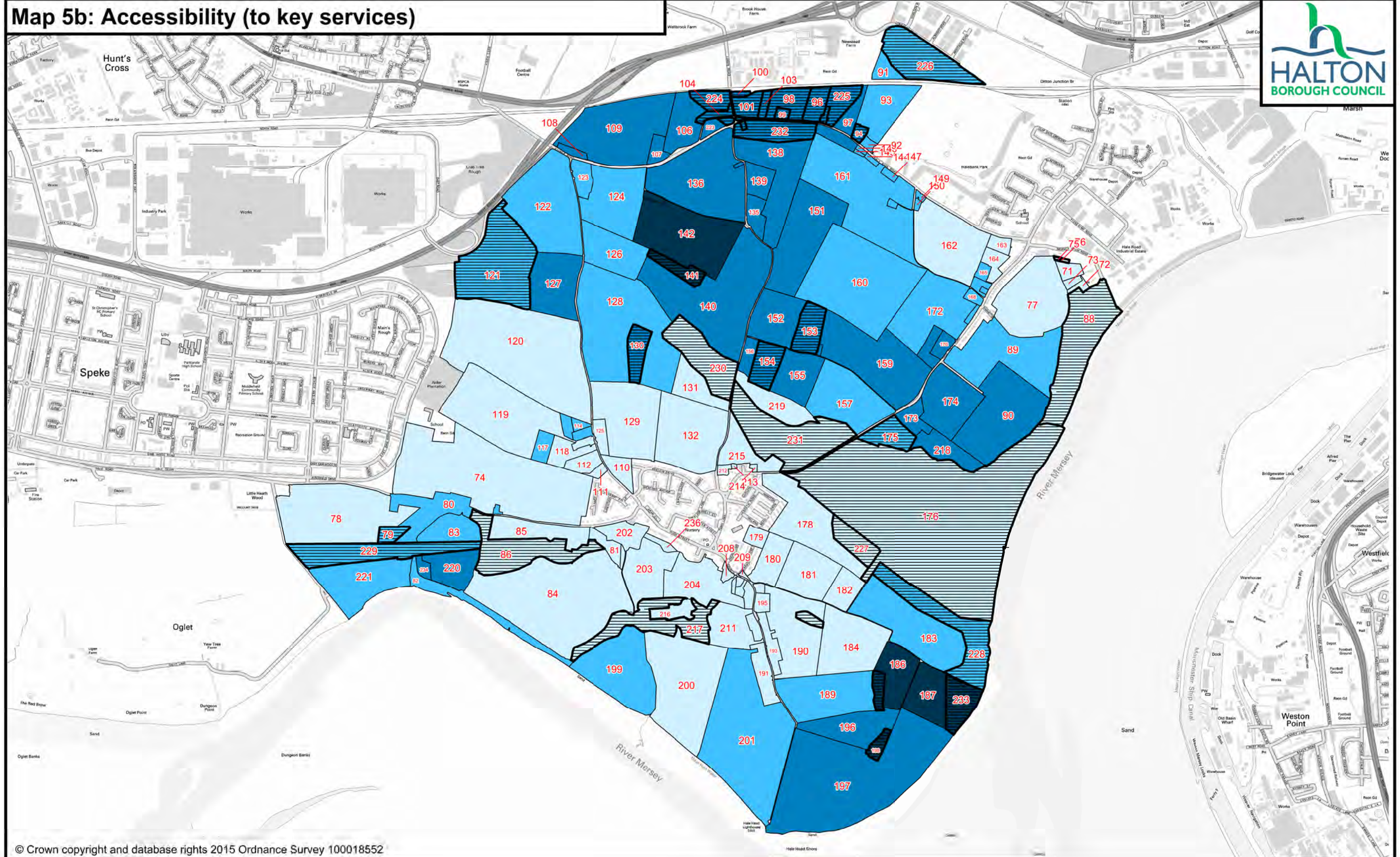
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Key

Very Good	Average	Prohibitive Constraints
Good	Poor	



Map 5b: Accessibility (to key services)



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Key

	Very Good		Average		Prohibitive Constraints
	Good		Poor		



Map 6: Containment

Map 6a: Containment



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Key

Not Contained

Partially Contained

Largely Contained

Contained

Prohibitive Constraint



Map 6b: Containment



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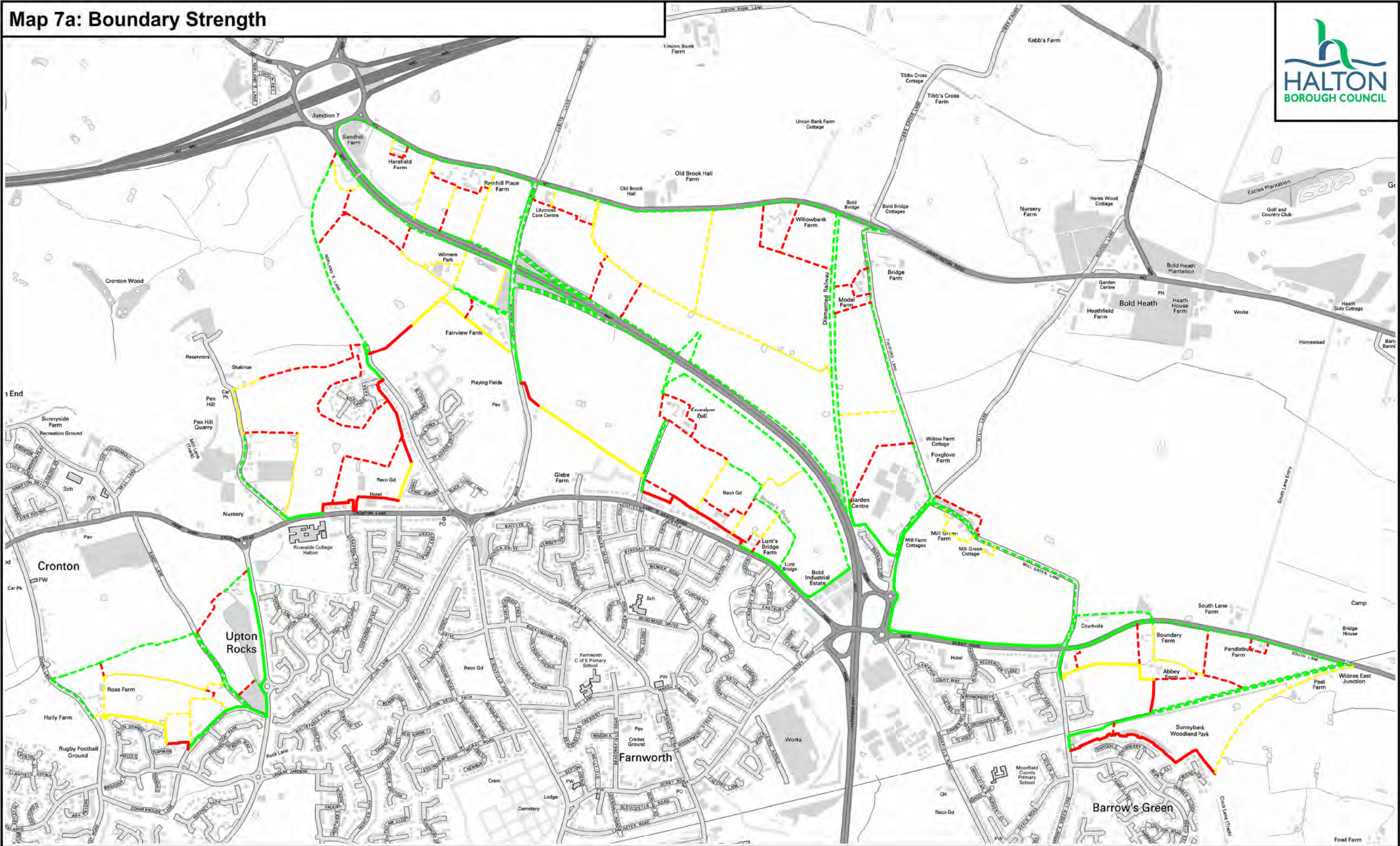
Key

	Not Contained		Largely Contained		Prohibitive Constraint
	Partially Contained		Contained		



Map 7: Boundary Strength

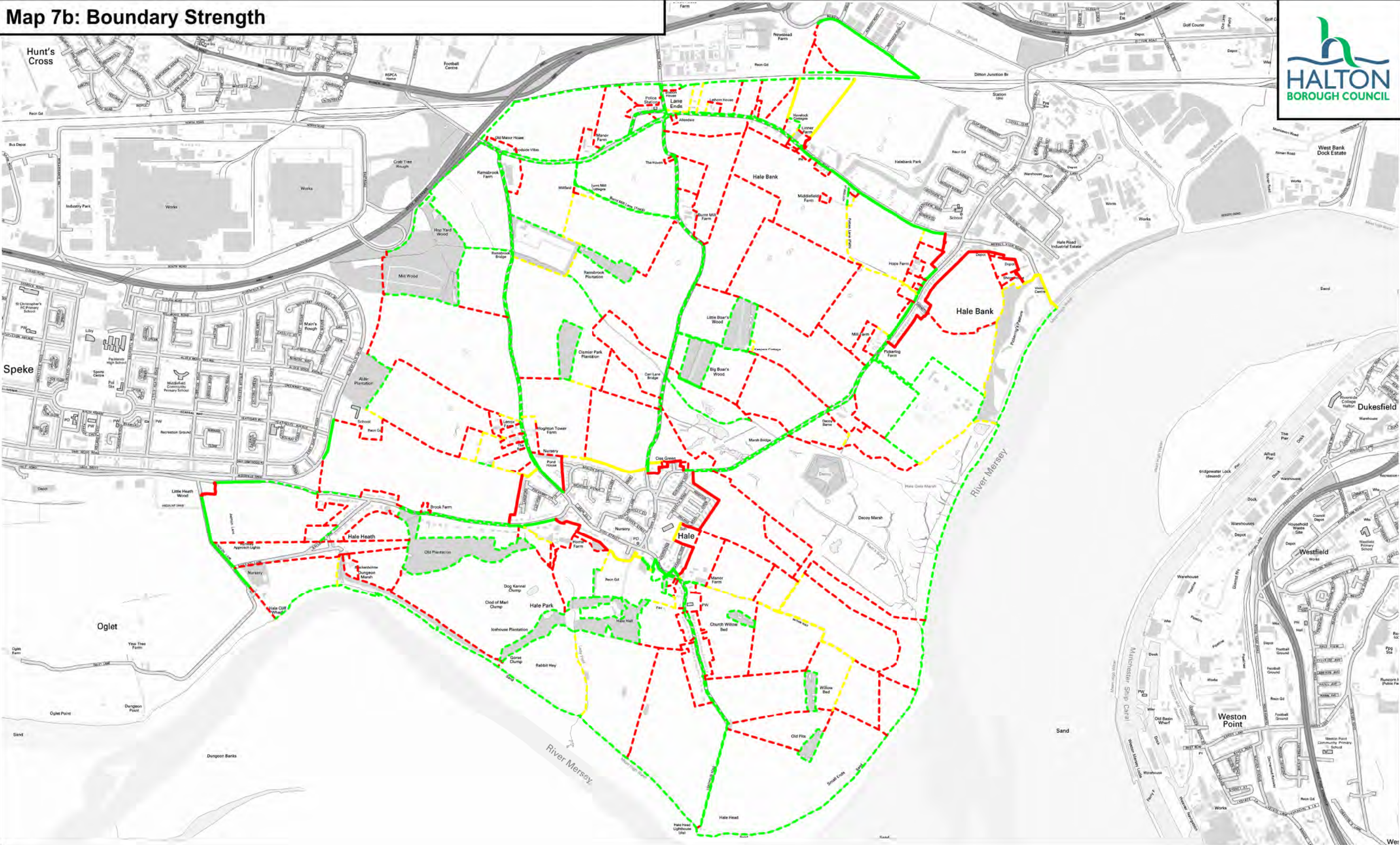
Map 7a: Boundary Strength



Key

Moderate Weak Strong

Map 7b: Boundary Strength



Key

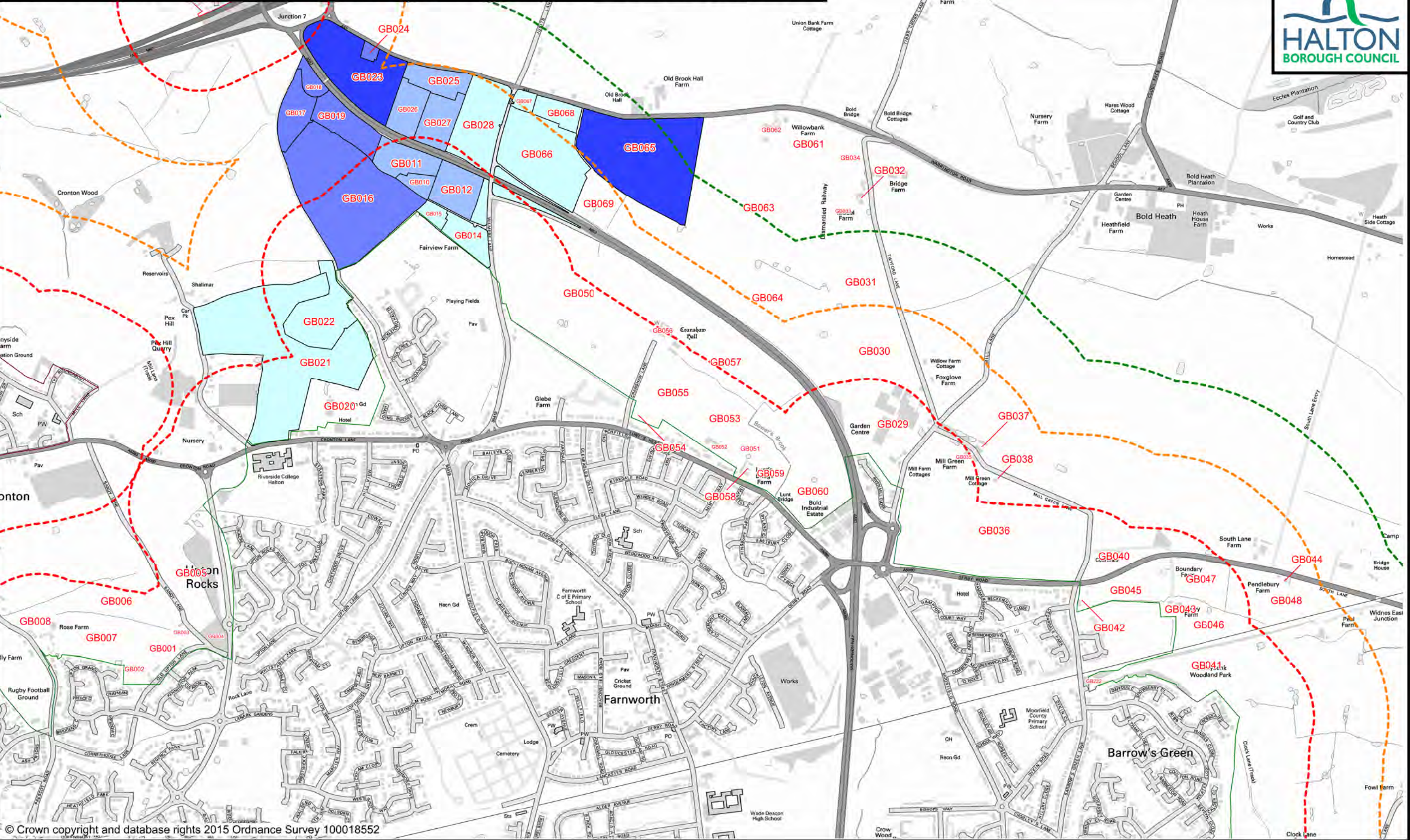
Moderate

Weak

Strong

Map 8: Gap

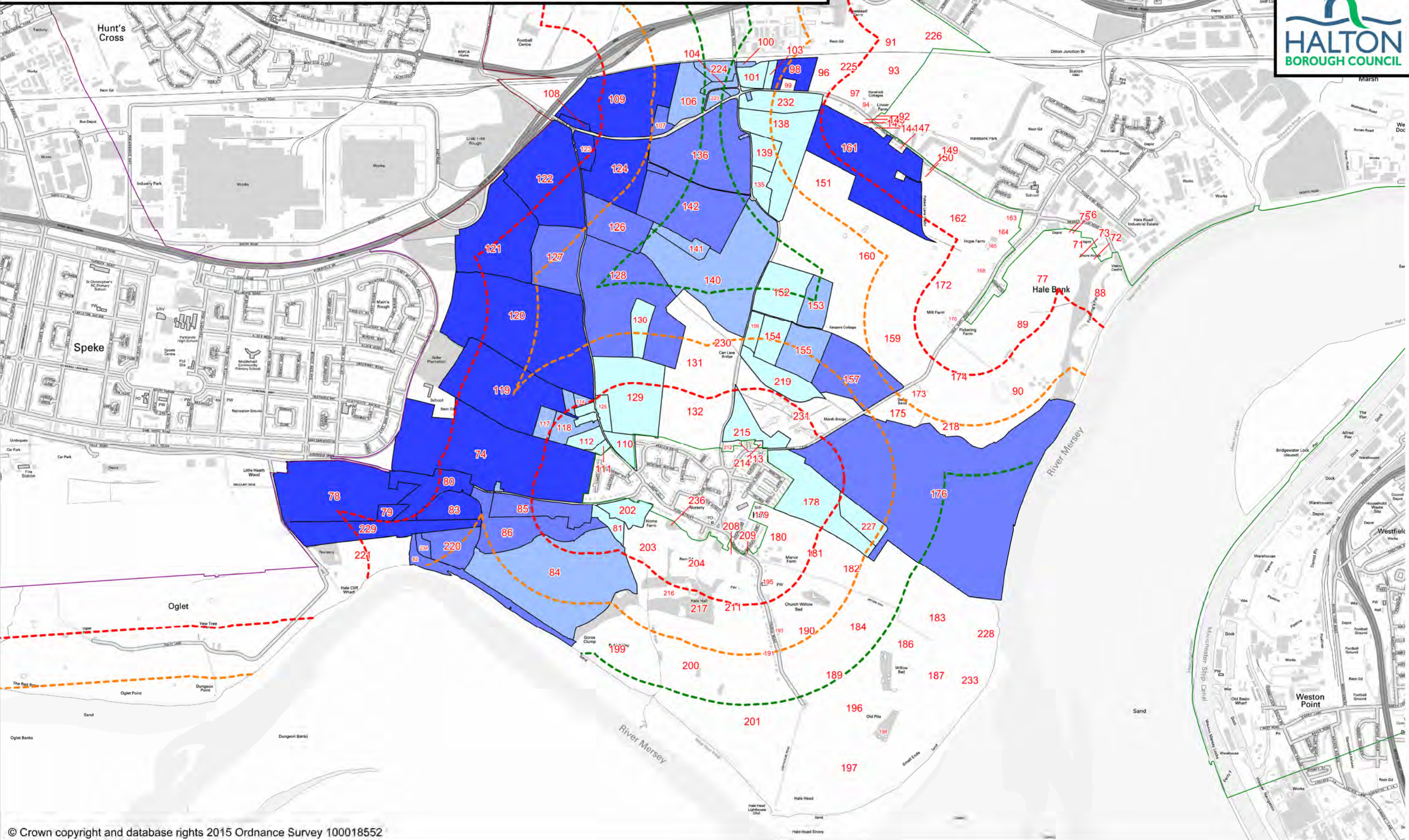
Map 8a: Green Belt Width and Remaining 'Gap' should Parcels be Released



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Map 8b: Green Belt Width and Remaining 'Gap' should Parcels be Released



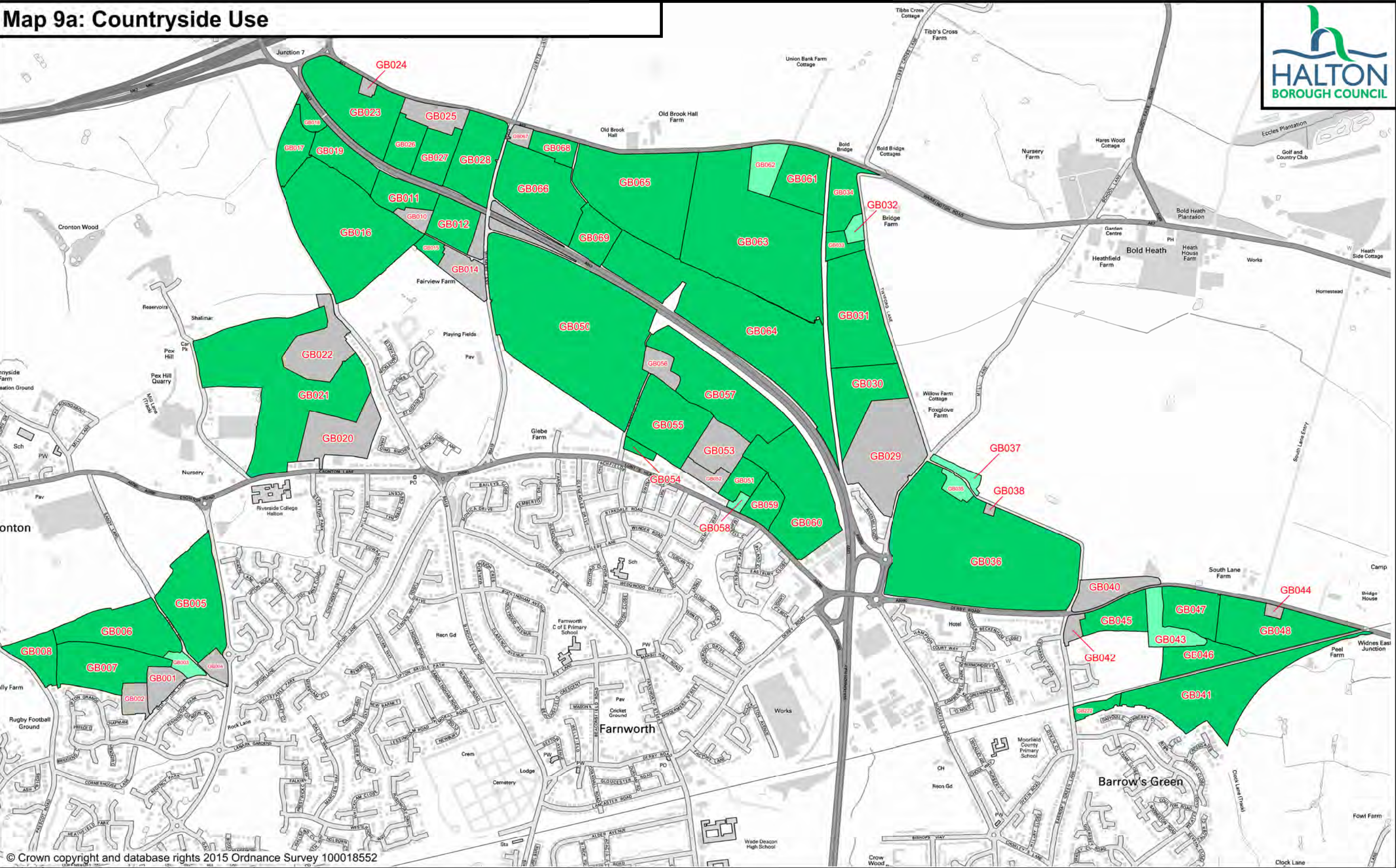
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Key
750m 500m 250m



Map 9: Countryside Use

Map 9a: Countryside Use



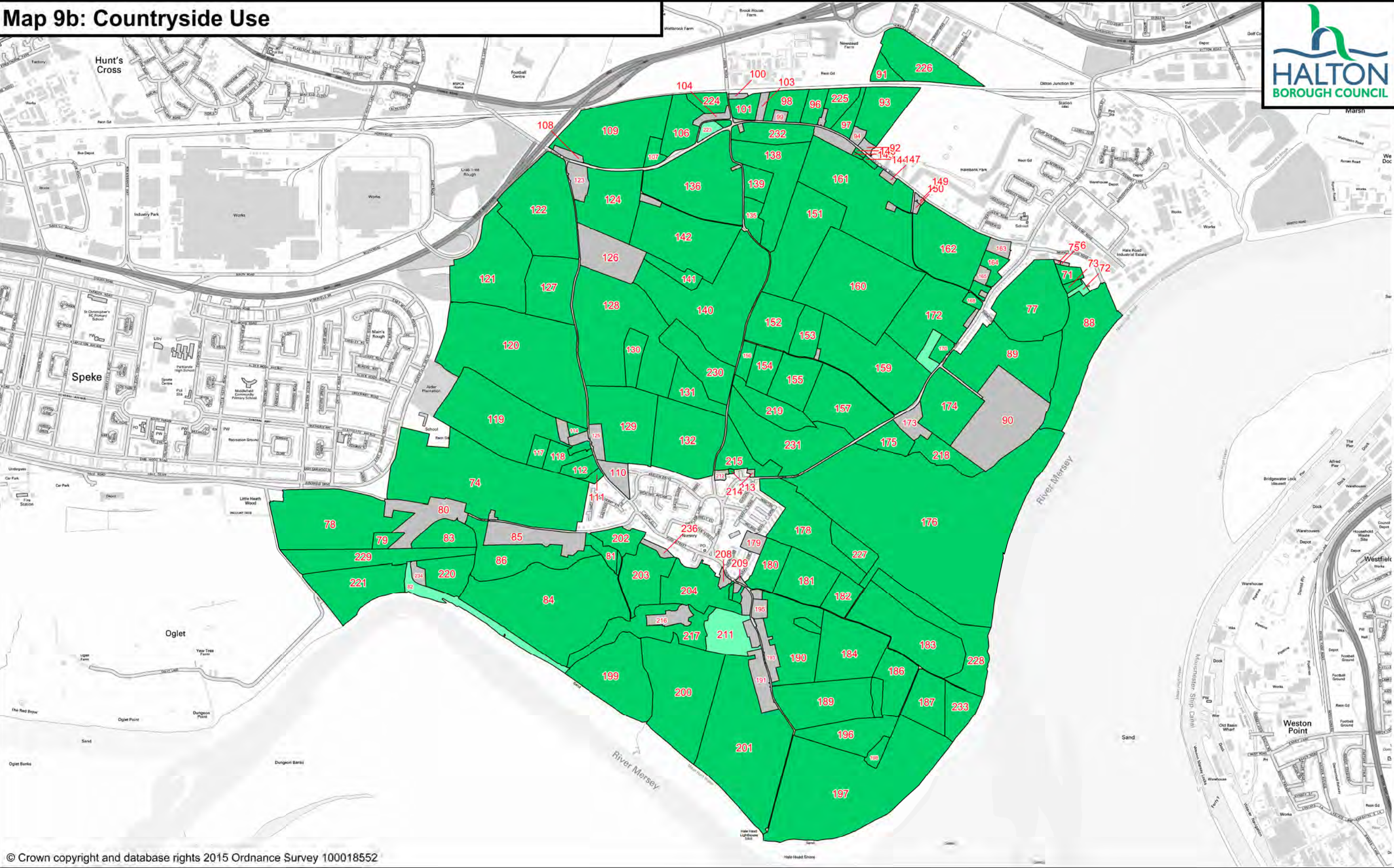
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Key

	Country Use
	Partial Country Use
	Non Country Use



Map 9b: Countryside Use



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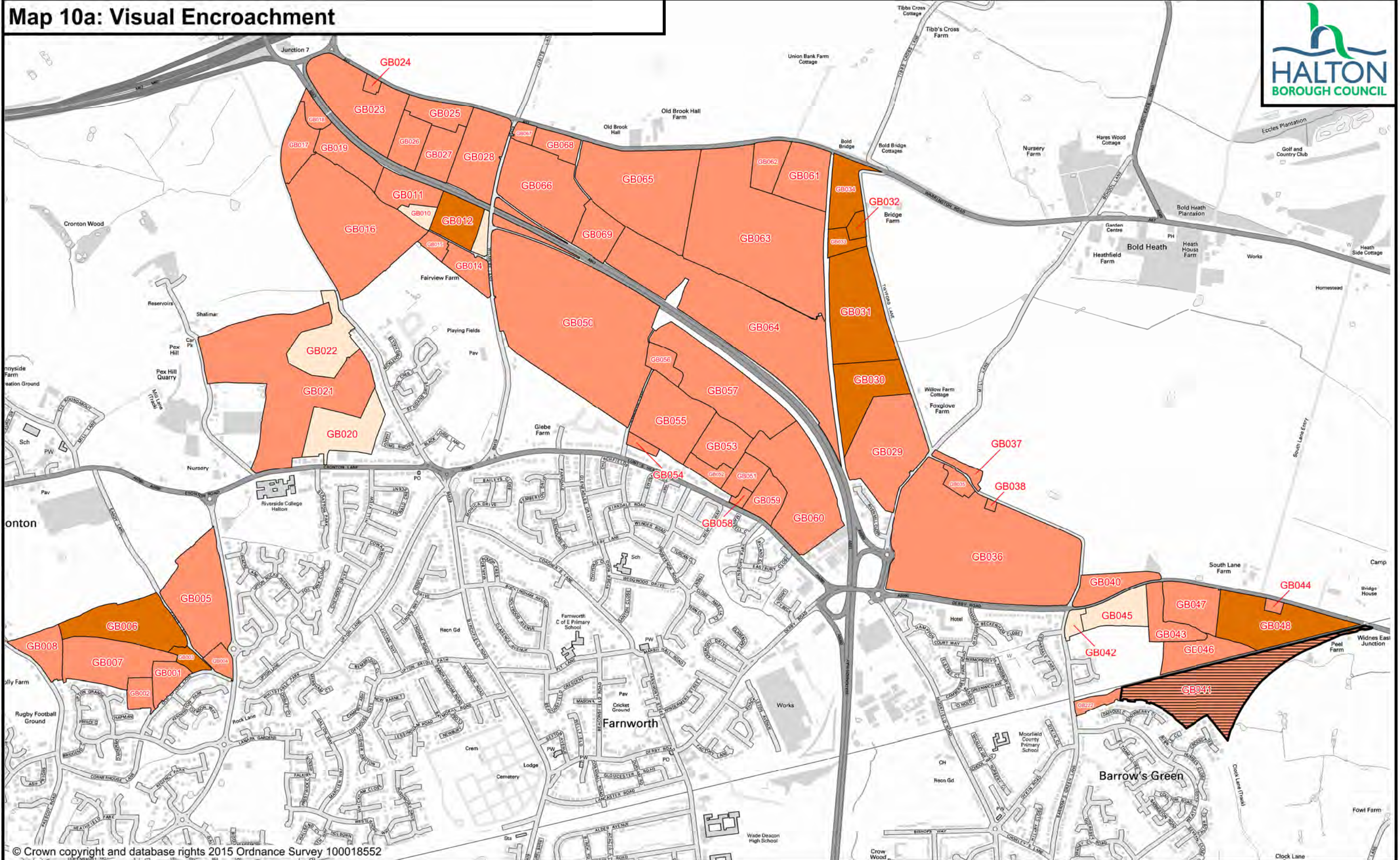
Key

	Country Use
	Partial Country Use
	Non Country Use




Map 10: Visual Encroachment

Map 10a: Visual Encroachment



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Key

 High level of Visual Encroachment

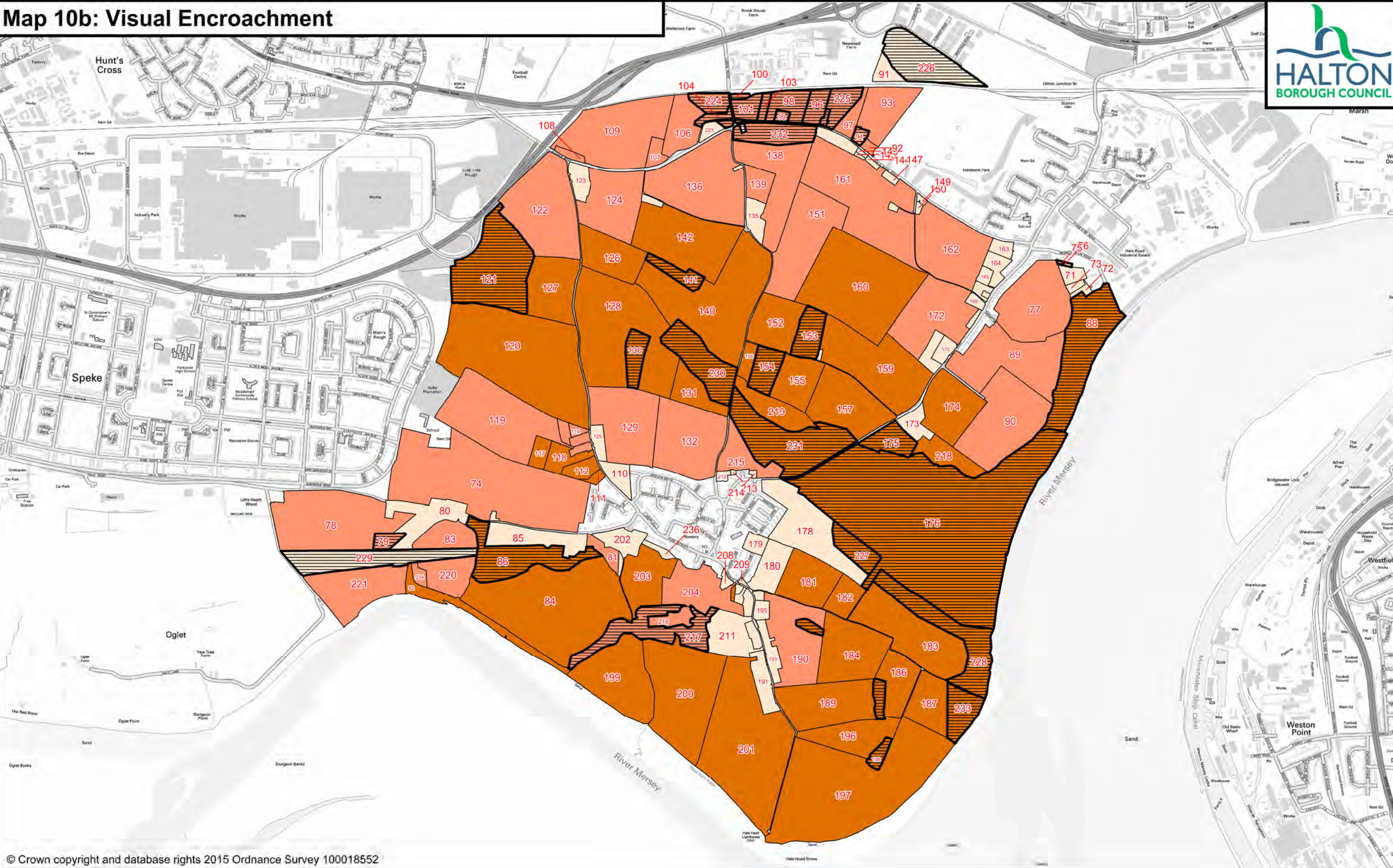
Partial Visual Encroachment

Limited Visual Encroachment

Prohibitive Constraint



Map 10b: Visual Encroachment



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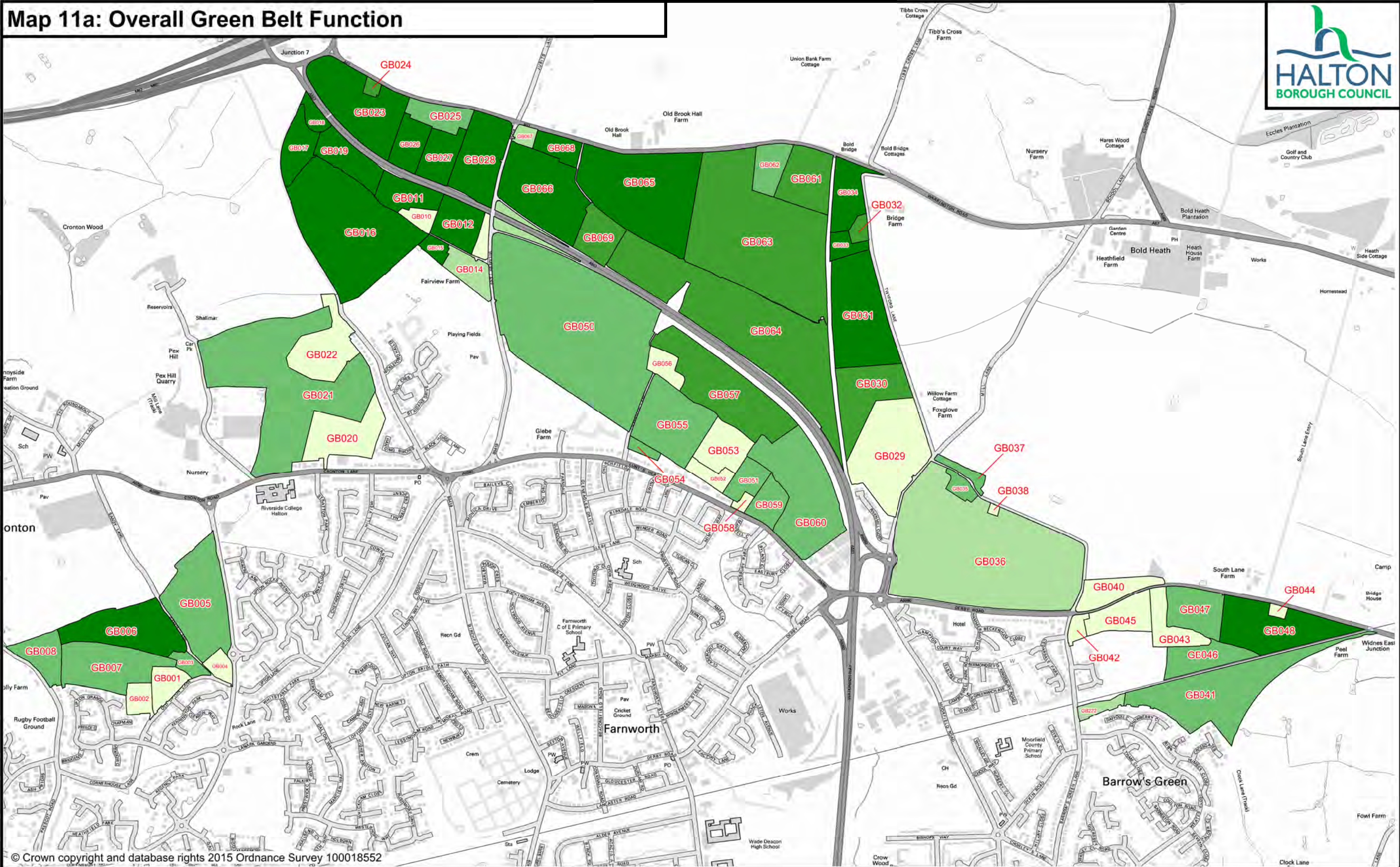
Key

High level of Visual Encroachment	Partial Visual Encroachment	Limited Visual Encroachment	Prohibitive Constraint
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Map 11: Green Belt Purpose

Map 11a: Overall Green Belt Function



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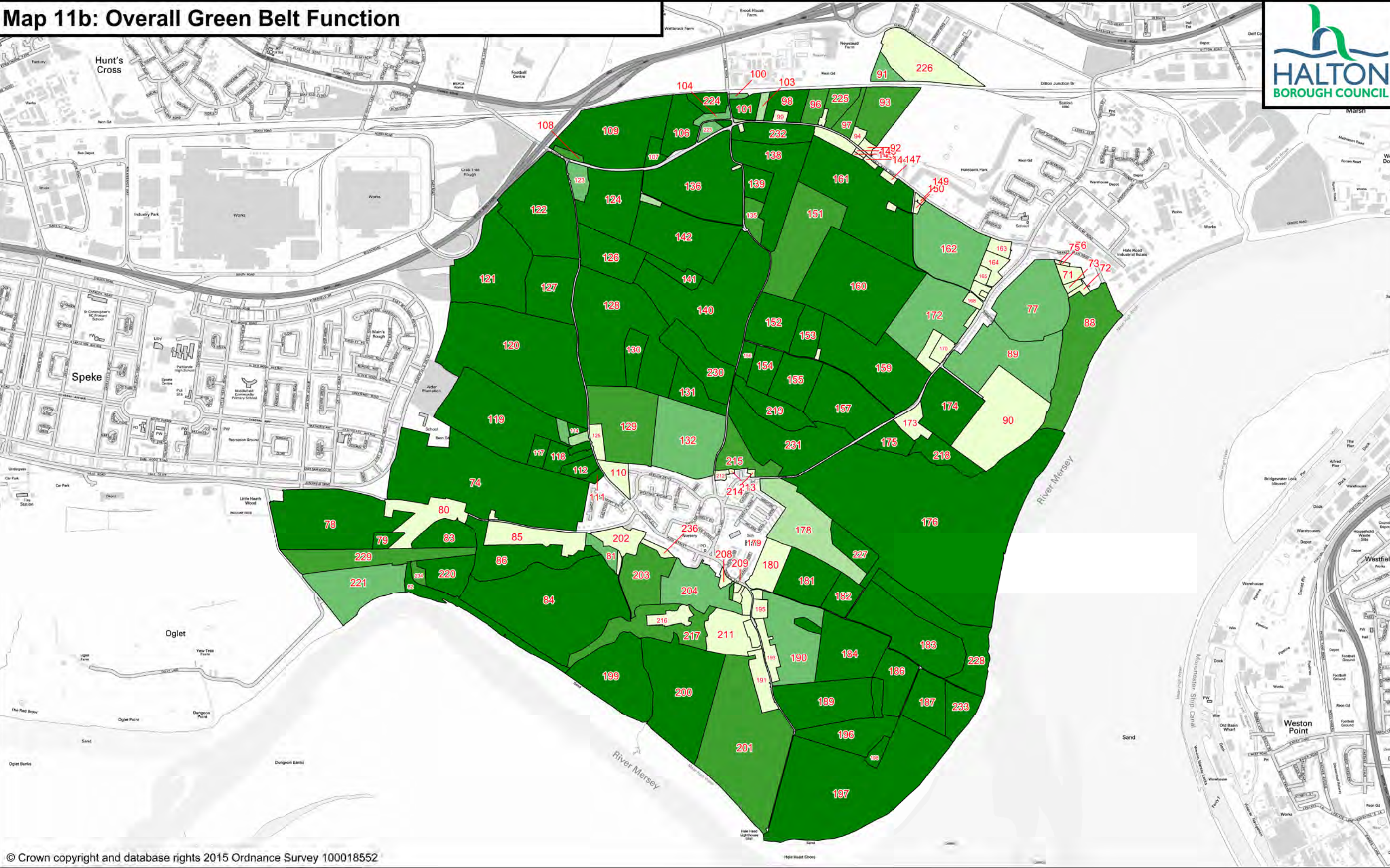
Key

Highest

Lowest



Map 11b: Overall Green Belt Function

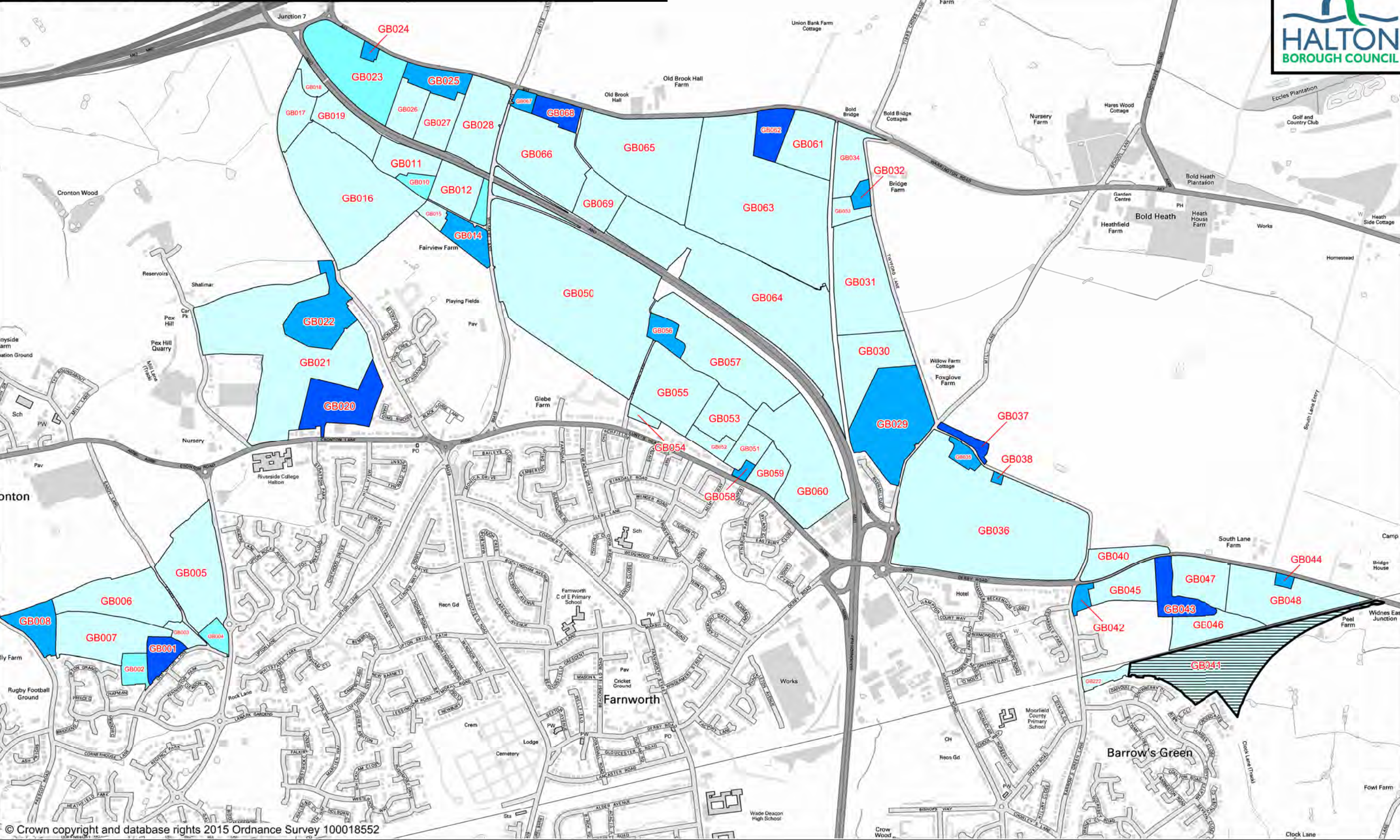


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Map 12: Openness

Map 12a: Openness



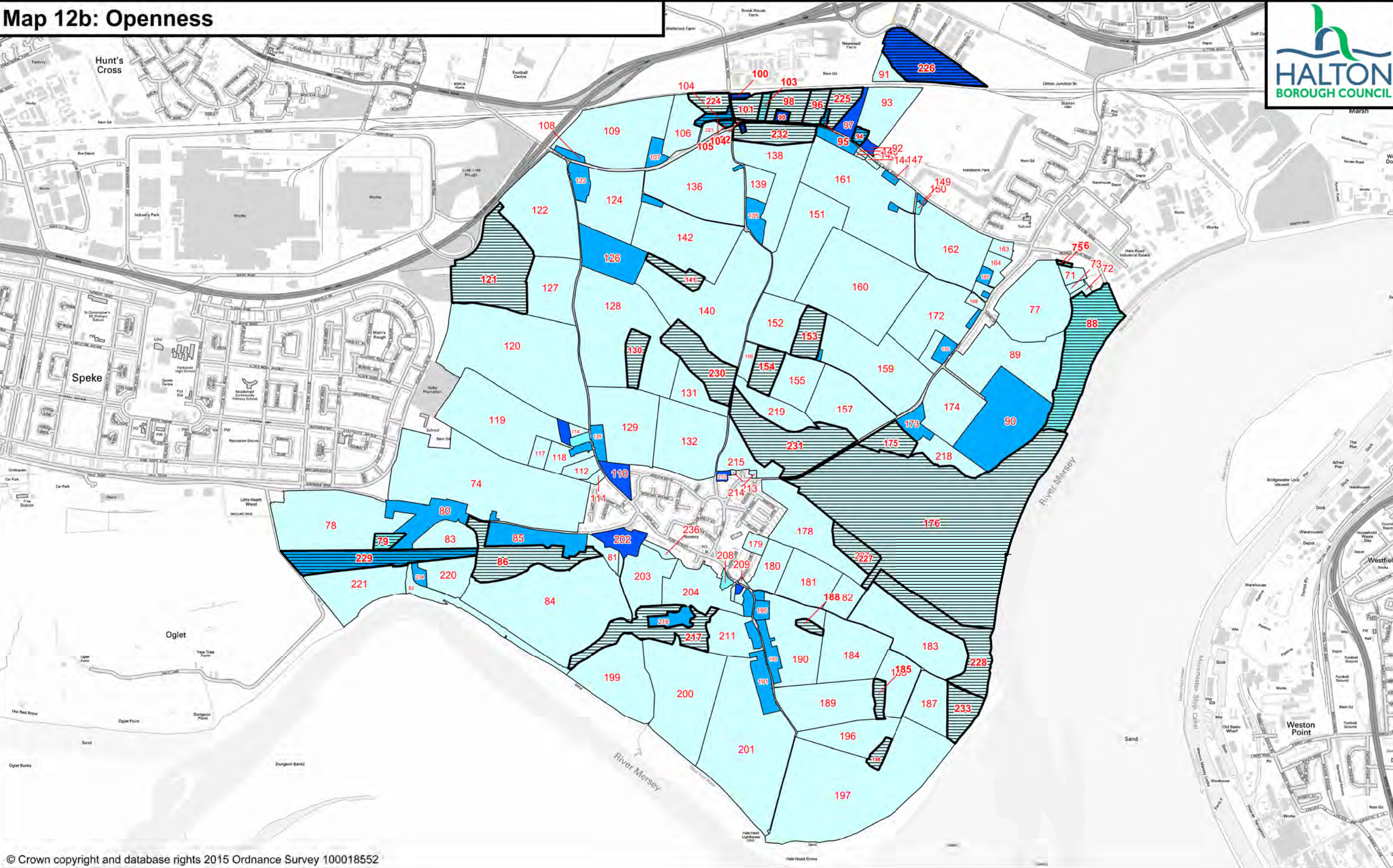
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Key

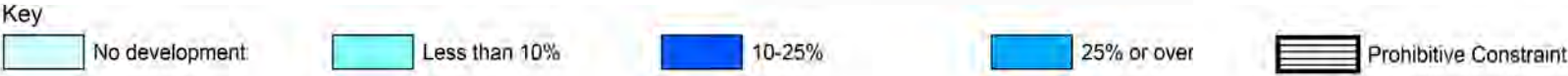
No development	Less than 10%	10-25%	25% or over	Prohibitive Constraint
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Map 12b: Openness



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Appendix A: Compendium of Individual Site Records

(Separate Document)



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