

Agricultural Land Classifications Topic Paper

April 2017

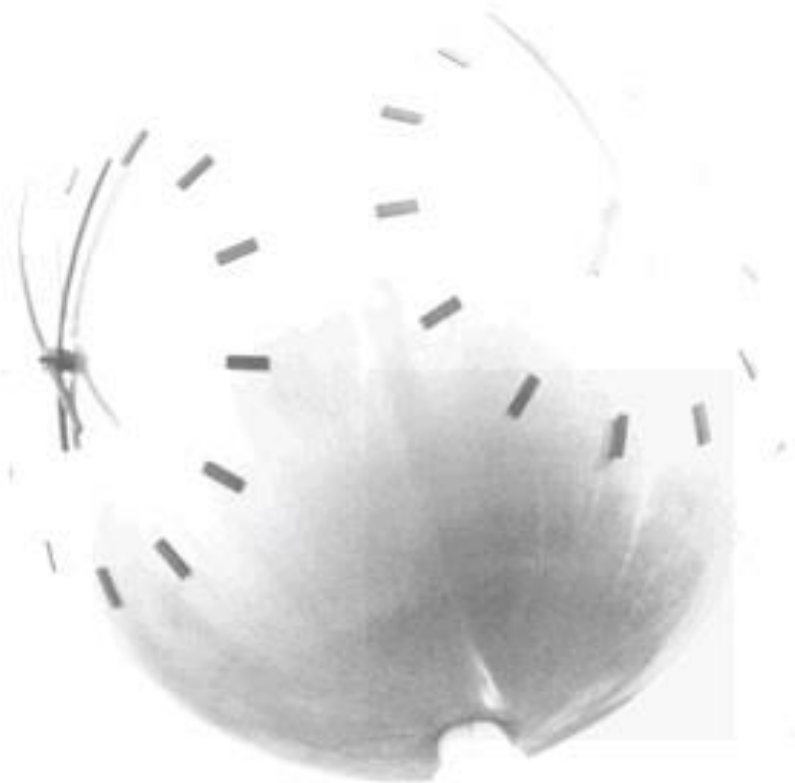


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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Agricultural land is an important natural resource which is vital to sustainable development.
- 1.2 The Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system was introduced in 1966 and the whole of England and Wales was mapped from reconnaissance field surveys. The ALC provides a framework for classifying land according to the extent to which its physical or chemical characteristics impose long-term limitations on agricultural use¹.
- 1.3 Through the ALC, the land is classified into grades one to five, with grade 3 being subdivided into two further subgrades 3a and 3b. Agricultural land that is categorised as grades 1, 2 or 3a is considered to be the best and most versatile and grades 3b, 4 and 5 of a moderate to poor quality. Factors that affect the grading's are climate, site and soil characteristics, and the important interactions between them. A detailed explanation of the criteria for each ALC grade can be found in Appendix 1.
- 1.4 The *National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)* paragraph 112 states that "Local planning authorities should take into account the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land. Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, local planning authorities should seek to use areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of higher quality"².
- 1.5 Soils are under continuing threat of being lost to housing and commercial, industrial and infrastructure development. Net loss of soils to development is one of the Government's Quality of Life indicators. Pressures of erosion, compaction and organic matter decline are all an issue, and the impacts of development also include sealing and increased run-off and pollution. Such issues are likely to be exacerbated by climate change.
- 1.6 Development can therefore have adverse effects on both the biological and physical properties of soil and can limit its future uses. The sustainable use of soil requires that a sufficient quantity of greenfield soils be retained for present and future needs.
- 1.7 In light of the above it is considered important to assess how the best and most versatile agricultural land in the Basildon Borough can be safeguarded.

Report Structure

- 1.8 This topic paper is structured around the following sections:

¹ Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 1988. Agricultural Land Classification of England and Wales: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402151656/http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/landmanage/land-use/documents/alc-guidelines-1988.pdf>

² Para 112, Section 11, p 26, National Planning Policy Framework, March 2012

- **Section 2 – Purpose** explains the background for the topic paper and details the ALC for the Basildon Borough;
- **Section 3 – Policy Background** looks at the policy background for planning relating to agricultural land;
- **Section 4 – Local Plan Policy Options** looks at the various options the Local Plan could promote to provide safeguarding to agricultural land;
- **Section 5 – Recommendations** considers the Local Plan policy options and recommends what approach that should be employed in Basildon Council’s Local Plan.

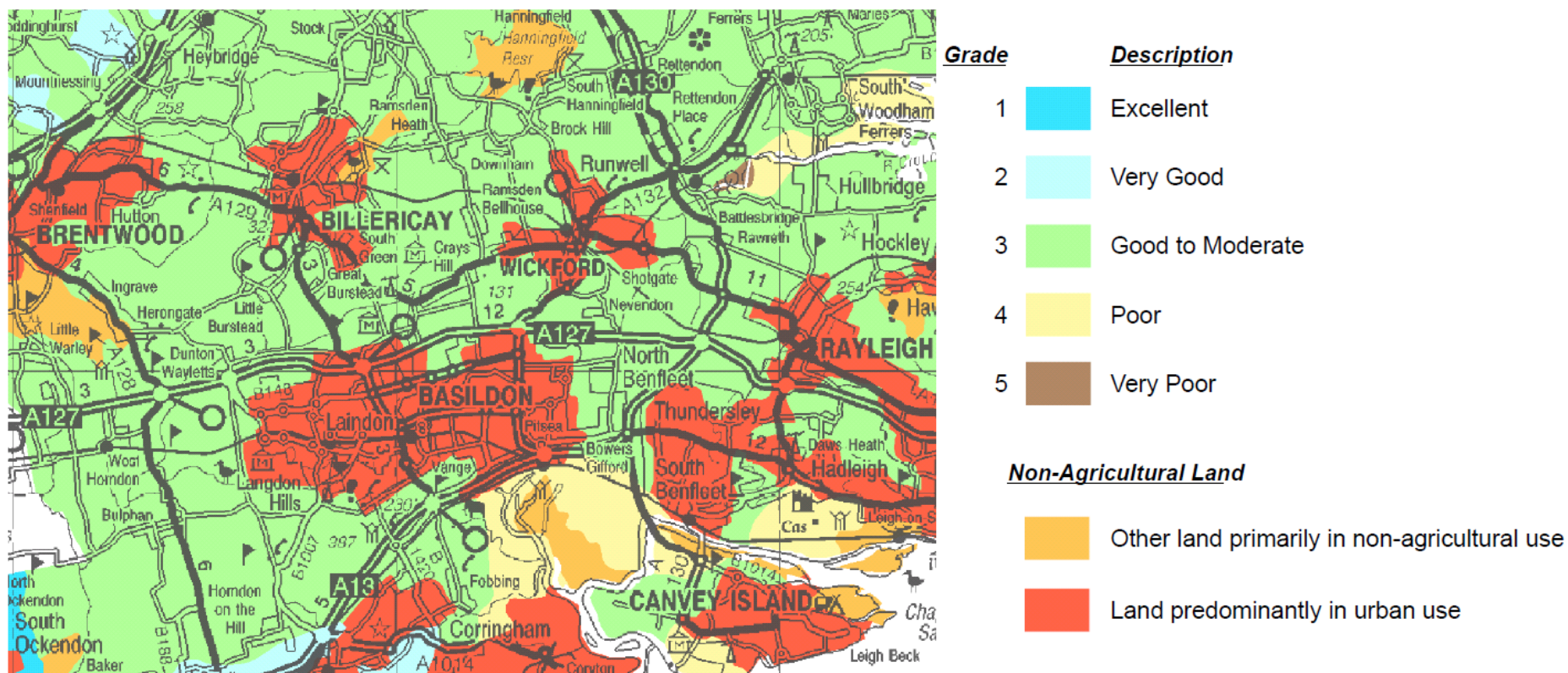
2. PURPOSE

- 2.1 The *NPPF* provides clear guidance for LPAs on how they should be considering agricultural land quality and ensuring that where possible the best and most versatile agricultural land is not developed where it is possible to use poorer quality land.
- 2.2 Basildon Borough Council received a consultation response from Natural England (NE) reiterating this matter. NE have ALC maps which detail what agricultural land is graded from 1 to 5, it does not however include the sub categories 3a and 3b.

Agricultural Land Classifications in the Basildon Borough

- 2.3 Current estimates are that Grades 1 and 2 together form about 21% of all farmland in England; Subgrade 3a also covers about 21%.
- 2.4 The map detailed in Figure 1 shows the ALC for the Basildon Borough from NE. It shows a small area of land to the south within the Basildon Borough is grade 4, whereas the rest of the land is Grade 3, however it does not provide information relating to the subgrades 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.
- 2.5 There is no agricultural land within the Basildon Borough that is grade 1 or 2.

ALC Map of the Basildon Borough



(Source: Natural England: Agricultural Land Classification map Eastern Region (ALC008)³)
 Figure 1: Agricultural Land Classification map Basildon Borough Council area

³ Natural England, 2010. *Agricultural Land Classification map Eastern Region (ALC008)*: <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/127056?category=5954148537204736>

3. POLICY BACKGROUND

- 3.1 There are a number of European and National policies in place which aim to protect the best and most versatile agricultural land. Some of these important policies are detailed further below.

European Policy

- 3.2 *Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)*, launched in 1962, is the agricultural policy of the European Union (EU). It is a partnership between agriculture and society and between Europe and its farmers. The main aims of the *CAP* are to improve agricultural productivity, so that consumers have a stable supply of affordable food, and to ensure that EU farmers can make a reasonable living⁴. The UK is due to leave the EU by 2019. The Great Repeal Bill White Paper⁵ sets out how the EU legislation, such as the *CAP*, will be transposed into UK law and thereafter amended where necessary. Therefore it is likely that *CAP* will remain an important policy for the near future.

National Policy

- 3.3 The *Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012* requires statutory consultation with NE for preparation of Development Plans. NE advise on Agricultural Land Classification as part of this requirement.
- 3.4 The *Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2010 (as amended)* refers to the best and most versatile agricultural land in relation to planning applications which are for non-agricultural development proposals that are not consistent with an adopted local plan, and involve the loss of twenty hectares or more of the best and most versatile land. The land protection policy is relevant to all planning applications, including those on smaller areas, but it is for the planning authority to decide how significant the agricultural land issues are, and the need for field information. The planning authority may contact NE if it needs technical information or advice. NE is also responsible for Minerals and Waste Consultations where reclamation to agriculture is proposed.
- 3.5 *Agricultural Land (Removal of Surface Soil) Act 1953* places restrictions on the removal of surface soil from agricultural land without planning permission. When sites are developed with the benefit of a consent, topsoil is normally stripped off before construction commences, and any surplus removed for reuse elsewhere.

NPPF and PPG

- 3.6 The *Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)* and the *NPPF* (as detailed in the above sections) provide guidance on agricultural land development. The *PPG* strengthens the position of the *NPPF* by encouraging LPAs to use the ALC as a

⁴ The EU's common agricultural policy (CAP): https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/sites/agriculture/files/cap-overview/2016_en.pdf

⁵ Great Repeal Bill White Paper:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/604516/Great_repeal_bill_white_paper_accessible.pdf

method of assessing the quality of farmland to enable informed choices to be made about its future use within the planning system⁶.

⁶ Planning Policy Guidance; Paragraph: 026 Reference ID: 8-026-20140306, Revision date: 06 03 2014

4. LOCAL PLAN POLICY OPTIONS

- 4.1 As set out in the above sections, LPAs are required to give consideration to the best and most versatile agricultural land in plan preparations and in determining planning applications. To be able to do this, NE suggests that LPAs ensure that sufficient detailed site specific ALC survey data is available to inform decision making. However this is not currently possible in terms of differentiating between subgrades 3a and 3b as there is no existing data for the Basildon Borough.
- 4.2 ALC site surveys are costly and time consuming and given that agricultural land within Basildon Borough is considered to be grade 3 (a and b), and not grade 1 or 2 which are of a higher quality, it is not considered proportionate to carry out site surveys on the potential strategic site allocations.
- 4.3 Where landowners have local site information in relation to ALC then it should be utilised to ensure that poorer quality agricultural land is used in preference of higher quality agricultural land.
- 4.4 NE promote the advice contained with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) document: 'Construction Code of Practice for the Sustainable Use of Soils on Construction Sites'⁷ in relation to soils from agricultural land. The 'Code of Practice' encourages a number of methods to be incorporated by developers during construction works to better protect soil.
- 4.5 Through review of a number of recently adopted Local Plans across England, it seems to be best practice that a policy be included promoting the use of poor quality agricultural land in preference to that of higher quality. Local Plans do not seem to go over and above this requirement, most likely due to cost implications and the expectation that an evidence base is proportional and not exhaustive.

⁷ Defra: Construction Code of Practice for the Sustainable Use of Soils on Construction Sites, 2011: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/69308/pb13298-code-of-practice-090910.pdf

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Agricultural Land Classifications – Policy Context for the Local Plan

- 5.1 Paragraph 112 of the *NPPF* requires local planning authorities to consider the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land. Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be used in preference to that of higher quality.

Agricultural Land Classifications – Supporting Text for the Local Plan

- 5.2 Agricultural land is an important natural resource which is vital to sustainable development. The Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system was introduced in 1966 and it provides a framework for classifying land according to the extent to which its physical or chemical characteristics impose long-term limitations on agricultural use. Agricultural land is classified into grades 1 to 5 with grade 3 being subdivided into two further subgrades 3a and 3b. Agricultural land that is categorised as grades 1, 2 or 3a is considered to be the best and most versatile and grades 3b, 4 and 5 of a moderate to poor quality.
- 5.3 NE's *Agricultural Land Classification map Eastern Region* shows that there is a small area of land to the south within the Basildon Borough that is grade 4, whereas the rest of the land is Grade 3, however it does not provide information relating to the subgrades 3a and 3b.
- 5.4 NE promote the use of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)'s guidance titled 'Construction Code of Practice for the Sustainable Use of Soils on Construction Sites'. This standing advice should be regarded in accordance to development on agricultural land within the Borough.

Agricultural Land Classifications – Local Plan Policy

- 5.5 Through considerations of the *NPPF*, NE's promotion of the 'Code of Conduct' and other recently adopted Local Plans across England, the following policy wording is therefore suggested to be included within Basildon Borough Council's Local Plan:

"Development of the best and most versatile agricultural land shall be avoided, unless it is demonstrated to be the most sustainable choice from reasonable alternatives. Where it cannot be avoided, standing advice from Natural England shall be applied."

Conclusion

- 5.6 The above proposed policy and supporting text clearly outlines the approach Basildon Borough Council have deemed as robust and proportionate in relation to agricultural land classifications and the necessary preservation of agricultural land within the Basildon Borough.

APPENDIX 1

Description of the Grades and Subgrades of Agricultural Land⁸

Grade	Quality	Description
Grade 1	Excellent quality agricultural land	Land with no or very minor limitations to agricultural use. A very wide range of agricultural and horticultural crops can be grown and commonly includes top fruit, soft fruit, salad crops and winter harvested vegetables. Yields are high and less variable than on land of lower quality.
Grade 2	Very good quality agricultural land	Land with minor limitations which affect crop yield, cultivations or harvesting. A wide range of agricultural and horticultural crops can usually be grown but on some land in the grade there may be reduced flexibility due to difficulties with the production of the more demanding crops such as winter harvested vegetables and arable root crops. The level of yield is generally high but may be lower or more variable than Grade 1.
Grade 3a	Good quality agricultural land	Land capable of consistently producing moderate to high yields of a narrow range of arable crops, especially cereals, or moderate yields of a wide range of crops including cereals, grass, oilseed rape, potatoes, sugar beet and the less demanding horticultural crops.
Grade 3b	Moderate quality agricultural land	Land capable of producing moderate yields of a narrow range of crops, principally cereals and grass or lower yields of a wider range of crops or high yields of grass which can be grazed or harvested over most of the year.
Grade 4	Poor quality agricultural land	Land with severe limitations which significantly restrict the range of crops and/or level of yields. It is mainly suited to grass with occasional arable crops (e.g. cereals and forage crops) the yields of which are variable. In moist climates, yields of grass may be moderate to high but there may be difficulties in utilisation. The grade also includes very droughty arable land.
Grade 5	Very poor quality agricultural land	Land with very severe limitations which restrict use to permanent pasture or rough grazing, except for occasional pioneer forage crops.

⁸ Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 1988. *Agricultural Land Classification of England and Wales*: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402151656/http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/landmanage/land-use/documents/alc-guidelines-1988.pdf>