



**WARRINGTON**  
Borough Council

# **Warrington Borough Council**

## **Local Plan**

***Preferred Development Option***

**Regulation 18 Consultation**

**Standard Response Form**

**July 2017**

## 2: Questions

### Question 1

Do you have any comments to make about how we've worked out the need for new homes and employment land in Warrington over the next 20 years?

### Response:

Please see supporting letter of representation.

## **Question 2**

**Do you have any comments to make about how we've worked out the number of homes and amount of employment land that can be accommodated within Warrington's existing built up areas?**

### **Response:**

Please see supporting letter of representation.

### **Question 3**

**Have we appropriately worked out the amount of land to be released from the Green Belt, including the amount of land to be 'safeguarded'?**

#### **Response:**

Please see supporting letter of representation.

## **Question 4**

**Do you agree with the new Local Plan Objectives?**

### **Response:**

Please see supporting letter of representation.

## **Question 5**

**Do you have any comments to make about how we've assessed different 'Spatial Options' for Warrington's future development?**

### **Response:**

Please see supporting letter of representation.

## **Question 6**

**Do you have any comments to make about how we've assessed different options for the main development locations?**

### **Response:**

Please see supporting letter of representation.

## **Question 7**

**Do you agree with our Preferred Development Option for meeting Warrington's future development needs?**

### **Response:**

Please see supporting letter of representation.



## **Question 8**

**Do you have any comments to make about our Preferred Development Option for the City Centre?**

### **Response:**

We have no comments to make in relation to this question.

## **Question 9**

**Do you have any comments to make about our Preferred Development Option for the Wider Urban Area?**

### **Response:**

We have no comments to make in relation to this question.

## **Question 10**

**Do you have any comments to make about our Preferred Development Option for developing the Warrington Waterfront?**

### **Response:**

We have no comments to make in relation to this question.

### **Question 11**

**Do you have any comments to make about our Preferred Development Option for the Warrington Garden City Suburb?**

### **Response:**

We have no comments to make in relation to this question.

## **Question 12**

**Do you have any comments to make about our Preferred Development Option for the South Western Urban Extension?**

### **Response:**

We have no comments to make in relation to this question.

### **Question 13**

**Do you have any comments to make about our Preferred Development Option for development in the Outlying Settlements?**

#### **Response:**

Please see supporting letter of representation.

## Question 14

Do you agree with our approach to providing new employment land?

### Response:

We have no comments to make in relation to this question.

## **Question 15**

**Do you agree with our suggested approach for dealing with Gypsy and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople sites?**

### **Response:**

We have no comments to make in relation to this question.



## **Question 16**

**Do you agree with our suggested approach for dealing with Minerals and Waste?**

### **Response:**

We have no comments to make in relation to this question.

## **Question 17**

**Having read the Preferred Development Option Document, is there anything else you feel we should include within the Local Plan?**

### **Response:**

Please see supporting letter of representation.

Our ref: 39899-4502

29 September 2017

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Planning Policy & Programmes  
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Dear Sirs

**RE: Warrington Local Plan – Preferred Development Option (Regulation 18) Consultation  
Land to the North of Eaves Brow Road, Croft, Warrington**

Introduction

This representation has been prepared by Peter Brett Associates LLP ('PBA') on behalf of our client, Elterwater Investments, in response to the Warrington Local Plan Preferred Development Option ('PDO'), which was published for consultation by Warrington Borough Council ('the Council') in July 2017. We welcome this opportunity to respond to this consultation on behalf of our client, who controls land to the north of Eaves Brow Road in Croft, which is currently designated within the Green Belt.

At the outset, we would like to support the Council's acknowledgement within the PDO, of the need to release land from the Green Belt in order to meet the borough's housing needs. We would like to take this opportunity to reiterate the suitability of our client's site as a sustainable and logical location for residential development. Before we do so, we consider the appropriateness of the housing requirement identified within the PDO.

Meeting Warrington's Housing Needs

As part of the evidence base to support the emerging Local Plan, the Council has updated its Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) to take account of the most recent population and household projections.

The updated SHMA identifies that Warrington's Objectively Assessed Need ('OAN') is 955 dwellings per annum ('dpa') over the period from 2015 to 2037, based on the baseline economic growth scenario. The SHMA also sets out the requirement for 1,113 dpa to be delivered within the borough if the Council intends to plan for a higher level of employment growth, as proposed within the Cheshire and Warrington LEP's Devolution Bid. It is worth noting that planning for higher employment growth was the preferred approach indicated in the initial Warrington Local Plan Review consultation, on the basis of the LEP's Strategic Economic Plan.

The PDO identifies the Council's proposed housing target as 1,113 dpa, which equates to 24,220 dwellings over the plan period 2017 to 2037. In general, we fully endorse and support the Council's proactive and ambitious approach of planning for growth.



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The Council will be aware that since the PDO was published for consultation in July 2017, the Government has subsequently published its own consultation on measures to boost housing supply in England<sup>1</sup>. As part of the consultation, a proposed standardised methodology for calculating local housing needs was released, together with an indicative assessment of housing need for each local authority based on the proposed methodology. Although an indicative housing figure is not explicitly provided for Warrington Borough Council within the spreadsheet which was published alongside the consultation, we understand that the indicative housing need figure based on the proposed methodology is in fact 914 dpa for the borough.

Whilst we note the housing figure based upon the proposed standardised methodology is approximately 200 dpa lower than that which is currently proposed within the PDO, we wish to highlight that the proposed methodology figure is not intended to present an upper limit on the housing target. Indeed paragraph 46 of the Government's consultation document confirms:

*'Plan makers may put forward proposals that lead to a local housing need above that given by our proposed approach. This could be as a result of a strategic infrastructure project, or through increased employment (and hence housing) ambition as a result of a Local Economic Partnership investment strategy, a bespoke housing deal with Government or through delivering the modern Industrial Strategy. We want to make sure that we give proper support to those ambitious authorities who want to deliver more homes. To facilitate this we propose to amend planning guidance so that where a plan is based on an assessment of local housing need in excess of that which the standard method would provide, Planning Inspectors are advised to work on the assumption that the approach adopted is sound unless there are compelling reasons to indicate otherwise.'*

It is clear from the above that the Government's ambition is to support housing requirements which promote an agenda for economic growth and prosperity. We are pleased that the proposed housing target identified within the PDO accords with the spirit of the Government's approach.

The PDO states that in order to meet the development needs arising from its growth aspirations, the Council will need to release sufficient Green Belt land to provide for 8,791 homes. The PDO then goes on to identify areas for Green Belt release including the 'Garden City Suburb' (6,324 dwellings), South West Extension (1,831 dwellings) and 'Outlying Settlements' (1,190 dwellings). In order to adequately cater for housing needs in different markets and locations across the borough, we consider that more housing land should be earmarked in sustainable outlying settlements – including Croft – to ensure delivery in the early years of the plan period. The current focus of development on large strategic sites and urban extensions will result in a lag in housing delivery given the lead in times associated with securing planning permission, discharging conditions, and delivering the necessary supporting infrastructure. The Council therefore needs a broader portfolio of sites of varying sizes across the borough to ensure a continuous rolling five-year housing land supply.

Our client's site is located in Croft, which identified as an outlying settlement, which is currently inset from the Green Belt under Policy CC1 of the adopted Warrington Local Plan Core Strategy (LPCS). The PDO goes on to identify an 'indicative Green Belt capacity' of 60 new homes to be delivered within Croft. We consider that the settlement is able to accommodate a much higher proportion of housing growth relative to that currently proposed within the PDO. Croft is a sustainable settlement which benefits from a range of services and facilities including a primary school, village hall, several public houses and a general store. Croft is therefore capable of

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<sup>1</sup> 'Planning for the right homes in the right places: consultation proposals', DCLG, September 2017.



accommodating a significantly higher level of growth than is currently earmarked for this settlement.

The Council has published limited evidence to explain or support why the notional housing allocation for Croft has been constrained to only 60 units. The Settlement Profile document (July 2017) considers a range of growth options and begins to look at the current ability of Croft to support additional development. The proposed PDO ('Incremental Growth') only allows for up to 60 additional units, when it is clear from the Council's own assessment that a much higher level of growth (in the region of 350 dwellings) can be accommodated without the need to release Green Belt land that has been deemed to perform a 'strong' function in the Green Belt Assessment. Indeed, this higher level of growth could be accommodated on 'weak' and 'moderate' importance Green Belt land, including our client's site.

The Council's assessment also makes clear that a much higher level of growth in Croft could still constitute sustainable development without any adverse impacts, and that it is possible to deliver any necessary enhancements in terms of local facilities. We are therefore unclear as to why the Council has decided to proceed with the lowest level option of housing growth in Croft when there is clearly scope for a much greater number of new homes in this location. In addition, we note that there is a wide gap between the very low 60-unit 'Incremental Growth' option, and the much higher 350-unit 'Sustainable Settlement Extension' option. There are clearly a range of other alternative options that could be considered that will deliver a more appropriate level of housing growth in this sustainable location.

### Site Details

Our client's site comprises approximately 3 ha of undeveloped land adjacent to the north-east of Croft, which currently consists of heavily wooded land. As shown on the site location plan, which is enclosed alongside this correspondence, the site is bounded to the west and south by existing residential properties situated along Betsyfield Drive, Gerard Road and Eaves Brow Road, and by open land to the north and east. The land does not extend any further into the countryside than the existing settlement footprint, and when considering the wider context and surrounding residential uses we consider that residential development at the site would represent a logical 'rounding off' of the urban area of Croft.

There are now clearly defined and acknowledged 'exceptional circumstances' requiring the release of Green Belt land in order to meet Warrington's housing needs, and it is therefore appropriate to examine the release of our client's land at Eaves Brow Road for development, which is deliverable and has the potential to make a genuine contribution to meeting the borough's dwelling targets.

Whilst the site is currently designated as part of the Green Belt within the adopted LPCS, it is important to note that the site has previously been identified as land 'safeguarded' for future development. The site historically formed part of the North Cheshire Green Belt which was first formally adopted as part of the Cheshire Structure Plan 1977 (adopted 1979), but it was identified as an 'Area of Search' and safeguarded for development beyond 2001 within published versions of the Warrington Borough Local Plan (WBLP) until its abandonment in June 1999. Whilst the WBLP was not formally adopted, the Local Plan Inspector supported the designation of the site within an 'Area of Search', thereby excluding the land from the Green Belt.

Within the First Stage Deposit Draft version of the Warrington Unitary Development Plan (UDP) which was consulted on during summer 2001, the site continued to be identified as safeguarded land which was required for future development. Owing to a 'sea-change' in national policy at the time involving an aspiration to minimise greenfield housing development, the (now revoked) Regional Planning Guidance considered that Warrington was able to meet its housing needs



until at least 2016 without incurring into safeguarded land. Therefore, all safeguarded sites, including our client's land, were re-designated as Green Belt within the Revised Deposit Draft UDP, which was published for consultation during winter 2002 and subsequent versions of the (now 'saved') Warrington UDP. It is clear therefore that the principle of residential development at our client's site has previously been considered to be acceptable by the Council.

We acknowledge that Policy QE5 of the adopted LPCS identifies the land as a Local Wildlife Site ('Croft Grasslands'). This was due to the nature conservation value of the neutral grassland that dominated the site at the time of designation in 2000. During late 2016, PBA undertook an ecological review in order to understand the site's current ecological conditions. The Ecological Review, which is submitted alongside this representation, demonstrates that natural succession has all but eliminated the grassland interest for which the LWS was originally designated. The site is now dominated by young broadleaved woodland and remnant grassland is now limited to small areas along cleared pathways and small damp glades within the woodland.

The housing surrounding Eaves Brow Road was developed by our client and this site was intended to be brought forward as the next phase of the wider residential scheme. Development stalled as a result of the altered planning policy context described above and the land has been left open ever since. There is an existing vehicular access to the site directly from Eaves Brow Road which was constructed to service residential development at the site and the site is in also within easy walking distance to bus stops providing public transport services to the surrounding area. The land is therefore sustainable and deliverable.

### Green Belt Assessment

Our client's site forms part of Parcel CR4 within Green Belt Assessment, which is identified as making an overall '*moderate contribution*' to the Green Belt:

*'The parcel has been judged to make a moderate overall contribution as although it supports a strong-moderate degree of openness and the boundaries between the parcel and the settlement are non-durable, there are durable boundaries between the parcel and the countryside. Thus any development would be contained and would therefore not threaten the openness and permanence of the Green Belt.'*

We are pleased that the Green Belt Assessment concludes that the development of Parcel CR4 would not harm the openness and permanence of the Green Belt. It is important to note that that Parcel CR4 covers a much larger extent of land beyond our client's ownership. A Green Belt Assessment Addendum has been prepared following the original Warrington Local Plan Review Regulation 18 and call for sites consultation held in October 2016. The PDO states that the Council's consultant has undertaken individual assessments of all of the call for sites where they differ from the parcels originally assessed. The Addendum assesses our client's site (Ref: R18/115) and concludes that it makes a 'moderate' overall contribution to the Green Belt. We would strongly disagree with this conclusion. In the assessment the land only makes a strong contribution to one purpose, and moderate contribution to another. It makes a weak contribution to one purpose and no contribution to the remaining two proposes. Overall therefore we would question how the site can be judged to make a 'moderate' contribution, when it is quite clearly a 'weak' overall contribution taken in the round.

Our client's site is located immediately adjacent to the existing settlement of Croft, and its development would not lead to an incursion into the wider open countryside beyond the existing settlement boundary to the north and east. Croft cannot be defined as a 'large built up area' and so development at this site will not lead to 'unrestricted sprawl', nor is it an historic town. Development of our client's land would clearly not lead to any coalescence with other settlements. On that basis we consider that the land currently performs virtually no function in



terms of the five purposes of including land in the Green Belt listed under paragraph 80 of the National Planning Policy Framework, and is therefore an ideal candidate for release now for residential development.

### Summary

We full endorse Warrington Borough Council's proactive and ambitious approach of planning for growth, and support the Council's acknowledgement of the need to release Green Belt land within the borough in order to meet its housing needs.

In order to adequately cater for housing needs in different markets and locations across the borough, we consider that more housing land should be earmarked to sustainable outlying settlements including Croft.

Residential development at our client's site to the north of Eaves Brow Road in Croft represents an excellent and very logical opportunity to 'round off' the settlement and will contribute towards addressing the Borough's housing needs.

The Council has previously accepted the principle of additional residential development in this location, having safeguarded the land for future development. Given the Council's acknowledged need to need to release Green Belt land within the borough in order to meet its housing needs, we believe that our client's site should be considered favourably as a potential housing allocation. We can confirm that the site is suitable, available and deliverable for residential development.

We look forward to receiving confirmation of your receipt of this representation. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require any further clarification regarding any of the points made in our correspondence.

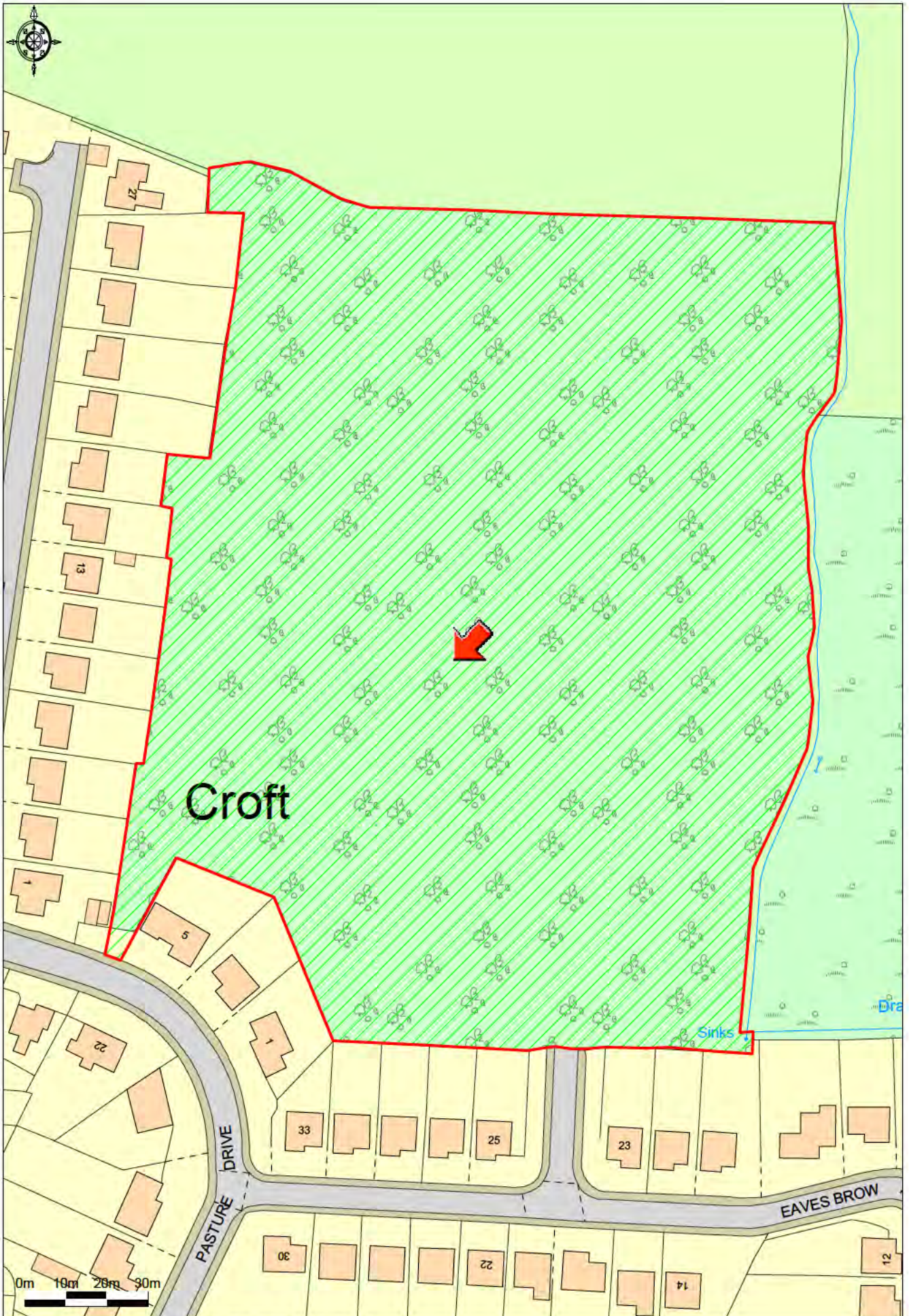
Yours sincerely



**Senior Associate**  
For and on behalf of  
**PETER BRETT ASSOCIATES LLP**

Encs:           Site Location Plan  
                  Ecological Review (Peter Brett Associates)

Land to the North of Eaves Brow Road, Croft, Warrington



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# Land to the North of Eaves Brow Road, Croft, Warrington

## Ecological Review

On behalf of **Elterwater Investments**

Project Ref: 39899 | Rev: AA | Date: December 2016



## Document Control Sheet

**Project Name:** Land to the North of Eaves Brow Road, Croft, Warrington

**Project Ref:** 39899

**Report Title:** Ecological Review

**Date:** 01 December 2016

	Name	Position	Signature	Date
<b>Prepared by:</b>	██████████	Senior Associate	SM	01.12.16
<b>Reviewed by:</b>	██████████	Environment Director	ER	02.12.16
<b>Approved by:</b>	██████████	Senior Associate	MG	02.12.16
<b>For and on behalf of Peter Brett Associates LLP</b>				

Revision	Date	Description	Prepared	Reviewed	Approved

This report has been prepared by Peter Brett Associates LLP ('PBA') on behalf of its client to whom this report is addressed ('Client') in connection with the project described in this report and takes into account the Client's particular instructions and requirements. This report was prepared in accordance with the professional services appointment under which PBA was appointed by its Client. This report is not intended for and should not be relied on by any third party (i.e. parties other than the Client). PBA accepts no duty or responsibility (including in negligence) to any party other than the Client and disclaims all liability of any nature whatsoever to any such party in respect of this report.

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# 1 Executive Summary

- 1.1.1 Elterwater Investments controls land to the north of Eaves Brow Road in Croft, and is submitting the site for residential development as part of the current 'call for sites' exercise taking place alongside a Regulation 18 consultation on the Warrington Local Plan Review. The majority of the land proposed for development is notified as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS) known as Croft Grasslands (**Figure 1**).
- 1.1.2 Peter Brett Associates LLP (PBA) was commissioned by Elterwater Investments to undertake a review in order to gather information in relation to current ecological conditions at the LWS, to assist in determining the viability of pursuing development proposals.
- 1.1.3 A desk study has been undertaken to review open source information and a field survey completed to determine the broad habitat types currently present at the site. The information gathered has supported an assessment as to whether the criteria resulting in notification of the LWS continue to be satisfied.
- 1.1.4 The desk study has confirmed that no sites with a statutory designation for nature conservation are associated with the site, or are likely to be effected by progressing a residential led scheme at the site.
- 1.1.5 Information held on the Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside (MAGIC) website confirmed the site is registered on the National Forest Inventory as being broadleaved woodland.
- 1.1.6 The citation for Croft Grasslands LWS confirms the site was notified in 2000 for its neutral grassland interest, but that the site at the time of its last monitoring visit had largely succeeded to woodland, and that remaining grassland was restricted in extent.
- 1.1.7 A recent field survey has confirmed the site is now dominated by broadleaved woodland, comprised primarily of young and semi-mature trees. As such the site no longer supports the neutral grassland interest for which it was notified.
- 1.1.8 Bringing forward a residential scheme that is proportionate in scale and setting, opens up the opportunity to deliver ecological enhancement. Grassland restoration in those areas, primarily in the east of the site, where there is remnant grassland; beneficial management of woodland at the site boundaries, particularly in the north of site; and measures to improve the watercourse and its adjacent habitats, have the potential jointly to enhance the intrinsic ecological value of the site and its connectivity with the wider landscape.
- 1.1.9 An effective approach would need to be informed by further botanical (and others) surveys. However, the ecological history of the site and the nature of its current features are such that habitat restoration and management could be expected to be effective in delivering ecological gain. This could comprise a key focus for a landscape strategy delivered as an inherent component of any proposals for the future development of the site.

## 2 Introduction

### 2.1 Overview

- 2.1.1 Elterwater Investments controls land to the north of Eaves Brow Road in Croft, and is submitting the site for residential development as part of the current 'call for sites' exercise taking place alongside a Regulation 18 consultation on the Warrington Local Plan Review. The majority of the land proposed for development is notified as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS) known as Croft Grasslands (**Figure 1**), hereafter referred to as 'the site' in this report.
- 2.1.2 Peter Brett Associates LLP (PBA) was commissioned by Elterwater Investments to undertake a review in order to gather information in relation to the current ecological conditions, and in particular to determine the habitats that now dominate the site.
- 2.1.3 This report sets out the findings of the review in order to support a preliminary assessment of the current condition of the site, and in particular whether it continues to satisfy the criteria for which the LWS was notified.

### 2.2 Background

#### Site Location

- 2.2.1 Croft Grasslands LWS is located at grid reference SJ635934, to the north of Eaves Brow Road in Croft, approximately 6km to the north-east of Warrington.
- 2.2.2 Residential properties and their gardens lie at the western and southern boundary of the site. Fields that are in arable production lie to the north.

#### Proposed Development

- 2.2.3 Proposals for the site have yet to be developed, although the opportunity to bring forward a residential led scheme are currently being explored. The land is being submitted to the current 'call for sites' exercise being undertaken by Warrington Borough Council as part of the Local Plan Review process.

### 2.3 Report Purpose

- 2.3.1 The purpose of this report is to describe the habitats currently present at the site in order to determine whether the criteria resulting in its notification as a LWS continue to be satisfied; and hence whether a future residential led scheme could be viable, when considering the ecological sensitivities of the site.

### 2.4 Report Objectives

- 2.4.1 The objectives of this report are therefore to:
- Describe the methods used to complete a desk study and field survey;
  - Set out the findings of the desk study and field survey;
  - Assess whether Croft Grasslands LWS continues to meet the criteria for which it was notified; and
  - Present summary measures with the potential to improve the condition of the LWS in line with its reasons for notification and/or to enhance ecological value.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Overview

- 3.1.1 This section confirms the approach to the desk study and field survey that support the assessment as to whether Croft Grassland LWS continues to satisfy the criteria for which it is notified.

### 3.2 Study Area

- 3.2.1 For the purposes of the field survey the study area comprised Croft Grassland LWS and the habitats immediately adjacent to its boundaries. The desk study extended to 2km from the site boundary to provide ecological context, and in particular to determine the nature and location of any priority habitats in the wider landscape.

### 3.3 Desk Study

- 3.3.1 A desk-based assessment of existing ecological information relevant to the site and its surroundings was undertaken. This involves a review of:
- Statutory designated nature conservation site information held on the Multi-Agency Geographic Information for the Countryside (MAGIC) website;
  - Records of European Protected Species licences granted in relation to areas within 1 km of the site held on MAGIC;
  - Aerial photography and habitat layers (MAGIC website) of the site and the surrounding area;
  - Citation for Croft Grasslands LWS; and
  - Criteria for Local Wildlife Site selection for the Cheshire region (Cheshire Wildlife Trust and partners 2014)

### 3.4 Site Survey

- 3.4.1 A walkover survey of the site was undertaken on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2016 by Paul Howden-Leach MCIEEM. The survey was based on the JNCC (2010) Phase 1 Habitat Survey Guidelines. During the survey, the broad habitat types present were mapped with notes made on dominant or characteristic flora.
- 3.4.2 Particular attention was paid to the remaining grassland areas in order to record the grass and forb species present.

### 3.5 Limitations

- 3.5.1 The survey was not specified to be a detailed botanical assessment given the time of year. The purpose of the survey was to determine the broad habitat types currently present within the site and to note the dominant species. The habitats present were readily evident and the surveyor was able to characterise and map these reliably. As such there was no limitation to the survey.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Overview

- 4.1.1 This section summarises the results of the desk study and field surveys, with further detail provided in **Appendix A** (Croft Grasslands LWS Citation) and **Appendix B** (Site Photographs).

### 4.2 Desk Study

#### Designated Sites and Impact Risk Zones

- 4.2.1 A review of the statutory designated nature conservation site information held on the MAGIC website confirms that neither the site or any areas within 2km of its boundary are subject to a statutory designation.
- 4.2.2 The data held on the MAGIC website confirms the site falls within the Impact Risk Zones (IRZ) relating to Highfield Moss Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) c. 3km to the north-west and Risley Moss SSSI c 3km km to the south-west. Natural England has identified the types of development that may have adverse effects on the two SSSIs; in neither case is rural housing identified as a concern.

#### European Protected Licences

- 4.2.3 The MAGIC website confirms that there is one site within 2km of the site for which a European Protected Species licence has been approved by Natural England in the last three years. This was a great crested newt licence to authorise works at a location c. 1km to the south of the site, and south of the M62 motorway. The licence expired in July 2014.

#### Aerial Photography and Habitat Layers

- 4.2.4 A review of aerial photography indicates site to be a woodland located in a predominantly agricultural landscape. This comprises both arable and pasture fields, with varied boundary vegetation that include hedgerows and occasional standard trees.
- 4.2.5 The habitat layers on the MAGIC website also records the site as being woodland. It also confirms the site to have been entered on the National Forest Inventory in 2014 as being deciduous broadleaved woodland.

#### Citation for Croft Grasslands LWS

- 4.2.6 The citation for Croft Grassland LWS is included in **Appendix A**. This confirms the site was first notified on 5 September 2000, and that there was a revision in 2010 (date not specified). The criteria for selection as a Local Wildlife Site is stated to be H7 – Neutral Grassland.
- 4.2.7 The citation confirms the date of the last survey was in July 2010, and that since the previous survey in 2003 the process of succession had continued such that the site had a woodland character, with oak, ash and hawthorn being the predominant species.
- 4.2.8 The continued presence of small areas of grassland is recorded; these were along a cleared path; in small damp glades; and in places where householders have extended their gardens into the site along the western boundary. These remnant areas of grassland were, at the time of the 2010 survey, supporting some species of interest including orchids, meadow vetching, black knapweed and common birdsfoot trefoil.



## Criteria for Selection of Local Wildlife Sites in Cheshire

- 4.2.9 Cheshire Wildlife Trust and its partners clarified the selection criteria for Local Wildlife Sites for the Cheshire region in 2012; these were subsequently updated in 2014. In its introduction the document setting out the selection criteria confirms Local Wildlife Sites are varied in their size and nature but all have a role to play in conserving the UK's natural heritage, providing refuges in their own right as well as acting as stepping stones, buffers and corridors to protect wildlife.
- 4.2.10 Croft Grassland LWS was selected in 2000 because, at the time, it satisfied the criteria set out for H7 – Neutral Grassland.
- 4.2.11 H7 grasslands includes NVC grasslands types MG4, MG5 and MG8; and to qualify as a LWS must also meet a threshold relating to species composition, requiring a minimum number of indicator species (set out in appendices to the document confirming the selection criteria) of:
- four 'occasional' indicator species at least three of which are listed as neutral grassland indicators; or
  - four 'rare' neutral grassland indicators.

## 4.3 Field Survey

- 4.3.1 The habitats present on site, as recorded during the site survey on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2016, are described below. Their location and distribution is confirmed in **Figure 1**; site photographs are in **Appendix B**.

### Woodland

- 4.3.2 The site was dominated by young broad leaved woodland, the majority of which did not appear to have been subject to any formal management. Many of the trees were consequently close together resulting in a sparse ground flora. The tree canopy was dominated by ash and oak although other species including sycamore, willow and hawthorn were also present.
- 4.3.3 The woodland was dominated by young and semi mature trees, However, there were a number of mature trees within the site. These were located on a raised embankment running east-west near the centre of the site, likely to be a former hedge line. In addition, trees associated with stream to the east of the site appeared to be more mature, with many showing evidence of having been coppiced and/or pollarded in the past.

### Scrub

- 4.3.4 There are power lines over the east of the site. The area beneath appeared to have been subject to management and bramble dominated scrub had established.
- 4.3.5 At the southern and western boundaries, adjacent to the neighbouring gardens and houses, the woodland canopy extended up to the garden boundaries. The shrub layer was denser in this area of the site and supported native and non-native species including bramble, elder, holly, hawthorn, raspberry, hazel, cotoneaster (possible garden escape), snowberry, honeysuckle and dog rose. The ground layer included: the grasses, cocksfoot and Yorkshire fog; ruderal species, nettle and rosebay willowherb; garden escapes, monbretia, garden privet and geranium species; as well as more typical woodland flora species including pendulus sedge, male fern and common ivy.

### Grassland

- 4.3.6 The site no longer included any substantive areas of grassland. At the woodland edge grass species were limited to cocksfoot, Yorkshire fog and common bent (along the stream). A sedge was also present in the sward; this was thought to be carnation sedge, although due to the time of year this could not be confirmed.
- 4.3.7 Anecdotal evidence provided to the surveyor by a local resident indicated orchids were present within the site. However, given the time of year that the survey was undertaken no evidence of orchid was found, or expected to be found.

### Open Water

- 4.3.8 A stream flowed north to south along the eastern boundary of the LWS. This appeared to be very disturbed; with numerous worn areas along the banks and rope swings attached to several trees that overhung the stream.

### Domestic Gardens

- 4.3.9 Occupants of numbers 19 and 21 Betsyfield Drive have created an informal extension to their gardens at the western boundary of the site which encroach into the woodland by c. 20 x 15m.

## 5 Interpretation

### 5.1 Overview

- 5.1.1 The desk study and field survey findings indicate the ecological conditions that prevailed within the site in the past, and have confirmed the nature and condition of the habitats now present.
- 5.1.2 Based on the findings of the desk and field studies, this section makes an assessment of the current value of the LWS having regard to the reasons for its original selection.

### 5.2 Current Habitat Conditions

- 5.2.1 Croft Grassland LWS was selected and added to the suite of Local Wildlife Sites on the basis of the nature conservation value of the neutral grassland that dominated the site at the time of designation in 2000.
- 5.2.2 The process of natural succession to broadleaved woodland has been allowed to continue with only minimal, incidental management intervention. The grassland interest has consequently been in decline since at least 2000.
- 5.2.3 The LWS is now dominated by young broadleaved woodland. This is evidenced by the findings of the recent survey and the listing of the site on the National Forest Inventory in 2014.
- 5.2.4 Remnant grassland is now limited to small areas at the edge of cleared pathways and along the wayleave. The findings of the survey have confirmed that Croft Grassland now comprises a young broadleaved woodland and no longer meets the LWS selection criteria in relation to H7 – neutral grassland.

### 5.3 Future Habitat Conditions

- 5.3.1 If the site remains largely unmanaged, the process of natural succession will continue and the woodland, both in terms of its structure and species composition, will mature. The canopy will close, further limiting the light reaching the woodland floor, such that the remnant grassland in the small glades that currently remain, will continue to decline and ultimately be lost.
- 5.3.2 The nature and condition of the habitats within the LWS are entirely dependent on how the site is managed in the future.
- 5.3.3 This review has determined that natural succession has all but eliminated the grassland interest for which the LWS was designed. However, grassland has been the dominant habitat within the LWS up until the recent past and some remnant grassland remains. This opens up the opportunity to potentially retrieve the position through a programme of habitat restoration, alongside a residential scheme. This would yield numerous benefits in terms of providing much needed new housing, while restoring some of the grassland interest that has been lost over time.
- 5.3.4 Woodland has established across the LWS as there has been no driver for sustaining a programme of management. As long as the site continues to have no function, that will remain the case. Bringing forward a residential scheme that is proportionate in scale and setting, opens up the opportunity to deliver grassland restoration and effective woodland management. This could comprise a key focus for a landscape strategy delivered as an inherent component of any proposals for the future development of the site.

## **5.4 Next Steps**

- 5.4.1 The outcome of the desk and field studies set out in this report are adequate to establish the principles set out above. However, further habitat and species specific surveys, undertaken at the optimal time of year, will be required to gather sufficient information to establish (i) ecological sensitivities associated with the woodland that now dominates the site; and (ii) to inform development of an appropriate and acceptable scheme for the site.

## 6 Conclusion

- 6.1.1 The desk study and field survey have jointly established the following in relation to Croft Grasslands LWS:
- There are no sites with a statutory designation for nature conservation within 2km of the LWS;
  - The LWS lies within the Impact Risk Zones for the SSSIs that lie 3km to the north-west and to the south-east. Natural England do not identify development that brings forward rural housing as likely to have adverse effects on these SSSIs;
  - There is one record of a European Protected Species licence having been granted for a site within 1km of the LWS. This related to a great crested newt mitigation scheme and the licence expired in 2014;
  - A review of aerial photography indicated the site is now dominated by woodland. The site appears on the National Forest Inventory as broadleaved woodland.
  - The citation for Croft Grasslands LWS confirms it was originally notified in 2000 for its neutral grassland interest, but it has now succeeded to young woodland.
  - Review of the selection criteria for Local Wildlife Sites in Cheshire set out the qualifying criteria for H7 – Neutral Grassland which include the presence of certain key grassland indicator species. A detailed botanical survey has not taken place, but its succession to woodland is such that the site can no longer be regarded as a key grassland site. On this basis the current designation cannot be sustained.
  - A recent field survey has confirmed that the site is now dominated by young/semi-mature broadleaved woodland, with small areas of remnant grassland restricted to the edge of paths and along the wayleave.
- 6.1.2 The grassland for which the site was notified has been lost as the site has not been subject to management, allowing succession to woodland. Grassland interest could be re-established through appropriate management in some areas. However, succession to woodland will have enriched the soils such that recovery of substantial areas of grassland that supports key grassland indicator species is unlikely to be possible.
- 6.1.3 Bringing forward a residential scheme that is proportionate in scale and setting, opens up the opportunity to deliver ecological enhancement. Grassland restoration in those areas, primarily in the east of the site, where there is remnant grassland; beneficial management of woodland at the site boundaries, particularly in the north of site; and measures to improve the watercourse and its adjacent habitats, have the potential jointly to enhance the intrinsic ecological value of the site and its connectivity with the wider landscape.
- 6.1.4 An effective approach would need to be informed by further botanical (and others) surveys. However, the ecological history of the site and the nature of its current features are such that habitat restoration and management could be expected to be effective in delivering ecological gain. This could comprise a key focus for a landscape strategy delivered as an inherent component of any proposals for the future development of the site.



## 7 References

JNCC, (2010), Handbook for Phase 1 habitat survey - a technique for environmental audit, ISBN 086139 636 7

Cheshire Wildlife Trust and Partners, (2014) Local Wildlife Site Selection Criteria for the Cheshire region.

## Figure 1

Local Wildlife Site (LWS) known as Croft Grasslands

	Croft Grasslands LWS
	Broad-leaved woodland
	Gardens
	Scrub



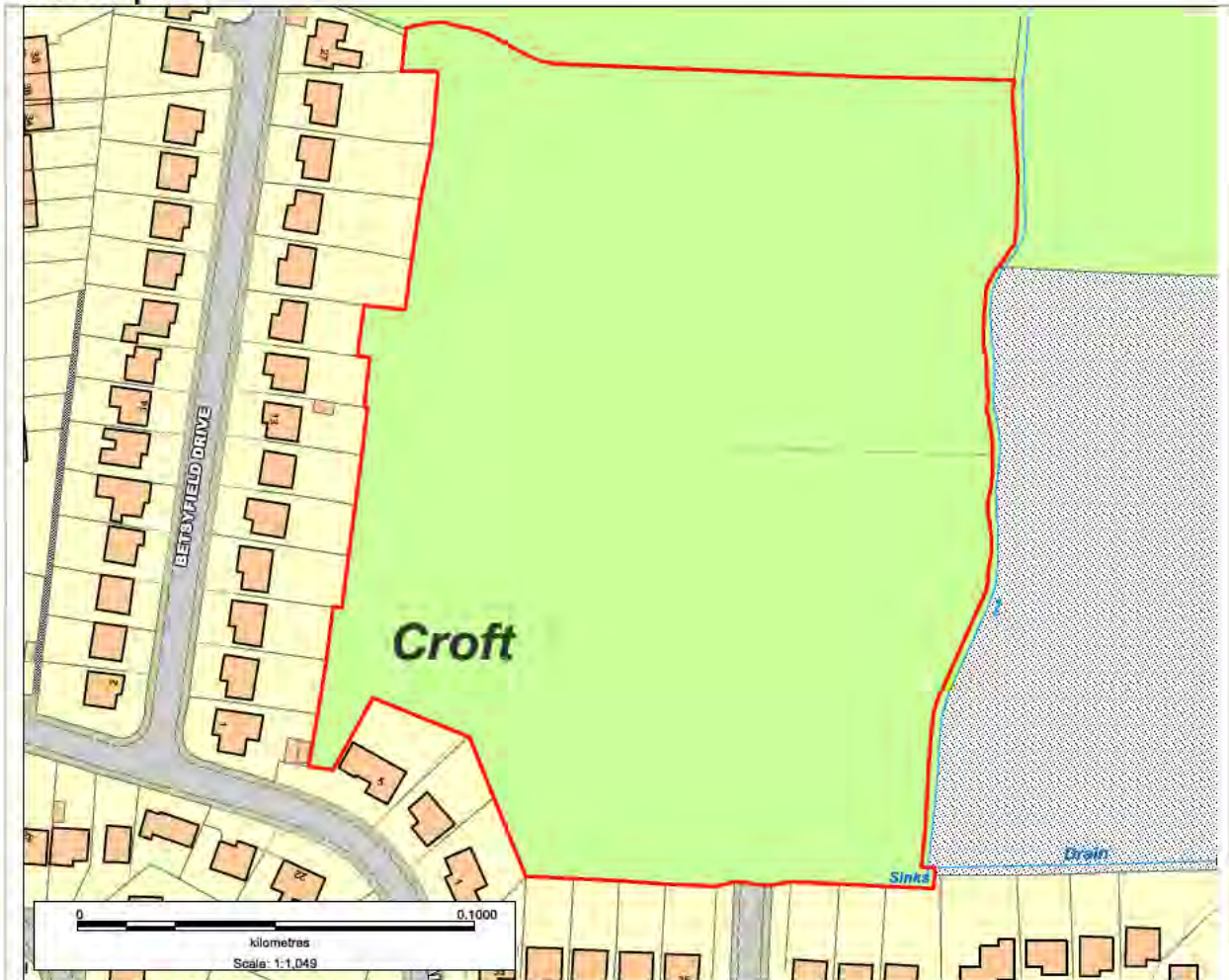


## **Appendix A Croft Grassland LWS Citation**

Site name: Croft Grasslands

Site code: WA006

Site map:



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Ordnance Survey 100022848.

<b>Site name:</b> Croft Grasslands	<b>Site code:</b> WA006
<b>Ward:</b> Culcheth, Glazebury and Croft	<b>Grid reference:</b> SJ635934
<b>Area:</b> 3.0 ha	<b>Ownership:</b> Private
<b>Date of Notification:</b> 05/09/2000	
<b>Date of Revision:</b> 2010	
<b>Status:</b> Local Wildlife Site	

**Description:**

Since the last survey in 2003, the process of succession has continued so that the site now has the general character of a woodland. Oak, Ash and Hawthorn predominate.

A ride was cleared along the path which now has scrub and saplings and is a good area for butterflies. On the Western edge, one or two house-holders have created rough lawns within the site boundary.

There are small patches of herb-rich damp grassland (albeit with some scrub encroachment) and extensive areas dominated by Hawthorn scrub. The site still supports numerous grassland species such as orchids, meadow vetching, blacknapweed and common birdsfoot trefoil.

There are good numbers of woodland birds such as bullfinch, jay and great spotted woodpecker which visit adjacent gardens. Willow tit has reportedly been identified on site.

<b>Criteria for selection:</b>	H7 – Neutral Grassland
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<b>Most recent survey:</b>	July 2010
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<b>Inventories:</b>	
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## Appendix B Site Photographs



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4