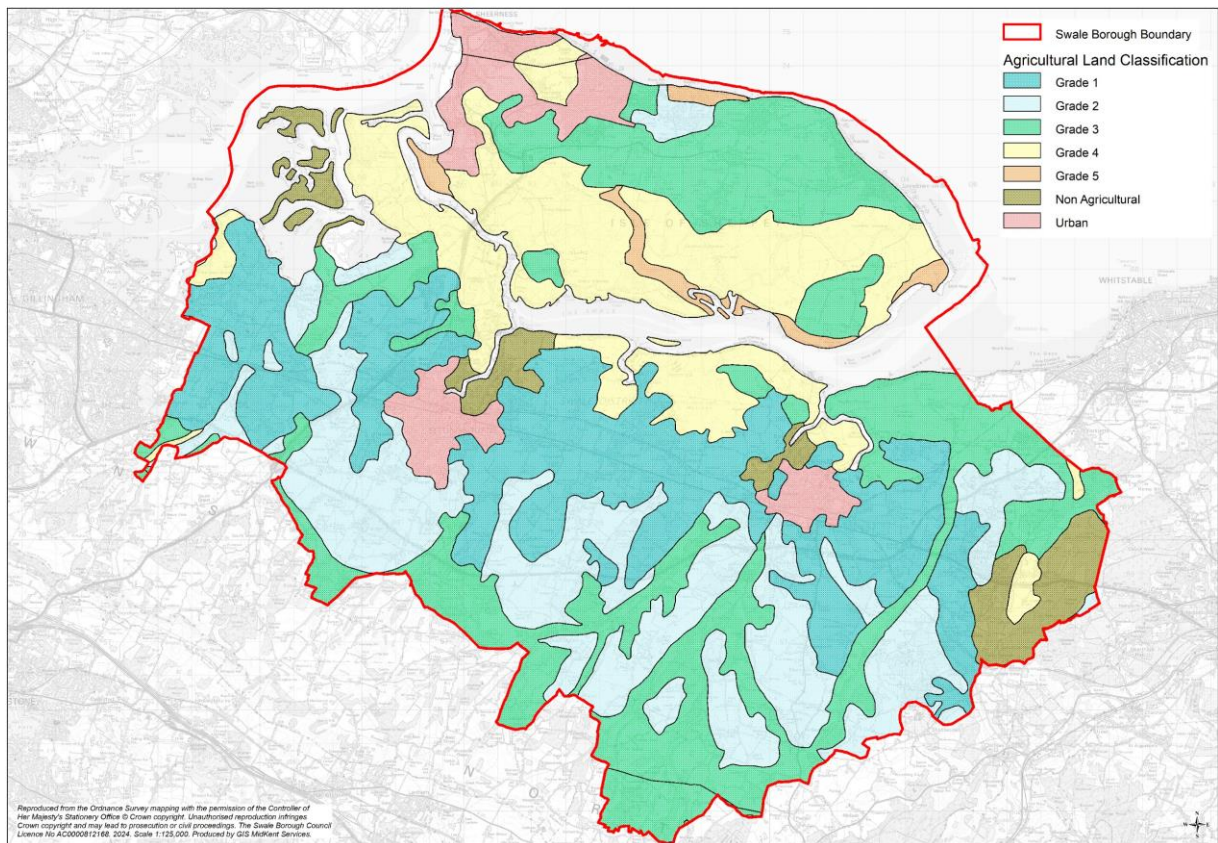


Agricultural Land Report - Stage 1: Baseline Information

September 2024



Agricultural Land Report - Stage 1: Baseline Information (September 2024)

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Contents

1 Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this report is to address national planning policy on agricultural land to inform Local Plan preparation with regard to this topic. The Agricultural Land Report is split into two stages:

- Stage 1: Baseline Information; and
- Stage 2: Site Analysis.

1.2 This report is Stage 1 which looks at the overall baseline information, and sets out the methodology which will be used for Stage 2. Stage 2 will be prepared at a later date, once sites have been selected for allocation in the Local Plan. Stage 2 will look at the amount of agricultural land which may be lost as a result of site allocations.

1.3 This document firstly looks at the policy context, followed by the definition of high quality agricultural land. The methodology to apply to both stages is then set out, followed by the results of Stage 1, and the conclusions of Stage 1.

2 Policy Context

2 Policy Context

2.1 The current national policy is the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (2023), but the Government is currently consulting on a new NPPF (2024) which is anticipated to be published by the end of 20245. This section considers both documents.

2.2 The requirement to consider agricultural land quality comes from paragraph 181 of the NPPF (2023) which states that:

"Plans should: distinguish between the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites; allocate land with the least environmental or amenity value, where consistent with other policies in this framework."

2.3 Agricultural land quality is one element of environmental value. Swale has a large amount of high value agricultural land, and so it is necessary to understand where the highest value land is, so that the approach set out in paragraph 1841 of the NPPF can be followed.

2.4 Footnote 62 of paragraph 181 of the NPPF (2023) provides further detail on agricultural land, stating:

"Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality. The availability of agricultural land used for food production should be considered, alongside the other policies in this framework, when deciding what sites are most appropriate for development."

2.5 Paragraph 181 of the existing NPPF (2023) is not proposed to be changed in the new NPPF (2024). However, the proposed new NPPF (2024) proposes deleting the second sentence of the footnote (proposed footnote 63). Assuming the new NPPF is published as currently proposed, this footnote would be changed from the 2023 version to simply read:

"Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality."

3 What is high quality agricultural land?

3.1 There are five grades of agricultural land (grades 1-5), plus 'non-agricultural' and 'urban'. The highest grades, known as '**best and most versatile agricultural land**' (BMV) are Grades 1, 2 and 3a, with Grade 1 being the highest quality. Grade 3 is the only grade sub-divided into two (a and b). Grade 3a is best and most versatile, whereas Grade 3b is not.

4 Methodology

4.1 Firstly, GIS mapping data has been reviewed to establish the amount of each agricultural land grade there is in the Borough. Defra data based on the pre-1988 Agricultural Classification has been used, as this is the most up-to-date information available on a Borough-wide basis. The pre-1988 data does not distinguish between grades 3a and 3b, so where grade 3 is listed, this includes both grades 3a and 3b without carrying out detailed soil surveys.

4.2 Following the review of the GIS data, a review of other documents informing the Local Plan has then been conducted. This covers both the Sustainability Appraisal (SA), and the Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA). The key points raised from both of these is brought together in this Stage 1 report.

4.3 Stage 2 will provide an assessment of the sites selected for allocation. The assessment of site allocations will look at the amount of best and most versatile land on each proposed site allocation likely to be lost, and consider this against the overall amount of best and most versatile land in the Borough.

5 Results - Stage 1: Baseline Information

GIS Data Review

5.1 GIS showing the pre-1988 Agricultural Land Classification has been used to measure how much of each agricultural land grade is present in the Borough. The results of this are shown below in Table 1. A map showing the different grades and their location is provided in Appendix 1.

Agricultural Land Grade	Area of land (rounded to nearest whole hectare)	% of the Borough
Grade 1	8,255	22.3
Grade 2	7,724	20.9
Grade 3	10,218	27.6
Grade 4	6,509	17.6
Grade 5	552	1.5
Urban	1,747	4.7
Non-agricultural	1,999	5.4
Total	37,005	100%

Table 1 Agricultural Land Grades across Swale Borough

5.2 As can be seen from Table 1 above, a large part of the Borough is BMV land. If you assume that all grade 3 land is grade 3a (as it is not possible to distinguish between grades 3a and 3b without performing detailed soil surveys), this equates to 70.8% being best and most versatile land.

Sustainability Appraisal

5.3 The Scoping Report for the Swale Borough Local Plan Sustainability Appraisal (Dec, 2018) https://services.swale.gov.uk/assets/Planning_Policy_2019/SCI_Documents_Sept_2024/Aecom_Scoping_Report_for_SBLP_SA_July2018.pdf, includes a map of the Borough, and its grades, which is consistent with that provided at **Appendix 1** of this report. As can be seen from the map at **Appendix 1**, the highest grade agricultural land is focussed around the Borough's main settlements, notably around Sittingbourne and Faversham. On this basis, the SA suggests that "It is considered likely therefore that a degree of future development within the Borough will be directed towards areas of the best and most versatile land."

5.4 The Scoping Report also includes a review of the current baseline which finds that:

"There is considerable diversity of agricultural land quality within the Borough, Areas of Grades 1 to 5 are all present as well as land classified as 'non-agricultural' and as 'urban'. A band of Grade 1 and 2 runs through the centre of the Borough forming the spine of the Fruit Belt, punctuated by the urban areas of Sittingbourne and Faversham. To the south of this, as the Fruit Belt gives way to the Kent Downs AONB, and the land transitions to Grade 3.

5 Results - Stage 1: Baseline Information

5.5 Land immediately to the north of the Fruit Belt is generally of poorer quality. A large strip of land either side of the Swale estuary on both the mainland and the Isle of Sheppey is Grade 3 and there are areas of Grade 5 around some coastal areas of Sheppey along with urban and non-agricultural land around Sheerness. The north east of the Island sees a return to better quality land with an area of Grade 3 and a pocket of Grade 2 land occupying much of the north east."

5.6 It is apparent that the Council needs to allocate sites for development which includes BMV land, as at a high level, to the south of the central band of BMV land is the Kent Downs National Landscape (formerly Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), and to the north the land is largely affected by flooding. To allocate sites in areas with the lowest grade agricultural land, would generally mean allocating sites away from existing settlements, in remote areas of the countryside, or in areas with other significant constraints such as flooding or National Landscape.

5.7 The SA has an objective specifically on 'land', which is to be used to assess the Local Plan:

"Promote the efficient and sustainable use of natural resources, including supporting development which avoids the best and most versatile agricultural land and development which makes effective use of previously developed land."

5.8 The strategic growth options and potential sites for allocation, as well as draft policies will all be assessed through the SA against this objective.

Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment

5.9 Agricultural land grades are considered as part of site assessments in the HELAA. GIS has been used to establish how much of each site is high grade agricultural land, and what grade that is. Whilst not used as a sole reason to reject a site, the specific grade of each HELAA site is taken into account.

5.10 The HELAA is carried out in stages, stage 1 eliminating sites with significant constraints, such as: being remote from settlements (more than 400m away), already having planning permission, or having severe constraints such as flood zone 3b occupying most of the site. Sites remaining after such constraints have been taken into account are then taken forward to stage 2 for further consideration.

5.11 At the time this report was prepared, 186 sites had been taken forward to stage 2 of the HELAA, only 26 of the 186 HELAA sites considered at stage 2 including no BMV land, whereas 110 of the sites included grade 1 agricultural land, 46 sites included grade 2, and 37 sites included grade 3. This demonstrates the lack of options for site allocations outside of areas of BMV land.

6 Conclusions – Stage 1: Baseline Information

6.1 The results of the review of baseline information as set out above show that it is difficult to avoid loss of BMV land (grades 1-3a) in the Borough when allocating sites for development without disregarding other important constraints.

6.2 Whilst the current NPPF (2023) makes it clear that consideration must be given to higher grade agricultural land, it also indicates that this should be considered alongside other policies in the framework when assessing where to allocate land for development. In Swale's case, other important policies include those directing development away from areas at risk of flooding, and areas of National Landscape. The proposed new NPPF (2024) does not change this.

6.3 Swale has large areas of BMV land, mostly located around the Borough's main towns. Site allocations for development will inevitably sterilise some of this land, however, opportunities presented from developing sites such as meeting housing need (as per the NPPF definition) and promoting economic growth, may well be considered to outweigh the impact on BMV land. Opportunities to minimise the loss of BMV land will need to be taken where possible, by maximising development on brownfield land, and on lower grade agricultural land.

Appendix 1: Agricultural Land Classification across Swale

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