Agricultural Land in Castle Point

June 2025

Castle Point
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Contents

Executive Summary

This document is a background evidence study to the emerging Castle Point Plan, specifically Policy ENV6 'Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land'. It recommends that Grade 3 Agricultural land is given policy protection within the Castle Point Plan.

The national Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system grades quality from 1 to 5, with grade 3 being subdivided into two further subgrades 3a and 3b. It is based on the land's *potential* for agricultural use and applies regardless of whether land is actively farmed at the moment.

The ALC was developed in the twentieth century for the purpose of preserving long-term food security, originally motivated by both the threat and reality of war in the mid twentieth century and now added further weight by the threat of climate change. Agricultural land that is categorised as grades 1, 2 or 3a is considered to be the best and most versatile (BMV) and grades 3b, 4 and 5 of a moderate to poor quality.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that planning policies and decisions should recognise the benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and that '*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 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2022 identifies risks to food production and food security from predicted climate change. The UK government's 25 Year Environment Plan sets out the plan to improve the health of the environment by using nature resources more sustainably and efficiently, including protecting the best agricultural land.

Local planning authorities are required to give consideration to the best and most versatile agricultural land in plan preparations and in determining planning applications. Just over 21% of Castle Point's land area remains in agricultural use, which is a declining proportion and below national and regional proportions. Grade 3 is the predominant agricultural grade in Castle Point, although there are also significant areas that are grade 4. Major grade 3 areas to which Policy ENV6 would apply include: North-West Thundersley, Land around Daws Heath, West Canvey, Land east of Benfleet, Benfleet Downs and central corridor to Thundersley

The Precautionary principle is legally enshrined in the Environment Act 2021, as well as international agreements such as the Rio Declaration that the UK has committed to. In line with the precautionary principle, there will be an assumption that areas classified as grade 3 on national mapping fall into the category of best and most versatile agricultural land, unless local site-specific surveys, that have been carried out in accordance with Natural England /DEFRA guidance, demonstrate otherwise.

Developers will be expected to demonstrate the sustainable use of soils during the construction phase in accordance with Natural England guidance and DEFRA code of practice.

1. Introduction

1.1 Role and Purpose of this Document

1.1 This document is a background evidence study to the emerging Castle Point Plan, specifically Policy ENV6 ‘Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land’.

1.2 The Castle Point Plan is a long-term plan which sets out a positive vision for the area and identifies where and how development should take place up to 2043. It sets out allocations and policies for the delivery of development across Castle Point. It includes policies around what kind of development can go where to ensure the right types of homes, space for businesses and the infrastructure, such as schools and health facilities, are provided to support our growing population. It also contains policies to safeguard and enhance the environment, enable climate change mitigation and adaption, and secure high-quality design.

1.3 Agricultural land and 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. Development can therefore have direct adverse effects. The sustainable use of land requires that a sufficient quantity of greenfield soils be retained for present and future needs.

1.4 In light of the above it is important to assess how the best and most versatile agricultural land in Castle Point can be safeguarded.

2. Agricultural Land and it's Classification

2.1 History of Protecting Agricultural Land in the UK

2.1 The ALC provides a strategic framework for classifying land according to the extent to which its physical or chemical characteristics impose long-term limitations on agricultural use.

2.2 The origins of Agricultural Land Classification in the UK stemmed from the Dudley Stamp (LSE) Land Utilisation Survey initiated in 1933 and carried out by a vast array of volunteers including thousands of school children. It had the aim of managing land and food production more efficiently. The survey came into its own in wartime, when it was used for agricultural planning at a time when food security became a significant issue. Post war the survey maps were used in urban planning.

2.3 Following WW2 and against the backdrop of a re-expanding population when international political and trade relations were being redrawn, the UK sought to increase self-sufficiency of food production to avoid the supply problems experienced during the war.

2.4 In 1962, at a time of urban growth the Agricultural Land Service conference "Classification of Agricultural Land in Britain" considered the need to protect the land with the greatest value for crop production to ensure Britain's long-term food security in the event of ever again facing future threats like that of WW2.

2.5 The Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system was finally introduced in 1966. The whole of England and Wales was mapped from reconnaissance field surveys, using five grades with no sub-divisions. In 1976, grade 3 was sub-divided. In 1988, the system was further reviewed, and these guidelines remain in current use today.

2.2 The Current Threat to Agricultural Land in the UK

2.6 According to research by the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) there's been a hundred-fold increase in our best farmland lost to development in just over a decade. The CPRE's Building on Food Security found that almost 14,500 hectares of the country's best agricultural land, which could grow at least 250,000 tonnes of vegetables a year, has been permanently lost to development in just 12 years. This is enough to feed the combined populations of Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield their recommended five-a-day fruit and vegetables.

2.7 There was a huge rise in high quality – known as Best and Most Versatile (BMV) – agricultural land set aside for housing and industry between 2010 and 2022, from 60

hectares to more than 6,000 hectares per year. As a result, almost 300,000 homes were built on more than 8,000 hectares of prime farmland in that time.

2.8 Food security concerns may be exacerbated by, and contribute to, climate change.

- 60% of England's finest agricultural land is at the highest risk of flooding from climate change.
- In addition, importing food, or increasing the food miles from source, contributes to unsustainable travel patterns and
- Reduces the local self-sufficiency of communities

2.9 The issue led Crispin Truman, chief executive of CPRE, the countryside charity, to comment that *"For the first time in several generations, our food security is at risk – yet we've seen a 100-fold increase in the loss of our best farmland to development since 2010. Heating, eating and housing are fundamental needs. A healthy environment, mitigating and adapting against the devastation threatened by the climate emergency, is the bedrock that underpins them all."*

2.3 The Five Grade Classifications and their Criteria

2.10 Through the ALC, 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 (BMV) and grades 3b, 4 and 5 of a moderate to poor quality. Factors that affect the grading's are climate, site and soil characteristics, yields or output, climate range and versatility of use, consistent yield and input requirements; as well as the important interactions between them.

2.11 It is notable that:

- The most limiting factor determines grade
- Poorer quality land may still produce consistently high yields of a narrower range of crops

2.12 Current estimates are that about 42% of all agricultural land in England can be classed as the Best and Most Versatile (Grades 1, 2 and 3a). A detailed explanation of the criteria for each ALC grade, as defined by Natural England, can be found below.

Grade 1 – excellent quality agricultural land

2.13 Land with no or very minor limitations. A very wide range of agricultural and horticultural crops can be grown and commonly includes:

- top fruit, for example tree fruit such as apples and pears
- soft fruit, such as raspberries and blackberries
- salad crops
- winter harvested vegetables

Yields are high and less variable than on land of lower quality.

Grade 2 – very good quality agricultural land

2.14 Land with minor limitations that affect crop yield, cultivations or harvesting. A wide range of agricultural and horticultural crops can usually be grown. 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 3 – good to moderate quality agricultural land

2.15 Land with moderate limitations that affect the choice of crops, timing and type of cultivation, harvesting or the level of yield. Where more demanding crops are grown yields are generally lower or more variable than on land in grades 1 and 2.

Subgrade 3a – good quality agricultural land

2.16 Land capable of consistently producing moderate to high yields of a narrow range of arable crops, especially cereals, or moderate yields of crops including:

- cereals
- grass
- oilseed rape
- potatoes
- sugar beet
- less demanding horticultural crops

Subgrade 3b – moderate quality agricultural land

2.17 Land capable of producing moderate yields of a narrow range of crops, principally:

- cereals and grass
- lower yields of a wider range of crops
- high yields of grass which can be grazed or harvested over most of the year

Grade 4 – poor quality agricultural land

2.18 Land with severe limitations which significantly restrict the range of crops or level of yields. It is mainly suited to grass with occasional arable crops (for example 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 using the land. The grade also includes arable land that is very dry because of drought.

Grade 5 – very poor-quality agricultural land

2.19 Land with very severe limitations that restrict use to permanent pasture or rough grazing, except for occasional pioneer forage crops.

2.4 Application to Land not Currently in Agricultural Use

2.20 It is important to note that Land can still be classified as agricultural land even if the land is currently fallow or used for something other than agriculture. This is because the classification is based on the land's *potential* for agricultural use, not its current use, meaning its soil quality and other characteristics are considered regardless of whether it's actively farmed at the moment.

2.21 This aligns with the purpose of agricultural land classification and its historical evolution. As outlined part 2.1, agricultural land is preserved in part to ensure long-term food security.

2.22 This purpose of ensuring long-term food security, originally motivated by both the threat and reality of war in the mid twentieth century, is now added further currency by the threat of climate change, which is elaborated upon in section 3.1 below

3. National and International Policy Background

3.1 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 'Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability'

3.1 In 2019, the Climate Change Committee (CCC) said climate change would make it harder for the government to ensure the resilience of the UK's food supply. In 2022 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 'Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability' argued some natural and human systems had already been pushed beyond their ability to adapt to these changes, causing irreversible damage to food security. The IPCC said increases to global warming of between 1.5°C and 2°C would put further pressure on food production and access. It also said the risk to food security would increase in areas worst affected and least able to adapt.

3.2 This is important since it outlines and confirms that the issue of agricultural land preservation is a long-term one, linked to climate change and with the potential to come to the forefront during times of national or international crisis.

3.2 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

3.3 The NPPF defines the best and most versatile agricultural land: Land in grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification.

3.4 Paragraph 187. states that *'Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by: b) recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland'.*

3.5 Paragraph 188. states that plans should '*allocate land with the least environmental or amenity value, where consistent with other policies in this Framework'.* Footnote 65 elaborates that *'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.'*

3.6 Paragraph 188. continues that plans should '*take a strategic approach to maintaining and enhancing networks of habitats and green infrastructure; and plan for the enhancement of natural capital at a catchment or landscape scale across local authority boundaries.'*

3.7 Paragraph 154. explains that 'buildings for agriculture and forestry' are a form of development for which exceptions apply and may therefore be appropriate in the

Green Belt. This issue is, therefore, one that sits alongside consideration of appropriate uses within the Green Belt.

3.3 National Regulations

3.3.1 The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012

3.8 The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 requires statutory consultation with Natural England (NE) for preparation of Development Plans. NE advise on Agricultural Land Classification as part of this requirement.

3.3.2 The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2010

3.9 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.

3.4 National Policy Paper - A Green Future 'Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment' (2018, updated 2023)

3.10 The government's 25 Year Environment Plan sets out the plan to improve the health of the environment by using nature resources more sustainably and efficiently, **including protecting the best agricultural land.**

3.11 As part of wider aims the 25-Year Plan sets out government action to help the natural world regain and retain good health. It aims to deliver cleaner air and water in our cities and rural landscapes, protect threatened species and provide richer wildlife habitats.

3.12 The 25 Year Plan is a complex piece of environmental forward planning with a considerable breadth of coverage over a long timescale. It sets out a wide range of actions designed, over the course of the Plan, to result in cleaner air and water, richer

habitats for more wildlife and an approach to agriculture, forestry, land use and fisheries that puts the environment first. It also frames proposals to tackle waste, soil degradation, and the effects of climate change.

3.13 The principles that underlie the 25 Year Environment Plan are ones which align with the wider principles previously embodied in Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) legislation, and as such have a direct and indirect influence on the context of planning and the SA process in the UK.

3.14 In particular, under actions for Housing and Planning, it states commitments to high environmental standards for all new builds; to protect the high flood risk areas and our best agricultural land.

3.15 It commits to protecting and enhancing the Green Belt to make this land 'breathing space' for our urban populations to enjoy, and our diverse wildlife to flourish, while delivering the homes the country needs.

3.5 DEFRA 'Environment Act (2021)

3.16 This Act made provision about targets, plans and policies for improving the natural environment; for statements and reports about environmental protection; for the Office for Environmental Protection.

> *Section 17(5) of the Act set out the following "environmental principles":*
>
> *(a)the principle that environmental protection should be integrated into the making of policies,*
>
> *(b)the principle of preventative action to avert environmental damage,*
>
> *(c)the precautionary principle, so far as relating to the environment,*
>
> *(d)the principle that environmental damage should as a priority be rectified at source, and*
>
> *(e)the polluter pays principle.*

3.6 DEFRA 'Environmental Principles Policy Statement' (2023)

3.17 The 5 principles in this policy statement, as set out in section 17(5) of the Environment Act, are internationally recognised as successful benchmarks for environmental protection and enhancement. When making policy, and where relevant, ministers will need to consider the 5 principles, including the precautionary principle.

3.18 The statement confirmed that the UK government has already committed to these 5 principles through international instruments and processes. One prominent example is the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development 1992 which includes commitments on the principles. Environmental principles are also featured in a number

of environmental agreements to which the UK is party. For example, the precautionary principle is referred to in the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

3.19 Policymakers should consider and use the principles iteratively from the outset and during subsequent stages in policy development. They should identify the potential environmental effects (positive or negative) and use the principles to inform and influence the design of the policy.

3.7 DEFRA 'Code of Practice for the Sustainable Use of Soils on Construction Sites' (Last updated 2018)

3.20 The 'Code of Practice for the sustainable use of soils on construction sites' encourages a number of methods to be incorporated by developers during construction works to better protect soil.

3.21 The code of practice provides relevant advice on the use of soil in construction projects. It recognised that soil is a fundamental and ultimately finite resource that fulfils a number of functions and services for society which are central to sustainability.

3.22 Some of the most significant impacts on this resource occur as a result of activities associated with construction activity, although the report suggested there was a general lack of awareness and understanding of this need within the construction industry. A Code of Practice was therefore developed to assist anyone involved in the construction sector to better protect the soil resources with which they work as well as achieve cost savings for businesses.

3.23 It includes key advice on pre-construction planning, soil management during construction and landscape, habitat or garden creation.

3.8 DEFRA 'Safeguarding our Soils – A Strategy for England' (2011)

3.24 By 2030, the strategy aims to have all of England's soils to be managed sustainably and degradation threats tackled successfully. This will improve the quality of England's soils and safeguard their ability to provide essential services for future generations.

- agricultural soils will be better managed and threats to them will be addressed;
- soils will play a greater role in the fight against climate change and in helping us to manage its impacts;
- soils in urban areas will be valued during development, and construction practices will ensure vital soil functions can be maintained;

- pollution of our soils is prevented, and our historic legacy of contaminated land is being dealt with.

3.25 Soil quality has a key role in water quality, climate change issues and the historic legacy and health of the environment. The Castle Point Plan should attempt to retain and protect soil quality within the borough through construction techniques. Through aligning with the strategy, development in the borough can occur responsibly without causing soil degradation.

3.9 Natural England 'Guide to Assessing Development Proposals on Agricultural Land' (2021)

3.26 Natural England (NE) have produced guidance on assessing development proposals on agricultural land, with guidance both for LPAs and developers. NE have ALC maps which detail what agricultural land is graded from 1 to 5, it does not however include the subcategories 3a and 3b and this subgrade information is not readily available.

3.27 Natural England advises on development proposals as a statutory consultee in the planning process. This guide sets out that the aim is to protect:

- the best and most versatile (BMV) agricultural land from significant, inappropriate or unsustainable development proposals
- all soils by managing them in a sustainable way

3.28 Natural England must be consulted for development proposals that are both:

- likely to cause the loss (or likely cumulative loss) of 20ha or more of BMV land
- not in accordance with an approved development plan

3.29 Natural England will advise on the level of impact the proposal may have on BMV agricultural land, taking into account the type of development and its likely long-term effects.

3.30 The guide specifies that soil scientists or experienced soil specialists should be used to carry out new surveys. They should be:

- members of the British Society of Soil Science, the British Institute of Agricultural Consultants or similar professional body
- knowledgeable about the ALC 1988 guidelines
- experienced in soil description and ALC assessments

3.10 Natural England 'Technical Information Note TIN049 Agricultural Land Classification: protecting the best and most versatile agricultural land

3.31 This note sets out that 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. It noted that the Government has also re-affirmed the importance of protecting our soils and the services they provide in the Natural Environment White Paper the Natural Choice: securing the value of nature (June 2011), including the protection of best and most versatile agricultural land (paragraph 2.35).

3.32 The technical note contains information on new field surveys, noting that digital mapping and geographical information systems have been introduced to facilitate the provision of up-to-date information. ALC surveys are undertaken, according to the published Guidelines, by field surveyors using handheld augers to examine soils to a depth of 1.2 metres, at a frequency of one boring per hectare for a detailed assessment. This is usually supplemented by digging occasional small pits (usually by hand) to inspect the soil profile. Information obtained by these methods is combined with climatic and other data to produce an ALC map and report. ALC maps are normally produced on an Ordnance Survey base at varying scales from 1:10,000 for detailed work to 1:50 000 for reconnaissance survey.

3.33 NE note that there is no comprehensive programme to survey all areas in detail. Private consultants may survey land where it is under consideration for development, especially around the edge of towns, to allow comparisons between areas and to inform environmental assessments. ALC field surveys are usually time consuming and should be initiated well in advance of planning decisions. Planning authorities should ensure that sufficient detailed site specific ALC survey data is available to inform decision making.

3.11 Environment Agency 'The State of the Environment: Soil (2019)

3.34 The state of the environment report for soil highlights the importance of soil. It looks at the latest available evidence and the need for further monitoring and research.

3.35 Soil holds 3 times as much carbon as the atmosphere, it reduces the risk of flooding by absorbing water, it is a wildlife habitat, and it delivers 95% of global food supplies. Unfortunately, it is a limited resource under pressure from climate change, population growth, urban development, waste, pollution, and the demand for more (and cheaper) food.

3.36 The government's 25 Year Environment Plan states that England's soils must be managed sustainably by 2030, and steps must be taken towards restoring the UK's soils.

3.12 The Institute of Environmental Assessment and Management (IEMA) 'A New Perspective on Land and Soil in Environmental Impact Assessment' (2022)

3.37 This guidance seeks to move practice away from a narrow focus on quantifying and financially compensating impacts on agricultural land, instead advocating a new and wider approach to assessing the soil functions, ecosystem services and natural capital provided by land and soils. It highlights and reinforces the importance of soil functions and ecosystem services to wider systems including, but not limited to, carbon and climate, hydrology, food production, biodiversity and ecology. Part position paper, part educational resource and part methodological guidance.

4. Agricultural Land Uses in Castle Point

4.1 Land Uses in Castle Point

4.1 Just over twenty-one percent of Castle Point's land is in agricultural use. This is a much lower proportion than national (63.1%) and regional figures (58.6%). However, Castle Point does retain 955 hectares of agricultural land within its 17 square mile area which is not insignificant considering many UK local authorities contain no agricultural land at all.

4.2 Castle Point has higher proportions of developed land, residential gardens and recreational land, reflecting its increasingly urbanised status. The remaining agricultural areas in the Castle Point are increasingly fragile but contribute greatly to the Borough's character and will be important to preserve.

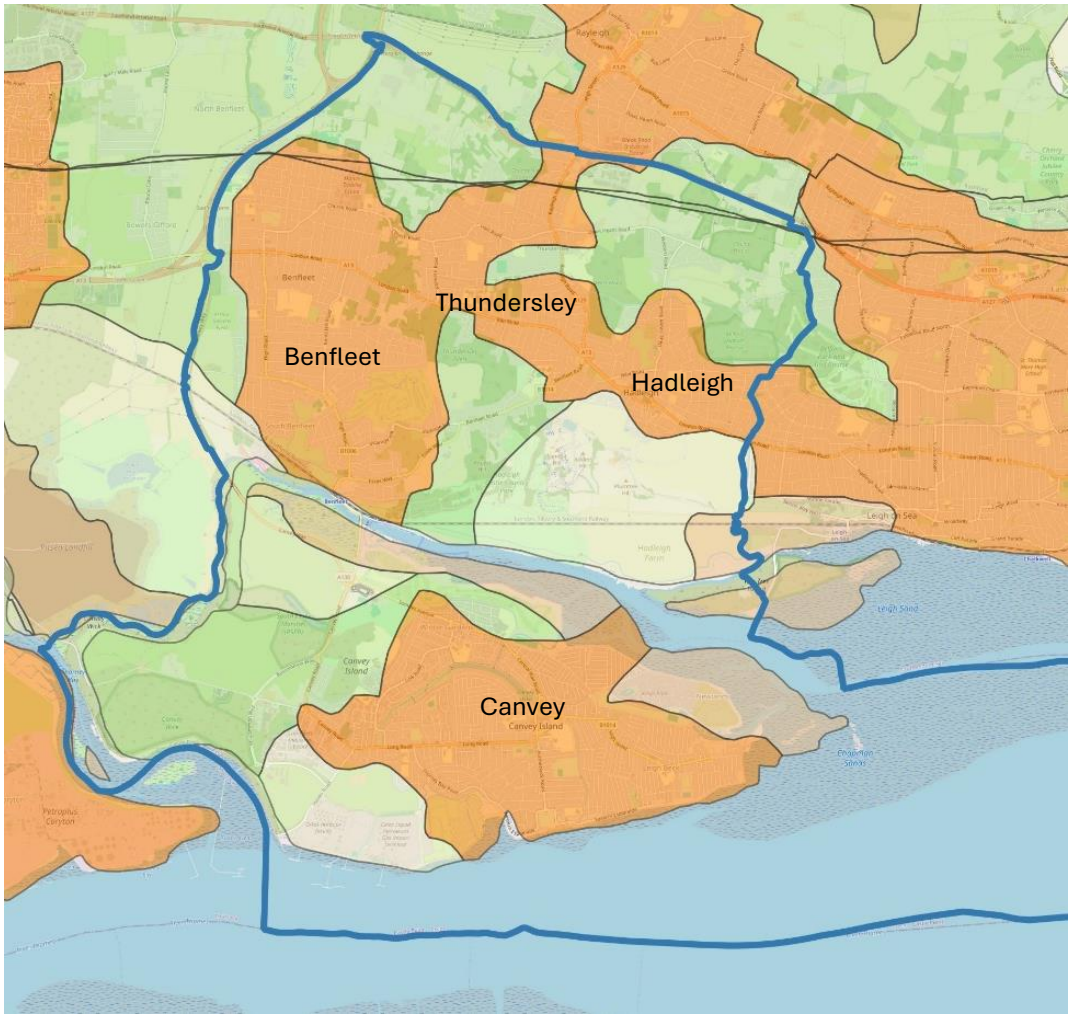
Table 1: Proportion of total land area by usage type

		England	South East	Castle Point
Developed use	**Community service**	**0.7**	**1.0**	**2.5**
	Industry and commerce	**0.4**	**0.4**	**0.8**
	Residential	**1.3**	**1.5**	**6.8**
	Transport and utilities	**4.4**	**5.0**	**9.7**
	Unknown developed use	**1.9**	**2.0**	**4.0**
	Developed use	**8.7**	**9.9**	**23.9**
Non-developed use	Agricultural buildings	0.1	0.1	0.0
	Agricultural land	63.0	58.5	21.3
	Agriculture	**63.1**	**58.6**	**21.4**
	Forest, open land and water	**20.1**	**20.2**	**18.1**
	Outdoor recreation	**2.1**	**3.1**	**11.4**
	Residential gardens	**4.9**	**7.1**	**21.4**
	Undeveloped land	**0.9**	**1.0**	**3.5**
	Non-developed	**91.1**	**89.9**	**75.8**
Vacant		**0.2**	**0.2**	**0.3**
Grand Total		**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Source: Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 'Land Use Statistics' 2022 Data

4.2 Agricultural Grades in Castle Point

Map 1: Agricultural Land Classification in Castle Point



Key

Grade	Description
3	Good to Moderate
4	Poor

Non-Agricultural Land

- Other land primarily in non-agricultural use
- Land predominantly in urban use

4.3 Castle Point has significant areas that do not fall into the 5-grade classification at all, including the urban areas of Benfleet, Thundersley, Hadleigh and Canvey Town, as well as waterside areas along Benfleet Creek classed as not being in agricultural use.

4.4 Approximately half the Borough has an agricultural classification, of which the predominant grade is 3. However, the mapping does not provide information relating to the subgrades 3a and 3b. Grade 3 areas include:

- North- West Thundersley
- Land around Daws Heath
- Land east of Benfleet, Benfleet Downs and central corridor to Thundersley
- West Canvey

4.5 There are no areas of grade 1, 2 or 5 in the Borough. However, there are some areas of agricultural grade 4 which are typically areas of nature conservation or in industrial usage. They include:

- Hadleigh Castle Country Park and Hadleigh Farm
- Areas around the Oil and Gas facilities on Canvey
- North West Canvey

4.6 By comparing the figures in Table 1 (21% of land in agricultural use) with Map 1 (Approximately half of Castle Point's land has an agricultural grading) we can see that agricultural land is only loosely associated with farming in the Borough. The costs associated with yields have reduced the number of arable farms in the Borough. Limited cropping occurs in the east of the Borough, most goes unused or is used for grazing.

4.7 Nonetheless, given that the purpose of preservation is long-term food security, the benefits of preserving grade 3 agricultural land applies regardless. Once the graded agricultural land is lost to development, it is lost forever.

5. Castle Point Local Planning Policy

5.1 Expectations of Local Planning Authorities

5.1 As established in the earlier sections 2 and 3, LPAs are required to give consideration to the best and most versatile agricultural land in plan preparations and in determining planning applications.

5.2 NE suggests that LPAs ensure that sufficient detailed site specific ALC survey data is available to inform decision making. However, differentiating between subgrades 3a and 3b is problematic as this is not part of the national mapping and there is no existing data for Castle Point Borough. ALC site surveys are costly and time consuming and it is not considered proportionate to carry out site surveys on the potential site allocations in the Castle Point Plan. 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 at the planning application stage.

5.2 Consideration through Castle Point Plan

5.3 Castle Point's areas of Grade 3 Agricultural Land, which is defined as good to moderate quality, coincides with several promoted development sites that have been considered in the plan making process. These sites have been considered through wider evidence supporting the plan, including the Sustainability Appraisal (SA).

5.4 Specifically, SA Objective 4 is to 'To conserve and enhance soil and mineral resources' which includes agricultural land quality. All options sites were assessed against a range of indicators which included indicator 4.3 'agricultural land quality'. Sites coinciding with Grade 3 agricultural land covering at least 20% of the site were given a negative assessment. Sites coinciding with Grade 3 agricultural land covering less than 20% of the site were given a neutral assessment. Sites with at least 20% Grade 4 were positive, while urban sites were a significant positive.

5.5 Whilst agricultural land is just one of many considerations (one of approximately 70 indicators for sites that are within the SA).

5.3 Recommendations

5.6 National policies aim to protect the best and most versatile agricultural land. The NPPF links the issue to wider policies that contribute to and enhance the natural environment by recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and

other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland (NPPF para 187).

5.7 As section 4.2 showed, there are widespread areas of agricultural land classification grade 3 ‘Good to moderate’ in Castle Point, although detailed survey information to distinguish between grades 3a and 3b is not currently available from Natural England.

5.8 The UK is committed to the ‘precautionary principle’ through domestic legislation and international instruments and processes, as confirmed in sections 3.9 and 3.10. The precautionary principle is an approach to risk management, where, if it is possible that a given policy or action might cause harm to the public or the environment and if there is still no scientific agreement on the issue, the policy or action in question should not be carried out.

5.9 The long-term harm from losing good quality agricultural land is well established via decades of domestic policy provision and remains recognised to this day. Indeed, evidence and international declarations suggest the threat not only remains but will be exacerbated by climate change predictions and effects.

5.10 Therefore, a local policy adding additional protection to those areas currently classed grade 3 ‘Good to moderate’ agricultural land (and reasonably likely to be classed as ‘Best and Most Versatile) is consistent with international declarations, national policy and legislation and the precautionary principle which is enshrined within the Environment Act.

Glossary and Abbreviations

ALC	Agricultural Land Classification
BMV	Best and Most Versatile
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
LPA	Local Planning Authority
NE	Natural England
NPPF	National Planning Policy Framework
PPG	Planning Practice Guidance