Greater Cambridge Local Plan — Regulation 19 Representation

Policy BG/PO: Protecting open spaces

Representor details

Haslingfield Parish Council]

Document and policy this representation relates to

Greater Cambridge Local Plan, Proposed Submission (Regulation 19) — Policy BG/PO: Protecting open spaces, paragraphs 1–5 and supporting text 5.77–5.84.

Reasons

1. Paragraph 5 is not consistent with national policy on Local Green Space

Local Green Space (LGS) is a well-established national designation, carried forward without substantive change between the December 2024 and August 2026 versions of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Both versions are clear that development affecting land designated as Local Green Space should be treated with the same weight as development in the Green Belt.

The December 2024 NPPF states, at paragraph 108: "Policies and decisions for managing development within a Local Green Space should be consistent with national policy for Green Belts." The August 2026 NPPF restates this at policy HC8(1) in materially identical terms.

The protection this confers does not come from the phrase "very special circumstances" itself, but from what triggers it. Green Belt policy states plainly: "Inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances." Development is deemed inappropriate — and therefore presumed harmful — unless it falls within a short, specifically defined list of exceptions (essentially: agricultural and forestry buildings, certain outdoor sport and recreation facilities, proportionate extensions, like-for-like replacement buildings, and limited infilling in villages). Outside that narrow list, harm is presumed regardless of a scheme's appearance or design quality, and very special circumstances must be shown to overcome that presumption.

Policy BG/PO paragraph 5 operates on the opposite logic. It states: "Development will not be permitted within or adjacent to areas identified as Local Green Space on the Policies Map if it would adversely impact on the character and particular local significance placed on such green areas which make them valued by their local community." This only blocks development where adverse impact on character or local significance can be demonstrated — an open test a well-designed, modest scheme could satisfy (i.e. avoid) without needing to justify anything as exceptional.

The practical consequence is that the two tests catch different things. A scheme that is unattractive or clearly damaging to a Local Green Space's character would likely be blocked under either test. But a scheme that is modest, well-designed, and does not visibly harm the site's character — precisely the kind of development most likely to actually come forward on a small, locally valued green space — could clear paragraph 5's test while still requiring very special circumstances under genuine Green Belt-equivalent protection, since it would not fall within the narrow list of exceptions and its harm would be presumed rather than assessed by appearance. Paragraph 5's threshold is accordingly lower than the standard national policy requires, in precisely the cases where the difference is most likely to matter.

We have found no representation at Regulation 18 stage that raised this specific inconsistency, and no response from the Councils addressing it. We do not believe this was a deliberate departure from national policy; rather, it appears to be an unintended drafting gap between the designation of Local Green Space (paragraph 5.84, which correctly describes the national criteria for designation) and the policy's own decision-making test for development affecting it (paragraph 5), which does not carry the same rigour through to application.

2. Protection for undesignated open space is not effective

Paragraph 1 extends protection to "undesignated areas that fulfil the criteria used to assess protected open space," and paragraph 5.80 confirms that previously unidentified sites can qualify for protection where the Councils assess that they meet the relevant criteria.

However, paragraph 5.80 also makes clear that this assessment is reactive: "If an application is received which affects a site that may be worthy of protection, an assessment will be made of the site against the assessment criteria." There is no proactive identification, register, or periodic review of undesignated sites that may qualify — the mechanism only activates once a planning application affecting the site has already been submitted.

This creates the same structural gap we raise in relation to Policy BG/TC and the pre-application clearance of trees and hedgerows. A site's qualifying environmental or recreational value could be degraded or removed — through a change of use, loss of public access, or physical alteration — before any planning application is made. By the time a proposal does come forward, there may be no basis on which the site could be found to meet the protection criteria, regardless of the value it held previously, and regardless of the Council's assessment process operating exactly as designed.

A policy that protects a category of land only once a specific, identifiable trigger (a planning application) has occurred, with no mechanism to establish or preserve evidence of the land's qualifying condition before that trigger, is not effective at protecting land whose qualifying condition can be altered without triggering that same mechanism.

3. The mechanism for designating Local Green Space is not effective in practice

The December 2024 NPPF confirms, at paragraph 106, that "Local Green Spaces should only be designated when a plan is prepared or updated" — through either a Local Plan or a Neighbourhood Plan. (The August 2026 NPPF restates this at policy HC2(2) in materially identical terms.) In practice, this gives a parish a narrow and infrequent window in which to secure Local Green Space protection for a site it values: either through a Local Plan review, which happens roughly once a decade, or through producing its own Neighbourhood Plan.

This has become materially harder since Regulation 18 stage. On 12 June 2025, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government confirmed, via its delivery partner Locality, that it would not commission new neighbourhood planning support services beyond March 2025, with existing support packages winding down by March 2026 at the latest. This ended the long-standing grant and technical assistance programme that had previously helped parishes and neighbourhood forums undertake Neighbourhood Plan preparation, including the technical work — such as Strategic Environmental Assessment and Habitats Regulations Assessment screening — that a Neighbourhood Plan requires to proceed to examination.

The practical effect is that protection for a valued green space now depends less on the merit of the site, and more on whether a parish happens to have the volunteer capacity, expertise, and independent funding to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan without national support — a capacity that will vary significantly between parishes, and will tend to disadvantage smaller or less resourced communities regardless of the ecological, recreational, or amenity value of the land they wish to protect.

We recognise that the Councils cannot reverse the withdrawal of national funding for neighbourhood planning support. We do not consider this a criticism of the Plan's drafting. However, we consider it a soundness issue that the Plan's sole mechanism for parishes to secure new Local Green Space protection between full Local Plan reviews — a Neighbourhood Plan — has become significantly less accessible since the evidence underpinning this policy was prepared, without the Plan itself offering any alternative or supported route to reflect that changed context.

Modifications sought

- Amend Policy BG/PO paragraph 5 to apply the very special circumstances test set out in NPPF paragraph 108 (December 2024) / policy HC8(1) (August 2026), rather than the lower adverse-impact threshold currently drafted, so that development affecting designated Local Green Space is subject to the same presumption against development, and the same narrow exceptions, that national policy applies to the Green Belt.
- Establish a mechanism for identifying and recording undesignated sites that may qualify as protected open space ahead of any planning application — for example a proactively maintained register, informed by periodic review or community nomination — so that protection under paragraph 1 does not depend on a site remaining undisturbed until an application happens to be submitted.

- Establish a proportionate, Council-supported route through which parishes can seek Local Green Space designation directly through future Local Plan reviews, without a made Neighbourhood Plan as a precondition, so that protection under this policy does not depend on which communities retain the resources to produce one following the withdrawal of national neighbourhood planning support.