

LENHAM NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

**LIKELY IMPACT ON BEST AND MOST
VERSATILE AGRICULTURAL LAND**

Report 1499/1c

20th February, 2019

Land
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LENHAM NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN
LIKELY IMPACT ON BEST AND MOST VERSATILE
AGRICULTURAL LAND

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SUMMARY

A consultation draft of the Lenham Neighbourhood Plan published in September 2018 sets out a strategy to accommodate approximately 1,000 new dwellings that the Maidstone Borough Local Plan has proposed for the village. A Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to accompany Regulation 14 consultation on the Neighbourhood Plan identifies significant permanent and long-term negative effects in relation to the loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land as a result of Neighbourhood Plan allocations.

Policy 170 of National Planning Policy Framework 2018 states that *'Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, ... including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land'* and adds 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'*.

Best and most versatile agricultural land is defined as grades 1 to 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification system for England and Wales.

This report reviews all published Agricultural Land Classification surveys of land on the margins of Lenham, including:

- Surveys by the former Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food in the 1990s
- Surveys undertaken by Land Research Associates in 2014 for the Maidstone Borough Local Plan
- Surveys for land being promoted by developers.

The results show that:

- There is a high likelihood of best and most versatile land to the north of the A20, north of the railway line on the western flanks of the village, and alongside Old Ashford Road to the east.
- South of the railway line there is a lower likelihood of BMV land.

The land immediately to the south and east of Lenham church is designated as Lenham Local Landscape Area (LLLA) in the draft Neighbourhood Plan. This land is subject to Policy LLLA1 in the Plan which aims to give priority to the protection of the landscape and countryside setting of the village over other planning objectives. Some of this land is not available for development at the present time. It is inevitable therefore that residential development close to the current village boundary at the level set by the Maidstone Borough Local Plan will involve at least some best and most versatile land and will often need to be exclusively on such land.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Maidstone Borough Local Plan, adopted in October 2017, identifies at Policies SP8 (6) and H2 (3) that Lenham should be a broad location for the delivery of approximately 1,000 new dwellings up to 2031. To meet this requirement, the September 2018 Regulation 14 consultation draft of the Lenham Neighbourhood Plan proposed a number of site allocations for residential development. However, a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to accompany the consultation draft identifies significant permanent and long-term negative effects in relation to the loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land.

PLANNING SIGNIFICANCE OF BEST AND MOST VERSATILE LAND

- 1.2 To assist in assessing land quality, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) developed a method for classifying agricultural land by grade according to the extent to which physical or chemical characteristics impose long-term limitations on agricultural use for food production. The Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system, last revised in 1988, classifies land into five grades, grade 1 being the highest quality and grade 5 being the lowest, with grade 3 divided into two subgrades (3a and 3b). Grades 1, 2 and subgrade 3a have been subsequently classed as representing the 'best and most and most versatile' land.
- 1.3 Policy 170 of the National Planning Policy Framework 2018 states that '*Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, ... including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land*', and adds 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*'.
- 1.4 By reviewing detailed Agricultural Land Classification surveys undertaken around Lenham and a desk study of other factors which may determine the agricultural land quality of unsurveyed land, this report considers the potential impact of proposed development on best and most versatile land and whether opportunities exist to minimise the impact.

2.0 Desk study on agricultural land quality

ALC SYSTEM APPLIED TO THE SURROUNDS OF LENHAM

- 2.1 The ALC system uses a combination of climatic, site, standalone soil and interactive limitations to determine ALC grade. These limitations have been applied for a study area that extends between the North Downs Way and the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, and 500 m east and west of the current village limits. The full area considered is shown by Map 2 in an appendix to this report.
- 2.2 Climatological Data for Agricultural Land Classification¹ indicate that the study area is not limited in agricultural use by climate *per se* but the dry summers combined with soil moisture retention can result in slight impacts on crop yield (see paragraph 2.5 below).
- 2.3 Site limitations include gradient and flooding. The study area is not prone to flooding and, apart on a small area either side of Faversham Road north of the A20, is gently sloping such that slope doesn't affect agricultural quality.
- 2.4 Standalone soil limitations such as shallow depth over rock or significantly stony topsoil are not reported in published surveys of the area, but may be present on a small area either side of Faversham Road north of the A20.
- 2.5 The main limitation to agricultural land quality around the village are *interactive* limitations: soil wetness (where the soil's inherent drainage characteristics adversely affect plant growth or imposes restrictions on cultivations or grazing by livestock), and droughtiness (where the moisture that the soil can retain throughout the growing season is inadequate to sustain the yield potential of the crop being grown).

BROAD PATTERNS OF LAND GRADE AROUND LENHAM

- 2.6 The soils across the study area vary considerably in texture and drainage, largely due to differences in the underlying geology.
- 2.7 Hard chalk lithologies that occupy the land north of the A20 mainly give rise to deep freely draining silty soils with chalky and/or flinty subsoils. These soils mainly give rise to grade 2 agricultural land that is suitable for a wide range of cropping but with crops yields slightly below potential in the locally dry summers.
- 2.8 Alongside and south of the A20 the geology is of softer chalk marls that in many

¹ *Climatological Data for Agricultural Land Classification*. Meteorological Office, 1989

places are overlain by silty 'brickearth' deposits. This land has a mixture of grade 2 and subgrade 3a land, the latter occurring where heavy layers in the subsoil slightly impede drainage, restricting agricultural access to the land during wet period of weather. Land between Tanyard Farm and the railway tends to have slowly permeable clay at shallower depth and this causes more significant soil wetness which downgrades the land to subgrade 3b. South of the railway Gault Clay results in poorly draining soils that are heavy to the surface and give subgrade 3b land.

DETAILED SURVEYS AROUND LENHAM

2.9 A number of detailed ALC surveys have been carried out by government agencies and independent consultants, either stimulated by development plans of specific development proposals. Those relevant to the study area (see Map 1) are:

- Land between Old Ashford Road and A20 in East Lenham (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 2007).
- Land east of Old School Close and Croft Gardens (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 2007).
- Land west of Old Ham Lane (Land Research Associates for Maidstone Borough Plan, 2014).
- Land between Old Ashford Road and railway (Land Research Associates for Maidstone Borough Plan, 2014).
- Land off Loder Close (Vaughan Redfern Agricultural and Rural Development, 2015).
- Land south of Old Ashford Road (Land Research Associates, 2017).
- Land west of Headcorn Road (Land Research Associates, 2017).
- Land west of Old Ham Lane (Soil Environment Services, 2018).

2.10 The results of the detailed ALC surveys are fairly consistent, except for the land east of Old Ham Lane, where one survey shows all of the land as of subgrade 3a and another a mixture of subgrade 3b and 3a.

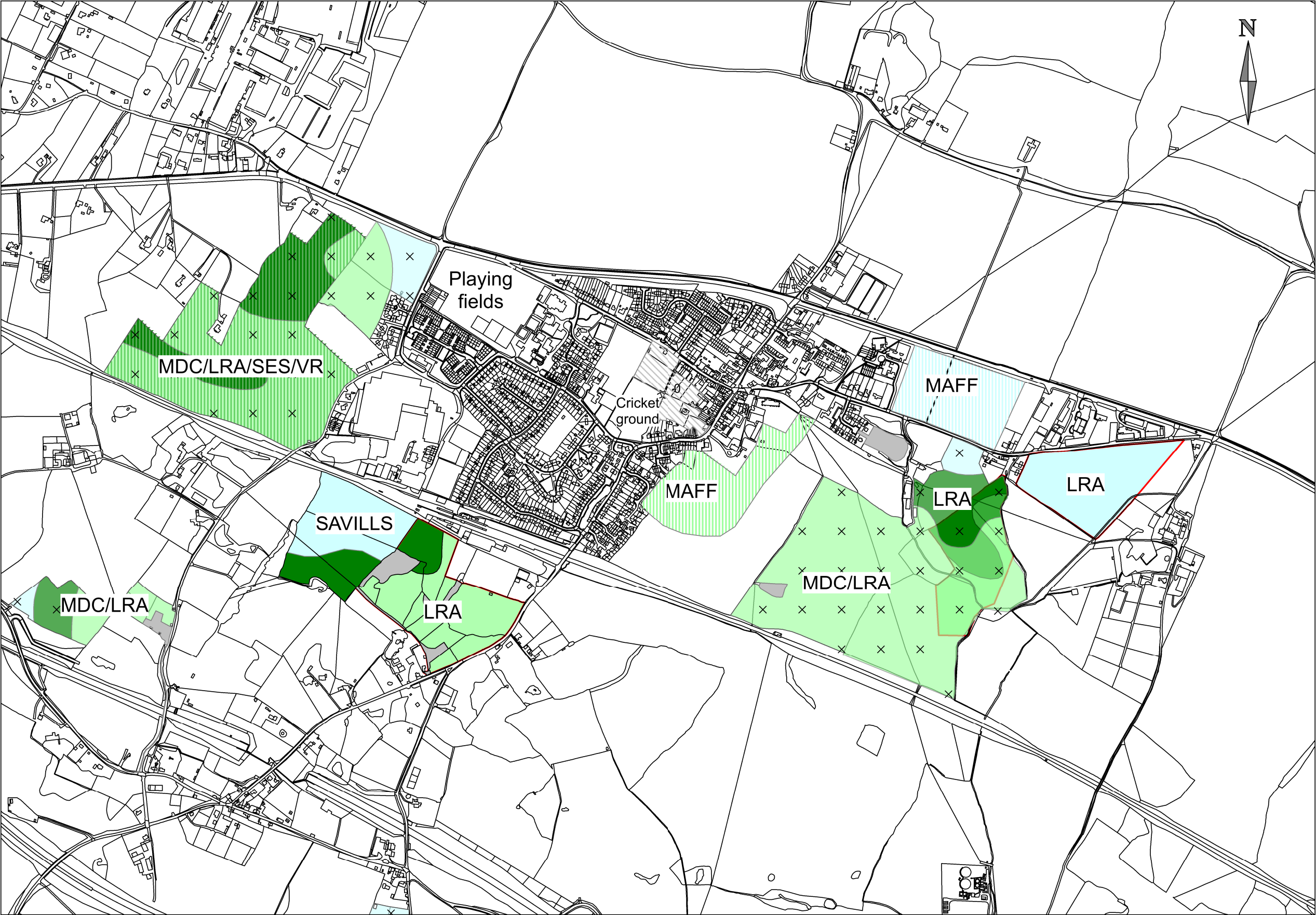
2.11 The detailed surveys and the desk study based on land and soil characteristics have been used to prepare Map 2 which shows the distribution of best and most versatile and poorer agricultural land around Lenham village.

3.0 Discussion and conclusions

- 3.1 It is clear from Map 2 that the current urban area of Lenham is almost completely fringed by best and most versatile agricultural land. The exception is the land east of Lenham Church extending south to the railway.
- 3.2 The draft Neighbourhood Plan proposes seven strategic housing delivery sites, six of them north of the railway, east of Old Ham Lane or immediately south of the railway between Old Ham Lane and Headcorn Road. While best and most versatile land is less common to the south of the railway, nearly all land abutting the urban area north of the railway is in the best and most versatile category.
- 3.3 The land immediately to the south and east of Lenham church is designated as Lenham Local Landscape Area (LLLA) in the draft Neighbourhood Plan. This land is subject to Policy LLLA1 in the Plan which aims to give priority to the protection of the landscape and countryside setting of the village over other planning objectives. Some of this land is not available for development at the present time. It is inevitable therefore that residential development close to the current village boundary at the level set by the Maidstone Borough Local Plan will involve at least some best and most versatile land and will often need to be exclusively on such land.

APPENDIX

MAPS



KEY

- Grade 2 agricultural land
- Subgrade 3a agricultural land
- Subgrade 3b agricultural land

Project:
Lenham Neighbourhood Plan

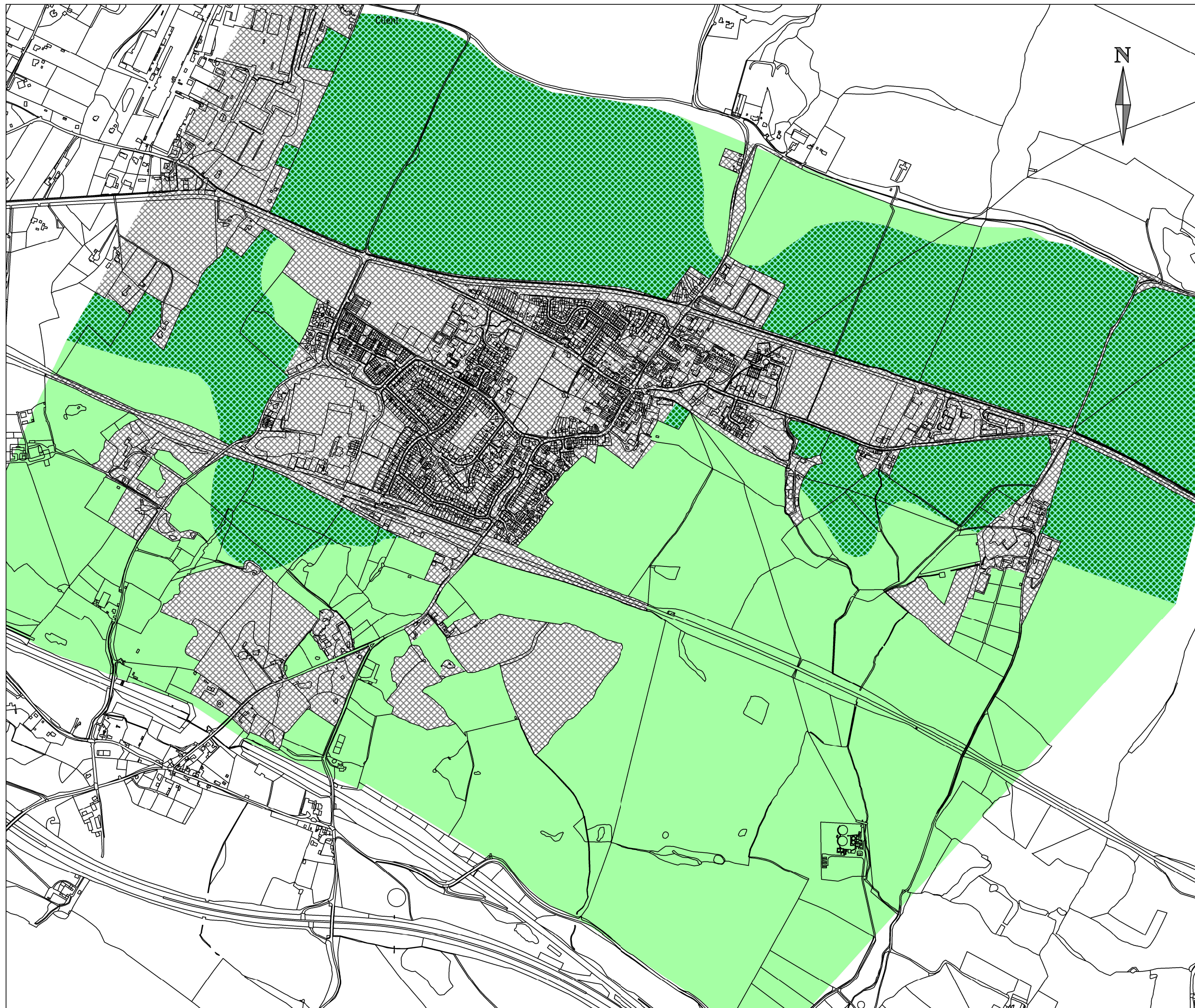
Map title:
**Map1
Detailed agricultural land classification
surveys around Lenham**

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Scale: 1:100,000
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Date: 12/2/2019



KEY

-  Predicted extent of best most versatile land (grade 2 & subgrade 3a only around Lenham)
-  Poorer land (predominantly subgrade 3b)
-  Woodland or urban land with no agricultural potential

Project:
Lenham Neighbourhood Plan

Map title:
Map 2
Predicted agricultural land quality around Lenham

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