EVIDENCE BASE T: Agricultural land classification and the link with planning policy.

NPPF policy paragraph 112:
Local planning authorities should take into account the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land. 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 a higher quality.

T.1 Natural England is the Government’s advisor on the environment.  
www.naturalengland.org.uk/about_us/whatwedo/default.aspx

T.2 Natural England’s Information Note TIN049 describes the Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) for England and Wales and informs: The ALC provides a method for assessing the quality of farmland to enable informed choices to be made about its future use within the planning system. It helps underpin the principles of sustainable development.

T.3 The ALC system classifies land into five grades. The best and most versatile land is defined as Grades 1, 2 and 3a. This is the land which is the most flexible, productive and efficient in response to inputs and which can best deliver future crops.

T.4 Government policy is to minimise the loss of the best and most versatile farmland (grades 1, 2 and 3a). This is because, while the UK produced 78% of its food in 1984, sustainability has fallen year on year to 60% in 2010 see: www.defra.gov.uk/.../defra-stats-foodfarm-food-trade-sel suff-110525.xls.

T.5 The UK’s dependence on imported food is increasing yet ‘The current global food security situation is a cause for deep concern’ see: www.ifr.ac.uk/.../DEFRA-Ensuring-UK-Food-Security-in-a-changing-world-170708.pdf.

T.6 The 2011 edition map showing the Agricultural Land Classification for Backwell is reproduced at the end of this Evidence Base. It includes the latest survey data for Backwell acquired in 1997.

T.7 The best and most versatile land in Backwell. An extract from the classification map for the main village area is shown below. The best and most versatile land (blue and dark green) is located at:

a) Backwell Green east of Chapel Hill: mainly grades 1 and 2  
b) Farleigh west of Chapel Hill: mainly grades 1 and 2  
c) Farleigh Fields north of St Andrews Church: mainly grade 2  
d) The area from Moor Lane towards Chelvey: grades 2 & 3a.

T.8 Areas a) and b) are outside of the Settlement Boundary and within the Green Belt. BACKWELL FUTURE endorses this status.

T.9 Area c), Farleigh Fields, is also outside of the Settlement Boundary but these fields are not in the Green Belt. The land
is productive and versatile being farmed for cereals, animal feed crops and raising beef cattle.

Area d), Moor Lane towards Chelvey, is outside the Settlement Boundary, not in the Green Belt and productively farmed.

Complete retention of the current agricultural units is essential for future viability. Areas of the best and most versatile land facilitate flexibility of use which is demonstrated by past husbandry that in some cases is different from current usage.

Planning applications have, in the past, been made to develop parts of Farleigh Fields. These have been rejected. In 1986 the Secretary of State ruled, in rejecting an appeal, that ‘it is considered that the loss of this high quality agricultural land would be contrary to the national policy of protecting such land and would constitute demonstrable harm to that interest’. [Letters from Sec. of State 10/9/1986 & 25/9/1989.]

Complete retention of the current agricultural units is essential for future viability. Areas of the best and most versatile land facilitate flexibility of use which is demonstrated by past husbandry that in some cases is different from current usage.

This policy is to help safeguard the sustainability of the UK's self-sufficiency of food production, maintain the viability of existing agricultural holdings, and retain the traditional close integration of agriculture with the village setting and life. It is the basis of PLANNING POLICY: DEVELOPMENT 7 that appears in the New Development section of BACKWELL FUTURE.

Currently, sufficient lower grade land is available to meet identified development needs over the period to 2026. In the longer term however it is conceivable that the supply of lower grade land, below grade 3a, will become exhausted in Backwell.

PLANNING POLICY: DEVELOPMENT 7 should be taken into account in any revision to, or replacement of, the current Core Strategy and would be consistent with paragraph 112 of the NPPF reproduced at the start of this Evidence Base.

The Agricultural Land Classification is one of several key criteria used, in EVIDENCE BASE G, to determine where development should or should not take place in Backwell.

The Agricultural Land Classification map is reproduced by permission of the Controller of the Stationery Office.
EVIDENCE BASE T: Agricultural land classification and the link with planning policy

[Map of agricultural land classification with various grades indicated]