

Public
Key Decision - Yes

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: Draft Land Availability Assessment Methodology

Meeting/Date: Cabinet – 21 March 2023

Executive Portfolio: Executive Councillor for Planning

Report by: Chief Planning Officer

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Executive Summary:

A Local Plan must be supported by an assessment of land that can meet the development needs across its plan period. National policy requires local authorities to have a clear understanding of the land available for development in their area and notes that they should identify from this a sufficient supply and mix of sites, taking into account their availability, suitability and likely economic viability.

This report presents the draft Land Availability Assessment Methodology which will build on the Call for Sites to enable the Council to commence this process and meet the requirements as set out the National Planning Policy Framework and Planning Practice Guidance.

The primary purpose of the Land Availability Assessment (LAA) is to set out a clear methodology by which to assess potential development sites and provide a consistent way in which to assess their suitability, availability, achievability, deliverability and potential capacity. It will help the Council to establish approximately what development sites could be available to meet Huntingdonshire's growth needs, what their capacity is, the constraints that would need to be overcome to deliver them and when they may be completed.

This assessment of sites will help to identify a future supply of land for housing and economic development uses over the plan period and has the potential to identify other uses such as sites for recreation, green infrastructure, flood mitigation and renewable energy generation. It is proposed that public consultation is undertaken to enable people and organisations to contribute towards the development of the land availability assessment methodology.

Both the Call for Sites engagement and the Land Availability Assessment Methodology form a key part of the evidence to prepare the next Huntingdonshire Local Plan.

Agreement is also sought to conduct public consultation to seek input on the draft Land Availability Assessment Methodology to help finalise an agreed Methodology by which potential Local Plan site allocations will be assessed.

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet is

RECOMMENDED

- To approve the contents of the draft Land Availability Assessment Methodology.
- To agree that the draft Land Availability Assessment Methodology can be published for public engagement for six weeks after this meeting and its call-in period.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report presents the Land Availability Assessment (LAA) Methodology (Appendix 1) for consideration and asks that Cabinet approve the contents and agree that it can be published for public engagement for six weeks after this meeting and its call-in period.

2. WHY IS THIS REPORT NECESSARY?

- 2.1 Paragraph 68 of the NPPF states that 'strategic policy-making authorities should have a clear understanding of the land available in their area through the preparation of a strategic housing land availability assessment. From this, planning policies should identify a sufficient supply and mix of sites, taking into account their availability, suitability and likely economic viability....'
- 2.2 The Council must have a consistent methodology to assess all proposed or identified sites. This is achieved through a Land Availability Assessment. The identification and assessment of land availability forms a key part of the evidence shaping the next Huntingdonshire Local Plan and provides a consistent way in which to assess potential development sites as required through paragraph 68 of the NPPF.

3. LAND AVAILABILITY ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 The role of the LAA is to provide a consistent approach to the consideration of potential sites available for development or allocation in a Local Plan. This draft LAA Methodology document sets out how land will be assessed and presented and contains a series of questions throughout the methodology asking consultees if they agree with the approach proposed, providing an opportunity for the public to influence the scope of the assessment.
- 3.2 The proposed assessment methodology is broken down into five stages.
- Stage 1 – Site/Broad Location Assessment (Appendix 1 pages 4 to 7)
 - Stage 2 – Sites Assessment (Appendix 1 pages 8 to 41)
 - Stage 3 – Windfall Assessment (Appendix 1 page 42)
 - Stage 4 - Assessment Review (Appendix 1 page 43)
 - Stage 5 – Production of a Final Evidence Base (Appendix 1 page 43)
- 3.3 It is important to note that the assessment does not in itself determine whether a site should be allocated for development. It is the role of the assessment to provide information on the range of sites which are potentially available to meet the Council's requirements. It is for the development plan itself to determine which of those sites are the most suitable to meet those requirements. A summary of the draft LAA Methodology is provided below.

- 3.4 As set out in Stage 1 of the draft LAA Methodology, the document proposes to broadly follow the methodology for land availability assessment as set out in national guidance (shown on page 3 of Appendix 1). It proposes to identify a potential future supply of land and assess whether it is suitable, available and achievable for a variety of uses such as housing and economic development over the plan period. This requires sites to be assessed without consideration of existing local policies to avoid predetermining their suitability. Where there have been differences or adaptations to the national guidance, these have been identified and justified within the methodology document.
- 3.5 National guidance focuses primarily on sites for residential and employment uses although other uses can be incorporated. It is proposed that the LAA should also identify potential sites for other uses such as recreation, green infrastructure, flood mitigation and renewable energy generation. It is proposed that Huntingdonshire's LAA considers all potential land uses together so that a full picture of the development opportunities across the district can be identified.
- 3.6 National guidance states that it may be appropriate to consider all sites and broad locations capable of delivering 5 or more dwellings, or economic development on sites of 0.25 hectares (or 500 square metres of floor space) and above. The Council can also consider alternative site size thresholds. In the draft LAA Methodology, it is proposed to follow the site threshold set out in national guidance.
- 3.7 To gather as many potential sites as possible, the draft LAA Methodology proposes a call for sites consultation (as detailed in a separate report on this agenda) complemented by a desktop review of other known sites identified from the following sources (Appendix 1, page 6):
- Sites that were assessed in detail in the last iteration of the Housing Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA) published in October 2017
 - Currently undecided planning applications for major development
 - Recently refused or withdrawn planning applications for major development
 - Currently undeveloped allocated sites from the Local Plan to 2036
 - Redevelopment opportunities identified within the Market Towns Programme
 - Permission in principle and brownfield register sites that are above the site threshold
 - Council owned sites that are not currently effectively used
- 3.8 Stage 2 of the draft LAA Methodology sets out that after the desktop review and the Call for Sites consultation, it is proposed that potential sites will be inputted into a GIS database. This will show the spatial distribution of potential sites across the district and also store key information in a single place that will be made viewable via an interactive map.
- 3.9 Once a site has been recorded, an initial filter based on fundamental constraints is proposed to determine if a detailed assessment of the site

should be undertaken or not. If fundamental constraints are identified, then the site would be discounted. The relevance of different constraints will vary according to the proposed use of the site.

3.10 A site passing the fundamental constraints would then progress to a detailed assessment in order to assess it for its suitability, availability, achievability and deliverability or developability. These terms are all defined nationally in the Planning Practice Guidance and explained with in the draft LAA Methodology. They are summarised as:

- **Suitable** – a high level assumption on whether a site would provide an appropriate location for development when considered against relevant constraints and their potential to be mitigated
- **Available** – no legal or ownership impediments exist to inhibit development which can come forward in the short term
- **Achievable** - there is a reasonable prospect that viable development will be built on the site at a particular point in time
- **Deliverable** – a housing site should be available, in a suitable location and have a realistic prospect of homes being built within 5 years
- **Developable** – a housing site should be suitable and have a reasonable prospect of being built at a specified time

3.11 As part of the assessment, the Council also proposes to identify an indicative potential capacity for each site to inform how many homes or the amount of non-residential floorspace could be achieved on potentially suitable economic development or residential sites during the plan period (Appendix 1, commencing on page 14). The potential capacity of sites is based on a series of categories. These have been devised using guidance documents relating to net developable areas and density, local examples of characteristic areas and monitoring data of more recent planning permissions. This has resulted in a series of residential and economic development categories ensuring a localised approach towards capacity calculations. For some land uses like renewable energy or green infrastructure, creating categories is inappropriate due to their individual natures, so these are proposed to be assessed on a site by site basis.

3.12 The categories are expected to form a starting point for the calculation of the potential capacity for growth which will be adjusted to reflect site specific circumstances. Capacity may be subject to further refinement once detailed development proposals are under consideration and more detailed site specific evidence is available.

3.13 By including sites that are potentially suitable for a wide range of development types, the LAA provides the opportunity to consider both the potential benefits and impacts of development as a whole on the surrounding area and acknowledges the range of uses that are necessary to maintain viable, mixed and sustainable communities. This approach ensures that all land is assessed together as part of plan preparation to identify which sites are the most suitable and deliverable for particular uses.

4. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

- 4.1 The Panel discussed the Draft Land Availability Assessment Methodology at its meeting on 1st March 2023.
- 4.2 Following observations from Councillor Gray, the Panel heard that an update to Strategic Flood Risk Assessment 2017 in the form of Integrated Water Management Studies was underway which would address all aspects of flooding from recent years such as surface water run off from new developments.
- 4.3 The Panel heard, after a further question from Councillor Gray, that the approach to windfall sites has changed. The team were currently using available data for sites of less than 10 houses to formulate predictions for the future. It was acknowledged the wording would be adapted to clarify the windfall definition and the methodology.
- 4.4 Councillor Wells queried why recently refused applications appeared in the list of sites to review at 2.10, the Panel heard that under the methodology current planning policy cannot be taken into account, therefore these sites would be reviewed however may be refused again in the future once the planning policy has been reapplied.
- 4.5 Following the discussion, the Panel were informed that their comments would be added to the Cabinet report in order for the Cabinet to make a decision on the recommendations.

5. CONSULTATION AND TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- 5.1 Subject to agreement from Cabinet, the LAA Methodology will be published for public engagement. It is proposed that this will commence following this meeting and its call-in period and run for six weeks. This is not a statutory requirement. However, it is considered to be best practise and provides an opportunity for the community to start shaping the replacement Local Plan and the way potential sites are assessed from its earliest stage. Comments received from the public engagement period will be used to amend the LAA Methodology where it is necessary to do so.

6. LINK TO THE CORPORATE PLAN, STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND/OR CORPORATE OBJECTIVES

- 6.1 The production of the LAA will assist in the delivery of the Council's objectives within the Corporate Plan (2022-2023):
 - Tackling climate change and caring for the environment
 - Enhancing employment opportunities and supporting businesses
 - Supporting the needs of residents
 - Improving the housing situation
 - Strengthening our communities

- 6.2 Within the objective 'Improving the housing situation', the LAA specifically relates to key action 1: 'Commence an update of the Local Plan. This should ensure that local planning policies include a focus on sustainability of new developments, achieving the right mix of housing sizes, types and tenures to meet the needs of residents, the quality of the built environment, creating healthy spaces and communities, public transport and digital connectivity'.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 To be effective Local Plans need to be kept up to date. As set out in Regulation 10a of The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 plans should be reviewed to assess whether they need updating. Approval was received from Cabinet on 24th January 2023:

'To agree to the commencement of work to compile an updated local evidence base to inform and support preparation of the full update to the adopted Local Plan, working with partners and consultants as necessary'

- 7.2 The draft LAA Methodology is part of this process and will also ensure that the Council can evidence their decisions when the Local Plan is independently examined by the Planning Inspectorate on behalf of the Secretary of State.

8. SUSTAINABILITY, ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 The LAA Methodology provides a means by which to consistently assess whether potential sites are suitable, available, achievable and deliverable to meet Huntingdonshire's future needs throughout the plan period.
- 8.2 The development strategy and Local Plan more widely are required to be appraised through the sustainability appraisal process for their impacts on economic, social and environmental strands of sustainability ensuring that a sustainable direction of growth is achieved.
- 8.3 The Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report approved for public consultation at HDC's Cabinet meeting on 24th January 2023 sets out a sustainability framework whereby a series of decision aiding questions have been devised by which to assess the development strategy, sites and development management policy options and their alternatives. Sites judged to be deliverable or developable through the LAA will also be subject to this assessment. The outcomes of this will be presented in a Sustainability Appraisal document and cross referred to sites in the LAA.
- 8.4 Together both assessments/appraisals will help inform whether a site should be allocated in the next Huntingdonshire Local Plan.

9. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDED DECISIONS

- 9.1 The LAA Methodology forms a critical part of the preparation of the next Huntingdonshire Local Plan by providing a consistent way in which to assess potential sites to meet growth needs across the plan period. It builds on information gathered through the Call for Sites process which seeks to identify potential opportunities across the district and actively engages with site promoters and landowners. The LAA will enable the Council to demonstrate that they are meeting the requirements as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework and Planning Practice Guidance.

10. LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED

Appendix 1 – Draft Land Availability Assessment Methodology

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- [National Planning Policy Framework](#)
- [National Planning Practice Guidance: Housing and economic land availability assessment](#)
- [HDC Cabinet - Tuesday, 24 January 2023](#)

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