

Public
Key Decision – No

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: Local Plan Communications

Meeting/Date: Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth) – 8 July 2025)

Executive Portfolio: Executive Councillor for Planning

Report by: Head of Planning, Infrastructure & Public Protection/Chief Planning Officer

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Executive Summary:

This report sets out details on previous local plan engagement, provides a review of the consultation and outlines future changes to engagement. The report also provides a proposed communications strategy for the next round of public consultation scheduled for October 2025 where a preferred options (draft) local plan and sustainability appraisal will be consulted upon.

Recommendation(s):

The Panel is recommended to:

- To consider and comment on the report and findings including Section 6 'Future Actions'.
- To consider and comment on the contents of the Local Plan Communications Strategy
- To grant delegated authority to the Head of Planning, Infrastructure & Public Protection in consultation with the Head of Communications, Engagement & Public Affairs and Executive Councillor for Planning to make any necessary typographical or other minor changes to the Local Plan Communications Strategy and engagement material prior to its implementation or dissemination.

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report sets out details on previous local plan engagement, provides a review of the consultation and outlines future changes to engagement. The report also provides a proposed communications strategy for the next round of public consultation scheduled for October 2025 where a preferred options (draft) local plan and sustainability appraisal will be consulted upon.

2 WHY IS THIS REPORT NECESSARY/BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Preparation of the Local Plan is guided by statutory requirements. A local planning authority is required under Regulation 18 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 to invite representations on the potential content of any future development plan document.
- 2.2 At the request of the Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth), this report provides the opportunity for comment on the next round of [Regulation 18] public engagement and includes a background to, and the review of, previous consultation and engagement.
- 2.3 A communications strategy has been prepared for comment. The Strategy was developed in collaboration with the Communications Team. The intention is to use a multi-channel approach to communications to try to maximise the diversity of residents, organisations and businesses who can engage with and make comments on the Preferred Options Local Plan 2025.

3 LOCAL PLAN CONSULTATION – BACKGROUND

- 3.1 There are a number of formal stages of engagement that Local Authorities are required to undertake in line with planning regulations such as The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012. The stages include:
 - **Pre-production and evidence gathering stage (also known as Regulation 18):** This is part of the pre-production and evidence gathering stage for Development Plan Documents. This stage assists the Council in the creation of a final version of the document which will eventually be examined by a Planning Inspector and adopted by the Council as a document that will be used to assess and make decisions on planning applications
 - **Pre-Submission (Regulation 19 & 20):** At this stage, a final version of the Development Plan Document is produced alongside any evidence-based and supporting documents as required through regulation (22). This is referred to as the Proposed Submission document. A consultation will be held with all representations sent to the Planning Inspector. These documents are later examined.
 - **Examination (Regulation 23 to 25):** During the examination process there are a number of further opportunities for the public to participate, this includes being invited by the Planning Inspector to provide further information or to appear at a public examination session to voice

objections. In addition, if the Planning Inspector suggests that the Development Plan Document requires amendments, a public consultation will be held on the 'proposed modifications' to the document allowing people to voice their opinion on the suitability of these modifications.

3.2 Local Authorities across the country engage to varying degrees, some local authorities consult on regulation 18 and 19 stages only (outlined above) or on an Issues/Options Plan, Preferred Options Plan and a Submission Version of the plan (which is consulted upon before all comments are submitted to the planning inspectorate).

- To date the Council has undertaken the following rounds of public consultation (below) to ensure public engagement and input into the Local Plan.
Consultation on a [Statement of Community Involvement](#) and [Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report](#) from 1 February to 15 March 2023.
- Consultation on the [Land Availability Assessment Methodology](#) and [Settlement Hierarchy Methodology](#) from 29 March to 10 May 2023.
- [Call for Sites](#) from 29 March to 7 June 2023
- The Issues Engagement Papers from 26 April to 5 July 2023 with 3 options to help people respond:
 - [The Issues Engagement Paper](#) - an in-depth look at the issues including detailed questions to encourage comprehensive responses
 - [The Issues Summary Paper](#) - a quick look at the headline issues, with one or two open questions to get opinions
 - [The Issues Easy Read Version](#) - a simplified document with tick box questions.
- The Further Issues and options consultation from 18 September 2024 and 27 November 2024 which included:
 - [Further Issues and Options](#) - Set out options for what may be included in the new local plan. It also asks some questions about what is important to you.
 - [Land Availability Assessments](#) - Assessed sites that were put forward by landowners, developers, agents and interested third parties to see if they are potentially suitable or unsuitable for development.
 - [Sustainability Appraisal](#) - Assessed our strategies, options, sites and future policies against a series of sustainability objectives.
- The Additional Sites Consultation recently closed and ran from the 23 April 2025 to 4 June 2025 and included:
 - [Additional Sites Land Availability Assessments](#) - Assessed additional sites that were put forward by landowners, developers, agents and interested third

- parties to see if they are potentially suitable or unsuitable for development.
- [Additional Sites Sustainability Appraisal](#) – Assessed the additional sites against a series of sustainability objectives.

3.3 The consultations undertaken so far go significantly beyond the regulatory requirements allowing the public and stakeholders to comment on methodology papers, assessment of land submitted to the council and allowing early engagement to set out the themes and issues that the Local Plan should address. This has allowed the public to be involved in the earliest stages of Local Plan production, shaping it from the outset before any decisions have been made on the direction of travel. All consultations to date were also extended beyond the regulatory outlined 6 weeks to ten weeks to allow maximum time for those to respond.

4 FURTHER ISSUES AND OPTIONS CONSULTATION – ENGAGEMENT

4.1 The Further Issues and Options consultation ran between 18 September 2024 and 27 November 2024. The consultation period was extended beyond the statutory requirement of 6 weeks to ensure early engagement and input. In summary the following public engagement was undertaken.

4.2 Prior to the start of consultation workshops were held for Town and Parish councillors (2 workshops, offered online and in-person) and Members (1 workshop, online). This was followed up with an email providing slides, a recording of the presentation and briefing note to all. The presentation included a request for Town and Parish Councillors and Members to get involved and help spread the word. The briefing note included an overview of the consultation, the communications strategy, how to respond and a summary of the consultation documents.

4.3 Engagement packs were provided to Town and Parish Councils which were all picked up or distributed (by post to Parish Clerks) by the end of September. The packs included hard copies of the briefing note, consultation documents (a full copy of the Further Issues and Options consultation document and copies of the Land Availability Assessments and Sustainability Appraisals for their Town or Parish), posters (in A3 & A4 format), leaflets and a covering letter. Engagement Packs were designed to ensure that all residents within a Town/ Parish had access to the consultation documents to reduce the need to travel and enable greater accessibility.

4.4 The posters and leaflets provided a brief overview of the consultation and a description of the Local Plan. They included the dates and times for the public exhibitions, a QR code to the Let's Talk Huntingdonshire website and an email address to contact. Alternative options to respond were offered including email and paper forms (available upon request and at the public exhibitions).

- 4.5 At the commencement of consultation physical copies of the documents, posters and leaflets were distributed to all 11 libraries in Huntingdonshire and a copy was also provided at Pathfinder House.
- 4.6 In addition, a press release was issued at the start of consultation and published on the Huntingdonshire District Council website, social media platforms and the Hunts Post.
- 4.7 The consultation was also advertised on the Huntingdonshire District Council consultation webpage and further information was provided on the Local Plan Update Page. Under advisement the Let's Talk Huntingdonshire was used as a landing page to enhance outreach and provide key information and guides all on one platform. Let's Talk Huntingdonshire included a website link to the consultation portal on the frontpage banner, summaries of the topics and issues within the consultation documents, the inclusion of a video about the Local Plan Update and the consultations, FAQs, copies of the consultation documents and updated 'How to Respond' guides. This platform was promoted via social media and other media outlets to help people to navigate the consultation portal and understand the local plan process.
- 4.8 Posters and leaflets were provided to the mobile library service which covers the whole of Huntingdonshire, paper response forms were also posted to a number of parishes on request such as Yaxley.
- 4.9 Notification was sent at the beginning of the consultation to all those registered on the local plan consultation mailing list consisting of 5,000 consultees and agents. 2,306 new accounts were registered, an increase of 46% on the previous consultation.
- 4.10 Seven exhibitions were held in: Yaxley, Huntingdon, St Ives, Kimbolton, Sawtry, St Neots and Ramsey. Over 750 people attended the exhibitions comprising residents, Town and Parish Councillors and landowners. In comparison, the total number of attendees at previous exhibitions hosted for the Local Plan to 2036 consultation (7 exhibitions between 31 Aug – 23 Nov 2012) was 227. The exhibitions were an opportunity to learn more about the consultation, directed residents on how to respond to the consultation and provided the opportunity for residents to ask questions in person. Paper response forms were also available for those who wished to respond in writing.
- 4.11 The council attended multiple events to spread the word of the Local Plan consultation including: Invest in Huntingdonshire Intermediary Network, Cambs b2b (at Duxford and Peterborough), the Town and Parish Forum (including a presentation and question and answer session), The Climate Conference and Pride in Place: Visitor Economy event. At each event the team hosted a stall with exhibition boards, consultation documentation, leaflets and posters. This enabled further buy in from businesses and others to encourage involvement.
- 4.12 Regular updates about the consultation were provided to Town and Parish Councillors through the Parish Newsletter (4 updates), emails to Parish

Clerks and Chairs (2 emails) and through the Members weekly update (14 emails)

- 4.13 A social media campaign was conducted through Facebook, Twitter and Linked In. The campaign included a total of 11 posts (for each social media outlet) and included reminders of exhibition dates and locations, focus pieces on key topics, reminders to respond and release of Local Plan video (which provided an overview of the local plan, the consultation and key dates). Total impressions across all of the platforms was 41,726.
- 4.14 The Communications Team responded to queries from stakeholders on social media throughout the consultation and the Local Planning Policy Team responded and fielded queries assisting stakeholders and residents through the dedicated local plan email address and via phone.
- 4.15 During the consultation 5 articles were also published in the Hunts Post – written by Members including Cllr Mickelburgh, Lara Davenport-Ray, Taylor, Sarah Conboy and Tom Sanderson.
- 4.16 Advertisements publicising the Local Plan were placed on 7 Huntingdonshire District Council bin freighters, the route of which covered the whole district.
- 4.17 Large banners advertising the consultation were placed at local council owned parks including Huntingdon Riverside, Huntingdon Sapley Park, St Neots Riverside, St Neots Priory Park, St Neots Spar and St Ives Hill Rise. Banners were also installed at the four One Leisure Centre Venues: Ramsey, Huntingdon, St Ives and St Neots and posters and leaflets provided for those visiting the facilities.

5 FURTHER ISSUES AND OPTIONS CONSULTATION – ENGAGEMENT REVIEW

Successes

- 5.1 In total the number of responses received to the Further Issues and Options Consultation reached 6,982. Two of these responses comprised a petition totalling 387 signatures for sites in Hail Weston and 91 in Sibson. The Further Issues and Options Engagement Plan provided enhanced engagement in comparison to previous Local Plan Consultations.
- 5.2 When comparing these figures to the previous local plan consultation at a similar stage (for Huntingdonshire's Local Plan to 2036) the Council received 5,101 more responses, approximately 1400% greater.
- 5.3 Total impressions across all of the platforms as a result of the social media campaign was 41,726. This was an increase of 257% on the previous Issues consultation in 2023 which received 16,210 impressions.
- 5.4 QR codes on leaflets, posters, exhibition boards and banners received a total of 600 scans.

- 5.5 Engagement with Town and Parish Councils to encourage local engagement opportunities and information dissemination resulted in 27 Town and Parish councils sharing our posts on social media, most more than once. 25 Town and Parish Councils also publicised the consultation on their webpages and at least 8 held their own local plan events.
- 5.6 Comparison with nearby local authorities shows that Greater Cambridge at a similar stage of consultation (First Conversation 2020) received 7,874 comments. For reference the population of Greater Cambridge is 313,000 in comparison to Huntingdonshire's population of approximately 186,000. Similarly, Central Bedfordshire received 6,828 responses at their Regulation 18 draft Local Plan consultation with a population of 301,000.
- 5.7 The Council's preferred method of contact is online via the consultation portal, this enables the swift processing of responses allowing resources to be allocated to other business as usual requirements, fielding enquiries and progressing other elements of local plan creation to ensure that the Council can meet the submission deadline to the Planning Inspectorate of December 2026. Notwithstanding, the Local Plans Team (Planning Policy) understand the importance of accessibility and the need to provide alternative means to communicate with the Council in relation to the consultation. Other methods offered included in person at exhibitions, via email and letter and phone.
- 5.8 The number of responses received via different mediums recorded were as follows:
- Via the online consultation portal – 4,544 (65%)
 - Via email – 2,397 (34%)
 - Via letter/paper response form – 70 (1%)

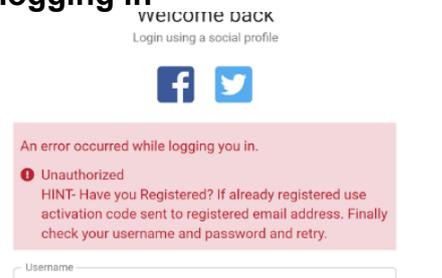
It should be noted that 29 of these responses were identified as 'inadmissible' and not counted in the final total number of responses, this is due to a number of reasons such as people submitting duplicate responses, updating their responses and some submitted blank responses.

- 5.9 The types of consultees were wide ranging from members of the public, neighbouring authorities, Town and Parish Councils, statutory consultees, landowners, developers, agents and special interest groups.

6 Challenges & Improvements

- 6.1 A number of challenges and issues were reported regarding the online consultation system. These issues were raised by the Planning Policy Team with the consultation portal provider or dealt with directly. Issues included:
- **Registration activation link not being received by consultee** – On most occasions the email was going to junk and spam folders and by the time they were accessed the link to activate accounts had timed out. Individuals were able to contact Local Plans team who manually activated accounts.

- **Error message ‘BE101 precondition required’ appeared to consultees when trying to submit comments** – the issue was raised with Objective (online consultation portal provider) in November 2024. Objective tested and recreated the error and implemented a fix. This issue has not been experienced since.
- **Consultees encountering the following message when logging in**



The issues was raised with and tested by Objective who found no software issue. It was likely a user error associated with agents who attempted to log in with no specific consultee to attach a comment to. This issue has not been experienced since.

- **Consultation portal and administration ‘back system’ running slowly including the public consultation portal** – Issue raised with Objective who advised this was due to the large number of traffic being directed to the consultation portal, particularly traffic from mobile phones. A fix was implemented by Objective to improve speed. This issue has not been experienced since.
- **Confusion regarding logging in** – the social media symbols confused some individuals who thought they had to log in via social media. Objective has a standard log in set up whereby a username and password can be used to log in or via another account such as social media. Objective are looking at a simpler log in, but this is part of a wider software update and there are no set timelines on when this will be implemented. Officers will ensure greater clarity is provided in consultation documentation e.g. briefing notes and information sheets to explain the log in process more clearly.

6.2 Some consultees reported difficulties in accessing the consultation portal and consultation material. The main landing page for the consultation was Let’s Talk Huntingdonshire whilst responding to the consultation online was via the Council’s online consultation system. The Planning Policy Team has consulted the Communications Team (the website owners) to identify any technical issues that may have impeded this process. They reported no technical issues with the Let’s Talk Huntingdonshire platform. Other potential reasons for this issue could be: The number of clicks to reach the online consultation portal, lack of clear signposting to information and the consultation portal from Let’s Talk Huntingdonshire and the number of consultation documents being consulted upon at one time.

7 COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

- 7.1 The next stage of consultation will be the Preferred Options Local Plan (a draft Local Plan) which will be accompanied by a Sustainability Appraisal (which will also be available for comment). The consultation is due to be held between October and November 2025.
- 7.2 The production and adoption of the Local Plan is identified as a Corporate Priority (34). To enable the Council to submit the Local Plan for examination by the Planning Inspectorate under the current planning system the Council must submit a Full Local Plan by December 2026. In line with the timeline set out in the Council's [Local Development Scheme](#) this will also require a final round of consultation in Summer 2026 prior to submission. Therefore to enable the Council to meet these targets and allow time for the finalisation of evidence based studies, refinement of policies and to continue discussions with organisations as required by regulation all future consultation will be scheduled to run for the statutory period of 6 weeks.
- 7.3 The Communications Strategy for the Preferred Options Local Plan consultation has been provided in Appendix A. The Communications Strategy proposes a continuation of the engagement approach of the Further Issues and Options Consultation with some amendments and recommendations.
- 7.4 In summary key changes to address issues experienced during the previous consultation include:
- Modifications to Let's Talk Huntingdonshire including clearer communication identifying the function of Let's Talk Huntingdonshire as a way of seeing FAQs and finding 'How to Respond' guides.
 - Further guidance in the briefing notes and how to respond guides to address how to log into the consultation portal and submit representations
 - In addition to the 'How to Respond' guides, a 'How to Respond' video will be created to be released on digital platforms.
 - Linking the consultation portal as priority on social media posts and QR codes rather than Let's Talk Huntingdonshire to reduce the number of clicks people need to make to access the consultation.
 - Response forms distributed to Town/ Parish Councils and members via email at the start of the consultation to allow councillors to assist residents with limited internet access.
- 7.5 In addition, a number of recommendations have been included which have the potential enhance engagement, these are subject to financial and staff resources and will require review. Recommendations include:]
- Paid social media: targeted Facebook adverts to reach people in certain areas and age groups.
 - Advertisement boards in town centre locations or use of digital screens in Market Towns.
 - Site allocation notices to be put up in areas where there is a site included within the Preferred Options consultation

- Attendance at the Developers Forum which has been reintroduced following the Planning Peer Review.
- Shorter format videos posted on Facebook with Councillors covering key information and topics.
- Hold workshops and focus groups for relevant stakeholders.
- Graphic design assistance to help enhance marketing material such as posters, leaflets, banners and potentially exhibition boards.

8 KEY IMPACTS / RISKS

- 8.1 The Council is currently in the ‘tilted balance’, therefore fast-tracking the Local Plan for Submission to the Planning Inspectorate by December 2026 reduces the amount of time that the Council will remain in this position. A six week consultation window will be one of the factors that will assist the Council in achieving this deadline.

9 WHAT ACTIONS WILL BE TAKEN/TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- 9.1 The timetable for Local Plan consultation is set out in the [Local Development Scheme](#) with updates on Progress provided within the [Annual Monitoring Report](#).

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

- 10.1 The production and adoption of a Local Plan aligns strongly with priority 2 of the Corporate Plan 2023-2028 which seeks to create a better Huntingdonshire for future generations. It contains options relating to each aspect of ‘Improving housing’, ‘Forward thinking economic growth’ and ‘Lowering our carbon emissions’. Within the Action Plan item 34. Specifically references the Local Plan as one of the mechanisms that can assist in achieving the vision “Continue the update to the Local Plan, including updating evidence bases in line with National Planning Policy”. The Local Plan also aligns with the aims of priority 1 to improve the quality of life for local people through options relating to creating well-designed places that people are proud to call home, providing affordable homes to help those who need them and attracting employers and visitors.

11 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The Council must follow specific Regulations in preparing the Local Plan. Eventually, once the final document is adopted, the Council has a legal duty to determine planning applications in accordance with development plan policies unless there are material considerations that indicate otherwise.

12 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 There are limited financial resource implications directly for the engagement work, primarily for exhibition hall hire and board production, publicity materials and printing. Staffing for exhibitions will be drawn from across the wider Planning department. Further discussion will be required to determine if the additional recommendations identified in paragraph 7.5 can be achieved.

13 REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDED DECISIONS

- 13.1 Public engagement is a statutorily required element of local plan preparation. It will also contribute towards achieving action 32 of the Corporate Plan 2023 – 2028’s annual Action Plan for this year, “Continue the update to the Local plan, including updating evidence bases in line with National Planning Policy, particularly where it relates to Economy, Environment and Housing.” Receipt and consideration of responses from residents, businesses, organisations and other stakeholders will contribute towards preparation of the Local Plan Update.
- 13.2 It is recognised that some members of the public, including Parish Council’s raised concerns through previous rounds of engagement regarding engagement. This approach ensures Members have oversight of the proposed approach to engagement and can support their communities through the next phase of consultation.

14 LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED

Appendix 1 – Preferred Options Local Plan Communications Strategy

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- [Town and Country Planning \(Local Planning\) \(England\) Regulations 2012](#)
- [Statement of Community Involvement](#)
- [Local Development Scheme](#)
- [Annual Monitoring Report](#)

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