

Public
Key Decision - Yes

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: Draft Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023

Meeting/Date: Cabinet – 21 March 2023

Executive Portfolio: Executive Councillor for Planning

Report by: Chief Planning Officer

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Executive Summary:

When developing local plans, the Council must adhere to Government legislation and policy such as the National Planning Policy Framework and National Planning Practice Guidance.

Paragraph 9 of the National Planning Policy Framework requires that 'Planning policies and decisions should play an active role in guiding development towards sustainable solutions, but in doing so should take local circumstances into account, to reflect the character, needs and opportunities of each area.'

Huntingdonshire's Local Plan to 2036 did this through the establishment of a settlement hierarchy for development, supported by additional policies to identify what type of development is acceptable and where.

The Huntingdonshire Draft Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 has been developed to reassess settlements and aid in the establishment of a settlement hierarchy for the next Local Plan. Identifying those areas that are the most sustainable will help the Council to begin the process of finding suitable locations for growth that provide the most social, environmental and economic benefits for the district and local communities. The consultation document sets out the proposed methodology for the assessment of the sustainability of settlements within Huntingdonshire. Measures used to assess the proposed indicators have been derived using a combination of available data, existing key national guidance for example, the DfT journey time statistics; relevant studies (such as Local Transport Plans that assess the social impact of commuting time) and reports and papers such as The Royal Society for Public Health's study 'Health on the High Street 2019 - Running on Empty (which outline and justify the importance of certain services and facilities).

The finalised settlement hierarchy will be part of a suite of studies including but not limited to strategic flood risk assessments, transport assessments, housing need and infrastructure assessments and requirements, which will all contribute

towards the identification of areas most suitable for sustainable growth in the district. This will enable the Local Plan to demonstrate that it can meet the requirements set out in the National Planning Policy Framework.

It is proposed that public consultation is undertaken for six weeks starting shortly after this meeting and the relevant call-in period to enable people and organisations to contribute towards the development of a settlement hierarchy and provide local knowledge and feedback on the proposed method of assessment.

Following public engagement, the comments submitted will be assessed and amendments made to the settlement hierarchy methodology where considered appropriate. The comments and any changes made will be documented in the Council's Statement of Consultation. Once finalised, the Council will assess the district's settlements using the final indicators. The final assessments will be fed into the next stage of plan making and published as an evidence document.

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet is

RECOMMENDED

- To approve the contents of the draft Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023; and
- To agree that the draft Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 be published for public consultation for six weeks

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report sets out the purpose and content of the draft Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 and asks that Cabinet approve the contents of the draft version of Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 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 The production of a local plan is enforced and guided by Statutory Instruments (Orders, Rules and Regulations) and Acts of Parliament (Acts). Two of the key items are the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended) and the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 (as amended). Section 19 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 specifically identifies matters that must be taken into account when preparing a local plan. This includes national policies and advice contained in guidance issued by the Secretary of State such as the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG).
- 2.2 The NPPF (paragraph 20) asks that Local Plans contain strategic policies. These strategic policies should set out an overall strategy for the pattern and scale of development and make sufficient provision for:
- a) housing (including affordable housing), employment, retail, leisure and other commercial development;
 - b) infrastructure for transport, telecommunications, security, waste management, water supply, wastewater, flood risk and coastal change management, and the provision of minerals and energy (including heat);
 - c) community facilities (such as health, education and cultural infrastructure); and
 - d) conservation and enhancement of the natural, built and historic environment, including landscapes and green infrastructure, and planning measures to address climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- 2.3 Paragraph 8 of the NPPF also requires that local plans meet the principles of sustainable development; achieving net gains from an economic, social and environmental perspective.
- 2.4 This consultation paper sets out the proposed methodology for assessing the sustainability of settlements which will help inform the creation of a settlement hierarchy and future development strategy/pattern of development for Huntingdonshire's next Local Plan. It will assist the Council in ascertaining the most sustainable options for development and ensure that the Council has a robust evidence base to demonstrate that it meets legislation and the requirements of plan-making as set out in the NPPF.

3. DRAFT SETTLEMENT HIERARCHY METHODOLOGY 2023

3.1 The draft version of the Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 provides a consistent, measurable methodology for assessing the sustainability of all settlements in Huntingdonshire. This will help inform the creation of a settlement hierarchy and future development strategy/pattern of development for Huntingdonshire's next Local Plan.

3.2 The draft Settlement Hierarchy Methodology covers the following matters:

- Chapter 1 – Introduction
- Chapter 2 – Context
- Chapter 3 - Geographical Study Area
- Chapter 4 - Topic Areas and Weighting
- Chapter 5 - Settlement Hierarchy Proposed Methodology
- Chapter 6 - Sample Score Sheet of Settlements
- Chapter 7 - Next Steps
- Chapter 8 - Appendices - Data Scoping and Refinement

3.3 Chapters 1 and 2 of the draft Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 introduce the concept of a settlement hierarchy and set out some of the key national legislation, policy and guidance that have influenced its development. A section on *Sustainable Development Principles* in Chapter 2 reflects on these influences and summarises some of the main themes behind the principle of sustainable development (page 5 of Appendix 1).

3.4 For further context the section *Huntingdonshire's Local Plan to 2036* (page 6 of Appendix 1) explains the current Local Plan's development strategy and settlement hierarchy, which comprises:

- Spatial Planning Areas
- Key Service Centres
- Small Settlements; and
- The Countryside

Engagement on issues relating to the Local Plan update will explore whether this settlement hierarchy remains appropriate or if a revised settlement hierarchy would better meet the future needs of the district and if so, what that hierarchy might look like.

3.5 Chapter 3 – Geographical Study Area (page 7 of Appendix 1) looks at Huntingdonshire as a whole and proposes that all settlements with 30 or more residential units are assessed using the proposed settlement hierarchy methodology. Settlements that fall below this threshold (hamlets) are proposed to be subject to a basic survey to illustrate their unsustainable nature whilst ensuring that a well-rounded assessment is conducted across as many settlements as possible within the district. A specific question is posed at the end of this section asking consultees if they agree with the approach proposed providing an opportunity for the public to influence the scope of the assessment.

3.6 Chapter 4 (pages 8 and 9 of Appendix 1) takes readers through the process of how the settlement hierarchy methodology was developed. It starts by explaining the main 'topic areas' that were identified as relevant to assess the sustainability of a settlement, these were guided by the requirements set out in the NPPF and include:

- Health
- Education
- Retail and Services
- Sports and Leisure
- Culture and Community
- Transport
- Communications; and
- Employment

3.7 Next, the approach to identifying indicators for each topic area is explained as a four-part process comprising:

- Step One – determining the key factors/criteria that contribute towards sustainable development for each topic area eg. important assessment criteria for Culture and Community could focus on cultural buildings, libraries, community buildings and public houses
- Step Two – identifying potential indicators and sourcing data that could be used to measure and assess the key factors/criteria eg. public houses could be assessed by identifying if there is a public house in a settlement, or by counting how many public houses there are. Data that could be used to assess this could be public house data from the Office of National Statistics, or CAMRA What Pub search facility.
- Step Three – a review of all proposed indicators and additional information to select a preferred indicator and create a proposed scoring mechanism for that eg. settlements could be scored from 10 to 2, with 10 being a settlement with the highest number public houses and 2 the lowest.
- Step Four – identification of final proposed indicator and weighting attached to said indicator eg. a weighting of times 2 is given to the indicator as a public house is used by some of the population, all of the time.

3.8 Chapter Four adds extra justification for the weighting of indicators (page 9 of Appendix 1). Weighting was devised to assist in establishing the significance of each indicator and its contribution towards the sustainability of a settlement. Each indicator was attributed a weighting based on frequency of use and the amount of the population that 'use' that service or facility. A specific question is posed at the end of this section asking consultees if they agree with this approach providing an opportunity for the public to influence the scope of the assessment.

3.9 Chapter 5 (pages 10 to 20) sets out in full the proposed settlement hierarchy methodology and includes each indicator, proposed scoring mechanism and weighting, below each topic area eg. Health; a maximum score is provided and the data sources that will be used to assess each indicator. Each topic area is followed by a question giving people the

opportunity to agree with the proposed indicator, express a preference for one of the other indicators considered in preparation of the methodology which are set out in each topic area appendix or to put forward their own suggested indicator. The means of assessment for settlements under 30 residential units is also set out in chapter 5. This chapter is expected to be the main focus of the consultation.

- 3.10 Measures used to assess the proposed indicators have been derived using a combination of available data, existing key national guidance for example, the DfT journey time statistics; relevant studies (such as Local Transport Plans that assess the social impact of commuting time) and reports and papers such as The Royal Society for Public Health's study 'Health on the High Street 2019 - Running on Empty (which outline and justify the importance of certain services and facilities).
- 3.11 To provide some examples of how the settlement hierarchy methodology would work in practice, four sample score sheets for settlements of varying size are provided in Chapter 6 (pages 21 to 34). The settlements chosen include St Neots (a main Market Town), Warboys (currently classified as a Key Service Centre), Stilton and Bythorn (two villages currently categorised as small settlements, but significantly different in size).
- 3.12 Chapter 7 (page 35) identifies the next steps of what happens after the consultation. This is further explained in section 5 of this Cabinet report.
- 3.13 Finally, a suite of appendices is provided (pages 35 onwards of Appendix 1). These are broken down into topic areas eg. Health, Education, Employment and allow those who wish to understand the methodology in more detail to see how each indicator has been developed. Each appendix is structured as follows:
- Step One – determining the key factors/criteria that contribute towards sustainable development for each topic area,
 - Step Two – identifying potential indicators and sourcing data that could be used to measure and assess the key factors/criteria,
 - Step Three – A review of all proposed indicators and additional information to select a preferred indicator and create a proposed scoring mechanism for that.

4. COMMENTS OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

- 4.1 The Panel discussed the Draft Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 at its meeting on 1st March 2023.
- 4.2 The Panel heard in response to a question from Councillor Gardener, that travel times shown were during peak time however travel times to doctors surgeries were during non-peak times as this is when most residents would access that service. In response to a further question, the Panel heard that the frequency of bus services had been considered rather than individual operators and that the TING service had not been included at this point as it is unknown whether this service will still be available at the time of the Local Plan's final publication.

- 4.3 It was observed by Councillors Gray and Pickering that significant portions of the data for St Neots appeared to be out of date with references being made to named businesses which had been out of business for many years, it was felt that this quality of data called into question the validity of the report. It was confirmed that the data collection occurred some time ago and that the data would be updated prior to Cabinet in relation to St Neots and Restaurants. The Panel heard that the team had used more in depth data to build a more comprehensive and relevant settlement assessment however, they were aware that more data quality checks were needed, it was hoped that town and parish councils would be able to assist in this task over the Summer.
- 4.4 Councillor Pickering observed that whilst it was useful to know how many residents could be served by a GP Surgery, it would be helpful to understand how many residents they are currently serving and therefore how sustainable this would be in the face of further development.
- 4.5 Following a further question from Councillor Pickering, the Panel heard that the Methodology needed to be tailored to Huntingdonshire in order to develop a robust plan which could then be scrutinised by the independent planning inspector, however all feedback received would be considered and adjustments made as the progress continues.
- 4.6 Following an observation from Councillor Corney on the 6 week consultation period causing issues to those parishes with bi or tri monthly meeting cycles, the Panel heard that although timescales were not statutory at this point, this would be the statutory timescale later on, therefore by using this timescale the process would be more familiar in the final stages. It was agreed that following the meeting, town and parish councils would be contacted and advised of the forthcoming consultation with the option to speak to the Planning team if the 6 week period would cause them significant issues.
- 4.7 The Panel heard, following a question from Councillor Gray that, any entirely new settlements would be considered separately to this document and would go through the usual Planning processes.
- 4.8 Councillor Gardener observed that parishes which border the A14 may be able to advise on alternative routes which residents use to safely access the road and that he was currently working with National Highways on improvements in this area.
- 4.9 The Panel heard, following a question from Councillor Pickering, that there is limited interaction between this report and the Call for Sites at present, there will be more interaction as the process develops.
- 4.10 Councillor Harvey enquired whether further education colleges were included within the secondary school information detailed, the Panel were advised that this would be checked and reported back. Following a further question the Panel heard that Dentists were not included due to the mainly private and chargeable nature of the service.

- 4.11 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. TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION & WHAT ACTIONS WILL BE TAKEN

- 5.1 Public engagement on the draft version of the Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 is proposed to run for six weeks after this meeting and its call-in period.
- 5.2 At the close of consultation, the comments made will be assessed and changes made where considered appropriate. The comments and any changes made will be documented in the Council's Statement of Consultation or equivalent documentation.
- 5.3 Once finalised the Council will assess each settlement using the final indicators. The final assessments will be published as part of the evidence informing preparation of the Local Plan.
- 5.4 The finalised settlement hierarchy will form part of a suite of studies including but not limited to strategic flood risk assessments, transport assessments, housing need and infrastructure assessments and requirements. Consideration will also be given to the Council's Corporate Strategies and priorities such as The Place Strategy and the Climate Strategy as they are finalised insofar as they relate to the Local Plan update. This more in-depth assessment will be used to identify areas most suitable for sustainable growth in the district and will enable the local plan to demonstrate that it can meet the requirements set out in the national planning policy framework.

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

- 6.1 The production of a Settlement Hierarchy Methodology aligns with the objective 'improving housing provision' as set out in the Corporate Plan 2022/23, a key action of which is:

"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."

- 6.2 The Settlement Hierarchy Methodology will assess the relative sustainability of settlements within the district. Alongside a more in-depth assessment this will be used to identify areas most suitable for sustainable growth in the district. This in turn will guide the location of and/or protection of housing, employment, green spaces, infrastructure, and community

services and facilities all of which work towards the corporate objectives of:

- Tackling climate change and caring for the environment
- Enhancing employment opportunities and supporting businesses
- Supporting our residents needs
- Improving housing provision
- Strengthening our communities

6.3 Consultation on the draft version of the Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 also adheres to the Corporate Plan's central approach to develop 'an enduring dialogue with residents, meaningfully engaging with them in the widest possible aspects of our work and listening and responding to concerns in shaping policies and priorities'. The consultation will allow people and organisations to feed into the early stage of local plan preparation and contribute towards the assessment of sustainability of settlements within the district.

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 review of the sustainability of settlements within the district through the establishment of a settlement hierarchy methodology is part of this process. The assessment of settlements through a finalised methodology will identify (in combination with other evidence), whether the current Local Plan settlement hierarchy and strategy for development is still the preferred approach, or whether alternative scenarios may need to be explored.

7.3 Providing a comprehensive assessment to inform the preferred strategy for development will also ensure that the Council can justify their decisions when the Local Plan is independently examined by the Planning Inspectorate on behalf of the Secretary of State.

8. HEALTH, ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

8.1 Paragraph 9 of the National Planning Policy Framework requires that 'planning policies and decisions should play an active role in guiding development towards sustainable solutions, but in doing so should take local circumstances into account, to reflect the character, needs and opportunities of each area.' This includes ensuring that the Local Plan and its policies meet the principles of sustainable development; achieving net gains from an economic, social and environmental perspective as follows:

- a) 'an economic objective – to help build a strong, responsive and competitive economy, by ensuring that sufficient land of the right types is available in the right places and at the right time to support growth, innovation and improved productivity; and by identifying and coordinating the provision of infrastructure;
- b) a social objective – to support strong, vibrant and healthy communities, by ensuring that a sufficient number and range of homes can be provided to meet the needs of present and future generations; and by fostering well-designed, beautiful and safe places, with accessible services and open spaces that reflect current and future needs and support communities' health, social and cultural well-being; and
- c) an environmental objective – to protect and enhance our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, improving biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy.'

(NPPF, paragraph 8)

8.2 The review of the sustainability of settlements within the district through the establishment of a settlement hierarchy methodology is part of this process. The assessment of settlements through a finalised methodology will identify (in combination with other evidence), the most sustainable and achievable way to plan development sustainably, creating positive impacts on health, the environment and climate change.

9. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDED DECISIONS

9.1 Engagement on the draft version of the Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 is considered beneficial in meeting many of the Council's Corporate Plan objectives. In particular it meets the required key action under 'improving housing provision' of 'commencing an update of the local plan'.

9.2 It is one of the key first steps towards the development of an evidence base to support preparation of a full update to the Local Plan as approved at Cabinet on 24th January 2023.

9.3 Engagement on the draft Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 also adheres to the Corporate Plan's central approach to develop 'an enduring dialogue with residents, meaningfully engaging with them in the widest possible aspects of our work and listening and responding to concerns in shaping policies and priorities.' The consultation will allow people and organisations to feed into the early stage of local plan preparation and contribute towards the assessment of sustainability of settlements within the district.

9.4 The final methodology will identify (in combination with other evidence), the most sustainable and achievable way to plan development, creating positive impacts on health, the environment and climate change. This in turn will help the Local Plan to demonstrate that it can achieve the

principles of sustainable development as set out in paragraph 8 of the National Planning Policy Framework by taking into account social, economic and environmental considerations.

9.5 The recommendations are therefore:

- To approve the contents of the Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023
- To agree that the Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023 can be published for public consultation commencing on 29 March 2023 and concluding on 10 May 2023.

10. LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED

Appendix 1 – Draft Settlement Hierarchy Methodology 2023

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- [Cabinet - Tuesday, 24 January 2023](#)
- [The Town and Country Planning \(Local Planning\) \(England\) Regulations 2012](#)
- [Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004](#)
- [National Planning Policy Framework](#)
- [National Planning Practice Guidance](#)

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