

**Consultation on the draft Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report
(Report by Head of Planning Services)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report recommends that the Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report (the Scoping Report) is approved as the basis for Sustainability Appraisal of the Huntingdonshire Local Plan to 2036. A draft Scoping Report has been prepared and consulted on. Taking into account comments received, and any additional comments from the Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Wellbeing) Panel, the document can be approved with any necessary amendments.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 When drawing up new planning documents the effects they will have on the environment and people's quality of life, both now and in the future are some of the most important things to consider. To be sure that the plan does not cause environmental, social or economic problems there is a system of appraisal known as Sustainability Appraisal (SA). This appraisal system is at the heart of the plan production process and is set out in European and British law.
- 2.2 SA, as a legally required process, has been the focus of a number of recent legal challenges where people who are opposed to particular local plans have successfully challenged how the SA process had been undertaken. A recent court decision concerning the Joint Core Strategy for Norwich will require the authorities there to return to the plan production process with significant impacts on resources both financially and in terms of the time involved with going through stages of plan production again. It is therefore clear that it is worthwhile ensuring that the SA process is completed in a robust manner, in line with the relevant legislation and guidance.
- 2.3 The SA process is divided into five stages. The Scoping Report and consultation on it make up the first stage. There are three roles for the Scoping Report: it needs to determine what environmental, social or economic issues should be tackled by looking at influencing factors including existing plans and programmes that the Local Plan will need to work with and data about the existing situation; secondly it needs to come up with a system for appraising the alternative options for the Local Plan to see how they could impact upon the issues identified; the final role is to establish a methodology for applying the appraisal system.

3. CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT SCOPING REPORT

- 3.1 The Council is required to consult on the Scoping Report with the Environment Agency, Natural England and English Heritage. These bodies are known as the SA bodies. In the interests of openness and to encourage engagement with production of the Local Plan the consultation has been open to anyone to make comments. The period for consultation is statutorily set at five weeks.

- 3.2 At the time of writing the consultation is still open and is due to close on 30 March 2012. There have only been a very small number of comments received so far and as such it is considered that to summarise them in this report may give undue emphasis to these early comments. Instead a full summary will be presented to Members at the meetings of Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet as they will take place after the close of the consultation period.

4. RECOMMENDATION

- 4.1 It is recommended that Cabinet authorises the Executive Councillor for Strategic Planning and Housing, in conjunction with the Head of Planning Services, to finalise and approve the Scoping Report.

Background Information

The consultation document and full comments are available on the Council's consultation portal: <http://consult.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/portal>

CONTACT OFFICER - enquiries about this report to Paul Bland, Planning Services Manager (Policy) on 01480 388430