

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>Local Plan Update: Revised Growth Strategy</b>
<b>FOR CONSIDERATION BY</b>	The Executive on Friday, 12 November 2021
<b>WARD</b>	None Specific;
<b>LEAD OFFICER</b>	Director, Place and Growth - Steve Moore
<b>LEAD MEMBER</b>	Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement - Wayne Smith

## **PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)**

The purpose of this report is to seek Executive's approval to carry out consultation on the Local Plan Update (LPU): Revised Growth Strategy. The LPU is the document that will guide how development will be managed in most circumstances. Once adopted, the LPU will replace the Council's current planning policies that are set out in the Core Strategy and Managing Development Delivery (MDD) local plans. Adoption of the LPU will enable the production of subordinate or supplementary planning documents and guidance such as the Borough Design Guide, which must be based on adopted planning policy.

The Regulations governing the preparation of local plans require that plans are prepared in consultation with the local community and other stakeholders.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

That the Executive:

- 1) agree the Local Plan Update: Revised Growth Strategy consultation document (as set out in enclosure 1 to the report) for consultation;
- 2) agrees the consultation framework as set out in the report;
- 3) agrees that minor changes to the content of the Local Plan Update: Revised Growth Strategy consultation document, and the production of studies and materials produced to support the consultation, be delegated to the Director of Place and Growth in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

National planning policy requires local authorities to regularly review, and where necessary, update their local plans – the documents that contains the council's planning policies and are used as the starting point for determining planning applications. Whilst the Core Strategy and Managing Development Delivery local plans are still working to manage development now, they are intended to do this to 2026.

The preparation of a new local plan – the Local Plan Update (LPU) - looking further into the future will ensure that planning policies continue to be effective in managing the

decisions on development proposals by the council, and where these are appealed, by government appointed planning inspectors.

Without effective planning policies, there would be no real control or influence over where and how new housing and other types of development take place. This could lead to housing and other forms of development being allowed in poor locations, being of lower quality, and in places where infrastructure cannot be improved to help deal with the impacts.

Local plans must be prepared in consultation with the local community and other stakeholders.

The council consulted on a Draft Local Plan in February 2020. A central plank of the Draft Local Plan was the creation of a garden town at Grazeley. Subsequent to agreeing the Draft Local Plan, a change in legislation resulted in the redetermination of the Urgent Action Area and the Detailed Emergency Planning Zone around AWE Burghfield. The redetermination unexpectedly extended the area where emergency plans must be in place to incorporate for the first time both the area of Grazeley as well as the villages of Three Mile Cross and Spencers Wood. The change means that the Grazeley garden town proposal, and therefore the strategy proposed by the Draft Local Plan, is no longer achievable.

Alternative strategies for the new local plan have been considered and a recommended revised spatial strategy defined. The new approach retains the principles of the Draft Local Plan including the expressed preferences of residents for development needs to be met through large scale development, where infrastructure can be planned alongside.

The Revised Growth Strategy proposed the allocation of a new Strategic Development Location (SDL) on land south of the M4 between Shinfield, Arborfield and Sindlesham. In addition, a number of new smaller development allocations are proposed across the borough.

The new SDL has been assessed as the most sustainable and suitable option to meet the majority of remaining additional housing needs in the plan period to 2037/38. It offers the opportunity to create new community, well supported by infrastructure so limiting the need to travel by car for everyday journeys, and the creation of a significant publicly accessible green space along the river corridor with ecological enhancements, an area without such access currently. Recognised also is the opportunity to provide housing in proximity to jobs.

The recommendation of the report is that Executive approved the Revised Growth Strategy for consultation. All comments received in response will be taken into account in preparing the final version of the new local plan. This will be subject to further consultation and subsequently examination by a government appointed planning inspector.

## **BACKGROUND**

The council's principal planning policies are contained in the Core Strategy local plan (adopted 2010) and Managing Development Delivery local plan (MDD) (adopted 2014).

National planning policy requires local authorities to regularly review, and where necessary, update their local plans. Whilst the Core Strategy and MDD are still working to manage development now, they are intended to do this to 2026. While they contain some flexibility to coordinate development for a longer period, the preparation of a new local plan – the Local Plan Update (LPU) - looking further into the future will ensure that planning policies continue to be effective in managing the decisions on development proposals by the council, and where these are appealed, by government appointed planning inspectors.

Without effective planning policies, there would be no real control or influence over where and how new housing and other types of development take place. This could lead to housing and other forms of development being allowed in poor locations, being of lower quality, and in places where infrastructure cannot be improved to help deal with the impacts, e.g. pressures on roads, schools and community facilities. The lack of control and coordination would likely lead to a higher scale of housebuilding across the borough, as has been experienced in the period before the adoption of the Core Strategy.

### **Consultation and Draft Local Plan February 2020**

Local plans must be prepared in consultation with the local community and other stakeholders. Through early consultations, respondents expressed clear preferences. These include:

- Preference for development needs to be substantially met through large scale developments, where infrastructure can be planned, funded and provided alongside.
- Preference for large developments to be located where there is good accessibility to transport links, are adjacent to existing settlements and ensures the delivery of new infrastructure.
- Recognition that a range of approaches are required to meet development needs, including size of site and location across the borough.
- Preference for infrastructure to be provided early, and where possible ahead of development, to limit impacts.
- Acknowledgement of the need to understand changes in the employment and retail markets and allowing areas to adapt positively to future requirements.
- The need to protect the identity of places, and the role of the countryside and Green Belt in achieving this.

The council prepared and consulted on a Draft Local Plan in February 2020. The Draft Local Plan had regard to the views and preferences expressed through earlier consultations and technical evidence.

A central plank of the Draft Local Plan was the creation of a garden town at Grazeley in the west of the borough. This provided an opportunity to create a new community including around 15,000 homes across land within Wokingham Borough and West Berkshire District. The proposal was jointly investigated by the two local authorities plus Reading Borough Council.

Subsequent to agreeing the Draft Local Plan, a change in legislation resulted in the redetermination of the Urgent Action Area and the Detailed Emergency Planning Zone around AWE Burghfield. The redetermination unexpectedly extended the area where emergency plans must be in place to incorporate for the first time both the area of Grazeley as well as the villages of Three Mile Cross and Spencers Wood. The change resulted in objections to the Grazeley garden town proposal from the Defence Nuclear Organisation (part of the Ministry of Defence) and the Office for Nuclear Regulation.

In light of the changed circumstances, the Grazeley garden town proposal, and therefore the strategy proposed by the Draft Local Plan, is no longer achievable.

The option of not agreeing an alternative or updated strategy would leave the council with no real control over where and how new housing and other types of development take place as explained above. It would also leave the council vulnerable to intervention by the government regarding exercising its planning function.

A high-level summary of the matters raised through the Draft Local Plan consultation is available on the council's website.

## **Vision and objectives**

The Draft Local Plan set out a vision for what Wokingham Borough should be like in the future with a new local plan in place. This vision was supported by 10 objectives, some of which are listed below, which set out what we want to achieve to make the vision a reality.

The broad philosophy of the vision and objectives remains sound and continues to reflect the clear preferences expressed to date.

The vision is:

- I. A borough that focuses on the needs of our residents.
- II. A borough that will be sustainable for years to come.
- III. A borough where people choose to live, learn and work because the places we build and the places we protect are valued and enriching.

The objectives include:

- Making the fullest contribution possible to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change and the transition to a low-carbon economy.
- Reduce the need to travel and widen travel choice, by providing local opportunities to access learning and employment, services and facilities, through ensuring that options for walking, cycling and public transport are attractive, accessible for all, convenient and safe, and by enabling digital connectivity.
- Maintain and strengthen the sense of place by securing quality designed development through protecting and enhancing the distinctive historic environment, landscape character, townscape character and biodiversity value, assisting vibrancy, and by keeping settlements separate.
- Champion thriving town and local centres to provide the focus of their communities both in social and economic activity, ensuring they can adapt to the challenges they face.

- Enable conditions to allow the economy to creatively grow by being adaptable to structural and technological change, ensuring the economic benefits are felt by all.
- Facilitate timely provision of new and improved infrastructure by working with providers to achieve focused investment and by securing appropriate benefits from new development.

## **Revised Growth Strategy - overview**

The Revised Growth Strategy focuses on those policies which relate to the scale and pattern of development, particularly where land is proposed to be allocated for development.

The Revised Growth Strategy retains the key principles and allocations set out in the Draft Local Plan, however the latter has been updated to reflect a different pattern of development across the borough.

Key principles to be retained include ensuring that identified development needs can be met with adequate infrastructure, in a manner that enables improvements to quality of life, reduces the need to travel, adapts to and mitigates against the impacts of climate change to achieve a carbon neutral future, and maintains and strengthens a sense of place.

With regard to the pattern of development, the main differences to the Draft Local Plan are:

- The removal of the Grazeley garden town;
- The identification of a new garden village on land south of the M4 between Shinfield, Arborfield and Sindlesham, referred to as Hall Farm / Loddon Valley;
- The identification of a significant area of additional housing within the South Wokingham Strategic Development Location; and
- The identification of additional smaller development sites within and adjacent to a number of villages across the borough.

## **Spatial Strategy and sites proposed for allocation**

The strategy established by our existing Core Strategy local plan focused the majority of development in four Strategic Development Locations (North and South Wokingham, Arborfield Garrison and South of the M4). This approach has enabled significant new infrastructure to be delivered alongside new homes, helping us to mitigate impacts and allowing opportunity to retain the character of our towns and villages through actions such as the retention of gardens.

The four Strategic Development Locations will continue to make a significant contribution to meeting development needs. Further land is however required to meet the medium and longer term needs and to address the national policy requirement for a proportion of land to be met on small sites under one hectare in size.

In line with the expressed preferences outlined above, an assessment of strategic scale development opportunities has been undertaken. This shows that the creation of a new Strategic Development Location at Hall Farm / Loddon Valley is the most sustainable and suitable option to meet the majority of remaining additional housing needs in the plan period to 2037/38. It offers the opportunity to create new community, well

supported by infrastructure so limiting the need to travel by car for everyday journeys, and the creation of a significant publicly accessible green space along the river corridor with economical enhancements, an area without such access currently. Recognised also is the opportunity to provide housing in proximity to jobs. This is not to assume that residents will necessarily work in the immediate area, wider travel will always be necessary and must be considered, but there is clearly an opportunity for this.

With continued delivery of existing SDLs and proposed allocation of a new SDL at Hall Farm / Loddon Valley, only moderate land is required from the 300+ areas promoted across the rest of the borough to meet development needs. These are spread across a number of settlements and take advantage of previously developed land where this is available.

### Local Green Space and sites proposed for allocation

National planning policy provides for an optional designation of Local Green Space (LGS). This allows communities to identify and protect green areas of particular importance to them. The Draft Plan proposed the designation of 12 LGS, helping to ensure that the value of these areas is reflected in the consideration of any development proposals.

Following the Draft Local Plan Consultation, the council proactively wrote to parish/town councils and local amenity groups to enquire whether they wished to nominate any additional areas. As a result, 100+ nominations were received. All sites have been assessed against national planning policy/guidance, with complying with the criteria proposed to be allocated. Over 70 areas are proposed for designation.

### **Sustainability Appraisal**

All local plans are required to be appraisal through a Sustainability Appraisal (SA) and subject to a Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA).

The SA considered ways that the plan can contribute to improvements in environmental, social and economic conditions; as well as a means of identifying and mitigating any potential adverse effects that the plan might otherwise have. In doing so, it helps make sure that proposals in the plan are appropriate given reasonable alternatives.

Alternatives to a garden settlement at Grazeley have been explored through the SA including strategic scale development north of the A329(M) and south of the M4, or release of land from the Green Belt at Twyford / Ruscombe, alongside building more homes south of Wokingham, and around the Arborfield Garrison SDL.

The HRA considers the potential impact of the plan on sites of international importance to nature consideration, including Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation. In doing so the HRA ensures the proposals in the plan maintain the integrity of these important sites.

### **Proposed consultation framework**

The council is required under the Regulations governing the preparation of local plans to consult with key stakeholders. The arrangements adopted by the council are expressed in the Statement of Consultation (SCI).

Taking the Regulatory and SCI requirements into account, the following actions are proposed:

Consultation will start on Monday 22 November 2021 and end on Monday 17 January 2022, an extended 8-week period to account for the Christmas and New Year period.

The consultation will involve the following:

- Notification of all those on the existing Planning Policy consultation database;
- Notification to all those people and organisations registered on the major development sites, vulnerable groups information databases;
- Making the Revised Growth Strategy document available on:
  - The Council's website;
  - At the Shute End offices;
- Making a summary newsletter available on the council's website;
- Distributing a 'postcard' notification of the consultation to households across the borough which included details of engagement events;
- Using social and traditional media to promote the consultation; and
- Holding six engagement events: two in-person staffed events, four virtual events in keeping with the revised growth strategy.

To minimise the potential spread of covid, in-person events will be held in large venues to allow for greater circulation space.

## **BUSINESS CASE**

As set out at the start of this report, the council is required under legislation and national planning policy / guidance to regularly review, and where necessary, update local plans. Whilst the council's current Core Strategy and MDD local plans are still working to manage development now, they are intended to do this to 2026. Preparing a new local plan which looks further into the future will ensure that planning policies continue to be effective in managing the decisions on development proposals by the council, and where these are appealed, by government appointed planning inspectors.

Without effective planning policies, there would be no real control or influence over where and how new housing and other types of development take place.

Consultation on the Revised Growth Strategy will facilitate further engagement in the plan-making process, providing opinion on the proposed strategy. This will enable the council to refine the proposed approaches and allocations prior to the plan being drawn together into its full final version next year.

The main risk regarding the local plan process is ultimately whether the plan will be found to be 'legally compliant' and 'sound' by the government appointed Planning Inspector who will conduct an examination in public. Key milestones for the preparation of the Local Plan Update are set out in the council's adopted Local Development Scheme.

## FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

***The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.***

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	Circa 200k	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Circa 280k	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Circa 115k	Yes	Revenue

### **Other Financial Information**

The table above sets out the project costs associated with producing the Local Plan Update.

This is a multi-year project and therefore the costs will be spread across a number of financial years, the exact timing of which will be subject to external influences such as the Planning Inspectorate's availability for the examination. The profile of the budget may also vary according to other external other factors, and unless exceptional costs arise, is expected to be covered by agreed budgets.

Not progressing the Local Plan Update will result in increased costs through the planning application and appeal process.

### **Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation**

Public consultation will be carried out in accordance with the Statement of Community Involvement, but may need to be adapted depending on latest government advice regarding Covid 19, including the temporary amendments to Regulation 35 of the Regulations, which means hard copies of relevant documents do not have to be made available at the principal council offices. All relevant information will be available on the website, and email notifications will be sent to all those on the existing consultation database.

The recommended revised growth strategy has had regard to the outcome of earlier consultations alongside technical studies and national planning policy / guidance.

### **Public Sector Equality Duty**

An Equalities Impact Screening Report Form is set out in Enclosure 2 to the report.

### **Climate Emergency – *This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030***

The Draft Local Plan (February 2020) included policies intended to ensure the majority of development was directed to locations where people would have the opportunity to walk and cycle, reducing the need to travel by private car unnecessarily. The plan also

included a range of policies which sought to improve the environmental performance of buildings, including the achievement of carbon neutrality. These principle are retained within the recommended revised growth strategy.

#### **List of Background Papers**

- National Planning Policy Framework.
- Planning Practice Guide: Housing and Economic Needs Assessments.
- LPU Issues and Options Consultation (August 2016).
- LPU Issues and Options: Summary of Responses.
- LPU Homes for the Future (November 2018 – February 2019).
- LPU Draft Plan Consultation (February 2020).

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