



Local Plan Committee

**Item
7**

2 October 2023

Report of

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Manager**

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Title

Approach to the Colchester Local Plan Review

**Wards
affected**

All wards affected

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 A Local Plan is a statutory requirement as outlined in Section 19 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. The Local Plan contains policies to guide development by identifying a spatial strategy, site allocations for employment and housing development and seeks to protect the environment, land and buildings for certain uses to ensure delivery of sustainable communities.
- 1.2 The Local Plan Committee's primary focus is to oversee the production and adoption of a Local Plan for Colchester and ensure that it remains up to date. This report sets out Officer's thoughts on the approach to the Local Plan Review and provides more detail on the approach to Issues and Options following agreement at the August Local Plan Committee meeting to take an iterative approach.

2. Recommended Decision

- 2.1 Members are asked to agree the approach to the Local Plan Review of using the green network and waterways and the 'creating a better environment' agenda as the starting point and key purpose of the Local Plan Review.

3. Reason for Recommended Decision

- 3.1 To enable Officers to progress work on the Local Plan Review with a focus on enhancing the green network and creating a better environment.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 The alternative is to pursue another approach to the Local Plan Review.

5. Background Information

- 5.1 Local Plan Committee considered reports about the Local Plan Review at the June and August meetings. The June report included a reminder of the current position with the development plan and the further work needed to review the Local Plan. The development plan is at the heart of the planning system with a requirement set in law that planning decisions must be taken in line with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. It is essential that plans are in place and kept up to date. The August report included a high-level programme for the Local Plan Review, including proposing an iterative Issues and Options engagement comprising multiple themed engagements rather than one composite Issues and Options consultation. An Engagement and Consultation Strategy was included as a background paper. This strategy has been published on the Council's website and sets out how stakeholders and the public will be engaged and consulted on the Local Plan Review.

Issues and Options

- 5.2 At the August Local Plan Committee meeting, the Committee agreed to the approach outlined in the report to an iterative Issues and Options engagement between Autumn 2023 and Spring 2024. Officers consider that engagement could include the key themes of: the green network and waterways; vision for the city; climate change mitigation and adaptation; call for sites; design and place; and health and wellbeing. Further details about each of these themes is outlined below.
- 5.3 The first Issues and Options engagement is focused on the city's green network and waterways. Engagement will commence in early October and will comprise two parts. The first part is a map of the existing green network and waterways network as an audit and baseline of the current location and condition of all types of green and blue spaces. Stakeholders will be asked to provide comments on the existing green network and waterways, e.g. what are your views on the condition of the space, what improvements could be made. The second part of the engagement is to ask stakeholders for their views on opportunities to enhance the green network and waterways. Stakeholders will be able to draw on an online map suggesting new green spaces and provide justification for their suggestion. Officers will consider all comments received on the existing network and opportunities to improve the network alongside the sites submitted as part of the call for sites and the emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Landowners proposing sites for new green spaces are encouraged to engage in both this green network and waterways engagement and the call for sites. Officers consider that new housing allocations could facilitate new green spaces including creating better linkages between existing green spaces and waterways for the benefit of people's health and wellbeing and for wildlife.
- 5.4 For the vision of the Local Plan Review engagement, Officers have arranged a workshop for all Planners to discuss ideas for the vision over the Local Plan Review period. A workshop will be arranged for Members in the autumn allowing

all Members the opportunity to outline their thoughts on a future vision for the Local Plan Review. Stakeholders will be invited to engage on the proposed vision by submitting their ideas online or by post, before a draft is agreed by Local Plan Committee for wider consultation.

- 5.5 Another key theme for the Issues and Options is climate change. Essex County Council has drafted climate change policies that reflect the latest best practice of using the Low Energy Transformation Initiative (LETI) standard of zero carbon. The LETI standard is included in the Council's draft Climate Change Supplementary Planning Document. As part of the Local Plan Review Issues and Options engagement, the Council will, engage with Officers in the Council's Sustainability and Climate Team, and will publish Essex County Council's draft climate change policies and seek views on whether these are suitable to apply in Colchester or whether the policies should be amended for Colchester.
- 5.6 For the design and place theme engagement, Officers intend to hold a workshop with relevant specialist officers within the Council and relevant partners. Engagement may also include informal input from design panel representatives and discussions about developing a design code as part of the plan. The scope of this theme is far reaching and will incorporate place making considerations which will include the character and historic assets, as well as key infrastructure to support sustainable placemaking. Learning from pilot work on National Model Design codes may also be a relevant tool to inform engagement on this broad theme. It may help inform considerations about the role of design codes and need for masterplanning on some site allocations at a later stage in plan making.
- 5.7 For the health and wellbeing engagement, Officers intend to hold a workshop with health and wellbeing professionals seeking views on how health and wellbeing can be incorporated into the Local Plan Review to ensure that health and wellbeing is a key thread running through the Local Plan Review.
- 5.8 Community and Social Infrastructure has not been identified specifically as a separate theme for Issues and Options. This is because evidence base work including the Infrastructure Audit and an Infrastructure Delivery Plan will include engagement. The Audit and Delivery Plan will be needed to support the Plan, and will be integral to all elements of plan making and form part of the place making and justification for sustainable development as options for growth are tested and selected. The capacity of the relevant infrastructure and ability for it to accommodate planned growth will also inform the preferred options for growth later in the plan process, so will also have a key role in informing the plan but will be addressed in any event as part of the evidence base.
- 5.9 A separate report to this Local Plan Committee meeting sets out the approach to the call for sites and methodology for the Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA).

Approach to the Local Plan Review

5.10 Planning reform, the Environment Act, the Environmental Improvement Plan, and the Government's broader consideration of land use in England, provide significant opportunities for planning to play a key role in meeting the Government's aspiration to create a better environment for future generations. Responding to the increasing environmental agenda in plan making will require a more coherent and streamlined approach to developing policy objectives in relation to the environment. Officers propose using the green network and waterways and the 'creating a better environment' agenda as the starting point and key purpose of the Local Plan Review. This approach complements the complex environmental agenda requiring integrated, coordinated approaches to achieve multifunctional benefits from the use of land supporting the principle of 'creating a better environment'. The environmental planning topics listed below are the topics which LPAs need to consider.

- Air quality
- Biodiversity net gain
- Biodiversity reporting
- Climate change adaptation and mitigation and net zero
- Conservation covenants
- Design
- Enhanced biodiversity duty
- Environmental assessment
- Finance, delivery and environmental markets
- Flooding and coastal erosion
- Green and blue infrastructure
- Greenspace provision
- Habitat Regulations
- Local Nature Recovery Strategy
- Natural capital and environmental net gain
- Protected land
- Protected sites and species strategy
- Water quality and resources

5.11 Officers propose making the priority for the Plan, including the spatial strategy and indeed the whole Plan, enhancing the green network and waterways and the linked consequential benefits of achieving this. Officers intend to do this by protecting the existing green network and waterways, creating linkages between green spaces and enhancing the network through the creation of new green spaces, in locations where it is most needed. Officers recommend that this priority should form the backbone of the Plan. Using this approach all allocations and policies will be developed having regard to the question: will it create a better environment?

- 5.12 Officers are keen to test this approach as an option at the very least but consider that it has the potential to provide the basis for a sound robust approach to plan making. This approach responds directly to the growing demands linked to the green agenda enabling delivery on climate change, health and wellbeing and biodiversity requirements as well as delivering growth requirements in a way which has planning for a better environment at the heart.
- 5.13 The green network and waterways has multiple benefits including for wildlife, active travel, health and wellbeing, climate change adaptation, air quality, flood and water management. Putting the green network and waterways at the heart of the Plan will result in multiple benefits across areas that planning must take into account, including the topics listed in paragraph 5.10.
- 5.14 The Plan must deliver allocations to meet Colchester's growth needs but rather than this be the starting point and driving force of the Plan this will be one of the Plan's objectives. New housing allocations will facilitate new green spaces, biodiversity net gain and wider environmental enhancements and under this approach the Council can prioritise allocating sites that will create a better environment. Focussing on enhancing the green network and the best outcomes in terms of biodiversity net gain will help to justify the selection of housing sites.
- 5.15 Officers hope that making enhancing the green network the priority for the Plan will help to build community support for the Plan. The opportunities for the green network and biodiversity net gain will come first, then the housing to facilitate this. Not the selection of a site allocation first and then thought about what should be delivered as part of the allocation. As part of the Strategic Land Availability Assessment and Settlement Boundary Review, Officers will engage with Town and Parish Councils and Residents Associations to understand the issues and opportunities in all of the city's settlements, including opportunities for new green spaces and better connections to the existing green network.
- 5.16 Officers would also like to allocate strategic biodiversity net gain sites and biodiversity net gain corridors/ stepping stones. This would define sites that would deliver the greatest opportunities for biodiversity net gain (the strategic biodiversity net gain sites) and biodiversity net gain corridors/ stepping stones that will enhance connections between existing and new wildlife sites. This will inform decisions on the spatial strategy. This suggested approach, will facilitate consideration of local supply and demand for biodiversity net gain. Developing the green network as the priority, with housing allocations to facilitate improvements to the green network, will enable planning for the highest gains for biodiversity by considering the location of strategic housing sites and how this relates to sites that will deliver the highest gains for biodiversity. This can ensure that there is a sufficient local supply of biodiversity units and reduce the risk of net gains delivered outside of the city.
- 5.17 As part of the call for sites it is intended to ask for biodiversity net gain offsite sites, green spaces, housing and employment sites and any other land uses as

appropriate. More detail about this is included in the Call for Sites and Strategic Land Availability Assessment report elsewhere on the agenda.

- 5.18 The provision of environmental benefits and green spaces has always been a recognised “trade-off” for development. The difference that Officers are suggesting is that the approach **starts** from identifying the optimum opportunities for the environmental enhancements through green network and biodiversity net gain which provide benefits to local communities, health and wellbeing, wildlife and climate change and link that to the strategy for development to enable its delivery and provide the best outcomes for place making.

6. Equality, Diversity and Human Rights implications

- 6.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been prepared for the Adopted Local Plan, and is available to view by clicking on this link:

<https://cbccrmdata.blob.core.windows.net/noteattachment/Equality%20Impact%20Assessment%20June%202017.pdf>

7. Strategic Plan References

- 7.1 The current Local Plan provides a key strategic delivery vehicle for many Strategic Objectives in the Council’s Strategic Plan (April 2023-April 2026). In particular the following Strategic Objectives are particularly relevant; Respond the Climate Emergency through policies which seek to conserve and enhance biodiversity; Improve health, wellbeing and happiness, through placemaking and provision of appropriate infrastructure; Deliver homes for those most in need, through housing targets, site allocations and policies providing for affordable housing and a mix of evidenced housing needs; and Grow our economy so everyone benefits, through policy seeking to provide and manage economic growth throughout existing and new communities.

8. Consultation

- 8.1 No consultation on matters in this report is required at this stage but future engagement and consultation will be undertaken at appropriate stages on preparation of evidence and plan making in accordance with the Planning Regulations and Statement of Community Involvement.

9. Publicity Considerations

- 9.1 None at this stage.

10. Financial implications

- 10.1 There is a significant financial implication in preparing a Local Plan. All evidence base documents that need to be prepared by consultants have an associated

cost along with all consultation exercises and the eventual examination. An up-to-date local plan does however help avoid costly appeals.

11. Health, Wellbeing and Community Safety Implications

11.1 There are no specific health, wellbeing and community safety implications.

12. Health and Safety Implications

12.1 No direct implications.

13. Risk Management Implications

13.1 No direct implications.

14. Environmental and Sustainability Implications

14.1 The Council has declared a Climate Emergency and has committed to being carbon neutral by 2030. The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development as defined in the National Planning Policy Framework. Achieving sustainable development means that the planning system has three overarching objectives, which are interdependent and need to be pursued in mutually supportive ways. These are economic, social and environmental objectives.

14.2 The Local Plan Review will take account of any updated evidence and changes in legislation that help contribute towards achieving carbon neutral by 2030. Further consideration of future policy development on the environment, climate change, biodiversity, place making and active environments will seek opportunities towards Colchester becoming a greener city that is resilient to the climate change challenges.