

Agenda Item: 10

Meeting: Sustainable Communities Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Date: 29 September 2009

Subject: Site Allocations Development Plan Document Criteria

Report of: Patrick Akindude, Principal Planning Officer

Summary: The report provides Members with the draft site assessment criteria developed for selecting the most appropriate sites for the Site Allocations DPD.

Contact Officer: Patrick Akindude (0300 300 4406)

Public/Exempt: Public

Wards Affected: All

Function of: n/a

Key Decision n/a

Reason for urgency/ n/a

Exemption from call-in
(if appropriate)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. That the Sustainable Communities Overview & Scrutiny Committee agrees the proposed draft assessment criteria to aid the determination of sites most suitable for allocation in the Site Allocations DPD.**

Reason for Recommendation: To present Members with the set of specific criteria to assess potential sites which have been put forward by developers and landowners for consideration in the Site Allocations Development Plan Document.

Introduction

1. This report relates to the Site Allocations Development Plan Document, part of the Local Development Framework for the North part of Central Bedfordshire (the former Mid Bedfordshire area). Joint work on the LDF for the South of Central Bedfordshire and Luton is ongoing and is being overseen by the Joint Committee.

2. The principal element of the LDF is the Core Strategy. This document sets out the high level approach to development across the area, sets out the vision and objectives for the places within the area and how these will be achieved. For the Central Bedfordshire North area, a draft Core Strategy was submitted to the Secretary of State in February 2009. An Independent Inspector conducted a Public Examination during June and July and the final Inspector's Report is expected in mid-September. The document can then be adopted at Full Council in November.
3. The Core Strategy sets the strategic context within which the Site Allocations DPD will operate. The Site Allocations DPD must identify specific sites for a variety of uses in order to achieve the vision and aims of the Core Strategy. The main elements of the Site Allocations DPD will be to allocate sites to help meet the requirement for 17,950 new homes and 17,000 new jobs between 2001 and 2026.
4. The approach to development set out in the Core Strategy is to focus on the larger settlements in the former Mid Bedfordshire area – known as the Major and Minor Service Centres – with less emphasis on the villages. The allocated sites must reflect this approach in order to be considered “sound”.
5. The Site Allocations process started in 2007 with an invitation to landowners, developers and other interested parties to submit potential development sites for consideration. Around 440 sites were submitted for a variety of uses. These sites were then subject to extensive public consultation through the “talk to Mid Beds” campaign. Following this consultation, Members of the former Mid Bedfordshire Task Force began work on developing a set of criteria against which the sites could be assessed. The criteria attached to this report reflect much of the work undertaken by the previous Task Force.
6. Although a considerable number of sites have been put forward, it is proposed that only a limited number of sites will be required to meet the development needs during the LDF period. This is based on future land requirements and the strategy set out in the Core Strategy.
7. As previously reported, the Council will need to demonstrate that there has been a logical and methodical process to site selection and that the preferred sites accord with national, regional and local policy, contribute to sustainable development and offer the most benefit to the community.
8. In order to appraise the relative suitability of various sites and to help inform the identification of preferred development sites, a robust site assessment methodology has been developed.
9. The criteria have been developed based on agreed sustainability factors in the Core Strategy and other local conditions and circumstances. The sustainability factors include building communities, housing provision, the provision of infrastructure, the economy and employment, transport and movement, health, water availability, waste and its management, climate change, energy, sustainable construction, biodiversity, the landscape, the built environment, heritage, land and soils and pollution.

10. The criteria were put out to public consultation between 1 and 23 September 2009 in order for residents to let us know their local priorities. This informal consultation aimed to continue the involvement of residents and other stakeholders in the Site Allocations process. The findings of the consultation will be reported verbally to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting on 29 September 2009.
11. This report sets out the refined Stages of the assessment criteria. The refined Stages 1 and 2 criteria have been piloted on sites within the major and minor centres and were found helpful to reduce the number of sites being considered and help to identify prospective sites.
12. As was suggested by Members of the former Mid Bedfordshire Council Task Force at the May 2009 meeting, the scale of recent development in some settlements will be taken into consideration when allocating further developments. But the specific proposals in the Core Strategy for settlements will still be required to be met. However, it is likely that settlements with recent large scale proposed development would be given a 'breathing space' to absorb those proposals. This could be achieved by phasing any new proposed development further down the line in the plan period.
13. Officers have worked with the Council's Consultants Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners who are giving advice on employment sites which are likely to be taken forward for development. The Council's retained consultants Enfusion are providing input on the requirements of SEA/SA process. Rather than assessing individual sites Enfusion have been involved in helping to ensure that the criteria being developed are sustainable.

Overview of the draft site assessment methodology

14. Due to the high number of sites put forward, it is necessary for the sites assessment to be undertaken in stages through which the most suitable sites will be identified and sites in the villages will undergo an additional stage. Stage 1 helped to eliminate area-wide "non-starter" sites while Stage 2 assessment criteria are being applied on a settlement-by-settlement basis. Stage 2 assessment criteria have been refined to help produce a shortlist of sites in each settlement. Stage 3 will involve a more specialist assessment by statutory consultees and other specialist organisations. After this stage there will be discussions held with proposers of all sites that have progressed to this stage to ascertain availability and deliverability. The discussions will involve ownership of land. Assessment of sites within the Villages has been developed for the rural areas. These assessments will ensure that the Council meets both its statutory obligation and that sites are only proposed on the basis of a sound appraisal of their suitability.

15. The 4 stages of assessment are as follows:

Stage 1 Area-Wide Exclusionary Stage (Appendix 1):

Its purpose is to eliminate sites which are obviously unsuitable. There are 7 criteria at this stage (see Appendix 1) against which all sites will be tested. They include:

- sites within the Green Belt;
- small sites with less than 4 dwellings, which should be able to viably provide at least one affordable housing;
- identified sites in other local plans and emerging DPDs such as the Minerals and Waste Local Plan;
- sites which are wholly in Flood Zone 2 and 3. The remaining part of any land not within zones 2 and 3 will be assessed accordingly;
- sites likely to have significant negative effect on a site of international, national biological or geological importance;
- sites likely to have a significant negative effect on a national archaeological site or monument or a nationally or internationally important historic site, and
- sites which are wholly in Important Countryside Gaps

16. Only about 16% of sites were discounted at this stage. This reflects the fact that there are relatively few absolute constraints to development in the former Mid Bedfordshire area. This places additional emphasis on stage 2 in terms of reducing the 'long list' to a manageable short list for more detailed assessment.

17. As stated above, these criteria have to be robust and defensible at an Examination. Some of the Stage 1 criteria reported to the Task Force in May 2009 have been reviewed and moved forward to later stages of the assessment while important countryside gaps to protect coalescence of settlements have been introduced at Stage 1.

18. **Stage 2 Settlement-by-Settlement Assessment (Appendix 2):**

At this stage sites for housing will be considered under 4 different categories which are use of land, the provision of facilities and services, transport and movement and employment opportunities. The scoring system is employed here in order to identify the most appropriate sites within each settlement. The scores are from 0 to 5, with 5 been the best and 0, the worst (see Appendix 2). The factors in these criteria were considered to have greater impact on the choice of sites. Some of these criteria will also apply to employment sites assessment being developed by Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners. The criteria under the 4 categories include:

- land previously developed and level of use/development;
- proximity to schools and health centres/GPs;
- proximity to town/settlement centres;
- proximity to the bus service;
- proximity to the train station
- proximity to local major (A) road network;
- proximity to employment opportunities;

The scoring system at this stage will help in identifying the most sustainable and most suitable sites for the settlement.

19. Applying these criteria will help the Council to produce a shortlist of possible sites for each settlement to be considered. The assessment will be done on a relative basis so that sites are compared against other sites within the same settlement.
20. **Stage 3 Preferred Sites Stage (Appendix 3):**
The sites that are found to be most sustainable from Stage 2 assessment will be sent for specialist assessment. These specialists will include statutory consultees and other specialist organisations such as Environment Agency, Highways Agency, English Heritage, DEFRA; Environmental Health; etc. Assessment at this stage will help identify sites that are not likely to have major barriers for development. This stage comes under 4 main categories of protecting the environment, protecting best and versatile agricultural land and , physical limitations, environmental factors and conflict with neighbouring uses
The issues to be looked at will include:
- Impact on heritage;
 - Impact on biodiversity;
 - Impact on landscape character;
 - Quality of agricultural land;
 - Access infrastructure;
 - Utilities provision;
 - Land condition;
 - Steepness of site; and
 - Pollution, dust, odour, noise
21. The exercise will help identify sites that can be taken forward for assessment of their availability and deliverability. Sites identified at this stage are likely to be more than sufficient to meet the amount of housing numbers required. However, where there is still a shortage of appropriate sites, further choices will be made at the next lower level under the scoring system.
22. **Stage 4 Assessment - Availability and Deliverability**
This stage will involve holding meetings and discussions with those whose sites have gone through the 3 previous stages. Discussions here will involve ownership of land issues, when sites could be available; negotiations on what are likely to be provided if sites were to be allocated.
23. **Assessment for housing proposals in the villages**
It has also been determined that the Stage 2 and 3 criteria may not be entirely effective in determining how to distribute the 400 dwellings proposed for the rural areas in the Core Strategy.
24. An additional specific assessment will have to be carried out for the villages. All sites in the villages will go through the all stages. However, the settlement hierarchy will help determine the most appropriate villages to locate new housing sites. The settlement hierarchy shows the location of infrastructure and facilities within villages and place the villages in order of hierarchy. Villages where there are available facilities and infrastructure are likely to be in the best position to accommodate more housing. However, villages that have recently had housing development proposal may be given time to absorb such development before being allocated more housing.

- 25 Consideration will be given to villages where increased housing development is likely to support sustainability of community facilities.
26. In addition to the criteria used in these 4 stages to assess the sites, the exercise will be informed by national and regional policies, as well as representations received, by way of the 'Talk To Mid Beds' 'Issues and Options' consultation exercises. The responses from local residents, Members and groups, and statutory consultees such as the Environment Agency, the Highways Agency, Natural England, etc. on key physical/environmental constraints (including capacity issues) on a site-specific basis will also be used to reach a final selection decision.

Timetable for the DPD Preparation Process

- 27 The table below shows the timetable for the preparation process.

Commencement of Document	Nov 2006
Invitation to submit sites for consideration	Nov 2006 - April 2007
First Issues & Options consultation	Feb - March 2008
Second Issues & Options consultation	July - Aug 2008
Consideration of comments received and preparation of Draft Submission LDD	Oct 2008 –Nov 2009
Draft Submission Publication	January 2010
Summary prepared of responses received to consultation	Jan - Mar 2010
Submission to Inspector	May 2010
Pre Examination Meeting	June 2010
Public Examination	Aug - Sep 2010
Production and Receipt of Inspectors binding report	November 2010
Adoption of Site Allocation DPD	March 2011

Next Steps

28. All sites do need to be assessed. Sites taken forward from Stage 1 will be assessed against criteria at stages 2 and 3. Site visits will be carried out at Stages 3 and 4 (for the rural areas) to physically assess the suitability of all sites that have not been discounted. This should help identify sites that will be considered as preferred options and taken forward.

Conclusion

29. The Committee is asked to agree the proposed draft assessment criteria so that they could be applied in selecting the most appropriate sites suitable for allocation in the Site Allocations DPD.

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

The LDF is a fundamental part of the Council's key aim to manage growth effectively

Financial:

n/a

Legal:

The Site Allocation Development Plan Document, when adopted will form part of the Council's development plan to guide development in the area.

Risk Management:

n/a

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

n/a

Equalities/Human Rights:

n/a

Community Development/Safety:

The Site Allocations Development Plan Document will allocate land for housing, employment, open spaces and community facilities which will help orderly development to promote a positive impact on communities and community cohesion.

Sustainability:

The Local Development Framework embraces sustainable development as its overarching aims as expressed in the Council's draft Core Strategy. This report presents criteria for selecting sites for housing development in the most sustainable manner and thereby delivering sustainable communities in accordance with government policies and the East of England Plan.

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Site Appraisal Draft Process – Area-Wide Exclusionary Stage (Stage 1)

Appendix 2: Site Appraisal Draft Process - Settlement-by-Settlement Assessment (Stage 2)

Appendix 3: Site Appraisal Draft Process - Preferred Sites Stage (Stage 3)