

Committee: Council

Agenda Item

Date: 21 March 2016

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Title: New Settlement Option for the Local Plan

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Cabinet Member for Environmental
Services**

Summary

1. This report provides an initial justification for promoting the option of a new settlement or settlements in the draft Local Plan. It sets out the background to new settlements, including reference to their advantages and disadvantages and the history of proposals in Uttlesford, specifically in relation to the withdrawn Local Plan.
2. The report stresses that this report of itself should not influence the formal evidence based planning policy position nor does the report consider the merits of individual proposals.

Recommendations

3. That, following consideration by Cabinet on 17 March, a new settlement (or settlements) should continue to be investigated and analysed alongside all other possible options for housing and employment distribution and should not be dismissed at this stage from the potential options for inclusion in the Local Plan.

Financial Implications

4. None.

Background Papers

5. The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author of the report:

None

Impact

- 6.

Communication/Consultation	The Issues and Options Consultation included a question on the principle of new settlements.
Community Safety	Community Safety would be incorporated into any new settlement proposal.
Equalities	N/A

Health and Safety	N//A
Human Rights/Legal Implications	None
Sustainability	Sustainability is a core principle of new settlements.
Ward-specific impacts	N/A
Workforce/Workplace	N/A

Situation

7. The Planning Policy Working Group considered a similar paper on 23 February and resolved to recommend to Cabinet and Full Council that a new settlement (or settlements) should continue to be investigated and analysed alongside all other possible options for housing and employment distribution and should not be dismissed at this stage from the potential options for inclusion in the Local Plan.

Background

8. The concept of purpose built new settlements originated in England through the work of philanthropic industrialists who developed model villages but is best known through the garden cities movement at the beginning of the last century. Ebenezer Howard pioneered the movement which was exemplified by new settlements such as Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities. The post war and 1960s new towns continued the tradition and more recent manifestations are the eco-towns promoted over the last decade.
9. New settlements and garden villages are to be distinguished from sustainable urban extensions through their scale and degree of self-containment e.g. Cambourne in Cambridgeshire. Whilst it is anticipated that urban extensions should provide requisite physical and social infrastructure there is still reliance on the original settlement for some facilities. New settlements have the complete range of employment, retail and transport facilities and are intended to be more self-sufficient. They require a higher population to create the critical mass necessary for this.
10. There are several key principles underpinning garden cities and these have been set out by the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), an advocate of garden cities, as follows:
 - Land value capture for the benefit of the community;
 - Strong vision, leadership and community engagement;
 - Community ownership of land and long-term stewardship of assets;
 - Mixed-tenure homes and housing types that are affordable for ordinary people;
 - A strong local job offer in the Garden City itself with a variety of employment opportunities within easy commuting distance of homes;

- Beautifully and imaginatively designed homes with gardens, combining the very best of town and country living to create healthy homes in vibrant communities;
- Generous green space linked to the wider natural environment, including a surrounding belt of countryside to prevent sprawl, well connected and biodiversity rich public parks, and a mix of public and private networks of well-managed, high quality gardens, tree-lined streets and open spaces;
- Opportunities for residents to grow their own food, including generous allotments;
- Strong local cultural, recreational and shopping facilities in walkable neighbourhoods; and
- Integrated and accessible transport systems – with a series of settlements linked by rapid transport providing a full range of employment opportunities.

These are the guiding principles as espoused by the TCPA and it may be unrealistic to expect their full realisation in an Uttlesford context.

11. There is Government support for new settlements in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the Coalition Government's Locally led Garden City Prospectus. The recent consultation on changes to the NPPF appeared to strengthen this backing.

The withdrawn Local Plan

12. The withdrawn Uttlesford Local Plan proposed a linked new settlement providing for 2,100 homes, a local centre (retail and employment uses and community and health buildings), primary education (and possibly secondary education, dependent upon future decisions concerning an existing school), and recreational uses at Elsenham.
13. The Inspector who held the Examination Hearings into the Plan held serious reservations about its soundness, including the Elsenham proposals (which he considered to be a "major village expansion" rather than a new settlement). However, in his letter dated 19 December 2014 he concluded "There appeared to me to be fairly widespread recognition that some form of 'new settlement(s)' may form an appropriate means for catering for the future long-term growth of the District and, if so, that this should be on a scale bold enough to achieve maximum possible sustainable critical mass and a long term solution, especially if there are judged to be limits as to how far relatively small towns with the characters of Saffron Walden and Great Dunmow can grow sustainably, attractively, and in an integrated way through successive phases of peripheral expansion. However, I do not consider it for me to comment further upon this matter."

The Current Local Plan

14. Following the withdrawal of the former Local Plan in January 2015 the Council embarked on a fresh plan-making programme and consulted upon 'issues

and options' for inclusion in the Plan between 22 October and 4 December 2015. The consultation document asked a question about the principle of a new settlement and the appropriateness of broad 'areas of search' for large scale development. Opinion was divided on the principle of a new settlement.

15. A separate 'call for sites' was undertaken between April and June 2015. This resulted in over 300 submissions, including several for substantial new settlements, some based on garden city principles. Whilst the issues and options consultation was not developer-led it is helpful in making an in principle decision to know that there are firm proposals which could potentially be implemented.
16. Various studies that will underpin the evidence base for the Plan are in preparation and it is hoped that most will be concluded by the summer. Several of these e.g. green belt review and transport will be particularly relevant to a new settlement option. The Council will then need to take some key decisions about the strategy and direction of travel for the Plan. One of these is whether a new settlement or settlements could form allocations in the Plan. It is therefore important to know early in the process if there is an appetite for this type of development. It is worth stressing that new settlements are not a 'one size fits all' solution and they would form part of a basket of measures required to meet the Council's housing targets.

Issues

17. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with new settlements. These are well documented and can be seen in the issues and options consultation responses.
18. The advantages include a comprehensive and cohesive strategic infrastructure package; a critical mass that will deliver social and community facilities; less drain on existing infrastructure; design coding etc. They can also form part of a longer term vision for the area beyond the lifetime of the current Plan and enable 'difficult' decisions to be made once.
19. In the Uttlesford context opting to expand existing settlements could lead to a greater number of negative socio-economic and environmental impacts and highlights a difficulty of mitigating against these negative impacts. Development of a new settlement alleviates this issue as it allows facilities and infrastructure to be appropriately designed into the development plan from concept e.g. secondary education
20. The disadvantages are high upfront infrastructure costs which can affect initial viability and long lead it times and therefore a slower housing delivery rate. Deliverability is a major issue, given that effectiveness is one of the key soundness tests for the Local Plan. Further issues include the difficulties in achieving transport connectivity and genuine self- containment.

21. New settlements need to be of sufficient size to support the required range of social and physical infrastructure. In their comments to the Issues and Options consultation Essex County Council note that any new settlement would require its own secondary school as part of the provision. This would require a minimum of some 5,000 houses/flats to support this provision. Any new settlement(s) would therefore likely be in the range of 5,000 – 10,000 homes which would be developed over a 20 – 25 year period.
22. It is worth noting that the Council’s objectively assessed housing need is 568 dwellings per annum. Taking into account existing commitments the Council will need to allocate over 4,500 dwellings during the lifetime of the Plan until 2033. Housing completions in the early stages of the development of new settlements are as low as 50 or fewer and it may be some years before significant supply comes on stream, probably up to 200 per year. This means that some 2,000 of the homes could be expected to be built within the plan period.
23. As outlined earlier in this report and for these reasons new settlements can only form one of a range of measures to meet the Council’s housing requirement. They would have to satisfy the “reasonable alternatives” test for SA/SEA purposes. To rely solely upon them would jeopardise the Councils five year housing land supply and put the Council at risk of unwelcome speculative planning applications and successful appeals.

Conclusion

24. Cabinet is asked to decide in principle whether to recommend the consideration of new settlements as part of the Local Plan having had regard to the points set out above. Any decision will not prejudice the site selection process which is a separate discrete exercise. It is recommended that the Council considers the option as it would be unwise to rule out the principle this early in the process given the potential planning benefits that such schemes bring.

Risk Analysis

25.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
3. That the Council fails to consider the potential contribution of new settlements to the Local Plan.	1. Unlikely.	4. Potential for the Local Plan being found unsound.	1. That the Council fully considers the principle of new settlements early in the plan-making process.

- 1 = Little or no risk or impact
- 2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.
- 3 = Significant risk or impact – action required
- 4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.