

Referral from Cabinet: West Suffolk Local Plan Preferred Options consultation

Report number:	COU/WS/22/010	
Report to and date:	Extraordinary Council	17 May 2022
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Decisions Plan: This item is included on the Decisions Plan and was considered by Cabinet on 26 April 2022. The Cabinet's recommendations have been referred to Council for a final decision.

Wards impacted: All wards

Recommendations: The Cabinet recommends to Council that:

- 1. the West Suffolk Local Plan Preferred Options (Regulation 18) document, as contained in Appendix A to Report number: COU/WS/22/010, together with supporting documents, be approved for the purposes of public consultation.**

- 2. Delegated authority be given to the Director (Planning and Growth), in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Planning to make minor non-material consequential changes to the documents, as necessary.**

1. Context to this report

- 1.1 The West Suffolk Local Plan will cover the period up to 2040. Upon adoption it will set out the Council's policies to address housing and employment needs and other associated economic, social and environmental priorities.
- 1.2 It is an important tool in supporting delivery of our strategic priorities and essential for the continuation of an effective planning service. In addition, the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (2004), requires local planning authorities to prepare and keep an up-to-date local plan.
- 1.3 West Suffolk Council is preparing a new Local Plan that once complete will replace the various documents which together form the existing Development Plan for West Suffolk:
- Former Forest Heath area Core Strategy (2010)
 - Former St Edmundsbury area Core Strategy (2010)
 - Former Forest Heath area Single Issue review (SIR) (2019)
 - Joint Development Management Policies Document (2015)
 - Former Edmundsbury area 'Vision' Site Allocation documents (2014)
 - Former Forest Heath area Sites Allocation Local Plan (2019)
- 1.4 The Council undertook consultation on the initial stages of the local plan in October 2020 with an Issues and Options consultation. The Council received over 3,500 comments. All comments are available to view online at the council's public consultation website [West Suffolk Local Plan \(Regulation 18\) Issues and Options October 2020 - West Suffolk Planning Policy Consultations \(inconsult.uk\)](#) The consultation responses, national policy guidance, evidence and research have been used to develop the Council's Preferred Options document for consultation (Appendix A).
- 1.5 The Preferred Options document (Appendix A) represents the next stage of the plan making process. The consultation asks questions to actively engage and invite comments from communities, businesses, the development industry, and other stakeholders.
- 1.6 It is important to note that the plan is still evolving, and no firm decisions have been made at this stage. The Council will continue to gather evidence throughout the local plan preparation and this consultation is an important aspect of this. Therefore, this is not what the final plan will look like.
- 1.7 Following consultation, the Council will continue to engage with infrastructure providers and stakeholders, and complete a number of key pieces of evidence, which may influence the final version.

- 1.8 At this stage, policy parameters have been drafted which set out the purpose of each policy area. These are not full policies but outline the scope or framework of the emerging policy which the Council is seeking comment on before work commences on the detailed policies. The consultation also includes a new 'call for sites' for housing, employment and gypsy and traveller sites in order to ensure that all potential options have been explored prior to the Council preparing a final suite of sites and policies.
- 1.9 The response received from this consultation will help shape the next version of the local plan. That version will be the document which the Council proposes to submit for examination to the Planning Inspectorate and will be subject to a further round of consultation prior to its submission. Consultation of the pre-submission document is anticipated in May 2023.

2. Proposals within this report

- 2.1 On 26 April 2022, the Cabinet endorsed the West Suffolk Local Plan Preferred Options (Appendix A) and has recommended to Council, approval of the document for public consultation (Report number: [CAB/WS/22/019](#) refers).
- 2.2 The West Suffolk Preferred Options consultation document has been prepared in three main parts for ease of reading.

Part One – strategic policies sets out the draft local plan vision and objectives and the strategic policies that are the heart of the West Suffolk Local Plan. These set out the Council's development strategy establishing our commitment to achieving net zero, adapting to and mitigating for climate change, setting the pattern, scale and quality of development to meet our need in West Suffolk to 2040, and making provision for all types of development, infrastructure, community facilities and the conservation and enhancement of the natural and built environment (where these issues relate to strategic priorities).

Part Two – non-strategic policies contains non-strategic policies. These are locally specific policies that will be used in day-to-day planning decisions (providing more detail on the strategic policies, and providing criteria that proposals are required to comply with).

Part Three – site allocations sets out the preferred site allocations. These include residential, mixed-use and employment site allocations. It also identifies existing employment areas, town centres and local centres.

- 2.3 A series of questions in each section invite comments on whether the right preferred option sites and policy parameters have been identified together with reason why the alternative options were not taken forward.

3. Alternative options that have been considered

- 3.1 The alternative option would be to not progress a new local plan or delay preparation and consultation. This would leave the Council at risk of unplanned, speculative development. As the Government requires West Suffolk to have an up-to-date plan in place, to not progress a local plan in a timely manner would be reputationally damaging and lead to Government intervention to produce a local plan for the district council and remove local decision making. See section 5 below.
- 3.2 In assembling the Preferred Options document, sixteen West Suffolk Local Plan Working Group meetings were held. The working group reviewed the comments received to the previous consultation, national guidance requirements, emerging evidence outcomes and provided a range of thoughts to identify a refined list of policy parameters and sites for consultation. These meetings were to ensure that the preparation of the Council's document was informed by councillors across political groups and where possible, a balance of geographical representation. These meetings fed into the production of the final consultation document (Appendix A) and a programme for consultation and engagement.
- 3.3 The Preferred Options Local Plan document itself considers reasonable alternatives and have provided reasons why policy and site options that were consulted on in the previous Issues and Options consultation have not been taken forward. The consultation also includes a new 'call for sites' which provide alternative options that the Council should consider.
- 3.4 Following this second consultation, the next stage will be to review the comments received and together with evidence and prepare a final local plan (pre-submission consultation), which will be subject to consultation, programmed for May 2023.

4. Consultation and engagement undertaken

- 4.1 The aim of the consultation and engagement will be to make as many people as possible across West Suffolk aware of the local plan consultation and encourage them to take the opportunity to have their say.
- 4.2 In order to achieve this aim, the Council will use a range of communication tools and channels both traditional and online making most of both virtual and real-life consultation events.
- 4.3 It is proposed to consult on the Preferred Options Local Plan and supporting documents for 8+ weeks from Thursday 26 May to Tuesday 26 July 2022.

- 4.4 The methods include but are not limited to:
- **Branding** - Branding, tone and style will be consistent with that of Issue and Options stage which resonated with people
 - **Virtual** - Exhibition, with display boards, an information table, video and feedback console with a live webchat function to speak to a member of the planning team to understand the consultation documents, ask questions and submit comments
 - **In person** - Alongside the virtual exhibition we will be holding events in each town and key service centre. Dates and timings will be into the evenings and at weekends. This will include displays with officers on hand to answer questions to tell residents the ways in which they can respond using business cards with QR code and weblink to virtual exhibition
 - **Targeted communication/meetings/briefings** – with town and parish councils, statutory consultees, neighbouring authorities, businesses and local groups
 - **Materials** - Posters available in libraries and sports centres and a range of other suitable organisations
 - **Social Media and Media** – Media adverts running weekly. Videos, images, podcasts etc.

- 4.5 The Local Development Scheme (LDS) is the document which sets out what planning policy documents the Council intends to produce and the timescale for their preparation. A link to the programme for the production of the West Suffolk Local Plan can be found under background documents below.

5. Risks associated with the proposals

- 5.1 Failure to proceed in a timely manner with the preparation of the new local plan through to adoption will leave the authority with a dated local plan, leading to less control over development across the district. West Suffolk would be at high risk of speculative, unsuitable, uncontrolled development. Development and infrastructure needs would be determined on a case-by-case basis rather than a strategically planned approach.
- 5.2 The option not to progress a new local plan would also leave the Council open to reputational damage and likely Government intervention to produce a local plan for the district council. The Council may be left with no control over local decision making until the local plan is completed.

6. Implications arising from the proposals

- 6.1 **Financial** – The Local Plan will be progressed through to adoption using existing budgets.

- 6.2 **Legal compliance** – The West Suffolk Local Plan is a statutory development plan. Local plans are prepared under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012. The Preferred Options is a draft document is prepared in accordance with Regulation 18.
- 6.3 **Personal data processing** – Planning Policies’ consultation system is considered to be General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliant.
- 6.4 **Equalities** – An Equalities Impact Assessment has been prepared and the consultation and engagement programme recognise that community engagement with all sectors of society is important if we are to prepare an inclusive and forward-thinking local plan.
- 6.5 **Crime and disorder** – The Suffolk Police Force and the Suffolk Police Architectural Liaison Officer were formally consulted as the Issues and Options consultation. Following feedback further engagement was undertaken and policy wording has been amended as a result.
- 6.6 **Environment or sustainability** – The Local Plan plays a central part in terms of supporting the West Suffolk Climate and Environment Emergency themes of creating energy efficient new buildings and protecting and enhancing the natural environment. Supporting documents to the Preferred Options include a Sustainability Appraisal and Environmental Constraints Study.
- 6.7 **Changes to existing policies** - This is the second formal consultation in preparing a new local plan for West Suffolk. Two further rounds of consultation are programmed. Once adopted the new plan and its policies will replace those in the existing development plan.

7. Appendices referenced in this report

- 7.1 **Appendix A:** West Suffolk Local Plan – Preferred Options draft consultation document

Note: Due to the length and filesize of the documents, Appendix A (which is divided into three supplementary packs containing Parts 1, 2 and 3 and their respective appendices) is only available electronically with the agenda papers, at the following link:

[Agenda for Council on Tuesday 17 May 2022, 7.30 pm \(westsuffolk.gov.uk\)](https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/Agenda-for-Council-on-Tuesday-17-May-2022-7.30-pm)

Any members wishing to obtain a paper copy, may request a pack directly from Democratic Services.

8. Background documents associated with this report

- 8.1 West Suffolk Local Plan consultation and Engagement Strategy
- 8.2 Sustainability Appraisal
- 8.3 Sustainable Settlements Study
- 8.4 Environmental constraints and opportunities study
- 8.5 Strategic Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (SHELAA)
- 8.6 Local Development Scheme (LDS) Programme for the production of the West Suffolk Local Plan [Supporting information \(westsuffolk.gov.uk\)](#)
- 8.7 Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) (June 2020) [Supporting information \(westsuffolk.gov.uk\)](#)