

REPORT TO: Environment and Urban Renewal Policy
and Performance Board

DATE: 21st November 2012

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director – Policy and Resources

PORTFOLIO: Physical Environment

SUBJECT: Site Allocations and Development
Management Local Plan

WARDS: Boroughwide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The report provides the Environment and Urban Renewal PPB with an overview of the next key document to be produced in Halton's Local Development Framework. The 'Site Allocations and Development Management Local Plan' will replace and update policies in the current Unitary Development Plan to ensure they carry fully weight in the planning process and in appeals.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That the content of the report is noted.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 It is a statutory requirement for local authorities to produce a development plan for their area. A development plan establishes what land use(s) would be acceptable on parcels of land across the area. The development plan is then the starting point for any decisions on planning applications, in what is known as a plan-led approach. Applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. It is for this reason that the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that it is highly desirable that local planning authorities have an up-to-date plan in place.

3.2 The NPPF was introduced in March 2012 and brought further changes to the planning policy system. The previous approach, introduced in 2004, was based around a Local Development Framework (LDF) which could be described as a set of planning policy documents which together made up the development plan. Documents in the LDF could be produced and reviewed at different timescales dependent on the priorities of an area. The NPPF has moved away from local authorities having multiple documents for planning policy and advocates a single local plan for its area, with additional development plan documents only used where clearly justified.

- 3.3 The Council began to produce a Core Strategy under the 2004 system with the intention that it would be accompanied by a series of other Development Plan Documents, making up the Local Development Framework. These documents would replace the current Unitary Development Plan (UDP) in order to provide an up-to-date basis for determining planning applications. Following a lengthy production process, the Core Strategy is proposed to be adopted at the meeting of Full Council on 12th December 2012. In line with the 2004 system, and as the Core Strategy only provides high level planning policy guidance, the Council now needs to produce another Local Plan to cover the allocation of sites and detailed policies for the determination of planning applications – the ‘Site Allocations and Development Management Local Plan’. These documents are still known as ‘Development Plan Documents’ in the legal legislation and regulations.

Site Allocations and Development Management Local Plan

- 3.4 Work has already commenced on the Site Allocations and Development Management Local Plan, as the planning policy document which will replace the remainder of the UDP. This document will detail sites across the Borough to be allocated for a specific purpose, such as housing, employment or green space. Policies will also give protection to certain areas across the Borough, including important open spaces and town centres. In addition to those policies which relate to a specific area of the Borough as shown on an accompanying Proposals Map, more general policies setting out development principles will be included. These will be a key tool when assessing planning applications for all forms of development across Halton and will cover a broad range of topics such as design, car parking standards and contaminated land.

Green Belt Review

- 3.5 Following the outcome of the examination into the soundness of the Core Strategy, the Council has committed to undertake a partial review of the Borough’s Green Belt boundaries around Widnes and Hale. The Inspector examining the plan ruled that this was necessary as insufficient development land exists within the urban areas of Widnes/Hale to deliver the level of housing needed to meet the town’s identified needs. Sufficient sites exist in Runcorn for future housing development and so a review of Runcorn’s Green Belt is not necessary.
- 3.6 The Inspector ruled that the Green Belt review should take place in the early part of the Core Strategy’s plan period (2010-2028). Therefore the Green Belt review will need to be conducted as part of the next planning policy document - the Site Allocations and Development Management Local Plan. The amount of land that may need to be released from the Green Belt has not yet been determined, as although there is an identified shortfall in housing land in Widnes/Hale, Green Belt boundaries should endure beyond the lifetime of the current plan, and therefore the Council will need to look ahead to consider future development needs and pressures. Land needed for longer-term

development needs can be identified as 'safeguarded land' to make clear that it is not allocated for development in the short term.

3.7 In assessing the potential of areas to accommodate new growth, consideration will be given to the five purposes that land designated as Green Belt must serve. These are:

- to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

Any areas with potential for future growth will be analysed to establish the extent to which they meet any or all of the five purposes above and also which sites are the most sustainable.

3.8 Given that the Widnes/Hale Green Belt abuts the neighbouring authorities of Liverpool, Knowsley, St Helens and Warrington, the Council has committed to work in partnership with these authorities to ensure that a coordinated and strategic approach is taken. Knowsley Council have already conducted a Green Belt Study as part of their Core Strategy as there is a severe shortage of developable land for housing in their Borough. St Helens Council is also likely to need to review their Green Belt boundaries to meet development needs in the longer term. The Council's intention is to adopt the same methodology used by Knowsley, Sefton and West Lancashire Councils in their Green Belt Studies to ensure a consistent approach. In line with this methodology public consultation, including specific workshop events, are likely to be used to inform the Green Belt Review.

Production Process

3.9 The production of a Local Plan must follow the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) Regulations 2012. The process is similar to that followed for the Core Strategy, with consultation taking place on draft documents. A period of informal public consultation is required prior to formal consultation on the version of the plan that the Council intends to submit and subsequently adopt. A draft Green Belt Review document will need to be completed prior to the first round of public consultation on the Local Plan to inform the selection of sites and associated policies.

3.10 Preliminary work has begun on the Green Belt Review and on drawing together all sources of information that will be used to inform the allocation of sites. Assessment of the use and coverage of the existing policies in the UDP has also been carried out to discern the key policies that are needed for development management purposes. Similarly, the existing UDP site allocation and protection policies will need to be reviewed for their appropriateness and necessity into the future.

- 3.11 Impact assessments, namely Sustainability Appraisal (incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment), Habitat Regulations Assessment, Health Impact Assessment and Equalities Impact Assessment will need to be carried out at each stage of the document's production. The assessments should form part of the iterative process of policy writing as policies are drafted and sites to be allocated are selected.

Timetable

- 3.12 The timetable for producing the Site Allocations and Development Management (SA&DM) Local Plan is a challenging one. The document is a year behind the milestone dates published in the Local Development Scheme. As such, the following new timetable is proposed for the production of this Local Plan.

| Stage (associated Local Planning Regulation) | Date |
|---|----------------------|
| Preparation of Green Belt Review and drafting of document | Now - Spring 2013 |
| Initial Public Consultation (Reg 18) | Spring 2013 |
| Finalise Green Belt Review and redraft document | Summer – Autumn 2013 |
| Publication for formal Public Consultation (Reg 19) | Winter 2013 |
| Submission to the Secretary of State (Reg 22) | Spring 2014 |
| Examination (Reg 24) | Summer 2014 |
| Adoption (Reg 26) | Autumn 2014 |

- 3.13 The deadlines are achievable if this work is prioritised against current resource levels. It is a risky strategy to delay Site Allocations as it is the Council's mechanism for demonstrating it is making land available for growth and development.
- 3.14 The SA&DM Local Plan allows the Council to demonstrate it is making a supply of land available to meet growth and development needs. Without this planning document adopted it will be left to the market to bring forward sites to meet the quantum of development set out in the Council's Core Strategy. If the Council disagrees with the sites being proposed by the market then the only option to resist unsuitable developments would be to defend planning appeals against the market. Without this Local Plan, the Planning Inspector's hearing an appeal would look for evidence of a deliverable supply of development land. Without this evidence they may decide to go against the Council.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Site Allocations and Development Management Local Plan is set to replace the remainder of the Unitary Development Plan that has not already been replaced by the Halton Core Strategy or the forthcoming Joint Waste Local Plan. It will therefore be a key policy document for the

future development of the Borough and the Council's investment and economic prosperity strategies.

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The key non-policy implications of producing the Site Allocations and Development Management Local Plan relate to resources. The production of this Local Plan will be the key project for officers in the Places Team in the Policy and Development Services Division over the coming years. Involvement from other Council departments such as Open Space Services, Commissioning and School Place Planning, will also be vital to ensure that sites are allocated to meet the whole range of community needs.
- 5.2 Aside from the financial implications of producing material for public consultations and hosting events, it may be necessary to use planning consultancy services where specialist expertise or independent scrutiny is required. This is particularly likely for the specialist environmental assessments highlighted at paragraphs 3.10 and 3.11. Additionally, the Knowsley, Sefton and West Lancashire Green Belt Study involved the use of independent consultants to validate the study methodology, the work carried out by the authorities and the detailed boundary review. The financial implications of the above can be met from within existing budgets.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children & Young People in Halton

No specific implications identified.

6.2 Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton

No specific implications identified.

6.3 A Healthy Halton

No specific implications identified.

6.4 A Safer Halton

No specific implications identified.

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

The Site Allocations and Development Management Local Plan will be a key tool in bringing forward development on sites in the urban area by setting out allocations for specific land uses. It will also be vital in ensuring a high standard of development across the Borough, through development management policies on matters such as design, access and parking.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

- 7.1 The main risk to the production of the Site Allocations and Development

Management Local Plan is the need to prioritise resources to produce the document. There is a possibility that the timetable outlined above will not be met, and thus the eventual adoption of the document will be delayed. Financial resources are available for limited external support with some elements of the production of the document, which may be beneficial where specific expertise is not available within the Council.

7.2 Members will be aware of the sensitivities surrounding land in the Green Belt, particularly following recent announcements at the national level. It is anticipated that the Green Belt Review will generate a high level of interest both among residents and in the local press. Clear communication and public involvement will therefore be necessary at all stages.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 The policies in the forthcoming Site Allocations and Development Management Local Plan will be applied equally to all sections of Halton's communities. Equality Impact Assessments will be carried out during the production of the document to identify the potential impact of proposed policies on Halton's residents. Consultation on draft policies will take place with the stakeholders and the Borough's population and efforts will be made to ensure that all sectors of the community are reached.

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

| Document | Place of Inspection | Contact Officer |
|---|--|------------------------|
| The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 | Places, Economy and Transport Team, Municipal Building, Widnes | Alasdair Cross |
| National Planning Policy Framework (2012) | Places, Economy and Transport Team, Municipal Building, Widnes | Alasdair Cross |
| Halton Core Strategy Local Plan (<i>to be adopted</i> December 2012) | Places, Economy and Transport Team, Municipal Building, Widnes | Alasdair Cross |
| Report on the Examination into Halton Core Strategy Local Plan (October 2012) | Places, Economy and Transport Team, Municipal Building, Widnes | Alasdair Cross |