

Additional Sustainability Appraisal of North Essex Section 1 Local Plan: Executive Summary

Introduction

The Additional SA of the North Essex Section 1 Local Plan followed a two stage process:

- Stage 1 appraised strategic sites that could form part of alternative spatial strategies for the Section 1 Local Plan.
- Stage 2 appraised alternative spatial strategies for accommodating growth in North Essex over the Plan period and in the longer term.

Stage 1 – SA of Strategic Sites

23 strategic sites, comprising a mix of garden community alternatives, strategic urban extensions, and village extensions were subject to SA using a consistent and objective method.

The overall performance of the alternative strategic sites against the SA objectives found that the difference between them was not that great. There were no sites that performed extremely well against all the criteria and no sites that performed extremely poorly.

No 'showstoppers' were found at this stage of assessment, which meant that it was concluded that no individual sites could be ruled out on the basis of the SA alone.

Stage 2 – SA of Spatial Strategies

Taking into account the findings of Stage 1 of the SA, the North Essex Authorities (NEAs) defined alternative spatial strategies to be subject to SA during Stage 2 of the Additional SA process, using a set of planning principles. This resulted in ten strategic sites being discounted from further consideration.

The spatial strategies were naturally divided into two geographical areas: west of Colchester; and east of Colchester. 17 spatial strategies in total were subject to SA, eleven to the west and six to the east.

A review of academic research and guidance on urban form was also undertaken. This found that dispersed development performs less well across a range of criteria than new settlements or urban extensions. New settlements and urban extensions can perform similarly, depending upon where they are located and how they are designed and delivered.

The findings of the SA mirrored the academic research. It found that those spatial strategies that rely solely on proportionate growth (percentage) are the poorest performing, but for others the differences are much more finely balanced.

No spatial strategies stood out as performing much more strongly than the others. None of the spatial strategies are without challenges with respect to environmental assets, such as biodiversity, heritage, minerals and best and most versatile agricultural land.

West of Colchester

To the west of Colchester, the choice of strategy is complicated. Those alternatives that include urban extensions offer the opportunity to be integrated with existing settlements, but could be severed from the existing town by a bypass (Braintree), or have no rail service and are outside the key commuting corridors (Halstead).

The other alternatives offer different combinations of new settlements and/or extensions of existing smaller settlements. Those that are associated with the Great Eastern mainline offer use of existing infrastructure and sustainable access to key commuting destinations including Colchester, Chelmsford and London (although there are concerns about the capacity of this route to cater for additional demand at peak times).

The opportunity to introduce a coherent and integrated Rapid Transit System (RTS) to cater for other commuting routes, particularly east-west and to Stansted could be of considerable benefit since these routes are currently poorly served by more sustainable modes of transport. Therefore those alternatives

that offer a combination of both access to existing rail and investment in RTS perform strongly in sustainable transport terms.

East of Colchester

To the east of Colchester, the two proportionate growth alternatives did not perform as well as some of the other alternatives and an urban extension to the north-east of Colchester could impact significantly on Bullock Wood SSSI.

The CAUSE Metro Plan offers the considerable advantage of being on an existing railway line which links into important commuting destinations for people in Tendring (e.g. Colchester and Clacton-on-Sea). Taken together, the four constituent growth locations along the railway line form a critical size to support a range of services and facilities, although individually they do not. They are also rural in character, and all four settlements are already earmarked for considerable growth through existing commitments and Section 2 Local Plan allocations.

The Garden Community on the Colchester/Tendring Border and Tendring Central Garden Village each offer similar opportunities to develop a coherent development that incorporates a good range of services and facilities. Both have the drawback of not being on a rail route, although the Garden Community offers the opportunity to be connected to Colchester and beyond by RTS and is close to the university. Tendring Central Garden Village has the advantage of an existing employment area and good connections to the strategic road network.

Conclusions

It was not possible to come to a definitive conclusion that any one strategy, whether west of Colchester or east of Colchester, is the most sustainable option. The advantage of the Section 1 Local Plan as it stands is that it provides clear direction for strategic development to accommodate North Essex over many decades to come and therefore more certainty in terms of coherence and investment, including in new transport infrastructure, services and facilities. However, some of the alternatives offer opportunities to deliver similar benefits.

The SA noted that the scale of development proposed in the Section 1 Local Plan is considerable and will change the character of parts of North Essex, and the effects on the role and function, and relationship between the new and existing settlements is uncertain – if they complement and support one another, then this would be of benefit, but if they compete for investment and resources this could be a dis-benefit. Some of the other alternatives propose a similar scale of development and therefore offer similar opportunities and risks.

The alternatives that propose lower amounts of growth would be less likely to alter the character of North Essex and relationships between settlements, but on the other hand may be less likely to attract the scale of investment of the larger scale alternatives.

In the longer-term, it is likely that there will continue to be a need for more development, and so in future years (planning to well beyond the plan period), similar decisions will need to be made about where the additional growth should go. Under the larger scale alternatives, this decision will already have been made.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the pace of change of technology, the introduction of 'smart city' thinking, and planning for climate change (both in terms of a net zero carbon future, and adaptation to the effects of climate change), could result in changes in the way that we live our lives that are difficult to comprehend given our embedded lifestyles and, in particular, our reliance on fossil fuels and the private car. It is therefore important that any strategy is future proofed and flexible enough to accommodate these changes as and when they arise.

LUC

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