

CABINET

Date Of Meeting: 4 January 2024

Title Of Report: Settlement Capacity and Intensification Study

Report of: Executive Director – Place

Cabinet Portfolio: Planning Policy and Place

Key Decision: No

Confidentiality: Non-Exempt

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. To present the findings of the ‘Settlement Capacity and Intensification Study’ (SICS) and to consider the continued use of digital software to support the Council’s planning policy function.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. Cabinet is recommended to:
 - i. Note the findings of the three different scenarios illustrated in the Settlement Capacity and Intensification Study (SCIS). The study will be published on the council's website.
 - ii. Subject to compliance with the Council's procurement rules, the ongoing use of digital software to support the Council Planning Policy function should be supported, and appropriate provisions should be made in the 2024/25 budget.

BACKGROUND

3. In November 2021, Cabinet decided to commission a study called the 'Settlement Capacity and Intensification Study'. The purpose of this study was to assess the potential and capacity of the district's settlements for regeneration, renewal of brownfield sites, and overall development intensification. The focus of the study was to be on opportunities arising within the existing defined settlement boundaries rather than green fields beyond those boundaries.
4. The Cabinet report outlined that the Study would utilise a 'policy off' approach. This implies that any current planning policy designations (excluding statutory designations) will not be applicable during the initial assessment. The reason for this is to ensure that no opportunities for assessment are missed simply due to historical land use designations or constraints in previous plans.
5. Priority regeneration opportunities would be focused on areas identified in adopted or emerging Neighbourhood Plans, as these are opportunities identified by local communities themselves.
6. The insights obtained from such a study would be used to support any future work that may be required when a new Local Plan is needed. This will help to balance the potential for more concentrated development within the settlements against all other growth options.
7. Cabinet also agreed that a Local Plan review assessment is carried out once any 'Planning Bill' has passed through Parliament and the Government has

issued any associated updated guidance (a 'review' is an assessment of whether the policies need updating; it is not a new local plan).

8. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act (LURA) received Royal Assent in October 2023 and will largely be implemented through secondary legislation. There will also be changes to the National Planning Policy Framework. Under current rules, the 'review' of the Hart Local Plan 2032 must be completed by April 2025 (five years after adoption).
9. The upcoming local plan must ensure sufficient provision for the delivery of new homes in the district. The exact number of homes required will be determined according to national policy, which is yet to be announced. Therefore, it will be necessary to explore various options for determining where new homes, as well as the necessary infrastructure, should be developed.

Purpose of The Study

10. Ahead of the next local plan process, the purpose of the SCIS is to explore the potential capacity for new homes within existing settlements.

A DIGITAL APPROACH

11. Instead of conducting a single traditional urban capacity study, there is now software available that can assist in identifying and evaluating sites. This information can be saved in a site assessment database, which can be updated regularly and utilised for various purposes. The role of digital technology has risen up the planning agenda in recent years:

PLACEMAKER SOFTWARE

12. Urban Intelligence, a company that is leading the development of a digital approach to plan-making, has created Placemaker, a site assessment tool that can be updated continuously and adapted for different purposes. This tool can help in creating a digital evidence base for the local plan. Moreover, the company is working on developing additional modules to support different aspects of the local plan process.
13. For a study like the SCIS, the software automates some of the site search and assessment process:
 - it helps achieve a 'no stone unturned' approach to site search, rapidly generating many potential opportunities. Parameters for the site search can be set so that it includes or excludes different categories of land and buildings,
 - it enables a digital 'call for sites' process whereby landowners and the public can suggest and enter sites themselves directly into the tool, plotting them onto an on-screen map. This is a far more efficient process, for both Council officers and those submitting sites, than relying on paper submissions that have to be manually entered into databases, Geographical Information Systems etc,
 - it automates some of the site assessment work. Spatial data such as flood zones and Special Protection Areas can be imported into the software so that sites within those zones can be automatically excluded or their developable area reduced accordingly. Other less absolute constraints are flagged up for each site to inform a more focussed assessment of the site if needed,

- the software can calculate the prevailing residential densities and automatically generate a site capacity reflective of its surroundings. It can also factor a site's accessibility to public transport and facilities into site densities. Or one can apply bespoke densities. Once the parameters are set, the system can rapidly calculate development capacity, and it is possible to test different scenarios, and
- the software contains some land registry information which can be helpful should there be a need to contact landowners (sites allocated in the local plan need to be shown to be deliverable as part of the examination process).

The Hart SCIS

14. The Hart district SCIS explores the potential capacity for new homes within existing settlements. It is 'policy-off', illustrating hypothetical scenarios of the types of sites and densities needed to deliver significant numbers of new homes within settlements.
15. The benefit of the software is that a huge range of options could be considered. The algorithm can be amended to change the assessment criteria. For example, site size, densities, and existing use. For this reason, there is no single 'answer' to the capacity of the settlements in Hart district.
16. Working with Placemaker, the initial automated site search results and call for site results were assessed and refined. The study illustrates three different scenarios:
 - **Scenario A** includes 169 sites. Densities reflect the site's surroundings, or at 30 per hectare, whichever is higher. In town centres and designated employment sites, 50 homes per hectare are assumed.
 - **Scenario B** removes the North Fleet Conservation Area, North Hampshire Golf Club and private green spaces, the development or intensification of which would likely raise significant concerns in practice and potentially be contrary to national planning policy. Density assumptions were increased in town centres and employment sites to 100 homes per hectare.
 - **Scenario C** removes the same sites as scenario B removed but also removes the main employment sites. It is quite possible that to ensure a suitable supply of employment land in the long term, these sites would continue to be protected in the next local plan and so be unavailable for new homes. Density assumptions are the same as for Scenario B.
17. The results for the settlements as a whole can be summarised as:

	Number of sites	Indicative number of additional homes
Scenario A	169	7,185
Scenario B	161	5,692
Scenario C	152	2,275

18. This document shows possibilities and challenges that arise from focusing on new development within existing settlements. However, the scenarios are not local plan strategies as they are not supported by evidence of deliverability.

Nonetheless, they can provide insight and be used as a starting point for further work.

19. It is important to note that this is a study and not a plan. The inclusion of a site in the study does not imply support for its development. The study does not designate any sites for development and should not be considered as a significant factor in deciding planning applications.

FUTURE USE OF DIGITAL SOFTWARE

20. The Placemaker package is a useful tool for future planning policy work, such as the next local plan or brownfield register. The Council's current license expires in June 2024.
21. It is currently too early to recommend renewing the current Placemaker license for 2024/25, as decisions regarding the Service Plan and budget have not yet been made. However, it is suggested that Cabinet acknowledges the shift towards digital approaches to plan-making and approves the use of digital systems to support future planning policy work.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

22. The option to not complete the study was rejected as it is identified in the Corporate Plan as an action.
23. The option not to consider the future use of digital approaches in future was rejected given the direction of travel towards digital approaches to plan-making. The Council will need to prepare a new local plan in the future, and it will be important to make the best use of digital approaches when doing so.

Corporate Governance Considerations

Relevance to the Corporate Plan

24. The Corporate Plan 2023-2027 states under the Place theme (four-year goals): "Undertake a Settlement Capacity and Intensification Study to enable the prioritisation of future opportunities for development, ensuring that we properly research opportunities within our defined towns and villages before building on green fields."

Service Plan

- Is the proposal identified in the Service Plan? Yes, the SCIS at Appendix 1 is in the service plan.
- Is the proposal being funded from current budgets? The SCIS at Appendix 1 and the Placemaker license was funded from the Local Plan reserves. The future use of digital tools at further cost will be a matter for the budget process or Cabinet approval if outside the budget process.
- Have staffing resources already been identified and set aside for this proposal?
Yes

Legal and Constitutional Issues

25. None

Financial and Resource Implications

26. There are no resource implications from publishing the study other than time spent dealing with any enquiries regarding the study.

27. Decisions regarding the future use of Placemaker or another digital software solution to assist plan-making will be a matter for the budget process or Cabinet approvals if outside the budget process.

Risk Management

28. This report does not present any significant risks. It has been created as an initial groundwork to aid in the planning of the next local plan. It is not a formal piece of evidence that will be assessed during a local plan examination.
29. It is important to understand that the report is merely a study and not a plan. Therefore, identifying a site in the document does not necessarily imply the council's support for any development. Additionally, the study does not allocate any sites for development, nor is it relevant to the determination of planning applications. The only potential risk lies in how the report is perceived.

Equalities

30. There are no equalities implications arising from this report.

CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

31. None

ACTION

32. Publish the Settlement Capacity and Intensification Study and consider using digital tools to support future planning policy work.

Contact: Daniel Haws, Planning Policy and Economic Development Manager

Appendices

Appendix 1: Settlement Capacity and Intensification Study