

Local Plan Biannual Update Report

Planning and Transport Policy Sub-Committee

8 October 2024

Key Decision – no



Somerset Development Plan Biannual Update Report – October 2024

Chair of Committee: Councillor Mike Rigby – Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets

Executive Member: Councillor Mike Rigby - Lead Member for Economic Development, Planning and Assets

Local Members and Divisions affected: All

Executive Director: Paul Hickson – Service Director for Economy, Employment and Planning

Executive Summary

This report provides a project update on the progress made in developing the Somerset Local Plan.

Recommendations

That the Sub-Committee of the Executive notes the report.

Reasons for Proposals

This report does not contain proposals as it does not require a decision. It is a report to note.

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Main report and supporting information

Background and purpose of report



Introduction

1. Table 1 sets out the key milestones for the Local Plan as published in the Local Development Scheme¹.

Table 1: Local Plan Milestones (Local Development Scheme Oct 2023)

Milestones	Dates
Commence project planning and evidence gathering	Apr 2023
Early engagement with internal and external stakeholders and further evidence gathering	Apr 2024 - Feb 2025
Regulation 18 consultation on Draft Plan	Apr 2025 - Jun 2025
Regulation 19 publication	Oct 2026
Submission for Independent Examination	Mar 2027
Inspector's Report	Feb 2028
Adoption	March 2028

2. This report outlines the progress made since the previous report to the Planning and Transport Policy Executive Sub-Committee on 14 February 2024.

Evidence base gathering

3. Somerset Council need to produce an evidence base on a variety of topics to inform the preparation of the Local Plan. These will be produced in partnership with other service areas and shared with the Creating Communities Officer Group for other service areas to feed into. They may also be procured jointly with other neighbouring planning authorities if it produces efficiency savings and/or makes practical sense. The first round of evidence base gathering that we are progressing is that which needs to be progressed in advance of having spatial strategy options or sites identified and will inform that process. The evidence currently being progressed is set out below:

Economic Development Needs Assessment (EDNA)

Resource: Hardisty Jones Associates (HJA) and Somerset Council Planning Policy and Economic Development officers.

4. The EDNA will inform the Local Plan through forecasting employment floorspace needs over the Local Plan period which will in turn enable the Council to understand the need to retain existing employment sites and/or identify new sites.

¹ [Local Development Scheme \(https://www.somerset.gov.uk/planning-buildings-and-land/local-development-scheme/\)](https://www.somerset.gov.uk/planning-buildings-and-land/local-development-scheme/)

HJA have invited key stakeholders for consultations to gain local market and specialist perspectives on demand and growth opportunities in Somerset.

5. Running parallel, the Council's Economic Strategy team is in the process of producing a Somerset Economic Strategy, supported by consultants WSP which will inform the growth scenario for Somerset. Joint consultations by the consultants were arranged where appropriate to ensure that both the Local Plan and Economic Strategy share the same information and to make more efficient use of stakeholders' time.
6. Emerging outcomes from the draft Economic Strategy will inform the growth scenarios within the EDNA. To ensure this alignment and to produce a more robust EDNA, its timetable may experience a delay of 1-2 months. The advantages gained are considered to be worth this delay and will not affect the overall Local Plan timetable.
7. The EDNA will also consider proposed changes in the draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) currently out to consultation and any impact this may have on growth scenarios. The draft EDNA is expected in Autumn 2024 for review by council officers before being finalised.

Local Housing Needs Assessment (LHNA)

Resource: Opinions Research Services (ORS) and Somerset Council Planning Policy, Housing Enabling and Public Health officers. Jointly procured with Exmoor National Park Authority.

8. Assessing housing need is the first step in the process of deciding how many homes need to be planned for. Housing need is an unconstrained assessment of the number of homes needed in an area. ORS are progressing the LHNA, however, the recent proposed changes to the NPPF and the standard methodology will impact this data, which will necessitate re-working before the report can be drafted for review by council officers. This will have some effect on the timetable of the LHNA but will not adversely affect the Local Plan timetable. The final LHNA is likely to be finalised only after the proposed changes to the NPPF have been confirmed.

Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Level 1 (SFRA)

Resource: JBA Consulting and Somerset Council Planning Policy officers. Jointly procured with Exmoor National Park Authority.

9. The SFRA collates information on all known sources of flooding that may affect existing or future development within Somerset. Such sources include tidal, river, surface water (local drainage), sewers and groundwater. The SFRA will identify and map areas that have a 'low', 'medium' and 'high' probability of flooding, in accordance with national policy.
10. The report is in progress and the following organisations/groups are being involved in the preparation: Environment Agency, Somerset Drainage Board

Consortium, Wessex Water, South West Water, Bristol Water, South West Coastal Monitoring Group, Wessex Regional Flood and Coastal Committee, Somerset Council - Lead Local Flood Authority, Somerset Council - Highways and Public Rights of Way, National Highways, Reservoir Owners/Undertakers in Somerset, Catchment Partnerships - Somerset, North Devon, Bristol Avon, East Devon, Canal & Rivers Trust, Adjacent Unitary/District Councils.

11. The final SFRA Level 1 is expected in November 2024. An update is likely to be required once the National Flood Risk Assessment 2 (NaFRA2) datasets become available in 2025.

Gypsies, Travellers, and Travelling Show People Accommodation Assessment (GTAA)

Resource: Opinions Research Services (ORS) and Somerset Council Planning Policy and Gypsy & Traveller Liaison officers.

12. The GTAA assesses the future accommodation needs in Somerset for Gypsies and Travellers. This will be used to inform the preparation of Local Plan policy and site allocations for Gypsies and Traveller accommodation. ORS have progressed data gathering and desktop analysis. The assessment includes in person interviews with members of the Gypsy, Traveller and Travelling Showpersons community visiting all authorised and unauthorised sites as well as those currently living in "bricks and mortar".
13. The following organisations/groups have been contacted to be involved: Somerset Council representatives Housing Officers, Enforcement Officers, Homelessness Officers, Equalities Officer, adjacent Unitary/District Councils. The final GTAA is expected in October 2024.

Landscape Character Assessment

Resource: Land Use Consultants (LUC) and Somerset Council Planning Policy and landscape officers.

14. This project is in its early stages with the final report expected in March 2025.

Role and Function of Settlements Study

Resource: Somerset Council Planning Policy officers.

15. The Role and Function of Settlements study will ensure that we have a good understanding of the nature of the settlements within Somerset to inform the production of the Somerset Local Plan. It is a factual piece of work that will collate information on the services and facilities currently available in settlements, the population, employment opportunities and access to the transport network concluding on the relative sustainability of the various settlements in the form of a settlement hierarchy. A draft is expected later in 2024.

Town Centre Health Checks

Resource: Somerset Council Planning Policy officers.

16. Town Centre Health Checks are a tool for appraising and monitoring the changes in the overall vitality and viability of town centres informing plan-making and decision-taking at the local level. They are based upon a number of key performance indicators to help assess and monitor the overall health and performance of centres. The council's economy/town centres team will input into the document and a survey will take place to understand the view on the health of our town centres. It is in progress with a view to completion later in 2024.

Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report

Resource: Somerset Council Planning Policy officers

17. The Sustainability Scoping Report is the first stage in the Sustainability Appraisal (SA) (incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment) process and considers the context and scope of an SA for the Somerset Local Plan and establishes an assessment process to ensure that the options considered for the policies and site allocations are assessed against suitable sustainability objectives. This is being progress with a view to completing a draft for consultation with the three statutory consultees (Natural England, the Environment Agency and Historic England) in autumn 2024. This is in line with the requirements of The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004.

Consultation and engagement

18. Planning Policy will bring a Consultation and Engagement Strategy to a future meeting of the Sub-Committee once changes to the NPPF are finalised. In the meantime, early engagement activities will progress through targeted engagement with town, parish and city councils, and other stakeholders exploring issues to help inform the Role and Function of Settlements study, local priorities, key infrastructure priorities, open space and playing pitch facilities data collection.
19. The Call for Sites is anticipated later in 2024 which will ask landowners and developers to submit sites they consider suitable for development.
20. A Somerset Council all-Member launch will take place later in 2024.
21. The Planning, Transport, Economic, and Climate Policy Working Group (PTEC) is an internal team of policy officers who convene monthly to discuss policy and strategy issues. Their goal is to ensure that all service areas are informed about ongoing workstreams and remain aligned.
22. The Creating Communities Officer Working Group (CCOWG) is a cross-service group of officers to ensure a joined up approach to:
 - Strategic planning, transport, economic, environmental, housing, education and public health policy making;

- Strategic community, environmental, economic infrastructure and investment priorities including Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 spend priorities;
- Ensuring strategic sites deliver on cross-service objectives by enhancing outcomes around placemaking, land uses, affordable housing, climate change, infrastructure, active travel and stewardship;
- Information sharing, data collection and evidence base gathering.

The terms of reference have been agreed, including the meeting cadence, at the first meeting on 5 September.

Duty to Co-operate

Resource: Somerset Council Planning Policy officers

23. Local Planning Authorities are under a duty to cooperate with each other, and with other prescribed bodies, on strategic matters that cross administrative boundaries including meeting housing needs, delivering strategic infrastructure, and building economic and climate resilience. The duty to cooperate is proposed to be retained and strengthened by the draft National Planning Policy Framework.
24. Somerset Council will meet its duty in this regard through a variety of means. The first such meeting was held with Exmoor National Park Authority to discuss their Local Plan review and emerging cross boundary issues for the Somerset Plan.

Digital improvements

Resource: Urban Intelligence Ltd, The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and Somerset Council Planning Policy officers

25. Earlier this year, the Planning Policy team was awarded funding through the Government's Proptech Fund to collaborate with Urban Intelligence on developing a Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) site assessment module for their Placemaker tool. We have developed this module and undertook a BNG Call for Sites in May/June and are now testing the quality of the outputs and will refine the tool where required. We regularly report back to the funding team who monitor our progress.
26. Urban Intelligence has assisted in aligning GIS datasets from the five previous Somerset authorities which were in a variety of formats and of differing quality. Placemaker will be used to streamline the site assessment process for the main Local Plan Call for Sites, anticipated later in 2024.
27. MHCLG are supporting the council in undertaking a Digital Planning Maturity Assessment. This is a self-assessment tool, led by Planning Policy officers to show how digitally mature the planning department currently is and the scale of change needed to shift to modern planning practices. Planning Policy officers are also supporting MHCLG in testing new national guidance for site assessments and to help align the style and design of policy mapping both of which will help streamline the plan making process.

Next Steps

28. The following workstreams will be progressed over the next 6 months:

- Continue project management and support of the commissioned evidence base production.
- Commission the next round of evidence base production and, subject to staff resources, some projects potentially being partially completed in-house to build skills and reduce financial costs:
 - Playing Pitch, Built Sports Facilities and Open Space Assessments
 - Retail and Leisure Needs Assessment
 - Employment Land Review
 - Habitat Regulations Assessment screening report
 - Transport constraints heat mapping
- Produce a site assessment methodology and undertake a Call for Sites
- Developing a programme of targeted engagement activities including with town, parish and city councils
- All-Member launch
- Progress work on the spatial portrait, vision, issues and objectives
- Progress duty to co-operate discussions

Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan

29. The Local Plan aligns with the Council Plan 2023-27 vision and priorities, in particular the priority for *A Greener, More Sustainable Somerset*. Furthermore, the production of the Local Plan is consistent with the emerging Council Business Plan and reflects the Council's Climate Emergency Strategy. The Local Plan is one of a suite of strategic documents the Council will need to produce that support and complement each other. Using the vision and priorities set out in the Council Plan provides a starting point for developing agreed goals and ambitions in partnership with the community, businesses and the environment at the centre.

Other options considered

30. Not applicable as this report does not require a decision.

Key considerations for the Council

Scrutiny comments / recommendations:

31. Not applicable as this report does not require a decision.

Consultation and feedback

32. This report does not require a decision and therefore there is no consultation to be undertaken on it. The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England)

Regulations 2012 sets out the requirement for consultation on the production of the Local Plan which will be undertaken at the required stages.

Financial and Risk Implications

33. This report does not require a decision. There are no financial or risk implications of the recommendation to note this report.

Current Risk Score:

Likelihood	n/a	Impact	n/a	Risk Score	n/a
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Projected risk score if recommended actions are agreed and delivered:

Likelihood	n/a	Impact	n/a	Risk Score	n/a
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Legal and Procurement Implications

34. This report does not require a decision. There are no legal and procurement implications of the recommendation to note this report.

HR / Workforce Implications

35. Staff capacity to date given other work priorities is impacting progress on the Local Plan. Options are being explored, within the current budget, to build capacity which is likely to centre around striking the appropriate balance of internal and external resources working on evidence base projects and supporting key stages of the process.

Equalities Implications

36. Whilst this particular decision does not have any specific equality due regard considerations, we are aware that due regard consideration must be included within the plans being discussed in this document.

Community Safety Implications

37. This report does not require a decision. There are no community safety implications of the recommendation to note this report.

Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

38. This report does not require a decision. There are no climate change or sustainability implications of the recommendation to note this report.

Health and Safety Implications

39. This report does not require a decision. There are no health and safety implications of the recommendation to note this report.

Health and Wellbeing Implications

40. This report does not require a decision. There are no health and wellbeing implications of the recommendation to note this report.

Social Value

41. This report does not require a decision. There are no social value implications of the recommendation to note this report.

Background Papers

42. None.

Appendices

- None

Report assurance checklist ahead of report publication (for Audit, Executive, Full Council and Scrutiny Committees)

	Officer Name	Date Completed
Legal & Governance Implications	David Clark	09/09/24
Finance & Procurement	Nicola Hix	26/09/24
Workforce (*)	Dawn Bettridge	11/09/24
Asset Management (*)	Oliver Woodhams	20/09/24
Executive Director	Mickey Green	23/09/24
Executive Lead Member	Councillor Mike Rigby	23/09/24
Consulted:	Councillor Name	n/a
Local Division Members	List local members	n/a (report relates to the whole of Somerset)
Opposition Spokesperson(s)	Councillor Mark Healey	05/09/24
Relevant Scrutiny Chair(s)	Councillor Martin Dimery	05/09/24

Note:

Directors may nominate additional officers to act on their behalf
(*) – these areas only need to be consulted on proposals if the proposals have workforce or asset management implications

Reports will not be published if assurance checklist has not been adequately completed – report author to liaise with Democratic Services well ahead of publication deadlines.