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Introduction

1.1.1 This document provides a short summary of the Sustainability Appraisal (SA) carried out as part of the development of the Maldon District Council Local Development Plan. The main purpose of an SA is to consider significant positive or negative effects which the Plan, and alternative options, may have on the District’s society, economy and environment. As part of the SA we developed a structure for assessing issues associated with different policy options. This has helped shape the preferred options presented. The Sustainability Appraisal Report (SAR) presents the findings of that assessment, and is being published to help inform comments on the Local Development Plan preferred options document.

Background

1.1.2 In November 2005, Maldon District Council (MDC) approved its Replacement Local Plan for adoption. MDC then commenced work on the production of a Local Development Framework (LDF) for the District. In April 2009, the Local Development Scheme (LDS) was produced which outlined the contents of, and timeframe for, the development of the LDF. A Sustainability Appraisal (SA) was undertaken to inform the development of policies, and an SA Report (SAR) was produced to accompany the Maldon District Core Strategy Submission draft. However these documents were not progressed to consultation and submission.

1.1.3 This Sustainability Appraisal (SA) Report builds on the previous work, expanding upon it to reflect policies now contained within the Maldon Local Development Plan (LDP) Preferred Options draft. It reports on the findings and results of the SA process which was used in the development of the LDP.

1.1.4 This assessment and report has been prepared to fulfil statutory requirements for Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), and involved the following stages:

- Identifying other plans, programmes and objectives which inform and influence the development of the LDP;
- Establishing an understanding of the social, environmental, and economic condition of the District (the baseline);
- Identifying key sustainability issues for the District;
- Outlining SA objectives against which to evaluate the LDP;
- Gathering consultation feedback on the proposed SA coverage and level of detail;
- Assessing the ways in which the LDP policies are likely to affect the SA objectives (in terms of the nature, scale and time frame of the effects);
- Identifying measures to reduce or counteract any significant negative effects of the policies; and
- Proposing a strategy for monitoring the LDPs significant sustainability effects in Maldon.
Sustainability issues and assessment framework

1.1.5 Identification of the baseline for the District and review of relevant plans and programmes highlighted a number of issues which are considered to be of importance to the District and which could be influenced by the LDP. These issues were:

- Areas at high risk of flooding;
- High resource consumption;
- Rich historical assets and the built environment;
- Low availability of previously developed land;
- Housing – affordability, mix, size and tenure issues;
- High levels of car dependency;
- Poor transport connections and accessibility;
- Lack of public transport;
- Rural isolation;
- Out-migration;
- Demographics - ageing population;
- Limited diversity of employment opportunities; and
- Vulnerability of the rural/agricultural economy.

1.1.6 An SA Framework of objectives, targets and indicators was developed based on these key issues, relevant plans and programmes and baseline conditions for the District. It was consulted on with statutory agencies in a Scoping Report, and the final SA framework is the basis against which LDP policies have been assessed.

1.1.7 The SA Framework includes 17 sustainability objectives:

- To maintain and improve accessibility to services and facilities for all sectors of the community;
- To provide and maintain an adequate level of good quality affordable housing of appropriate size, tenure, mix and location to meet local needs;
- To promote healthier lifestyles, improve levels of health and wellbeing;
- To reduce rural isolation and social exclusion geographically and demographically through encouraging viable and vibrant communities;
- To protect and enhance the local townscape, heritage assets and their settings;
- To protect and enhance biodiversity and important wildlife habitats;
- To protect quality and levels of local water resources;
- To minimise the risk and hazards of flooding by adapting to the impacts of climate change, including sea level rise;
- To ensure efficient use of land and protect geodiversity, soil quality and mineral resources;
• To reduce emissions of greenhouse gases;
• To maintain air quality levels in line with national and/or WHO targets;
• To maintain and improve public transport provision, promote sustainable modes of transport and reduce journey miles undertaken by car;
• To reduce natural resource consumption;
• To maintain and enhance the quality of the countryside, coasts, estuaries and local landscape character including the unique skylines;
• To strengthen the local economy through supporting the growth and diversification of business sectors and improving the attractiveness of the District to investment in both urban and rural areas;
• To develop and support sustainable tourism within the District; and
• To support employment diversity to create jobs that matches the skills profile for the local population.

Sustainability of the proposed plan

1.1.8 In order to determine the overall sustainability of the approach proposed by the LDP, its objectives were tested against the 17 SA Objectives. Initial results indicated that the overall compatibility between the 2 sets of objectives was relatively good, although a number of the LDP objectives had the potential for conflict with some of the SA objectives. These included those relating to biodiversity, water resources, air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, and landscape character. However, no definite incompatibility was identified, and any impact was likely to be dependent on the nature and location of implementation. During its development the wording of the LDP objectives was altered slightly, and a new objective added. However, these changes were not considered to affect the original conclusions regarding compatibility.

1.1.9 LDP policies were individually assessed against the sustainability framework to highlight where the objectives were supported, or not, and to inform the development of the LDP. This involved predicting and evaluating the nature (positive, negative or neutral), scale and timeframe (short-term, medium-term or long-term) of the social, environmental and economic effects of each policy as they relate to each of the SA objectives.

1.1.10 This process was undertaken several times during the development of the LDP and its policies, with recommendations being provided at each stage to either reduce the potential impacts of the policy or help strengthen the positive effects. Initially it was assessed that the LDP, whilst having a positive sustainability effect overall, contained several policies with the potential for negative effects. These related primarily to the effects of physical development on the environment. There were moderate negative effects in relation to water resources, greenhouse gas emission and resource consumption. Following further development of the policies and the adoption of recommendations made in the SA Scoping Report these predicted impacts were reduced.

1.1.11 The policies within the Maldon District Local Development Plan Preferred Options document generally support the full range of sustainability objectives identified in the SA Framework. The policies are considered likely to offer significant positive effects on environmental, social and economic objectives. This specifically relates to the
environmental objectives concerned with the protection of local townscape and heritage assets; protection and enhancement of biodiversity and wildlife habitats. Moderate positive effects are also expected in relation to minimising flood risk and adapting to the effects of climate change; ensuring the efficient use of land; and maintaining and enhancing the quality of the countryside.

1.1.12 Major positive effects are also expected against social objectives concerned with improving accessibility to services and facilities; the delivery of housing to meet local needs; promoting health and wellbeing, reducing rural isolation and social and geographical inequalities, and maintaining and improving public transport and sustainable transport modes. In relation to economics, major positive effects are anticipated for all three of the SA objectives. The assessment of the policies found that there are three policies which are likely to have the most positive effects compared with the rest of the LDP policies. These are S1 (Sustainable Development), S3 (Place Shaping) and D2 (Climate Change and Environmental Impact of New Development). These policies had beneficial impacts across the social, environmental and economic objectives, seeking to protect and enhance the key features of the District as well as providing for the local population and economic community. Policy S1 sets out the sustainable development goals for the District which through development of the LDP and the iterative SA process is the one policy which has a positive effect for all of the 17 SA objectives. Through implementation of this policy there is the potential for extensive benefits for the natural environment over time including landscape, biodiversity, air quality, drainage and accessibility. The policy could create a healthy and competitive local economy and support the local population by providing housing growth appropriate to the needs of the District and creating sustainable communities.

1.1.13 Benefits will also be achieved as a result of policy S3, through the creation of garden suburbs which include sustainable transport, public spaces for all; the encouragement of the development of community services and facilities; and an attractive landscape which benefits biodiversity. Improved accessibility could lead to an increase in informal physical exercise and improve health levels and sense of wellbeing. Further, an increase in walking and cycling within communities could help to improve community cohesion, natural surveillance, vibrancy of rural communities, and mental wellbeing. Indirect benefits may arise for health through a decrease in air pollution over time.

1.1.14 Policy D2 has a number of environmental benefits related to reducing air quality, maintaining water resources and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, which will also have positive indirect effects on the improving community levels of health and wellbeing. The provision of flood management measures such as SuDS will provide environmental features which will enhance local biodiversity and provide features of interest for the local population. Negative effects are still predicted, however, against SA objectives seeking to: protect quality of water resources; reduce emissions of greenhouse gases; maintain air quality; and reduce natural resource consumption. However, these effects are expected to be minor and are likely to be avoided, minimised or offset through the effective implementation of other policies. As a result of assessment recommendations, the Council have amended the wording of policies S2 and S3 to reduce moderate negative effects on water resources and greenhouse gas emissions to minor effects.

1.1.15 Within the LDP, alternatives to the policies were provided and these were also assessed against the sustainability objectives, as a way of ensuring that the policies implemented within the plan are the most sustainable options for the District. Options and alternatives were also formally considered at an earlier stage of the Council’s Plan development.
Compliance with the Habitats Regulations

1.1.16 Alongside the SA, a Habitats Regulations Screening Assessment was carried out to consider the potential for likely significant effects – arising as a result of the implementation of the Plan - on the Blackwater Estuary Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar site; Colne Estuary SPA and Ramsar; Crouch and Roach Estuaries SPA and Ramsar; Dengie SPA and Ramsar, and Essex Estuaries Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

1.1.17 The HRA concluded at the end of the screening stage that there are not expected to be significant effects on the integrity of these international sites, alone or in-combination with other plans or programmes, as a result of implementing the Maldon District LDP.

Mitigation, monitoring and improvement

1.1.18 Throughout the assessment, recommendations have included measures envisaged to prevent, reduce or offset any significant adverse which could arise from a policy. In most cases, recommendations have sought to improve the potential significance of positive effects of the policies. For example, changes to wording to provide further refinement and clarity were suggested for some policies. In others, recommendations have been made to improve the protection of the environment through the provision of greater detail in policy content.

1.1.19 The majority of the recommendations arising from the SA process have been incorporated into the LDP policies through the iterative assessment and plan development process. Those that remain outstanding are:

- Policy D1 - Reference to designated nature conservation features/sites could be included in the first section of policy (i);
- Policy N2 - It should be made clear that where compensatory habitat is required (following agreement of IROPI under the Habitats Regulations, or in respect of losses of other habitat) habitat should be replaced with the same/similar habitat types and should be ecologically functional in advance of the loss; and
- Policy I1 - The statement on the phasing of infrastructure delivery (“On a strategic level …”) could be strengthened to ensure that necessary infrastructure is fully operational in advance of development to ensure that community and environmental benefits are realised from the start of development.

1.1.20 These recommendations are considered minor. They are not provided as a means of averting negative effects but instead seek to strengthen policies in relation to protecting biodiversity. It is therefore considered that the conclusion of the SA for the Maldon LDP stands and that the positive effects detailed will not be affected if these recommendations are not adopted.

1.1.21 SA guidance recommends SA monitoring to be incorporated into Local Authority’s existing monitoring arrangements. In accordance with Regulation 48 of the Town and Country Planning Regulations, the Council is required to prepare an Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) to assess the implementation of the LDP, the extent to which core policies are being achieved and to identify any changes if a policy is not working or if the targets are not met. It is recommended that the Council seeks to integrate the monitoring of the LDP’s significant sustainability effects in these wider monitoring arrangements.