

# **Site Selection Topic Paper**

Draft Uttlesford Local Plan 2021 – 2041 (Regulation 18)

October 2023

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# 1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Topic Paper summarises Uttlesford District Council's approach to selecting strategic sites proposed for housing allocation within the Regulation 18 Consultation version of the Uttlesford Local Plan 2021 to 2041.
- 1.2 Uttlesford District Council is currently preparing a new Local Plan to replace the existing Uttlesford Local Plan 2005. The emerging Uttlesford Local Plan 2021-2041 (hereafter referred to as the Plan) puts forward the spatial vision and strategic objectives for achieving sustainable development. It identifies that a total of 14,377 homes are planned for within the district over the plan period, including a need for around 5,000 homes on strategic sites.
- 1.3 The Plan proposes to allocate 10 strategic housing sites that represent the most sustainable locations to deliver the housing requirement of the district and meet the objectives of the Local Plan. For the purpose of the Plan, a strategic site has been defined as a site (or a cluster of adjacent sites) that could deliver 100 dwellings or more.
- 1.4 These sites have been selected following a five-stage evidence-led and proportionate assessment in line with national policy and guidance. This Topic Paper explains what the Plan considered in identifying, assessing and selecting sites, and how it has narrowed down reasonable site options, resulting in the recommendation of the proposed allocations.
- 1.5 All site options considered have been tested through the Interim Sustainability Appraisal Report of the draft Uttlesford Local Plan (October 2023). It is a legal requirement for the Local Plan under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended) and has taken place alongside the preparation of the Plan. The Sustainability Appraisal identifies Reasonable Alternatives to help inform the preferred options, overall spatial strategy and direction of the Plan.
- 1.6 This Topic Paper is published alongside the draft Plan for consultation. It should be read in conjunction with a series of complementary topic papers and evidence studies, including: the Uttlesford Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (October 2023), Interim Sustainability Appraisal Report of the draft Uttlesford Local Plan (October 2023), Neighbourhood Plan and Larger Villages Housing Requirement Topic Paper (October 2023) and Employment Land Site Selection Topic Paper (October 2023).
- 1.7 The Topic Paper consists of the following sections:
  - **Section 2 Policy Context** provides a summary of the relevant national policies and guidance relevant to the selection of residential development sites
  - **Section 3 Site Selection Methodology** explains our approach to identifying, assessing and selecting strategic sites for proposed allocations in the Plan
  - **Section 4 Recommendations** sets out the preferred strategic sites proposed for allocation in the Plan
- 1.8 The detailed outcomes of site selection are presented in **Appendix A Stage 1 to Stage 5 Site Selection Assessment** of this Topic Paper. Appendix A provides the assessment outcomes of all sites considered and their location by settlement.

- 1.9 The draft Local Plan does not identify any non-strategic sites below 100 dwellings for allocation; but does identify housing requirement figures for our Larger Villages. The Consultation invites Parish Councils and neighbourhood planning groups to consider if they wish to take responsibility for planning for any non-strategic development in their villages through a future Neighbourhood Plan or Neighbourhood Plan update.
- 1.10 Where the relevant Larger Villages wish to plan for the housing requirement in their villages (as set out within the Neighbourhood Plan and Larger Villages Housing Requirement Topic Paper), the Local Plan will not need to consider those non-strategic sites in any more detail.
- 1.11 If some of the relevant Larger Villages do not wish to plan for any non-strategic sites through a Neighbourhood Plan, then the next stage of the Local Plan (Regulation 19 to be published in Summer 2024) will include these. The approach to this will be included in a future version of this Topic Paper, although any consideration of non-strategic sites at Larger Villages will be undertaken in consultation with the relevant villages.

## 2. Policy Context

### National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

2.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (updated in September 2023) sets out the government's planning policies for England and how they are expected to be applied. It provides a framework within which locally prepared plans for housing and other development can be produced. The policies of relevance to site selection are set out below, but the Plan has regard to all other aspects of relevant national policy, where appropriate.

2.2 At its heart the Framework requires all plans and decisions to apply a presumption in favour of sustainable development. For plan-making, this means that:

*All plans should promote a sustainable pattern of development that seeks to: meet the development needs of their area; align growth and infrastructure; improve the environment; mitigate climate change (including by making effective use of land in urban areas) and adapt to its effects;*

*Strategic policies should, as a minimum, provide for objectively assessed needs for housing and other uses...<sup>1</sup>*

2.3 The NPPF further expands on the role of local planning authorities in planning and allocating sufficient sites to deliver the strategic priorities of the area and meet objectively assessed needs over the plan period through strategic policies:

*Broad locations for development should be indicated on a key diagram, and land-use designations and allocations identified on a policies map. Strategic policies should provide a clear strategy for bringing sufficient land forward, and at a sufficient rate, to address objectively assessed needs over the plan period, in line with the presumption in favour of sustainable development. This should include planning for and allocating sufficient sites to deliver the strategic priorities of the area (except insofar as these needs can be demonstrated to be met more appropriately through other mechanisms, such as brownfield registers or non-strategic policies)<sup>2</sup>.*

*Strategic policy-making authorities' should have a clear understanding of the land available in their area through the preparation of a strategic housing land availability assessment. From this, planning policies should identify a sufficient supply and mix of sites, taking into account their availability, suitability and likely economic viability<sup>3</sup>.*

2.4 The NPPF also sets out, at a high level, key considerations which should be taken into account when identifying and selecting suitable locations for development in varying contexts. These considerations have been included as part of the site selection methodology assessment criteria, as detailed in Section 3 of this Topic Paper. The key considerations are:

#### **Planning for larger scale development**

*The supply of large numbers of new homes can often be best achieved through planning for larger scale development, such as new settlements or significant extensions to existing villages and towns, provided they are well located and designed, and supported by the necessary infrastructure and facilities (including a*

<sup>1</sup> Paragraph 11 of the National Planning Policy Framework

<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 23 of the National Planning Policy Framework

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph 69 of the National Planning Policy Framework

*genuine choice of transport modes). Working with the support of their communities, and with other authorities if appropriate, strategic policy-making authorities should identify suitable locations for such development where this can help to meet identified needs in a sustainable way. In doing so, they should:*

*a) consider the opportunities presented by existing or planned investment in infrastructure, the area's economic potential and the scope for net environmental gains;*

*b) ensure that their size and location will support a sustainable community, with sufficient access to services and employment opportunities within the development itself (without expecting an unrealistic level of self-containment), or in larger towns to which there is good access;*

*c) set clear expectations for the quality of the places to be created and how this can be maintained (such as by following Garden City principles); and ensure that appropriate tools such as masterplans and design guides or codes are used to secure a variety of well-designed and beautiful homes to meet the needs of different groups in the community;*

*d) make a realistic assessment of likely rates of delivery, given the lead-in times for large scale sites, and identify opportunities for supporting rapid implementation (such as through joint ventures or locally-led development corporations); and*

*e) consider whether it is appropriate to establish Green Belt around or adjoining new developments of significant size<sup>4</sup>.*

## **Rural Areas**

*To promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. Planning policies should identify opportunities for villages to grow and thrive, especially where this will support local services. Where there are groups of smaller settlements, development in one village may support services in a village nearby<sup>5</sup>.*

## **Site Assessment**

*In assessing sites that may be allocated for development in plans, or specific applications for development, it should be ensured that:*

*a) appropriate opportunities to promote sustainable transport modes can be – or have been – taken up, given the type of development and its location;*

*b) safe and suitable access to the site can be achieved for all users;*

*c) the design of streets, parking areas, other transport elements and the content of associated standards reflects current national guidance, including the National Design Guide and the National Model Design Code; and*

*d) any significant impacts from the development on the transport network (in terms of capacity and congestion), or on highway safety, can be cost effectively mitigated to an acceptable degree<sup>6</sup>.*

2.5 The NPPF stresses that Local Plans should be informed throughout their preparation by a Sustainability Appraisal (SA) that meets the relevant legal requirements<sup>7</sup>. This should demonstrate how a plan has addressed relevant economic, social and

<sup>4</sup> Paragraph 73 of the National Planning Policy Framework

<sup>5</sup> Paragraph 79 of the National Planning Policy Framework

<sup>6</sup> Paragraph 119 of the National Planning Policy Framework

<sup>7</sup> Paragraph 32 of the National Planning Policy Framework

environmental objectives. The SA process has been integral to the site selection process, as detailed in **Section 3** of this Topic Paper.

## Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)

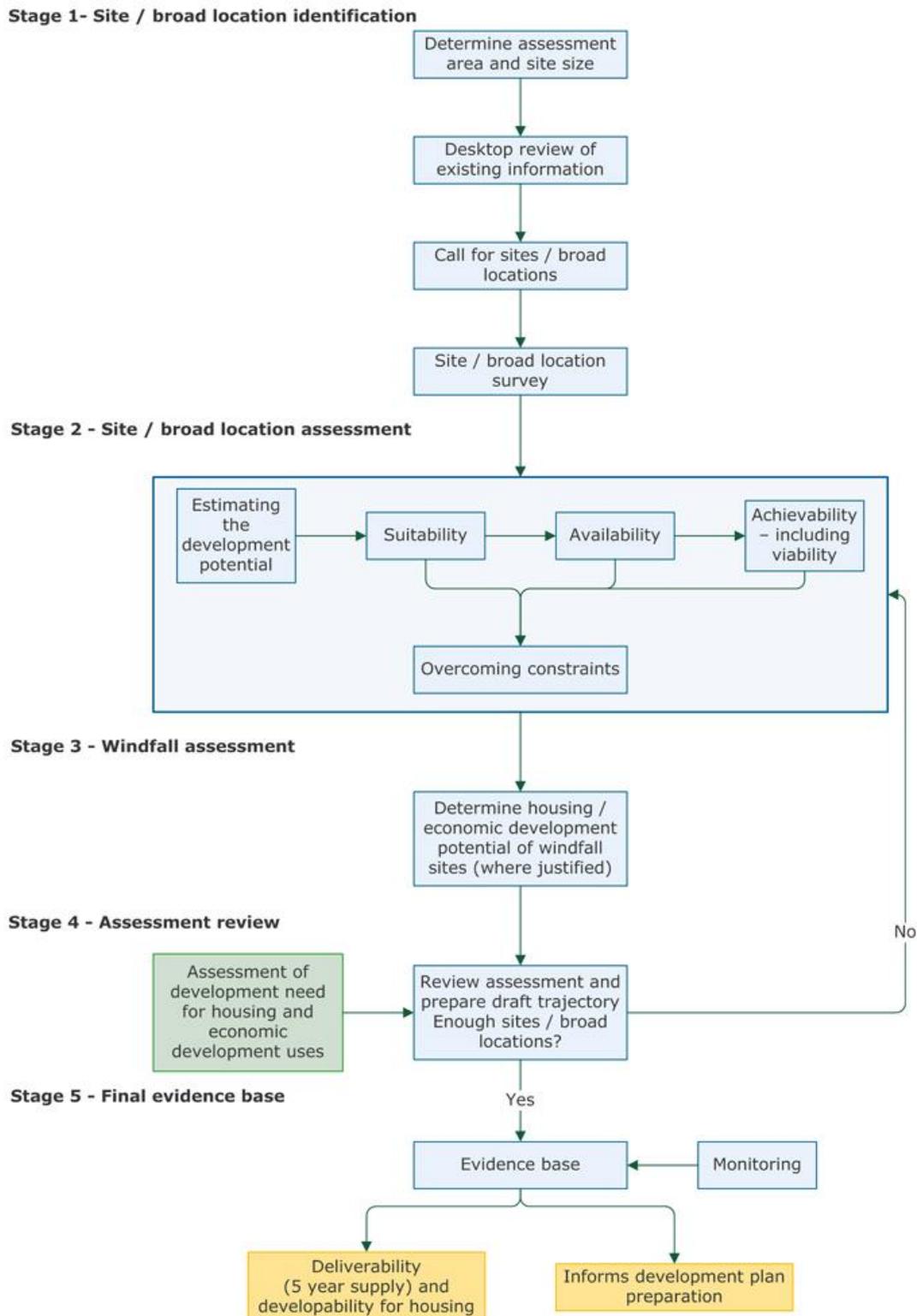
- 2.6 The national Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) provides complementary guidance on key policy themes included within the NPPF. Of relevance to the site selection process, the 'Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment' chapter sets out the method for assessing housing and economic land availability and guides local authorities in identifying appropriate land to meet development needs.
- 2.7 The PPG states that an assessment of land availability is required to identify the future supply of land that is suitable, available and achievable for housing and economic development uses over the plan period. The assessment is an important source of evidence to inform plan-making and decision-taking, and the identification of a 5-year supply of housing land<sup>8</sup>.
- 2.8 The PPG clarifies that the assessment does not in itself determine whether a site should be allocated for development. It is the role of the assessment to provide information on the range of sites which are available to meet the local authority's requirements, but it is for the development plan itself, to determine which of those sites are the most suitable to meet those requirements. Plan-making authorities may carry out land availability assessments for housing and economic development as part of the same exercise, in order that sites may be identified for the use(s) which is most appropriate. An assessment should:
- identify sites and broad locations with potential for development;
  - assess their development potential;
  - assess their suitability for development; and
  - the likelihood of development coming forward (the availability and achievability).
- 2.9 The PPG notes that plan-making bodies should consider constraints when assessing the suitability, availability and achievability of sites and broad locations. For example, assessments should reflect the policies in Footnote 6<sup>9</sup> of the National Planning Policy Framework, which sets out the areas where the Framework would provide strong reasons for restricting the overall scale, type or distribution of development in the plan area (such as the Green Belt and other protected areas).
- 2.10 The PPG emphasises the importance of taking a proactive approach when identifying as wide a range of sites and broad locations for development as possible (including those existing sites that could be improved, intensified or changed). It is important that plan-makers do not simply rely on sites that they have been informed about, but actively identify sites through the desktop review process that may assist in meeting the development needs of an area.
- 2.11 The assessment of land availability for the Plan is prepared through the Uttlesford Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA) (October 2023) in accordance with national policy and guidance. It has considered key suitability constraints noted in Footnote 7 of the National Planning Policy Framework. The

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<sup>8</sup> Paragraph 001, Reference ID: 3-001-20190722

<sup>9</sup> Now Footnote 7 (previously Footnote 6) of the National Planning Policy Framework. This includes: habitat sites (and those sites listed in paragraph 181) and/or designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest; land designated as Green Belt, Local Green Space, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, a National Park or defined as Heritage Coast, irreplaceable habitats; designated heritage assets (and other heritage assets or archaeological interest referred to in footnote 68); and areas at risk of flooding or coastal change.

HELAA effectively forms the first stage of the Council’s site selection process and provides the initial long-list of sites for more detail consideration through the plan making process.



**Figure 1 Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment Method Flowchart**  
(Planning Practice Guidance, Paragraph: 005 Reference ID: 3-005-20190722)

## 3. Site Selection Methodology

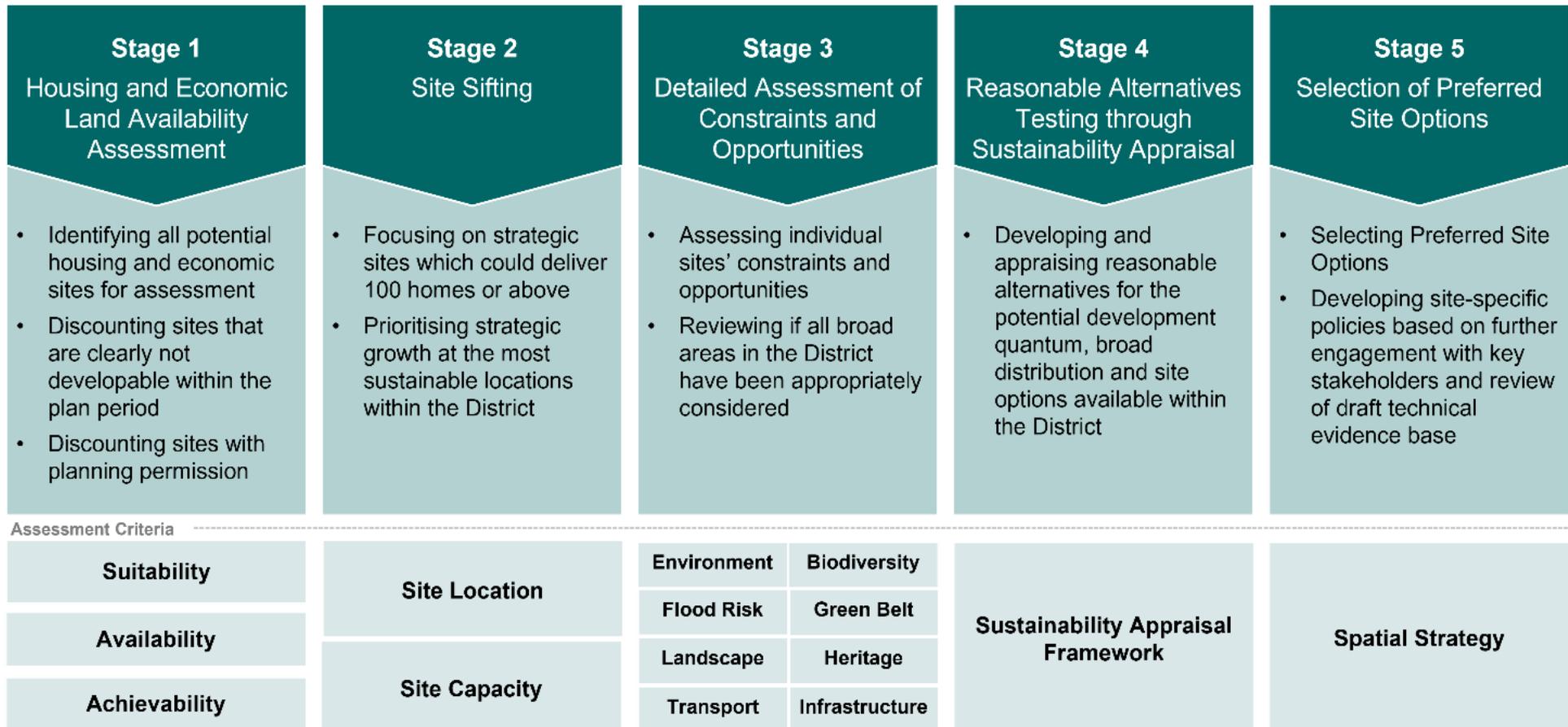
3.1 The site selection methodology undertaken, as illustrated in **Figure 2**, follows a robust and proportionate five-stage assessment comprising the following stages:

- **Stage 1:** Identification and initial assessment of sites through the Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA). This effectively provides a 'long-list' of sites which have potential to demonstrate suitability, availability and achievability for more detailed consideration at Stage 2 onwards. 431 sites, including 359 housing sites, were assessed at Stage 1 with 253 identified as appropriate for further assessment at Stage 2. The Uttlesford Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA) (October 2023) is published separately to this Topic Paper.
- **Stage 2:** An initial sift of sites which discounts non-strategic sites or site clusters unable to deliver 100 dwellings or more, as well as strategic growth (excluding standalone Garden Communities) not located at our top two tier settlements (Key Settlements and Local Rural Centres). In other words, strategic growth at the smaller and less sustainable rural settlements were ruled out for not being consistent with the Plan's objectives of supporting sustainable development. This stage helps to 'filter' the 'long-list' and creates a 'shorter long-list' for more detailed consideration. 253 sites were considered at Stage 2 with 85 identified as appropriate for consideration at Stage 3<sup>10</sup>.
- **Stage 3:** Proportionate assessment of constraints and opportunities based on the available technical evidence base, engagement with selected stakeholders and a review of the relevant planning history. This stage enables us to identify 'Reasonable Alternatives' for further consideration. 85 sites were assessed at Stage 3, with 29 sites assessed as 'Clear Preferred Site Option' or 'Marginal Preferred Site Option'.
- **Stage 4:** Reasonable Alternatives testing through the interim Sustainability Appraisal (October 2023). This stage establishes reasonable growth scenarios on the quantum and distribution of growth in Uttlesford within the plan period, including sub-area scenarios which considers the location of growth at each sub-area defined in the interim Sustainability Appraisal. 5 Reasonable Growth Scenarios are considered and appraised through the interim Sustainability Appraisal.
- **Stage 5:** Selection of Preferred Site Options

3.2 All sites submitted to the Call for Sites 2021 or actively identified by officers in accordance with the Planning Practice Guidance have been assessed through this process. Detailed outcomes of the site selection process are presented in **Appendix A** of this Topic Paper.

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<sup>10</sup> Non-strategic growth at Larger Villages, which form the third tier of settlements of Uttlesford's settlement hierarchy, is considered appropriate to support community vitality in accordance with Paragraph 79 of the National Planning Policy Framework. The Neighbourhood Plan and Larger Villages Housing Requirement Topic Paper sets out our approach in considering non-strategic growth at Larger Villages.



**Figure 2 Key Stages in Site Selection**

# Stage 1 Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA)

- 3.3 The first stage of site selection was to identify all potential housing and economic development sites in the District and undertake a high level assessment of suitability, availability and achievability through the Uttlesford Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA) (October 2023).
- 3.4 The HELAA assessed a total of 431 sites across the district from a wide range of sources, including a Call for Sites in Spring 2021 and a desktop review of potential information sources in accordance with the Planning Practice Guidance. Sites that have the capacity to deliver 5 or more dwellings (or 0.2 hectare or above), or 500 sqm or more economic floorspace (or 0.25 hectares) are considered in the HELAA.
- 3.5 A total of 295 sites, including 253 sites proposed for residential or mixed use development, with a 'theoretical' capacity of approximately 138,871 dwellings are considered to have the potential to demonstrate suitability, availability and achievability for development within 5-15 years (Category B) for further consideration at Stage 2.
- 3.6 It is important to stress that the HELAA provides a high-level consideration of potential future supply of land and does not in itself determine whether a site should be allocated for development. The assessment at this stage does not consider the broad spatial strategy for development, and in the context of Uttlesford, includes a number of proposals for very large standalone new communities; which even if one or two of these may be appropriate in the longer term, it would not be realistic for them all to come forward.
- 3.7 Nonetheless, the initial HELAA findings demonstrate that there is more than sufficient land available in the district to meet the development requirements of the Plan. This has been used as the 'long-list' of potential development sites for consideration.
- 3.8 Sites that are not considered developable within the plan period through the HELAA<sup>11</sup>, including sites which are unable or unlikely to address physical constraints; where development is unlikely or will not take place within the plan period; or, unable or unlikely to address achievability issues, are excluded from further consideration. It is considered that these sites have no potential for housing and economic development within the plan period and are therefore not taken forward to Stage 2.
- 3.9 Sites with planning permission are also discounted at this stage as they do not need to be allocated within the Local Plan. However, they have been taken into account in as any 'commitments' (sites with planning permission that will deliver within the Plan period are discounted from the 'additional' housing that the Council need to plan for.
- 3.10 Full details of the HELAA assessment methodology and outcomes, including the long list of detailed assessment criteria of suitability, availability and achievability, are provided in the Uttlesford Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (October 2023).

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<sup>11</sup> Category C within the Uttlesford Housing and Employment Land Availability Assessment (HELAA)(October 2023)

## Stage 2 Site Sifting

3.11 The long-list of sites identified in Stage 1 was subject to a high-level assessment to establish which sites could be reasonably taken forward for a further detailed assessment of constraints and opportunities. The initial sift focused on:

### **Site capacity threshold for strategic sites**

3.12 To differentiate between strategic and non-strategic sites, only sites that could potentially accommodate 100 dwellings or more<sup>12</sup> were considered. Where individual sites were too small to accommodate 100 homes, consideration was given to whether the site could be joined with neighbouring sites to deliver strategic development in combination. As explained above and in line with national policy, it is considered that Neighbourhood Plans provide an appropriate approach for planning for non-strategic sites (below 100 dwellings). These are considered separately in the Neighbourhood Plan and Larger Village Housing Requirement Topic Paper (October 2023).

### **Prioritising the most sustainable locations**

3.13 The initial sift was based on prioritising the most sustainable locations in the district, to reflect the inherent need to support sustainable development. Strategic sites within or adjoining the top two-tier settlements of the district, are taken forward for further consideration. This includes three Key Settlements (Saffron Walden, Great Dunmow and Stansted Mountfitchet) and six Local Rural Centres (Takeley, Thaxted, Hatfield Heath, Elsenham, Newport and Great Chesterford). These settlements are the most sustainable settlements in the district to support growth, containing the highest level of services with a relatively high level of connectivity to the transport network.

3.14 Strategic growth at smaller and less sustainable rural settlements were discounted, as this does not align with the council's commitment to deliver sustainable development and support the climate change agenda. Non-strategic development at appropriate Larger Villages in accordance with Paragraph 79 of the NPPF is discussed separately in the Neighbourhood Plan and Larger Village Housing Requirement Topic Paper (October 2023).

### **Approach to standalone Garden Communities (1500+ dwellings)**

3.15 Strategic sites which could deliver standalone Garden Communities (1500 dwellings or more – which is considered the minimum number of dwellings to support a new Primary School and Local Centre at a standalone location not related to an existing top two tier settlement), were also taken forward for further consideration at Stage 3. These sites were considered capable of delivering a minimum critical mass capable of delivering the necessary infrastructure and facilities, including a genuine choice of transport modes, to support a sustainable community.

3.16 Overall, Stage 2 resulted in 85 potential strategic sites being identified for further consideration at Stage 3.

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<sup>12</sup> Based on calculated theoretical capacity. The density multipliers used, ranging from 35 dwellings per hectare to 45 dwellings per hectare, are detailed in Table 2 of the Uttlesford Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (October 2023).

# Stage 3 Detailed Assessment of Constraints and Opportunities

3.17 Stage 3 focused on a more detailed assessment of constraints and opportunities of each of the 'shorter long-list' of sites identified from Stage 2. This helped to establish the sites suitability for development and consistency with the emerging Plan's spatial strategy and objectives to deliver sustainable development. The assessment was informed by a proportionate range of available technical evidence<sup>13</sup>, engagement with selected stakeholders and the review of relevant planning history.

3.18 The information collected for each site included:

- Whether the site is located within or adjacent to important environmental or biodiversity designations and their impact risk zones or Zone of Influence. This included Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Areas (SPA), Ramsar sites, (including the Essex Coast RAMS Zone of Influence), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), National Nature Reserves (NNR) (including Hatfield Forest) and Local Wildlife Sites (LWS)
- Whether the site contains irreplaceable habitats such as Ancient Woodland and ancient or veteran trees. Paragraph 180 of the NPPF resists development resulting in the loss and deterioration of irreplaceable habitats.
- Whether the site is subject to risks of flooding, including whether it falls within Flood Zone 2 and 3, based on the Uttlesford District Council Stage 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (November 2021 and as amended in September 2023) conducted by JBA Consulting
- Whether the site is located within the Green Belt
- Landscape sensitivity of the site, as assessed through the Uttlesford Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Phase 1-3 Reports conducted by LUC (November 2021 and as reviewed in October 2023) and informed by the updated Landscape Character Assessment (September 2023). As detailed in Chapter 2 of the Landscape Sensitivity Assessment, the study considers the landscape susceptibility and value of land parcels taking into account their physical character (landform, scale and field pattern); natural character; sense of time depth and historic landscape character; settlement character; visual character (including skylines); and perceptual and scenic qualities (including recreational value)
- Heritage sensitivity of the site, including high-level considerations of development impacts on the significance and setting of heritage assets, based on the Uttlesford Heritage Sensitivity Assessment (October 2021 and as amended in September 2023)
- Whether a potentially suitable access could be achieved based on high level desktop assessment and site visits working in partnership with Essex County Council (ECC) as the Highway Authority

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<sup>13</sup> This included evidence prepared as part of the current Development Plan (including 'made' Neighbourhood Plans), new evidence base prepared for the Plan published alongside this Topic Paper and, where applicable, submitted through a planning application or Call for Sites submission.

- Whether the site may put unacceptable pressure on the local highway network based on high level desktop assessment working in partnership with ECC as the Highway Authority
- Whether the site is well located to the rail network to promote sustainable travel based on high level desktop assessment working in partnership with ECC as the Highway Authority
- Whether the site is in an area subject to potential water supply, wastewater and environmental capacity issues, as investigated through the Stage 1 Water Cycle Study (July 2021 and as updated in August 2023) conducted by JBA and consulted with the relevant infrastructure providers
- Whether the site is likely to be subject to abnormal significant infrastructure requirements and costs, beyond the developer's ability to address, for example, mitigation required to address cumulative impacts on the strategic road network, as informed by engagement with selected stakeholders, including ECC
- Whether the site may be subject to challenges in primary and secondary education provision, considering the location and capacity of existing and committed education infrastructure and the potential for improved or new facilities. This is informed by engagement with education officers at ECC
- Relevant planning history of the site

3.19 Each site was assessed against the topic areas above based on their impacts and capacity to accommodate development, considering any potential mitigation measures that are likely to be required. It is informed by informal consultation with selected stakeholders, including ECC and consultants undertaking the Sustainability Appraisal.

3.20 An overall 'traffic light' rating (**Table 1**) is given to indicate if the site is an appropriate candidate as part of the Preferred Site Option to support the draft Plan. A total of 29 sites with a theoretical capacity of 19,975 dwellings were considered as either 'Clear Preferred Site Options' (27 sites) or 'Marginal Preferred Site Options' (2 sites) to inform Stage 4.

**Table 1. Stage 3 Assessment Rating Descriptors**

Overall Rating	Description
<b>Clear Preferred Site Option</b>	The site or site cluster is in a sustainable location for strategic growth, consistent with the objectives and broad spatial strategy of the Plan. The assessment may have identified potential constraints, however there is a reasonable prospect for the identified constraints to be mitigated successfully. The site is recommended for further consideration in Stage 4.
<b>Marginal Preferred Site Option</b>	The site or site cluster is in a relatively sustainable location for strategic growth, largely consistent with the objectives and broad spatial strategy of the Plan. The assessment may have identified potential constraints, however whilst there may be reasonable prospect for the identified constraints to be mitigated, the site is considered to meet the Plan objectives to a more marginal extent. The site is recommended for further consideration in Stage 4.
<b>Marginal Omission Site Option</b>	The site or site cluster is subject to one or multiple, and more significant development constraints and aligns to a more marginal extent with the objectives and spatial strategy of the Plan. The site is discounted from further consideration.

Overall Rating	Description
Clear Omission Site Option	The site or site cluster is subject to one or multiple, and more significant development constraints that are unlikely to be overcome through potential mitigation strategies and does not meet the objectives and broad spatial strategy of the Plan. The site is discounted from further consideration.

- 3.21 There is no weighting system for the different technical areas assessed and a degree of planning balance and professional judgement has been applied in relation to the broad spatial strategy of the Plan. It is important to recognise that this stage does not attempt to assess all the potential effects a development may have, but aims to identify, following a robust and proportionate approach, key constraints and opportunities critical to the broad spatial strategy of the Plan and/or 'showstoppers' to development.
- 3.22 Following the detailed assessment, the council has undertaken an officer-led review of whether all broad areas in the district have been appropriately considered, including land which may not have been promoted for development through the Call for Sites. No additional sites were identified through this process.
- 3.23 A review of available site options within the district at Stage 3, shows that there is sufficient land outside of the designated Green Belt to deliver the local housing need. This fact limits the progression of any Green Belt development sites in the selection of preferred site options given the requirement under Paragraph 140 of the NPPF to demonstrate 'exceptional circumstances' with respect to Green Belt release. As a result, no sites at Birchanger, Hatfield Heath and south of Stansted Mountfitchet are carried forward to Stage 4.

## Stage 4 Reasonable Alternatives Testing through Sustainability Appraisal

- 3.24 At Stage 4, site options were tested through the Sustainability Appraisal (SA), which appraised Reasonable Alternatives for the potential scale and location of growth in Uttlesford that could meet the Plan's objectives.
- 3.25 The Sustainability Appraisal is central to the site selection process and is a legal requirement for the Local Plan preparation. The Interim Sustainability Appraisal Report of the draft Uttlesford Local Plan (October 2023), at this stage, gives consideration to the range of development quantum, broad distribution of development and the pool of site options available within the district. It considers growth scenarios for individual settlements and identifies reasonable alternatives that sites might be allocated, in combination and the quantum of homes that are broadly appropriate for the sub-area. The SA identifies the likely significant effects of each growth scenario under consideration against sustainability objectives.
- 3.26 In summary, five Reasonable Alternative growth scenarios were tested which considered lower to higher growth scenarios across the district between 3,772 homes and up to 6,326 homes to be delivered through strategic allocations, including:
- Scenario 1: Low Growth across all sub-areas
  - Scenario 2: Scenario 1 plus higher growth at Saffron Walden
  - Scenario 3: Scenario 2 plus higher growth at Great Dunmow
  - Scenario 4: Scenario 3 plus additional expansion north of Stansted Mountfitchet
  - Scenario 5: Scenario 4 plus garden community north of Stansted Mountfitchet, minus expansion to the north of Stansted Mountfitchet.
- 3.27 **Figure 3** provides an extract of the summary appraisal findings of the interim Sustainability Appraisal.
- 3.28 In consideration of the appraisal outcomes, the Council considers that the preferred scenario is Scenario 3, which the appraisal shows to perform reasonably well relative to the alternatives. Scenario 3 gives rise to a degree of tension with certain sustainability objectives, as is inevitable in the context of a local plan, and it is recognised that there are certain arguments in favour of supporting an alternative approach, but Scenario 3 is judged to represent sustainable development on balance. There is good potential to address the identified tensions through policy, and adjustments can also be made to the emerging plan subsequent to the current consultation, taking into account consultation responses received.
- 3.29 With regards to Scenarios 4 and 5, the first point to make is that this quantum of growth could well prove to be in excess of what is required in order to meet locally arising needs, particularly once account is taken of the potential for the number of permissions to increase prior to plan finalisation. Secondly, whilst it is recognised that higher growth at Stansted Mountfitchet could assist with securing a new primary school more easily, the sites in contention to potentially deliver higher growth are both associated with clear issues.
- 3.30 The appraisal of the preferred scenario (Scenario 3) predicts moderate or uncertain positive effects under four topic headings (Accessibility, Biodiversity, Economy/employment and Homes), and flags moderate or uncertain negative effects

under two headings (Historic environment and Land/soils) having accounted for the proposed growth strategy, development management policy and established sustainability objectives. Under the remaining topics (Climate change adaptation, climate change mitigation, Communities, equality and health, Landscape and Transport) the appraisal concludes broadly neutral effects. This has informed refinement of the 'emerging' strategy at Stage 5.

- 3.31 Large Garden Communities capable of delivering 5,000 homes or above are considered inappropriate for further consideration in this Local Plan, to avoid over-relying on the delivery of single sites above the identified need to be accommodated on strategic sites without adequate evidence to demonstrate their viability. This reflects the Inspector's comments<sup>14</sup> on previously rejected plans, which stresses the need to allocate more small and medium sized sites that could deliver homes in the short to medium term and help to bolster the five year housing land supply. This does not mean larger scale development would not be appropriate for consideration in the longer term through the next Plan.

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<sup>14</sup> Paragraph 114 of the Inspector Report (10 January 2020) on the Examination of the Uttlesford Local Plan

	Scenario 1: Low growth	Scenario 2: SW	Scenario 3: SW, GD	Scenario 4: SW, GD, SM	Scenario 5: SW, GD, UGC
Topic	Rank of preference (numbers) and categorisation of effects (shading)				
Accessibility	4	3	2	1★	1★
Biodiversity	2	1★	1★	1★	1★
Climate change adaptation	=	=	=	=	=
Climate change mitigation	=	=	=	=	=
Communities, equality, health	2	1★	2	2	2
Economy and employment	5	4	3	2	1★
Historic environment	2	1★	3	3	4
Homes	5	4	3	2	1★
Land and soils	=	=	=	=	=
Landscape	=	=	=	=	=
Transport	2	1★	2	2	2
Water	=	=	=	=	=

Figure 3 Extract of the Summary Appraisal Findings of the Sustainability Appraisal

## Stage 5 Selection of Preferred Site Options

- 3.32 The final selection of Preferred Site Options is based on the information collected from Stages 1 to 4. A total of 10 sites were selected for inclusion in the draft Local Plan as the most sustainable and deliverable locations for development and consistent with the emerging Spatial Strategy for the Plan. This stage included the development of indicative masterplans and identification of any infrastructure requirements and/or mitigation strategies as part of the policy requirements, where required.
- 3.33 The Preferred Site Options selected, which were considered to form the ‘emerging strategy’ were subject to further consultation with the site promoters and key stakeholders to help refine the exact nature of any proposals and the policy requirements for each site. This included engagement with Essex County Council, Natural England, the Environment Agency, Historic England, Highways England and the Integrated Care Board and our neighbouring authorities in terms of Duty to Co-operate. The Duty to Co-operate Topic Paper sets out the detail in relation to the efforts undertaken to incorporate joint working with key stakeholders on the Plan.
- 3.34 The development of the detailed policy requirements was also supported by a series of evidence base documents, including:
- Draft Uttlesford Landscape Character Assessment Update (September 2023) and review of the 2021 Landscape Sensitivity Assessment (October 2023)
  - Draft Uttlesford Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy (July 2023)
  - Uttlesford Strategic Site Heritage Assessment Technical Note (September 2023)
  - Uttlesford Transport Study and Modelling, including a series of technical notes on settlement-based model outputs (September 2023)
  - Uttlesford Leisure Facilities Indoor and Built Facility Interim Findings (September 2023)
  - Uttlesford District Council Draft Open Space Update Report (September 2023)
  - Uttlesford Viability Assessment Stage 1 Draft Report (September 2023)
  - Draft Uttlesford Water Cycle Study Addendum to Stage 1 (September 2023)
- 3.35 It is perhaps helpful to provide some additional explanation for why there are no proposed strategic allocations at Great Chesterford, Elsenham or Hatfield Heath given that these are three of our six Local Rural Centres, which form the second tier of most sustainable settlements in our Settlement Hierarchy:

### **Elsenham:**

This settlement contains a number of sites suitable for development, but they already gave planning permission and there is already over 1,000 homes coming forward at this settlement. The assessment process did consider other sites, but these were not considered to be appropriate.

### **Great Chesterford:**

There were a number of sites considered at Great Chesterford, but these were all ruled out for various reasons as explained in Appendix A Stage 1 to Stage 5 Site Selection Assessment. In some cases, some of the sites in question may be suitable

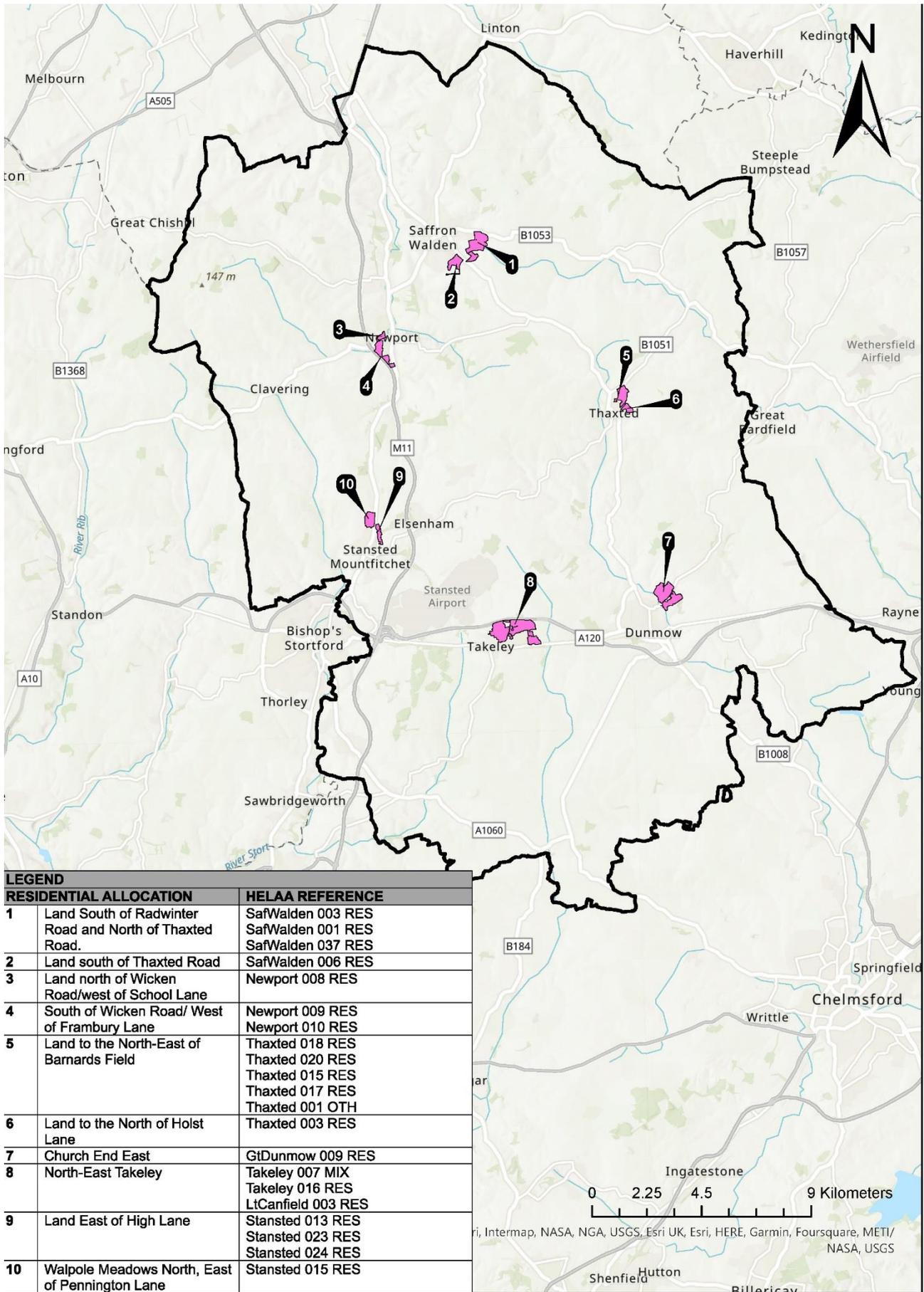
for consideration in a future Local Plan, but were not considered deliverable in the currently emerging Plan.

**Hatfield Heath:**

As has already been explained, this settlement falls entirely within the Green Belt and as such has not been considered for strategic development. It is demonstrated by this paper that there are more than sufficient sites available to meet the housing need elsewhere in the district and for that reason, it is considered that 'exceptional circumstances' would not exist to justify development in the Green Belt.

## 4. Recommendations

- 4.1 This Topic Paper summarises the site selection process Uttlesford District Council has undertaken to identify strategic housing sites proposed for allocation within the draft Uttlesford Local Plan 2021 to 2041 as proposed to be published for consultation in November 2023.
- 4.2 A proportionate and robust site selection process has been followed in accordance with national policy and guidance. It was informed by a wide range of available technical evidence and engagement with key stakeholders including site promoters and infrastructure providers. The approach has been integral to the broad Spatial Strategy and the importance of supporting sustainable development. The work was undertaken iteratively and informed by the Sustainability Appraisal.
- 4.3 The staged process described in this paper illustrates a comprehensive yet proportionate approach. Sufficient sites were identified that could meet the identified housing need at the top-tier and most sustainable settlements such that less sustainable options did not need to be considered in more detail.
- 4.4 Non-strategic development is supported at Larger Villages, but this is discussed more within the Neighbourhood Plan and Larger Village Housing Requirement Topic Paper. This is important to support the vitality of our larger and more sustainable rural communities in accordance with Paragraph 79 of the National Planning Policy Framework.
- 4.5 The draft Plan includes 10 preferred strategic housing sites, as highlighted in **Figure 4**. The council considers that, collectively, the preferred sites proposed for allocation are a sustainable approach to meeting the objectively assessed housing need for the district. The preferred sites are of varying sizes, types and geographical locations and can contribute to housing delivery in the first five years of the plan and beyond.



**Figure 4 Strategic Housing Sites Proposed for Allocation**