

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for the Revised Long Wittenham Neighbourhood Plan (RLWNP)

Environmental Report: Further Update
Non-Technical Summary

March 2019

Quality information

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Revision History

Revision date	Details	Authorised	Position
23/10/18	Final report for submission	Mark Fessey	Associate Director
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1. Introduction

AECOM is commissioned to lead on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in support of the emerging Revised Long Wittenham Neighbourhood Plan (RLWNP).

The RLWNP is being prepared by Long Wittenham Parish Council in the context of the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan and the new emerging Local Plan.¹ Once the RLWNP has been 'made' it will have material weight when deciding on planning applications, alongside the latest adopted South Oxfordshire Plan.

SEA is a mechanism for considering and communicating the likely effects of an emerging plan, and alternatives, with a view to avoiding and mitigating negative effects and maximising the positives. Central to the SEA process is preparation of an Environmental Report, which must then be published for consultation alongside the draft plan.

The Environmental Report was published alongside the draft – 'pre-submission' – version of the plan in 2018. An 'Environmental Report Update' was then prepared and submitted alongside the plan. The decision was then taken to undertake further consultation on the Environmental Report with a view to exploring further issues raised with regards to mineral resources. An 'Environmental Report Further Update' is published alongside the 'Submission' version of the Plan with a view to facilitating this consultation.

This report is the Non-technical Summary (NTS) of the Environmental Report Further Update.

The 'Further Update' includes extra consideration of mineral resource issues, which has resulted in minor changes to:

- The baseline review and SEA objectives for the SEA topic of 'land, soil and water resources'
- The appraisal of site options and reasonable alternatives
- The appraisal of the Plan as a whole

Structure of the Environmental Report Update / this NTS

SEA reporting essentially involves answering the following questions in turn:

1) What has plan-making / SEA involved **up to this point**?

- Including in relation to 'reasonable alternatives'.

2) What are the SEA findings **at this stage**?

- i.e. in relation to the draft plan.

3) What happens **next**?

Each of these questions is answered in turn below. Firstly though there is a need to set the scene further by answering the question 'What's the scope of the SEA?'

What's the scope of the SEA?

The scope of the SEA is reflected in a list of topics and objectives. Taken together, this list indicates the parameters of SEA, providing a methodological 'framework' for assessment.

¹ The existing Local Plan comprises the Saved Policies of the Local Plan 2011 (adopted 2006) and the Core Strategy (adopted 2012) - see southoxon.gov.uk/services-and-advice/planning-and-building/planning-policy/our-development-plan

The SEA framework

SEA topic	SEA objective
Biodiversity	Protect and enhance all biodiversity and geological features.
Climate change	Reduce contribution to climate change
	Support resilience to the effects of climate change, including flooding
Landscape and historic environment	Protect, maintain and enhance the cultural heritage resource, including the historic environment and archaeological assets.
	Protect and enhance character and quality of land and townscapes, in particular the setting of the AONB
Land, soil and water resources	Ensure the efficient and effective use of land.
	Promote sustainable waste management solutions that encourage the reduction, re-use and recycling of waste.
	Use and manage water and land resources in a sustainable manner.
Population / community	Cater for existing and future residents' needs as well as the needs of different groups in the community, and improve access to local, high-quality community services and facilities.
	Reduce deprivation and promote a more inclusive and self-contained community.
	Provide everyone with the opportunity to live in good quality, affordable housing, and ensure an appropriate mix of dwelling sizes, types, tenures.
Health and wellbeing	Improve the health and wellbeing of residents.
Transport	Promote sustainable transport use and reduce the need to travel.

2. Plan-making / SEA up to this point

An important element of the required SEA process involves assessing 'reasonable alternatives' in time to inform development of the draft proposals, and then publishing information on reasonable alternatives for consultation alongside the draft proposals.

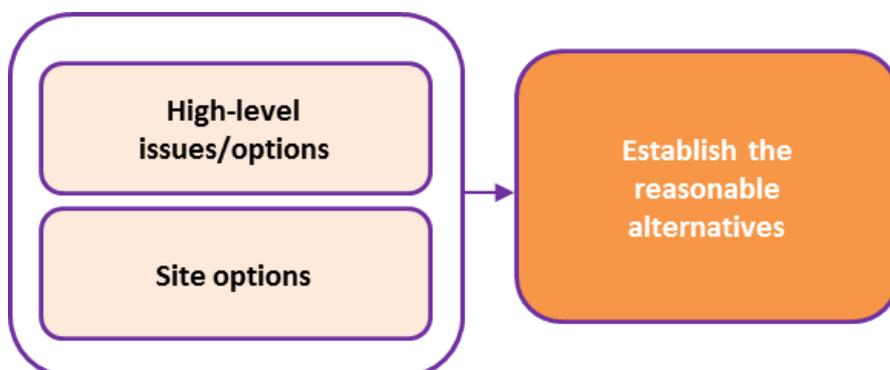
As such, Part 1 of the Environmental Report explains how work was undertaken to develop and assess a 'reasonable' range of alternative approaches to the allocation of land for development, or 'growth scenarios'.

Specifically, Part 1 of the report –

- 1) Explains the process of **establishing** the reasonable alternatives
- 2) Presents the outcomes of **assessing** the reasonable alternatives
- 3) Explains reasons for **establishing** the preferred option, in light of the assessment

Establishing reasonable alternatives

The main report explains how reasonable alternatives were established subsequent to process of considering the strategic policy context ('top down' factors) and the site options in contention for allocation ('bottom-up' factors). The figure below presents a summary.



Ultimately two reasonable alternatives were established. Each option, or scenario, would involve delivering a new community hub, to include a primary school and new village hall, as this is a key aim / objective of the plan. The alternatives vary in respect of the location of the scheme, and the 'enabling' housing that must necessarily be delivered alongside the hub, in order to make the scheme financially viable. The alternatives also vary in respect of the quantum of enabling housing. This reflects the fact that one of the sites under examination is being made available, by the landowner, at a heavily discounted price; such that the quantum of enabling housing necessary, in order to make the hub financially viable, is greatly decreased.

The reasonable alternatives are as follows -

In summary, there are two 'reasonable alternative' growth scenarios, as follows -

- **Option 1** -Deliver the hub at the Didcot Road site (centrally located within the village, east of Didcot Road) alongside c.40 dwellings
- **Option 2** - Deliver the hub at SHELAA site 1052, to the west of the village, alongside significantly more dwellings (likely several hundred).

Assessing reasonable alternatives

Summary alternatives assessment findings are presented within the table below. Within each row (i.e. for each of the topics that comprise the SEA framework) the columns to the right hand side seek to both categorise the performance of each option in terms of 'significant effects' (using red / amber / green) and also rank the alternatives in order of performance. Also, ' = ' is used to denote instances where the alternatives perform on a par (i.e. it not possible to differentiate between them).

Summary alternatives assessment findings

Topic	Option 1: Didcot Road	Option 2: SHELAA site 1052
Biodiversity	★1	2
Climate change	★1	2
Landscape and historic environment	=	=
Land, soil and water resources	★1	2
Population and community	★1	2
Health and wellbeing	=	=
Transportation	★1	2

Assessment conclusion

The assessment finds Option 1 to perform notably best, in that no major draw-backs, relative to Option 2, are identified. Whilst it is not the role of alternatives assessment to directly lead to the selection of a preferred option (rather, it is the role of the plan-maker, after having balanced the pros and cons identified through the assessment), in this instance a preferred option is clearly indicated.

However, Option 1 is not without its issues/impacts. Notably, a scheme to the south of the village could impinge on views to/from Wittenham Clumps, which are two adjacent hills that are popular viewpoints within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

It is also the case that part of the Clumps is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and the southern hill is a Scheduled Monument (Sinodun Hill camp). However, there is little reason to suggest the potential for impacts, with minimal increases in recreational pressure likely from residents of the c.40 additional homes. The Clumps are well managed as a nature reserve, by the Earth Trust.

It is also the case that Option 1 could well result in the loss of 'best and most versatile' agricultural land, i.e. land that is grade 1, 2 or 3a. The low resolution nationally available agricultural land quality map serves to suggest that land surrounding Long Wittenham is likely to be grade 2 quality; however, it is noted that land adjacent to the west of the plan area (namely the land that comprises the committed North East Didcot strategic site) has been surveyed in detail and found to comprise land that is of grade 3b, i.e. to comprise land that is *not* of best and most versatile quality.

Having made these initial points, the following is a summary of assessment findings -

- Biodiversity - A primary concern 'Hayward's Eyot' Local Wildlife Site (LWS), which is situated adjacent to SHELAA site 1052, which could be impacted as a result of a scheme comprising several hundred homes and a new community hub. However, there would be good potential for effective avoidance and mitigation, noting that the part of the site that lies adjacent to the LWS is within the floodplain, and hence would almost certainly be left undeveloped.
- Climate change - both options contain areas that are susceptible to surface water flood risk, but this is more of an issue for SHELAA site 1052, and it is also the case that a significant portion of the site is located within an area of fluvial flood risk. It is likely that the developable area would avoid areas of risk, and surface water flood risk can be mitigated with Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS); however, it is appropriate to take a sequential approach to site selection, with

sites at lower risk selected ahead of sites at higher risk, as far as possible. On this basis, significant negative effects are predicted for Option 2.

- Landscape - the current LWNP (2017) recognises the importance of viewing corridors across the Didcot Road site (Option 1), towards Wittenham Clumps; however, the situation has now changed, due to Fieldside having gained planning permission for 36 homes, and it is also anticipated that there will be good potential to mitigate impacts through careful layout and design measures. With regards to Option 2, the scheme would be of a much larger scale, and this is a sensitive landscape in that it forms a gap between Long Wittenham and Didcot Garden Town, which is expanding (as explored in detail in the Evidence Paper – Countryside).² Some form of landscape gap could be retained, within the site; however, the gap would be eroded significantly. It is thought likely that this landscape gap is of importance not just to residents of Long Wittenham, but also in the sense that it forms part of the vista from Didcot Garden Town and Shire's Hill and forms part of the setting of the AONB.
- Historic environment - neither site contains designated heritage assets; however, both are adjacent to areas of sensitivity, with SHELAA site 1052 adjacent to a large Scheduled Monument ('Settlement Site SE of Church'), and Didcot Road close to the Long Wittenham Conservation Area (though buffered by the site which has recently gained planning permission). As such, it is difficult to differentiate the alternatives in terms of historic environment / heritage impacts. There would likely be good potential to avoid/mitigate effects at the planning application stage.

Another consideration relates to archaeology, with both sites potentially being sensitive in this respect. Historic England has raised concerns over the potential for development to affect archaeological remains at the Didcot Road site in Option 1; due to indications in OS maps that the site is also the site of an Anglo-Saxon Burial Ground; whilst Landowner representations for Site 4, which is a component part of the larger SHELAA Site 1052, indicate that the site is known to contain archaeology "*from the Prehistoric, Roman, Anglo-Saxon through to the Medieval and Post-Medieval periods*". However, it is difficult to suggest that the site is a barrier to development, given an assumption that there would be full investigation, and the necessary steps taken towards preservation.

- Land, soil and water resources - Option 2 would involve a larger scheme, and hence could result in significantly greater loss of 'best and most versatile' agricultural land; however, land adjacent to the west of SHELAA site 1052 has been surveyed and been found to comprise land that is not 'best and most versatile'. The larger scheme under Option 2 also has the potential for residual minor negative effects as a result of significant land take hindering future access to mineral resources in the Plan area (soft sand).
- Population and community - there a number of considerations -
 - Growth proposed through Option 2 has the potential to significantly affect the character of the village and its community identity, not only by potentially doubling the size of the settlement (contrary to the Settlement Hierarchy proposed through the Local Plan), but also by significantly reducing the area of land that separates Long Wittenham and Didcot.
 - Option 2 would locate the community hub at the western extent of the village, which is a less accessible location, albeit it would be easily accessible to residents of the exiting housing area at the western edge of the village. Conversely, Option 1 would deliver the new hub at a central location, such that it would effectively form a focal point for the village.
 - Whilst the larger scale growth proposed through Option 2 would provide more new homes for the local community, it is unlikely that community infrastructure would be provided over-and-above Option 1.
- Health and Wellbeing - there is little to add beyond that discussed above, under 'Population and community', although it is noted that a bridleway passes through SHELAA site 1052, which is likely to be a popular walking route for residents of Didcot Garden Town, as they look to access the surrounding countryside. Either scheme would deliver new sports facilities and open space.
- Transportation - there is little to add beyond that discussed above, under 'Population and community'. Didcot Road (Option 1) is the more accessible location.

² Andrea Pellegram (2018) Evidence Paper - Countryside

Establishing the preferred option

The following is the Parish Council's response to the assessment of reasonable alternative growth scenarios –

The preferred option is Option 1, which accords fully with the alternatives assessment findings.

The Didcot Road site has been made available at a discounted rate to deliver the hub proposal and, in conjunction with Community Infrastructure Levy investment, would deliver the same level of infrastructure as a much larger scheme to the west of the village.

A large scheme to the west of the village (Option 2) is not supported. Such a scheme would significantly increase the built footprint of the village to an extent that exceeds that outlined by the Local Plan, and challenge the policy provisions within the Local Plan which seek to limit growth in this 'Smaller Village'. The delivery of such growth would significantly change the character and identity of the village, and a new community hub in this location would not be effective. It is also considered that the loss of the open countryside gap, between Long Wittenham and Didcot, would be contrary to Didcot Garden Town objectives."

3. Assessment Findings at this stage

Part 2 of the Environmental Report presents an assessment of the Pre-Submission Plan. Assessment findings are presented as a series of narratives under the 'SEA framework' themes. The following overall conclusion is reached –

RLWNP policies will benefit the local community through; the redevelopment and relocation of key service and facility provisions to meet local needs in a more accessible location; the delivery of new housing to meet local needs; protection of the surrounding countryside; a reduced potential for coalescence with Didcot; local heritage protection; and the protection of green spaces. The community hub proposal in particular is considered likely to lead to long term significant positive effects for the community.

It is recognised that the Plan is relatively limited in the potential to improve local transport infrastructure through new development, however capitalising on opportunities to connect the existing pedestrian and cycle network with the new hub, which will serve a large number of the residents, is considered likely to lead to positive effects for both 'transport and accessibility' and 'community health and wellbeing'.

No significant negative effects have been identified, however; it is recognised that there is the potential for minor long term negative effects through; the loss of greenfield land and potentially high quality soil resources; and a continued reliance on the private vehicle as residents are likely to continue to travel outside of the Plan area to access a wider range of services, facilities and employment opportunities.

Recommendations are also made for Policy LW1 to include the requirement for on-site sustainable drainage systems to reduce the potential for negative effects in relation to surface water flood risk, and to include the requirement for archaeological investigation and assessment prior to any development at the site.

4. Next Steps

Part 3 of the Environmental Report answers – What happens next? – by discussing plan finalisation and monitoring.

Plan finalisation

At Independent Examination, the Neighbourhood Plan will be considered in terms of whether it meets the Basic Conditions for Neighbourhood Plans and is in general conformity with the South Oxfordshire District emerging Local Plan and extant Core Strategy. This Environmental Report is required in demonstrating that the Basic Conditions have been met.

If the subsequent Independent Examination is favourable, the Long Wittenham Neighbourhood Plan will be subject to a referendum, organised by South Oxfordshire District Council. If more than 50% of those who vote agree with the Neighbourhood Plan, then it will be ‘made’. Once made, the Long Wittenham Neighbourhood Plan will become part of the Development Plan for South Oxfordshire, covering the defined Neighbourhood Plan Area.

Monitoring

The SEA regulations require ‘measures envisaged concerning monitoring’ to be outlined in the Environmental Report. This refers to the monitoring of likely significant effects of the RLWNP to identify any unforeseen effects early and take remedial action as appropriate.

It is anticipated that monitoring of effects of the Neighbourhood Plan will be undertaken by South Oxfordshire District Council as part of the process of preparing its Authority Monitoring Report (AMR).

The RLWNP commits the Parish Council to assessing performance of the plan every 12 months, with a fuller review of performance every five years. This is supported; however, we note that no particular objectives are identified as being worthy of particular close review.

In light of the assessment presented above (Chapter 9), it is certainly fair to suggest that delivery of the new community hub should be a focus of monitoring efforts. First and foremost, there is a need to monitor progression of a planning application for the scheme, and then there will be a need to closely monitor the nature of the scheme that emerges. Issues to consider will include visual / landscape impacts (in the knowledge that there might be some (limited) potential to take actions to address impacts, e.g. through delivering additional screening vegetation). Surface water flooding could also warrant monitoring, in the knowledge that it might be possible to put in place some remedial actions, should problems arise.

