

Meeting Cabinet
Portfolio Area Environment and Regeneration
Date 4 June 2025



PLANNING POLICY UPDATE INCLUDING REVISED LOCAL DEVELOPMENT SCHEME AND REVISED STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

KEY DECISION

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1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide Members with an update to changes in national planning policy and guidance announced by Government and the implications for plan making in Stevenage.
- 1.2 To seek Members' approval to adopt a revised Local Development Scheme (LDS) and Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) which consists of minor updates that affect the Council's approach to both plan making and how the Council consults on planning applications concerning land in the Council's ownership.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

That Cabinet:

- 2.1 Approve the revised Local Development Scheme.
- 2.2 Approve the revised Statement of Community Involvement.
- 2.3 Consider the comments of the Planning & Development Committee on the content of this Cabinet Report.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 This report provides Members with an update to changes in national planning policy and guidance announced by Government and the implications for plan making in Stevenage.
- 3.2 The changes to the NPPF and the emerging Planning & Infrastructure Bill does introduce additional considerations to the Council's approach to plan making in Stevenage. However, the Council considers it appropriate to proceed with the submission of the Local Plan – Review and Partial Update and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Charging Schedule as soon as is practical.
- 3.3 This approach was previously agreed at Cabinet in November 2024 (Local Plan) and January 2025 (CIL). In order to execute this, the Council is making minor changes to the Local Development Scheme and Statement of Community Involvement.

Approach to the Local Plan

- 3.4 The Stevenage Borough Local Plan [BD4] was adopted on 22 May 2019. The Plan sets out a spatial vision for the town to 2031 and contains detailed land use policies for the Borough. The Plan superseded the District Plan Second Review (adopted 2004) as the statutory Local Plan for the Borough and is used to determine applications for planning permission.
- 3.5 The preparation of Local Plans is subject to an extensive legal framework, as set out in relevant acts and regulations and interpreted through case law. This is supplemented by national planning policies and guidance which set out the clear principles and expectations of the planning system.
- 3.6 It was agreed, following legal advice, that there should be a two-stage process to reviewing the Stevenage Borough Local Plan, given the position the local authority finds itself regarding the age of the current Local Plan being 5 years since adoption:

Stage 1: Local Plan – Review and Partial Update
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Stage 2: Local Plan – New Plan

- 3.7 Officers have progressed with undertaking a review and partial update of the Local Plan. The scope of the Local Plan – Review and Partial Update is limited to new and revised policies of the existing adopted Stevenage Borough Local Plan (2019).
- 3.8 It is important to note that the Local Plan Review consists of a Review and Partial Update of the Stevenage Borough Local Plan, adopted May 2019. As such, the scope of the review to policies and supporting text is limited to necessary changes only, related to key drivers of change since the Plan was

adopted in 2019. The key changes made to the adopted Local Plan were detailed in the Officer Report to Cabinet in June 2024 [BD5] and November 2024 [BD6] and focus on the continued requirement to tackle the Climate Change and promoting sustainable and active travel across the Borough. Other wider changes will be considered for the next stage of the Local Plan Review, the New Plan.

- 3.9 The first consultation on the Local Plan review was held from 5 July to 15 August 2024 and took place in accordance with Regulation 18 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012). A second round of public consultation (under Regulation 19 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012) was held from 21 November 2024 to 14 February 2025. The next step in the process is to submit the Plan to the Secretary of State (MHCLG), ahead of an independent Examination in Public by an appointed Planning Inspector.
- 3.10 Approval was granted by Cabinet in November 2024 [BD6] (Local Plan) and in January 2025 [BD7] (CIL) to allow delegated authority to the Assistant Director: Planning & Regulation, in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder: Environment and Performance, to proceed to Submission of the Local Plan and CIL; this is scheduled for the Summer 2025. Submission for both updated Local Plan and CIL to the Secretary of State is expected to be from Summer 2025. A final consultation on any modifications proposed by the Inspector to the Plan is then held prior to the Inspector's Report, which would confirm whether the Plan can progress to formal adoption. Appendix C provides a summary of the process.
- 3.11 Given that the Local Plan – Review and Partial Update was at Regulation 19 stage prior to 12 March 2025 and the draft housing requirement meets in excess of 80% of local housing need, under the transitional arrangements outlined as part of the NPPF 2024 (explained further in paragraphs 3.15 to 3.17), this means that the Local Plan – Review and Partial Update will be submitted and examined under the NPPF 2023 and not NPPF 2024. This provides more certainty with regard to the need to update the Plan, which is now over 5 years old and as such progressing the revised Plan to adoption at an earlier stage would mean that policies carry greater weight in decision making.
- 3.12 The consequence of not falling under the transitional arrangements and instead operating under the NPPF 2024, would mean that we would need to prepare a new Plan from scratch, thus increasing the risk that policies in the 2019 Local Plan would lose weight in decision making over time, until the new Plan progressed to the first stage of consultation. By operating under the transitional arrangements and therefore under the NPPF 2023, we are working to a broad two-stage process:

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| <p>1. Local Plan – Review and Partial Update (to be submitted and examined under the NPPF 2023)</p> <p>2. New Local Plan (to be progressed under the NPPF 2024 or subsequent versions of the NPPF thereafter)</p> |
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- 3.13 Officers have sought legal advice from Counsel on the broad approach and Counsel are content that we are following the most appropriate process. In addition, in January 2025 officers sought the advice of the Planning

Inspectorate (PINS) who were also broadly satisfied that we are following the correct process, appropriate to our local circumstances.

Changes to National Planning Policy and Legislation

- 3.14 The following paragraphs run through the changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which the Council's Local Plan needs to be in accordance with.

National Planning Policy Framework

- 3.15 The previous version of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was last updated on 20 December 2023 [BD1]. Changes included:
- Plan-makers will have until 30 June 2025 to submit their local plans, neighbourhood plans, minerals and waste plans, and spatial development strategies for independent examination under the existing legal framework. The Government is also proposing that, to be examined under existing legislation, all independent examinations of local plans, minerals and waste plans and spatial development strategies must be concluded, with plans adopted by 31 December 2026.
 - Authorities that do not meet the 30 June 2025 submission deadline for 'old-style' plans will need to prepare plans under the new plan-making system.
 - Authorities will be required to start work on new plans by, at the latest, five years after adoption of their previous plan, and to adopt that new plan within 30 months. Plans that will become more than five years old during the first 30 months of the new system will continue to be considered 'up-to-date' for decision-making purposes for 30 months after the new system starts.
 - Authorities will no longer be able to prepare supplementary planning documents (SPDs) in the revised planning system. Instead, they will be able to prepare Supplementary Plans, which will be afforded the same weight as a local plan or minerals and waste plan. The government proposes that, when the new system comes into force, existing SPDs will remain in force for a time-bound period; until the local planning authority is required to adopt a new style plan. Current SPDs will automatically cease to have effect at the point at which authorities are required to have a new-style plan in place.
- 3.16 On 12 December 2024, Government released the updated NPPF [BD2]. It promises significant changes to housing delivery, Green Belt planning, and Local Plan collaboration – all in order to achieve, amongst other things, universal Local Plan coverage. Under the revised NPPF, plan makers now have until 31 December 2026 to submit their local plans for independent examination, replacing the previous deadline of 30 June 2025.
- 3.17 The new NPPF includes a set of "transitional arrangements". If draft Plans are beyond Regulation 19 stage on 12 March 2025 and can demonstrate that the draft housing requirement meets in excess of 80% of local housing need, then it will be examined under the previous version of the NPPF (2023).

Planning & Infrastructure Bill 2025

- 3.18 The Planning and Infrastructure Bill 2025 [BD3] was introduced 11 March 2025. It sets out changes to the planning system that the Government hopes will speed up decision making and streamline the delivery of new homes and major infrastructure.
- 3.19 The main highlights arising from the presenting of the Bill include:
- **Planning Committees:** A national scheme will delegate planning applications to officers or committees, set by the Secretary of State. Committees will focus on complex or contentious developments. Regulations will define committee size and composition, with smaller committees recommended for effective decision-making. Mandatory training for committee members will ensure consistency and understanding of relevant laws.
 - **Planning Application Fee Setting:** Local planning authorities (LPAs) can set their own fees, up to cost recovery levels. Income from fees will be ring-fenced for development management services.
 - **Strategic Planning:** The Bill restores strategic planning across England, requiring combined authorities to produce spatial development strategies (SDS). SDS will set housing figures and distribution, contribute to climate change mitigation, and align with local nature recovery strategies. SDS will be tested via public examination, with modifications reported to the Secretary of State.
 - **Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP):** National policy statements (NPSs) must be reviewed every five years. The Bill amends pre-application and acceptance stages for Development Consent Orders to streamline the process.
 - **Nature Recovery:** Establishes environmental delivery plans (EDP) by Natural England to outline conservation measures and levy payments for nature restoration.
 - **Compulsory Purchase:** Streamlines the process for compulsory purchase orders, extending powers to town / parish councils for affordable housing provision.
 - **Development Corporations:** Provides flexibility in geographical areas and types of development. Updates objectives to include sustainable development and climate change mitigation.
 - **Energy Infrastructure:** Empowers the Secretary of State to create financial benefit schemes for residents near new transmission infrastructure. Establishes a new grid connections process and amends the Forestry Act for renewable power generation.
 - **Transport Infrastructure:** Removes the need for licences for electric vehicle charging points, amends the Transport and Works Act 1992 for cost recovery, and sets deadlines for application determinations.
- 3.20 The Bill includes one clause related to Strategic Planning, which requires the production of Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) for a wider regional or sub-regional area.
- 3.21 It is not envisaged that the new wave of SDSs will be detailed or lengthy and instead will be similar to Joint Strategic Plans (JSP) and more information will follow in due course. Stevenage is part of a 6-authority approach to an emerging North East Central Hertfordshire JSP with Hertfordshire County Council, East Herts Council, North Herts Council, Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council and Broxbourne Borough Council.

3.22 The following sets out the timetable for the passage of the Bill:

- Second Reading 24 March 2025;
- Reading at House of Lords in Spring 2025, across Summer 2025 recess;
- Royal Assent in Autumn 2025;
- Powers commenced and live expected in March 2026.

Potential Future Developments

3.23 We are anticipating a series of further changes from Government, to national planning policy documentation and guidance in the coming months; Members will be kept updated and informed as these developments occur.

3.24 It is not expected that any of the above announcements will have an impact on the submission of the Local Plan – Review and Partial Update or Community Infrastructure Levy Revised Charging Schedule. Therefore the Council proposes to continue as planned with progressing these important strategic planning documents.

4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

Recommendation 2.1: That Cabinet approve the revised Local Development Scheme.

- 4.1 The Local Development Scheme (LDS) [BD8] was last approved by the Council's Cabinet in November 2024 [BD6]; it sets out a clear and timetabled programme for the production of the local development plan. The LDS sets out timescales to completion for the following Development Plan Documents:
- Stevenage Borough Local Plan – Review and Partial Update (including Policies Map)
 - New Local Plan
 - Stevenage Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Charging Schedule
 - Stevenage Statement of Community Involvement (SCI)
 - Parking SPD
 - The Impact of Development on Biodiversity SPD (*revoked October 2024)
 - Developer Contributions SPD
 - Design Guidance SPD
- 4.2 The Ishikawa diagram [BD9] explains the two broad stages to the review of the Local Plan. Essentially this is in two stages:
- Local Plan – Review and Partial Update (green section)
 - Local Plan – New Plan (orange section)
- 4.3 A further revised draft LDS (Appendix A) has since been updated to reflect the latest timescales relating to the Local Plan – Review and Partial Update and can be summarised below:

Local Development Document	Timescale for Review	Comments
Local Plan	<p>Commence review September / October 2023</p> <p>First Consultation June – July 2024</p> <p>Second Consultation November 2024 – January 2025</p> <p>Submission to Secretary of State from Summer 2025</p> <p>Adoption and Implementation from December 2025</p>	Based on the option to undertake a Partial Review of the Local Plan which will also incorporate the Stevenage Station Gateway Area Action Plan.
Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)	<p>Commenced review Early 2024</p> <p>Preliminary Draft Charging Schedule Consultation October – November 2024</p> <p>Draft Charging Schedule January – February 2025</p> <p>Submission to Secretary of State from Summer 2025</p> <p>Adoption and Implementation from December 2025</p>	To be submitted alongside the Local Plan – Review and Partial Update.
Statement of Community Involvement (SCI)	Revised version to be published June 2025	Will keep under regular review.

New Local Plan	Scoping work to commence end 2025 / early 2026	
Parking SPD	Adoption February 2025	Possible change of status to Supplementary Plans or wider incorporation into Local Plan Policies; to be determined after Partial Review and Update.
The Impact of Development on Biodiversity SPD	Revoked October 2024	National legislation has effectively replaced the content of the SPD.
Developer Contributions SPD	Adoption February 2025	Possible change of status to Supplementary Plans or wider incorporation into Local Plan Policies; to be determined after Partial Review and Update.
Design Guidance SPD	Adoption February 2025	Possible change of status to Supplementary Plans or wider incorporation into Local Plan Policies; to be determined after Partial Review and Update.
Other SPDs / Documents	As required	As identified and required but no more anticipated at the present time. Wider work relating to Conservation Area Appraisals is being scoped at the present time.

4.4 It should be noted that the timescales proposed within the Local Development Scheme are subject to change, as circumstances develop.

4.5 At this stage, the Cabinet are recommended to approve the draft timescales that would operate for the associated new proposed Local Development Scheme.

Recommendation 2.2: That the Cabinet approve the revised Statement of Community Involvement.

4.6 The Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) is a statutory document and sets out how Stevenage Borough Council will involve the community and other stakeholders in the preparation, alteration and review of local planning policy and decisions on planning applications. The Council recognises the importance of community engagement in the planning process and to make the best-informed decisions, we need to hear from those in the communities who will feel the impact of development. The original SCI was adopted and published in 2018 [BD10].

4.7 Whilst some requirements for consultation and engagement are set out in national legislation, the Council is committed to going beyond these statutory requirements and aims to get as many people involved in the plan preparation process as possible.

The SCI aims to frontload this process by ensuring that the community is involved at an early stage. The document sets out:

- Why consultation is important;
- What will be consulted on;
- Who will be consulted;
- When consultation and engagement will take place;
- How views will be considered.

4.8 The Council's last SCI was approved by Cabinet in June 2024 [BD5] and published in August 2024 [BD11]. Regularly reviewing the SCI allows for its effectiveness to be monitored and for amendments to be made to incorporate any policy changes, and to increase levels of public involvement, where possible.

4.9 Since the 2018 SCI, the way we interact with communities has changed. New technologies have emerged, such as online engagement tools and social media channels, which can help us reach out to more people. During and after the Covid-19 pandemic we implemented new digital ways of involving people in the planning process, which we want to build on for future engagement with our communities, in addition to traditional consultation methods.

4.10 The current SCI (2024) responded to and incorporated feedback during recent planning consultations, which highlighted that planning documents can be too technical with an overwhelming amount of information. Some feedback included:

- they heard things too late in the process, often when the scheme is already in the planning application stage.
- sometimes planning is not visible and could be promoted wider using newsletters and printed media beyond email notifications.
- the planning system is very complex, and it can be hard to understand without providing visuals and presenting the information in the correct way.
- young people do not hear about planning.
- the need to highlight the use of technology in consultation and consider the need to improve the way we engage with our communities in the planning process.

4.11 The current SCI requires the Council to publicise planning applications in accordance with The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015.

4.12 Changes from the previous SCI have responded to recent queries. Proposed amendments to the 2024 SCI are minimal. These include:

- Paragraph 46 has been updated to include clarification on the consultation methods for Council land sale applications.
- Small modifications to the document to ensure consistency with updates from legislation, corporate strategies and contact details for internal departments. This ensures that we aim to consult as widely as possible on planning documents and planning proposals.

4.13 The main change to the SCI expands on the consultation requirements for Council land sale applications. For these applications the Council (as Local Planning Authority) will consult specific ward members, properties directly adjoining and located opposite the land sale application site will be notified by letter and a notice will be posted on, or close to, the land sale application site. These communications will contain details of the Council land sale planning application proposal and information on where plans (and any supporting information) can be viewed. They will also explain how to make comments about the application.

4.14 The revised proposed SCI is attached as Appendix B to this Report.

Recommendation 2.3: That Cabinet consider the comments of the Planning & Development Committee on the content of this Cabinet Report.

- 4.15 The Planning & Development Committee, via the Chair and Vice Chair, have been circulated this Cabinet Report in advance of the Cabinet meeting.
- 4.16 Any feedback from Planning & Development Committee Members will be taken into consideration in the Cabinet's approval of this Report's recommendations.
- 4.17 A summary of Members' comments will be reported back orally at the Cabinet meeting on 4 June 2025.
- 4.18 The views of the Planning & Development Committee are of significant value in shaping the future direction the that local plan and policy making takes, as future Committee decisions will be based on revised and possibly new Local Plan policies and supporting documents.

5 IMPLICATIONS

Financial Implications

- 5.1 There are no financial implications arising from the revisions to the Local Development Scheme and Statement of Community Involvement.

Legal Implications

- 5.2 The Local Development Scheme and Statement of Community Involvement are being revised in accordance with the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012.

Risk Implications

- 5.3 Given that the adopted Local Plan is now over 5 years old, there is a risk that policies are considered out of date and therefore have less material weight in the planning decision making process.
- 5.4 By submitting to the Secretary of State at the earliest opportunity, the Local Plan gains further weight in accordance with the NPPF and therefore acts to reduce this risk.
- 5.5 An updated Local Development Scheme and Statement of Community Involvement supports the submission of the Local Plan – Review and Partial Update and revised Community Infrastructure Levy Charging Schedule and serves to provide greater certainty in the plan making process and therefore reduce elements of risk in the overall process.

Planning and Policy Implications

- 5.6 The Local Development Scheme and Statement of Community Involvement are proposed to provide accurate timescales for relevant plan making documents ahead and provide a sound structure for consulting as widely as possible and involving our communities and stakeholders in the plan making process.
- 5.7 The updated Local Development Scheme and Statement of Community Involvement will ensure that the Council's Future Town, Future Council Corporate Plan key policies and objectives are reflected as far as possible.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

- 5.8 There are no significant equalities and diversity risks associated with producing the revised Local Development Scheme and Statement of Community Involvement.

Community Safety Implications

- 5.9 There are no significant community safety implications associated with producing the revised Development Scheme and Statement of Community Involvement.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- BD1 National Planning Policy Framework (December 2023)
<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20231228093504/https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>
- BD2 National Planning Policy Framework (December 2024)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>
- BD3 Planning & Infrastructure Bill (March 2025) <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3946> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-planning-and-infrastructure-bill>
- BD4 Stevenage Borough Local Plan 2011–2031 (May 2019)
<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/planning-policy/stevenage-borough-local-plan/stevenage-borough-local-plan.pdf>
- BD5 Meeting of the Stevenage Borough Council Cabinet, Item 4: Local Plan Review and Revised Local Development Scheme (5 June 2024)
<https://democracy.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/s36560/4%20Cabinet%20Report%20Local%20Plan%20Review%20LC%20Final%20230524.pdf>
- BD6 Meeting of the Stevenage Borough Council Cabinet, Item 4: Local Plan Partial Review and Update: Regulation 18 Feedback and Regulation 19 Consultation (13 November 2024)
<https://democracy.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/s37640/4%20Cabinet%20Report%20Local%20Plan%20Review%20LC%20Final%20011124.pdf>
- BD7 Meeting of the Stevenage Borough Council Cabinet, Item 8: Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL): Draft Charging Schedule – Public Consultation (15 January 2025)
https://democracy.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/s38152/8%20Final%20Cabinet%20Report%20-%20CIL%2015012025%20LC_SM.pdf
- BD8 Stevenage Local Development Scheme (November 2024)
<https://democracy.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/s37645/4%20Appendix%20E%20Local%20Development%20Scheme%202024%20Revised%20151024.pdf>
- BD9 Local Plan Review Ishikawa Diagram (June 2025)
- BD10 Stevenage Statement of Community Involvement (2018)
<https://www.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/planning-policy/draft-statement-of-community-involvement/statement-of-community-involvement-2018.pdf>
- BD11 Stevenage Statement of Community Involvement (August 2024)
<https://democracy.stevenage.gov.uk/documents/s36564/4%20Appendix%20D%20Draft%20Statement%20of%20Community%20Involvement%20May%202024.pdf>

APPENDICES

- A Draft Revised Stevenage Draft Local Development Scheme (June 2025)
- B Draft Revised Stevenage Statement of Community Involvement (June 2025)
- C Development Plan Making Process (in line with Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012)