

Inspectors Dillon, Ford and Glasin  
Planning Inspectorate  
c/o Programme Officer

Please ask for  
E-mail Address

Neil Holly

Date

24 June 2026

Dear Inspectors Dillon, Ford and Glasin

## **Rugby Local Plan Examination – Inspectors’ Initial Questions**

1. Thank you for your letter of 12 June in respect of the sustainability appraisal. I set out the council’s response to your questions below. Your questions are set out in italics, followed by the council’s responses.

### **Issue: Compliance with Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Requirements**

*1. Please provide a clear explanation and precise references to the relevant section(s) of the submitted SA Final Report to demonstrate that the following have been undertaken:*

*a) assessment of the likely evolution of the environment in the absence of the submission Local Plan*

2. Answer: The environmental baseline of the area (i.e. its existing environmental characteristics) and the key environmental problems were described in section 4 (pages 7-16) and 5 (pages 17-20) of the SA Scoping Report (RBC1). This “baseline review” and how it informed the SA Framework used to assess the plan and reasonable alternatives is described on page 95 of the SA Report (CD5) – see also our answers to question 1b) and c) below.
3. In terms of evolution of the baseline in the absence of a plan, para 6.1.4 of the Final SA Report (CD5) in its discussion of the appraisal methodology explains that “Another key assumption is in respect of the future baseline, i.e. the situation without an adopted plan with a robust land supply. Specifically, the assumption is that there would be a risk of sub-optimal growth under the presumption in favour of sustainable development. This is an important assumption, because a significant effect is, by definition, a significant effect on the baseline.”. This means that the plan is not compared to a situation of stasis or zero development, but to the likely evolution of the area without the plan. That ‘future baseline’ would include development under the NPPF’s tilted balance as the current adopted policies become more out of date and the council is unable to demonstrate a sufficient housing and employment land supply.

4. This is expanded upon at paragraph 8.3.2 which states "...where an "effect" is a predicted change to the baseline situation, which is not simply a snap shot of the current situation, but also a projection of the current situation in the absence of the plan. As part of this, there is a need to recognise that housing growth locally would continue in the absence of the plan" and "The ability to predict effects accurately is also limited by knowledge gaps in respect of the baseline (both now and in the future).".
5. In the appraisal sections in section 9, the effects of the plan are then compared to the baseline, for example at paragraphs 9.2.8, 9.3.6, 9.4.7, 9.5.5, 9.6.3, 9.7.6, 9.8.6, 9.9.4, 9.10.6, 9.11.5, 9.12.3, 9.13.4, 9.14.2.
6. These sections do not try to describe in detail how the plan area would evolve in the absence of a local plan, because that is unknowable. The baseline is effectively "do nothing" i.e. have no local policy and rely exclusively on national policy, which is itself subject to frequent change. However, as stated, it is assumed that in a no plan scenario growth would still occur but in a sub-optimal and uncoordinated way. For example, in discussion of the "resources" section at para 9.12.3 it is stated "however, there is also a recognition that there could be similar or worse loss [of BMV agricultural land] under a baseline scenario.".

*b) identification of the environmental characteristics of areas likely to be affected*

7. Answer: Baseline social economic and environmental information about the areas likely to be affected i.e. Rugby Borough was set out in section 4 "Collecting Baseline Information – Stage A2" of the SA Scoping Report (CD21) on pages 7-16. This information was then cross-referred to in the final SA Report (CD5) in Table C on page 95.
8. The final SA report at section 2.3 on pages 3-8 also includes a more abridged discussion of the environmental characteristics of the area under the heading "The plan area".
9. It is considered that cross-referring to this earlier published appraisal work was an appropriate approach to take in the final SA Report. The alternative of repeating all that earlier material would have resulted in a much longer report that would be less accessible to lay readers. PPG paragraph 019 Reference ID: 11-019-20140306 states that "The sustainability appraisal report will need to (...) be prepared with a range of readers in mind, providing a clear accessible overview of the process and findings.".

*c) summary of the key existing environmental problems, including those affecting protected or sensitive areas of particular importance within the Borough*

10. Answer: Existing environmental problems were identified in section 5 "Identifying Sustainability Issues and Problems – Stage A3" on pages 17-20 of the SA Scoping Report (CD21). This information was then cross-referred to in the final SA Report (CD5) in Table C on page 95.

11. In addition to cross-referencing earlier work, the final SA report integrates discussion of the sustainability context and baseline (stage A of the SA process set out in PPG Paragraph: 013 Reference ID: 11-013-20140306) throughout the report within the various sections dedicated to setting the scene (Sections 2 and 3), defining growth scenarios (Section 5), appraising growth scenarios (Section 6) and appraising the plan as a whole (Section 9).
12. For example, paragraph 2.4.5 discusses housing need and employment land, which were both identified as key sustainability issues at scoping stage. The discussion of strategic factors at section 5.2 similarly discusses sections of the baseline, such as school place planning at para 5.2.47, transport at para 5.2.53 and landscape at paragraph 5.2.59.
13. Integrating the discussion of scope – including discussion of environmental characteristics (inspectors' question 1(b)), identification of key issues (1(c)) and relevant national objectives (1(d)) - throughout the report is aimed at delivering a concise and engaging SA Report.
14. The alternative - repeating a lot of material from the scoping report as a separate section - would have resulted in a much longer report that would be less accessible to lay readers. As set out above, the PPG encourages “a clear accessible overview of the process and findings” for good reason. Historically, such reports have attracted criticism for being too long and unwieldy. The SA Report seeks to strike the right balance between including sufficient detail, and remaining comprehensible for a wide readership. It avoids distracting discussion of theoretical issues that are in practice of little significance given the scope of the plan and reasonable alternatives.  
  
*d) explanation of relevant international, EU, and national environmental objectives and how these have been considered*
15. Answer: Relevant environmental objectives were explained in paragraphs 3.1 and 3.3 on page 7 of the SA Scoping Report (CD21) and set out in detail in Appendix 1 “Policies, Plans and Programmes” to that report on pages 28-40.
16. Section 5 on pages 17-20 of the SA Scoping Report explains how the review of relevant policies, plans and programmes and the baseline data was used to identify economic, environmental and social issues. Section 6 of that document (pages 21-26) shows how the review of environmental objective and issues informed creation of the SA Framework used to assess the plan.
17. At paragraph 6.3, the SA Scoping Report states “The SA objectives are grouped by themes and mirror many national and international sustainability objectives, they have been adapted to suit the Borough’s local circumstances. While the SA objectives are distinct from the Local Plan objectives, in many cases they overlap. The SA objectives have been derived from the findings of the review of relevant policies, plans and programmes, the evidence set out above and the identification of sustainability issues.”.
18. Following publication of the SA Scoping Report as part of the first Regulation 18 consultation (issues and options) between October 2023 and February 2024 the

SA objectives were reviewed. That review took into account responses to the scoping consultation. The outcome of that review was set out in section 3 of the interim SA Report (RBC1) which amended the SA Framework.

19. The final SA Report (CD5) reproduces the SA Framework at pages 10-11 and that framework is then used in the appraisal in section 6 (page 56 onwards).

20. In this way the relevant international, EU and national environmental objectives are used to create the SA Framework which is then used to assess reasonable alternatives.

21. The final SA Report also includes direct references to national objectives, for example its discussion of NPPF policy in section 2.2 "Context to plan preparation" on page 2-3.

22. For the reasons explained above, it is considered that cross-referring to this earlier published appraisal work was an appropriate approach to take in the final SA Report.

*e) the approach to identifying and selecting reasonable alternatives;*

23. Answer: Section 4 of the SA report defines what are considered reasonable alternatives i.e. combinations of sites which it labels "growth scenarios". Section 5 of the SA report outlines the approach to defining reasonable alternatives.

*f) demonstration that the SA methodology has been applied consistently in assessing all reasonable alternatives across all policies and proposals in the Submission Plan.*

24. Answer: The assessment of reasonable alternatives is set out in section 6 (pages 56-74) of the report. The appraisal methodology for this is explained in paragraphs 6.1.2-6.1.4 on page 56 of the SA Report.

25. The appraisal is thematic and based on the SA Framework; the reasonable alternative residential growth scenarios are assessed first, then the employment land growth scenarios. Results are presented in tabular format followed by a textual discussion of the scoring. The discussion is focussed on identifying where distinctions between growth scenarios can be drawn. This accords with the PPG guidance on focussing on significant effects (Paragraph: 009 Reference ID: 11-009-20140306).

26. Following this guidance, and in view of the strategic nature of the assessment and limits of methods of assessment, the thematic assessment does not discuss in detail the performance of every growth scenario or component site against each theme. Instead, it focuses on drawing distinctions. Nonetheless, the reasonable alternative growth scenarios are appraised consistently.

27. After the assessment of the reasonable alternative growth scenarios, the submission local plan is appraised in section 8 (pages 76-90). The methodology for this assessment is explained in section 8.3 on page 78. The appraisal

methodology here is again thematic and focussed on the identification of environmental effects of “the plan” overall.

28. DM policies are referred to as part of the thematic discussion (for example, at paragraphs 9.2.6-9.2.7; 9.3.5; 9.4.6; 9.5.4; 9.6.2; 9.7.5; 9.8.5; 9.10.3; 9.11.4; 9.13.3; 9.14.1). As no reasonable alternatives were identified for DM policies, the discussion of these policies is grouped/thematic and feeds into the overall appraisal of the plan against the SA framework.
29. This approach is proportionate and contains the level of detail reasonably required to identify, describe and evaluate the significant effects on the environment of the plan and reasonable alternatives.

### **Issue: How the reasonable alternative options were identified and assessed**

#### Link between SA and the preferred strategy

*2. Please clearly demonstrate how the SA has led to the selection of the preferred strategy. Where alternatives perform differently, explain how those differences have been evaluated and balanced in reaching the final Plan.*

30. The format of both the Interim Sustainability Appraisal report (RBC1) and the final Sustainability Appraisal report (CD5) is the same. Section 5 describes the process of defining reasonable alternative growth scenarios, section 6 appraises those scenarios and section 7 presents the council’s reasons for selecting its preferred approach in light of the alternatives.
31. It is important to note that the SA is not a decision-making document in and of itself. It is a document to assist and improve decision making by requiring the authority to assess the potential environmental effects of a plan before its adoption and to consider reasonable alternatives (*RLT Built Environment Ltd, R (on the application of) v The Cornwall Council & Anor* [2016] EWHC 2817 (Admin) para 46). The SA does not determine or lead the determination of policy outcomes i.e. the SA does not tell the Council which preferred strategy to adopt. The preferred approach as described by officers in section 7 draws on the preceding appraisal work (section 6), but also on wider factors.

#### Approach to Gypsies and Travellers needs

*3. Please clarify whether alternative approaches, including for transit stop over provision and the inclusion of windfall policy criteria, were considered and upon what basis any were discounted.*

32. Answer: Paragraph 5.2.64 on page 29 of the SA Report (CD5) identifies the limited options in relation to Gypsy and Traveller sites. There are no omission sites.
33. Policy S4 (Sites for Gypsies and Travellers) through paragraph B, sets criteria for windfall sites. Paragraph 1.30 of the reasoned justification to this policy explains that “The policy identifies criteria against which windfall applications will be assessed”.

34. A more liberal windfall policy would not, in the council's view, be consistent with national policy given that all existing pitches (authorised and unauthorised) are within the Green Belt.
35. Using a windfall policy instead of the proposed allocations plan is not in the council's view a reasonable alternative. The council has already tried this approach in the adopted 2019 Local Plan and its adverse consequences and drawbacks are discussed in paragraphs 5.2.60 and 5.2.61 of the SA Report. It is regarded as an environmentally inferior approach and thus not a reasonable alternative.
36. Transit/stopover provision is not a reasonable alternative to plan's site allocations because it seeks to meet a different need. The plan's site allocations meet an evidenced need for permanent pitches, whereas transit pitches are a separate consideration.
37. The Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (SD9) identifies a need for transit pitches, but the council has been unable to identify suitable areas of land for such provision as no land has been put forward in response to call for sites and the council does not itself own suitable land.

*4. Please explain how the chosen approach has been assessed against other reasonable alternatives.*

38. Answer: For the reasons explained in our answer to question 3 and summarised at paragraph 5.2.64 of the SA Report, no reasonable alternatives to the preferred approach were identified. Therefore, only one growth scenario was identified (para 5.5.1).
39. The plan's Gypsy and Traveller allocations are assessed as part of the appraisal of the plan as a whole in section 9 of the SA Report. In this part of the report the plan is assessed against the baseline (i.e. no plan) scenario. The plan is assessed as a whole, focussing on its environmental and wider sustainability effects. The thematic discussion of the plan against the appraisal framework makes reference to Gypsy and Traveller policy where relevant (at paragraphs 9.7.3, 9.8.3 and 9.10.2).

#### Development management policy alternatives

*5. How were reasonable alternative development management policy options scoped out, and on what grounds is the conclusion that no such alternatives exist supported?*

40. It was considered reasonable not to define alternatives to DM policies because of:
- The unlikelihood of DM policies giving rise to significant environmental effects. Furthermore, the unlikelihood that different DM policy options would be meaningfully different in their likelihood to give rise to significant environmental effects. [PPG Paragraph: 009 Reference ID: 11-009-20140306 "The

sustainability appraisal should only focus on what is needed to assess the likely significant effects of the plan”.]

- The fact Regulation 18 consultation responses overwhelmingly focussed on strategy and sites.
- The fact that deleting a DM policy is not a reasonable alternative, because that is the baseline position against which the plan is assessed in Section 9 anyway.
- The difficulty of generating reasonable alternatives to DM policies that are meaningfully distinct, as explained in the following paragraphs.

41. Many of the new development management policies (i.e. those for which there is no equivalent in the current adopted local plan) do not in the council’s judgement have any clear alternative other than not to introduce the policy at all. Policies in this category include C1 Rugby town centre, C3 Local and district centres, C4 neighbourhood hubs, EN3 Rainsbrook Valley landscape of elevated sensitivity, EN4 Area of separation, EN6 Canopy cover, H7 Housing standards, H8 Houses in multiple occupation, I5 New railway stations.

42. The main alternative to introducing these policies is to not introduce them, and the non-introduction of these policies forms part of the baseline against which the plan is appraised in Section 9 of the Sustainability Appraisal report. Testing minor rewordings/weakening/strengthenings of the wording of these policies, as was proposed by some respondents at both Regulation 18 and Regulation 19 consultation stages, was not considered practicable, because the alternatives would be insufficiently distinct to allow meaningful comparison and unlikely to vary in terms of their potential for significant environmental effects.

43. The council and SA consultants discussed the potential for testing alternatives to Policy CL1 Net zero buildings but concluded that the principal alternative was not to have the policy and rely instead on the building regulations.

*6. How does the SA demonstrate that the Plan was tested as a whole, rather than focusing primarily on the spatial strategy and sites?*

44. Answer: Section 9 of the SA Report (pages 78-90) is the appraisal of the plan as a whole. The methodology for this explained at section 8.3 on page 78. This explains “Appraisal findings are presented across 13 sections below, with each section dealing with a specific sustainability topic. For each sustainability topic the aim is to discuss the merits of the draft Local Plan, as a whole, before concluding on significant effects.”.

45. The appraisal findings make reference to development management policies in the 13 appraisal sections, for example at paragraphs 9.2.6-9.2.7; 9.3.5; 9.4.6; 9.5.4; 9.6.2; 9.7.5; 9.8.5; 9.10.3; 9.11.4; 9.13.3; and 9.14.1.

46. The focus on the spatial strategy is justified because this is the part of the plan most likely to give rise to significant environmental effects. PPG Paragraph: 009 Reference ID: 11-009-20140306 states “The sustainability appraisal should only

focus on what is needed to assess the likely significant effects of the plan. It should focus on the environmental, economic and social impacts that are likely to be significant. It does not need to be done in any more detail, or using more resources, than is considered to be appropriate for the content and level of detail in the Local Plan.”.

### Strategy and sites

*We note that the SA appears to focus primarily on “growth scenarios”.*

*7. Can you explain why alternatives have been defined in this way, rather than assessing different site options and/or different combinations of sites?*

47. Answer: Growth scenarios are combinations of sites. Paragraph 4.2.5 of the SA Report (CD5) refers to them as a “package of sites”.
48. Section 4.2 of the report explains that the requirement is to “examine reasonable alternatives (RAs) taking account of “the objectives and geographical scope of the plan”, which suggests a need to focus on the spatial strategy”. The report explains that individual sites are seldom in themselves reasonable alternatives, combinations of sites are needed.
49. The SA does not, however, ignore site options. Section 5.3 on pages 30-31 discusses the work undertaken by the Council in assessing site options and section 5.4 (pages 32-53) discusses these at individual settlement level to create “settlement scenarios” which then form the building blocks for the reasonable alternatives.
50. For employment land, the reasonable alternatives and the approach to their selection is set out in paras 5.2.24 to 5.2.28. This identifies the combinations of sites that make up the reasonable alternative growth scenarios. The report explains that in the case of employment, broad spatial strategy and site options are highly interlinked.
51. The advantages of the growth scenarios approach is that it keeps the focus strategic and on significant effects of the plan and reasonable alternatives to it. Simply assessing every site individually as if it were a reasonable alternative would result in reams of assessment tables which would conflict with Planning Practice Guidance that SA “should only focus on what is needed to assess the likely significant effects of the plan” (Paragraph: 009 Reference ID: 11-009-20140306) and would not “be prepared with a range of readers in mind, providing a clear, accessible overview of the process and findings.” (Paragraph: 019 Reference ID: 11-019-20140306).
52. Sustainability Appraisal reports prepared by Aecom using **the same approach** to defining growth scenarios have supported the following plans which were found sound/adopted within the past year: Chichester, Uttlesford, Lewisham and West Suffolk. There are numerous other plans at the proposed modifications stage or beyond where the inspector has not raised any concerns with the approach taken to defining reasonable alternatives in the Aecom-authored SA report.

*8. Given the approach taken, how can we be satisfied that all reasonable alternatives have been fully identified, considered and compared?*

53. Answer: The key word here is *reasonable*.

54. What is reasonable is defined by the objectives and scope of the plan. The requirement is not to test every possible alternative, bearing in mind that there are a very high number of potential combinations of different sites. As explained in footnote 5 on page 13 of the SA report “Another consideration is that to be ‘reasonable’ alternatives must be meaningfully different to the extent that they vary in terms of significant effects, where significance is defined in the context of the plan (taken as a whole). A focus on key diagram RAs (‘growth scenarios’) guarantees that this will be the case and so negates the need for a process of screening what should and should not then be a focus of subsequent work to explore (i.e. define, appraise and consult upon) RAs”.

55. The SA report devotes much of its word count to explaining the approach taken to defining reasonable alternatives (pages 13-55). This provides “An outline of the reasons for selecting the alternatives dealt with” as required by paragraph 8 of Schedule 2 to the Regulations.

56. In section 6 those reasonable alternatives are then appraised.

57. We consider that the report provides the level of information that is reasonably required by Regulation 12(3).

58. It is to be expected that omission site promoters will argue that their site is a reasonable alternative or should have formed the basis of one. However, as noted above, the Aecom approach to defining reasonable alternatives has supported numerous plans that have passed examination. We are confident the approach is proportionate, reasonable and in accordance with the relevant statutory framework and guidance. The approach is also engaging, in that it ensures readers are presented with mutually exclusive choices (the word ‘alternative’ suggests mutual exclusivity) in respect of the matters at the heart of the plan

*9 Given the approach taken, how can we be satisfied that all reasonable alternatives have been fully identified, considered and compared?*

59. Answer: In relation to the appraisal of reasonable alternatives for employment land, paragraph 5.2.3 of the SA Report (CD5) states that: “two further proposed allocations at or below 25 ha in size in area 7, namely Coton Park East and South West Rugby Phase 2, and both are somewhat committed such that there is little or no doubt that they do warrant allocation (the equivalent discussion in the Interim SA Report at the Draft Plan stage presented a detailed discussion before arriving at this conclusion”. The Interim SA Report (RBC1) discussion referred to includes box 5.1 on page 18 of that report. Both sites were viewed in the SA as “somewhat committed” because in the 2019 Local Plan Coton Park East was allocated for development albeit for a different use (residential) while in the same plan South West Rugby Phase 2 was identified as part of the wider South West Rugby site allocation and safeguarded to meet future development needs beyond the plan period.

60. Similarly, at 5.2.31 of the SA report, reasons for holding Ansty Park North as a “constant” across the growth scenarios are set out.
61. These sites being defined as constants, the variable element across scenarios then becomes the Land at Walsgrave Hill site allocation. The three alternative growth scenarios (para 5.2.38) each substitute a major omission site (or in the case of scenario 4, a combination of two omission sites) for Walsgrave Hill.
62. The reasons why another employment omission site, Magna Park, was not identified as part of a growth scenario are set out at paragraph 5.2.36. There is a more broad-ranging discussion of potential employment land broad locations at pages 18-19 of the Interim SA Report and see our answer to question 13 below for the reasons for not progressing other sites as part of the reasonable alternatives.
63. Having defined the growth scenarios, these are then appraised at pages 71-73 of the SA Report. These sections appraise the growth scenarios, which are defined based on the variable sites, against each other.
64. The appraisal is clearly comparative because the scenarios are ranked. The appraisal also identifies the potential for significant effects using a RAG rating system as explained at paragraph 6.2.57.
65. The separation of ranking and assessing environmental effects is important because the environmental effects are of the combination of sites that make up a growth option (the reasonable alternative plan), not the individual sites. This distinction is most clearly seen in the housing growth appraisal at table 6.1 (page 70) where for some SA topics the same effects are identified across all scenarios. The separation of ranking and assessment of environmental effects is also aids with differentiation. It avoids a situation whereby the same conclusion is reached regarding effects across numerous scenarios without any differentiation. In turn, it also helps to ensure a robust approach to predicting significant effects, in that it removes the temptation to ‘engineer’ predicted significant effects in order to differentiate between options.
66. The identification of growth scenarios for housing land involved consideration of a greater number of site options and possible combinations than for employment land. To present this in an accessible and understandable way, the SA report first introduces the council’s process for considering site options in section 5.3 then provides a comparative discussion of those site options at different settlements in section 5.4. This consideration of sites explicitly draws on the council’s site selection evidence (see para 5.3.11).
67. Settlement scenarios are provided to explain the reasons for selecting the reasonable alternative growth scenarios (para 5.4.6). The settlement scenarios discussion compares site options by settlement, drawing on the council’s site assessment work and other evidence base and identifies a reasonable growth scenario for each settlement. Table 5.1 (page 53) summarises these settlement specific growth scenarios.

68. Section 5.5 then explains how the settlement specific growth scenarios are combined to create reasonable alternative growth scenarios. This results in eight different overall growth scenarios for housing. These growth scenarios comprise different combinations of sites with, as for employment land, the variable sites identified. Section 6 then presents the appraisal of these housing growth scenarios both ranking them and identifying significant effects. The discussion of the appraisal focusses on the variable sites or combinations of sites. Through this, the growth scenarios are assessed against each other.
69. As is explained in the SA Report, because the scope and objectives of the plan require the allocation of a combinations of sites (not a single site), and because the requirements of the Regulations are to assess the likely significant effects on the environment of implementing *the plan* and reasonable alternatives to the plan, this comparative assessment is not of individual sites but of combinations of sites.

### Higher growth options

*The SA considers higher growth by testing a range of growth scenarios and strategic site options.*

*10. Please explain how the higher growth options were assessed, and how their assessment outcomes compare with that of the preferred strategy.*

70. Answer: For employment land the SA report does not assess higher growth scenarios. This is explained at paragraph 5.2.19.
71. For housing, higher growth scenarios are assessed as explained at paragraph 5.2.18.
72. The different level of housing that each of the scenarios could deliver is outlined in Table 5.2 (on page 55). Scenarios 2-4 are variants of the proposed submission approach and would deliver broadly comparable levels of housing as is explained at paragraphs 5.5.4-5.5.7. Scenarios 5-8 are more clearly higher growth options because they involve adding sites to the proposed submission plan. These scenarios are introduced at paragraph 5.5.8. The highest growth scenarios are scenarios 6, 7 and 8 which would each deliver 20% or more housing than local housing needs.
73. The appraisal of the growth scenarios is in section 6. The appraisal ranks the options and identifies the potential for significant effects. The thematic discussion following the appraisal tables discusses the principal variable sites and their differential effects. Some of these summary discussions refer specifically to higher growth scenarios where there is a clear distinction to be drawn between these and the lower growth scenarios (for example paras 6.2.7; 6.2.8; 6.2.11; 6.2.30; 6.2.42; 6.2.50; 6.2.52).
74. The results are drawn together in the appraisal summary on pages 69-70.
75. These sections allow comparison between the higher growth options and the preferred strategy. As can be seen from the appraisal summary (Table 6.1 on page 70) there are some topics on which the highest growth scenarios (scenarios

6, 7, 8) can be seen to perform notably less well than the preferred option and other low growth scenarios, specifically accessibility, air quality, historic environment and transport.

### **Issue: How SA influenced site selection**

*11. Please can you explain how the SA influenced site selection, providing documentary evidence and references to clearly show how and when sites were appraised, choices were made, and that the approach in the Plan has evolved in response to the different iterations of the SA throughout plan preparation. Where in the SA submission is a clear audit trail showing how reasonable alternatives were considered before arriving at the preferred options?*

76. Answer: How sites were considered in developing the SA reasonable alternative growth scenarios (i.e. combinations of sites) is explained in our answer to question 13. This explains how the SA, both at interim and final stages, drew on the council's site assessment work.

77. As is explained in our answer to question 7, reasonable alternative combinations of sites rather than individual sites were appraised in the SA report. The reasons for selecting those combinations of sites are set out in section 5 of the SA report.

78. The SA reports provided assessment of the environmental and sustainability effects of the plan and compares it to reasonable alternatives at each stage. At both interim and final SA report stages the SA showed that the preferred strategy performed reasonably well compared to reasonable alternatives. At each stage the council set out in section 7 its reasons for selecting the preferred approach taking into account the appraisal and reasonable alternatives. This shows the council's consideration of reasonable alternatives before arriving at the preferred approach. Indeed, the SA reports read as a whole demonstrate that consideration, because they were commissioned by the council and included in council reports at each decision stage.

79. The SA does not tell the council which sites to allocate, that is a result of a wider site selection process. That site selection process included (amongst other things) the HELAA (document IDs SS2 to SS5), Urban Capacity Study (documents SS6 and SS7), Stage 2 Site Assessment (document SS8), level 2 SFRA (documents SS9 to SS14), heritage assessment of sites (documents SS19, SS28 and WH3), landscape sensitivity assessments (documents SS20 to SS24) and ecological constraints assessment (documents SS25 to SS27). That wider process falls to be assessed against the NPPF tests of soundness, namely is the plan justified as an appropriate strategy, taking into account reasonable alternatives, and based on proportionate evidence. The SA is just part of that proportionate evidence base.

80. It should also be noted that the carrying out of a second Regulation 18 draft plan/preferred options consultation stage is an optional step under the local plan regulations. Many plans proceed directly from the first issues and options stage to pre-submission consultation with no intermediate stage or interim SA report.

81. Notwithstanding that, in reflecting on the interim SA report and responses to the Regulation 18 public consultation, the council did make changes, for example:

- A higher quantum of growth at Wolvey and sites south east of Rugby were both identified as variable options in the Interim SA. Reflecting on this and the responses to the consultation, these sites were omitted at proposed submission stage.
- The Interim SA highlighted the potential for comprehensive growth at Long Lawford including site 253. This option was revisited and included in the submission plan.

### Rejecting alternatives

*12. Please identify clearly where, within the submitted Sustainability Appraisal (SA), the reasons for rejecting alternatives are set out.*

82. Answer: The requirement of the SEA Regulation is to give both outline reasons for selection of alternatives for assessment (Schedule 2 paragraph 8) and reasons for the selection of a preferred option (per *Heard v Broadland DC* [2012] EWHC 344 (Admin) para 69).

83. The reasons for selecting the reasonable alternatives are set out in the SA Report section 5 (Defining growth scenarios). The reasons for the council selecting the preferred approach are then explained in section 7 (The preferred approach). The same stages were following in the Interim Sustainability Appraisal report (RBC1) with section 5 explaining the reasons for selection of the alternatives for assessment and section 7 setting out the council's reasons for selecting the preferred approach as it then stood.

84. The reason why some sites were not included in reasonable alternative growth scenarios is explained in our answer to question 13.

*13. For sites that were promoted but not progressed, where is the explanation set out as to why they were not considered reasonable alternative*

85. Answer: We have explained above why sites are not in themselves reasonable alternatives because sites are not mutually exclusive and would not in themselves meet the objectives of the plan. Therefore, reasonable alternatives must comprise combinations of sites.

86. The reasons for selecting those reasonable alternative combinations of sites are provided in section 5 (defining growth scenarios) of the Sustainability Appraisal report.

87. Some sites were not considered as candidate sites for inclusion in the SA reasonable alternatives:

- Sites rejected through the HELAA process (document IDs SS2 to SS5) or the urban capacity study (documents SS6 and SS7) as unsuitable, unavailable or unachievable. However, it should be noted that the SA consultants didn't take the HELAA findings at face value – note the comments on sites 34 (para 5.4.32) and 111 (para 5.4.42)

- Urban Capacity Study sites ruled out in the Stage 2 Site Assessment, as set out in Table 1 (pages 6-7) of document SS8.
- Other sites which were ruled out at earlier stages of plan making in the interim version of the Council's Stage 2 Site Assessment published in March 2025. As is explained at paragraph 5.3.9 of the SA Report, at draft plan stage the Council had identified through the Stage 2 Site Assessment (March 2025) from the 112 site options passing through the HELAA, a shortlist of circa 50 site options for potential allocation. These potential site options formed the focus of the Interim SA report. The remaining sites were ruled out in the Stage 2 Site Assessment (March 2025). This is explained in more detail at paragraphs 5.3.6-5.3.7 of the Interim SA Report. The Interim SA Report focussed on shortlisted sites that passed this second stage of site assessment by the council but nonetheless commented on some sites that were not progressed in the council's second stage site assessment, for example sites 102, 117. Sites that did not make this shortlist of sites at Regulation 18 Preferred Option stage in March 2025 are reasonably not revisited in the final SA Report. This is consistent with the iterative approach to plan and SA preparation whereby options are narrowed as plan-making progresses
- Sites at small rural villages. This is explained at paragraphs 5.4.96-5.4.97 of the SA report which refers back to the Interim SA Report.
- Employment omission sites ruled out in the Interim SA Report (paras 5.4.84-5.4.95). This is explained and cross-referenced at paragraph 5.2.37 and footnote 13 to the final SA Report.
- Sites which were combined into strategic sites for the purposes of assessment, but were submitted to the call for sites as separate sites. Examples of this are the component sites of site 325 (land adjacent Magna Park), site 321 (land south of A5), 316 (land at Long Lawford) and 315 (land south of Brinklow). The SA reports comment only on the combined sites, not their components.

88. Other sites were treated as a fixed element in the development of reasonable alternatives:

- Proposed allocation sites within the urban area as explained in paragraph 5.4.11 of the SA Report.
- Gypsy and Traveller sites in view of the absence of omission sites (as explained at paras 5.2.60-5.2.65).

89. All sites not falling into one of the above categories are referenced in the SA Report's discussion of site options in section 5. That discussion, as explained at paragraph 5.1.3, provides an outline of the reasons for selecting alternatives, in line with the requirements of the Regulations.

90. Section 5 explicitly draws on site selection work undertaken by the council as set out in paragraphs 5.3.1 to 5.3.11. It was not considered necessary or

proportionate within the SA Report to repeat the council's assessment of the sites or reassess sites already assessed by the council. The Stage 2 Site Assessment (document SS8) which stretches to 380 pages and more than 100,000 words provides clear reasons why sites were not progressed as allocations and summarises and synthesises other site assessment work undertaken by the council.

### Comparing reasonable alternative site options

*The SA uses a set of sustainability objectives to evaluate options. Given that much of the assessment is narrative, it is unclear to us how reasonable alternative site options have been scored against the preferred option.*

*14. How have the different options been assessed and compared in a consistent way and where is this set out in detail in the evidence?*

91. The SA Report compares reasonable alternative combinations of sites, not individual site options.

92. Section 6 of the report provides the appraisal of the preferred option against reasonable alternatives. The appraisal provides assessment tables ranking the growth scenarios (reasonable alternatives) and uses a RAG rating system to identify the potential for significant environmental effects.

93. This is followed by a written commentary. The written commentary focuses on the variable growth locations. This focus on the variable elements is justified because the scenarios are combinations of sites and there are a number of commonalities (i.e. fixed sites) across all scenarios.

*15. On what basis is the methodology clear for readers to understand why some options perform better than others?*

94. In the residential appraisal, paragraph 6.2.1 identifies the variable sites across the different scenarios assessed. The appraisal commentary focuses on the differential impact of these variable sites and then draws conclusions. Read together, this summarises the reasoning why some scenarios perform better than others.

For example, in the accessibility to community infrastructure topic (page 57) on the residential appraisal scenario 1 (the preferred option – which includes the variable site options at Long Lawford) and scenario 5 (the preferred option plus south of Rugby) perform well. This is reflective of the good access to community infrastructure from Long Lawford and South of Rugby as explained at paragraph 6.2.4.

95. The employment appraisal follows a similar approach.

## Issue: Effects before and after mitigation

*The SA should identify measures to avoid, minimise, or compensate for adverse effects. The submitted SA refers to mitigation being delivered through plan policies and site-specific requirements.*

*16. Could you explain what the likely effects of the Submission Plan would be in the absence of mitigation, and to what extent mitigation is expected to lessen those effects?*

96. Answer: When appraising reasonable alternative growth scenarios (Section 6 of the Sustainability Appraisal report) there is a need to make cautious assumptions regarding mitigation, with a view to an unbiased appraisal. This ensures that the appraisal is not biased in favour of proposed allocations for which detailed work has been undertaken.
97. By contrast, in the appraisal of the plan as a whole (section 9) all policy requirements within the plan are accounted for. Those policy requirements include both DM policies (for example a policy on canopy cover or areas of separation) and site-specific policy requirements for site allocations contained in the development site allocations annex. Both types of mitigation impact on the appraisal scores of the plan versus the baseline, as is explained in section 9.
98. There is no “zero mitigation” appraisal, because the plan is appraised against the baseline (i.e. no plan). The plan but with no mitigation would not be a realistic scenario and so has not been appraised.
99. Site-specific mitigations flagged in section 9 of the appraisal include:
- Accessibility – paragraph 9.2.3 notes that the provision of a country park at Walsgrave Hill adjoining Coombe Abbey Country Park positively impacts the plan’s appraisal. Similarly paragraph 9.2.4 comments favourably on the site-specific requirements.
  - Biodiversity – paragraph 9.2.4 notes the good potential for mitigation of the impacts of Walsgrave Hill on Coombe Pool. Similarly paragraph 9.4.3 fifth bullet point notes that land West of Fossey Way is a more sensitive site but would deliver new greenspace and there is a policy requirement to retain existing mature trees and hedgerow on Fosse Way. Paragraph 9.4.4 notes the careful policy consideration given to balancing employment land and open space at SW Rugby employment phase 2 given the sensitivity of Cawston Spinney.
  - Historic environment – paragraph 9.9.1 notes that the Walsgrave Hill allocation does give rise to a degree of tension with historic environment objective but there is good potential for mitigation [note that this remains the council’s view]. Paragraph 9.9.3 notes the requirement for the Land at Long Lawford allocation includes a site-specific requirement to ““Retain and reuse the 19th century L-plan building to the southwest of Avon Lodge if it is found to be of historical interest. Layout to provide some open space buffer to the listed farmhouse (Avon Lodge) and L-plan building (if retained).””.

- Landscape – paragraph 9.11.1 notes a tension of the Walsgrave Hill strategic employment site with landscape objectives but highlights good potential for mitigation. Paragraph 9.11.3 notes the role in site specific policy in providing a buffer between South West Rugby Employment phase 2 and Cawston Spinney.
- Transport – paragraph 9.13.2 notes that at Stretton-on-Dunsmore growth may support public transport enhancements. Paragraph 9.13.3 notes that transport objectives are a key focus of site specific policies and those securing walking and cycling upgrades are of particular importance. The policy for site 59 Newton Manor Lane is cited as an example of this.

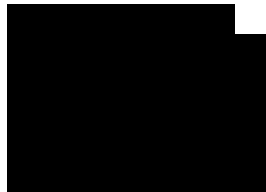
**Issue: Cumulative impacts**

*It is unclear to us how the submitted SA clearly demonstrates how it has evaluated the overall combined effects of the Submission Plan.*

*17. Could you clarify how the SA has assessed the cumulative effects arising from the Plan in its entirety and as it has evolved?*

100. Answer: Section 9 of the report (i.e. the main section within Part 2 of the Sustainability Appraisal Report) presents an appraisal of the plan as a whole. Paragraph 9.15.4 comments on 'cumulative effects', which are defined as the effect of the plan in combination with other plans.

101. The interim Sustainability Appraisal Report (RBC1) similarly contained an assessment of the whole draft plan (as it then stood) in section 9 (pages 64-71).



Neil Holly MRTPI  
Development Strategy Manager