

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

TITLE OF REPORT: LAND NORTH-EAST OF GREAT ASHBY (GA2) STRATEGIC MASTERPLAN FRAMEWORK

REPORT OF: NIGEL SMITH, STRATEGIC PLANNING MANAGER

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: CLLR DANIEL ALLEN, LEADER & INTERIM EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR PLANNING & TRANSPORT

COUNCIL PRIORITIES: THRIVING COMMUNITIES / RESPONSIBLE GROWTH / SUSTAINABILITY

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report asks Full Council to approve the Strategic Masterplan Framework for land to the north-east of Great Ashby to Full Council. This site is allocated for development in the Council's adopted Local Plan (Site GA2, Policy SP18) as a strategic site for approximately 600 homes and supporting infrastructure.

The policies of the Local Plan require the preparation of a masterplan for this site. A masterplan for the site has been produced by the applicant team working with Council officers and advisors. This has followed approved guidance and procedures. The draft masterplan was subject to public consultation and independent design review to inform the final version. The masterplan provides an appropriate framework for the future planning and development of this strategic site.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. That the Strategic Masterplan Framework for the land North-East of Great Ashby (Local Plan site GA2), attached at Appendix A, is approved and adopted as a material planning consideration for relevant planning decisions relating to the site.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1. To set an agreed design framework for the delivery of a strategic site within the Council's adopted Local Plan. To accord with policy requirements of the Local Plan.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1. The Strategic Masterplan Framework (hereafter 'masterplan') has, in officers' view, been appropriately prepared in accordance with national and local policies, guidance and advice. It has been prepared under the Council's preferred approach; the Local Plan and associated guidance encourage the preparation of masterplans for strategic sites in advance of and separate to any planning applications or decisions.

The Council is currently 'behind schedule' in delivering the homes required by the Local Plan. It is important that the strategic sites progress expediently through the planning system.

- 4.2. The alternative is to not adopt the masterplan. This is not recommended for same reasons as above. There would be planning, financial and reputational risks if Full Council decided not to proceed. These are explored in Section 11 of this report.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

- 5.1. Preparation of this masterplan has been overseen by the Council's internal, informal Strategic Planning Project Board. This includes cross-party representation from all political groups recognising that the implementation of strategic sites are long-term projects which may span administrations of the Council. The Project Board is chaired by the Executive Member for Planning & Transport. Local ward members have been invited to participate in relevant meetings of the Board.
- 5.2. The draft masterplan was presented to the Project Board at its meeting of 19 March 2024. Great Ashby Community Council, Weston Parish Council and other stakeholders, including the general public, have been invited to comment on the masterplan through public consultation and focussed meetings. Officers briefed the newly-elected Councillors for Great Ashby following the local elections in May.
- 5.3. All Councillors were invited to a briefing and 'Q&A' session on the Local Plan and the general principles of masterplanning and design on 8 July 2024.
- 5.4. In August 2024, Project Board advised upon amendments to the Project Board Terms of Reference. These included recommendations for the future reporting of masterplans to Councillors. The updated Terms of Reference were endorsed by Cabinet in September 2024 and have been followed in preparing and presenting this item. This includes the masterplan summary document prepared by officers and attached at Appendix B, additional Councillor representation on the Board and seeking Board feedback on any views from their wider groups.
- 5.5. The final masterplan was presented to and considered by the Project Board at its meeting of 15 October 2024. The Board agreed the officer recommendation that the masterplan should progress for formal approval via Cabinet and Full Council.
- 5.6. All Councillors were invited to an officer briefing and 'Q&A' session on this masterplan on 6 November 2024, ahead of consideration of this item by committees.
- 5.7. This item was considered by Cabinet at its meeting of Tuesday 19 November. The Cabinet referral will be reported to the meeting.

6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This report contains a recommendation on a key Executive decision first notified to the Public in the Forward Plan of 13 August 2024.
- 6.2 This report specifically relates to the Forward Plan item titled "GA2(Great Ashby) Strategic Masterplan". It does not relate to the Forward Plan item titled "Land required for access to GA2".

This will be subject to a separate report to a future meeting of Cabinet. Each item must be considered separately and on its own merits. The Monitoring Officer has issued a dispensation to all Councillors to allow consideration of both items. Further information is set out in the legal implications.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1. The Council's Local Plan (the Plan) was adopted by Full Council in November 2022. It forms part of both the Council's adopted Policy Framework and the statutory Development Plan for the District.
- 7.2. The Plan sets out the Council's strategy for meeting the development needs of North Hertfordshire over the period to 2031. The Plan makes provision for at least 13,000 new homes. A significant proportion of these are to be delivered on six Strategic Housing Sites – defined as sites of more than 500 homes – around the main towns in and adjoining the District. These are supplemented by a range of Local Housing Allocations which range in size up to approximately 300 homes within and around the District's towns and villages.
- 7.3. The Inspector examining the Local Plan was clear that deciding where and how housing needs should be met was an extremely complex issue. The arguments for, and the potential benefits of, new development were extensively scrutinised and carefully balanced against the inevitable harm that will arise from the release of this land.
- 7.4. All of the Strategic Housing Sites are greenfield locations. They contain agricultural land, leisure routes and Public Rights of Way enjoyed by residents as well as habitats of importance for flora and fauna. However, the examination concluded that the imperative to boost housing supply – in terms of both local evidence of acute housing need and national policy directions – meant these developments should proceed. Key paragraphs from the Inspector's conclusions are shown below for context:

487. Without impinging on the Green Belt, the consequences for sustainable development would be significant. This would involve either building new homes in considerably less sustainable locations – in all probability away from the areas where they are most needed – or not delivering them at all. The former would most likely lead to a significantly greater increase in use of the private car and could lead to the creation of communities that would be relatively isolated, particularly in terms of access to shops and services. The latter would deny many the opportunity to live in their own home close to their family, friends and work, and could stifle the local economy. To my mind, neither proposition would best, or even adequately, serve the achievement of sustainable development, particularly in respect of its economic and social dimensions.

492. On the one hand, it is clear to me that the development of most of the housing allocations proposed in this Plan would cause significant or moderate harm to the Green Belt, even with mitigation. That is a highly regrettable outcome and a very important factor. Indeed, I give substantial weight to it.

493. On the other hand, however, the need for housing both in North Hertfordshire and in Luton is acute. The proposed allocations would ensure that those needs are met where they arise in the most sustainable locations that are deliverable/developable. Rejecting these sites would delay meeting the pressing need for housing further, and not impinging on the Green Belt would mean accepting that those needs would not be met where they arise. Both would choke the local housing market. The home-making aspirations of many people, particularly those requiring affordable homes, would be shattered and the local economy would most likely suffer negative consequences. These too are matters of substantial weight.

494. In my judgement, on balance, the latter considerations outweigh the harm that would be caused to the Green Belt. Consequently, I consider that the exceptional circumstances necessary to alter the Green Belt boundaries to facilitate the allocation of the housing sites concerned do exist both in principle and in each individual case. This aspect, therefore, should not stand in the way of their allocation.

[North Hertfordshire Local Plan Inspector's Report, September 2022](#)

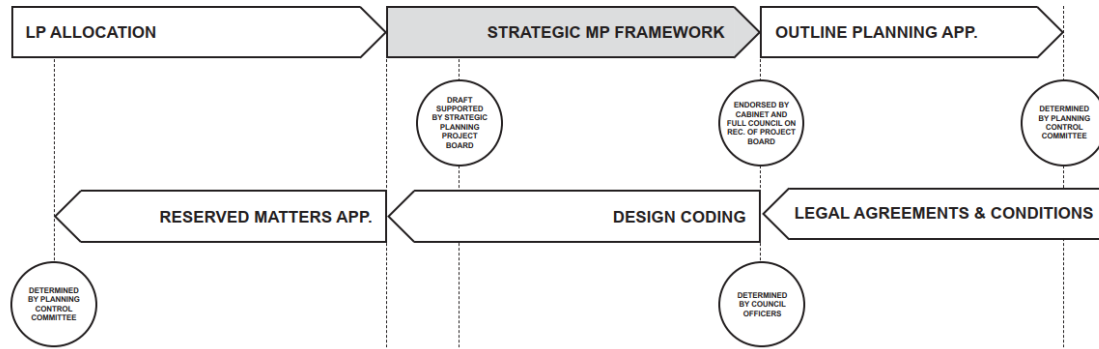
- 7.5. The Strategic Housing Sites are of a greater size and complexity than any developments that have taken place in the District over the last twenty years. They are critical to the overall strategy of the Plan. Their delivery is essential to increase the number of homes being built above historic averages and address the acute need for housing.
- 7.6. Policy SP9 of the Local Plan sets out the Council's approach to Design and Sustainability. This states the Council will require the production of Strategic Masterplans for Strategic Housing Sites and other significant development. Significant development generally comprises development of 100 homes or more.
- 7.7. Policy SP9 also sets out a series of design principles to be followed in masterplans and applications for development meeting these thresholds. It contains documentation requirements and sets out the approaches to approval. The Local Plan encourages the submission of masterplans for agreement before the submission of a planning application. Where applications have already been submitted, the Policy also allows for masterplans to be agreed with the Council prior to their determination.
- 7.8. Masterplans are a recognised 'good practice' tool as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. Government Planning Practice Guidance explains a masterplan as follows:

What are masterplans?

Masterplans set the vision and implementation strategy for a development. They are distinct from local design guides by focusing on site specific proposals such as the scale and layout of development, mix of uses, transport and green infrastructure. Depending on the level of detail, the masterplan may indicate the intended arrangement of buildings, streets and the public realm. More specific parameters for the site's development may be set out in a [design code](#), which can accompany the overall masterplan.

A range of other plans and technical reports may be needed alongside a masterplan, to provide supporting evidence and set out related proposals, such as a local character study, landscape assessment, transport assessment and proposals for securing biodiversity net gain. An implementation strategy could also be included, especially where development is expected to be brought forward in a number of phases.

- 7.9. To support the Council's masterplanning approach, Cabinet agreed in March 2021 to establish an informal, internal Project Board to provide corporate oversight and strategic direction. This is not a formal committee or decision-making body. Through Project Board a range of associated procedural guidance has been produced and subsequently endorsed by Cabinet (see links in Section 18).
- 7.10. These say masterplans produced and approved before the submission of a planning application or prior to the determination of a planning application will follow the final approval process below (subject to a positive outcome at each step):
- Project Board recommendation to Service Director
 - Service Director recommendation to Cabinet
 - Cabinet recommendation to Full Council
 - Adoption by Full Council as a material consideration in the determination of any relevant planning applications
- 7.11. Consideration of the masterplan does not necessitate any further debate upon the general principles of whether the development should take place in the first instance. Neither should it lead to debate on the fact that, at a strategic level, the development will result in some harm to the local area or may lead to more congestion or delay on local roads. These matters have been considered through examination and adoption of the Local Plan. Some adverse impacts are 'priced in' as the cost of ensuring the needs of existing and future residents are appropriately met. Relevant policies in the Local Plan identify site-specific and general measures that should be included to mitigate the impacts of development. These matters will be subject to further technical consideration through detailed assessments at the formal planning stages.
- 7.12. In this context, officers are not asking Councillors to confer any greater or lesser weight to the idea of development on this site than already exists; the masterplan provides a high-level design framework against which any future planning applications for the site can be considered. The level of design detail will increase as proposals move through the planning process.
- 7.13. The masterplan is the second stage in a (broadly) six-step approach to securing the planning, regulation and delivery of a site through a combination of statutory and discretionary measures. This process should be viewed holistically as a means of collectively securing design quality, setting out the vision, community engagement, on-site infrastructure and off-site contributions for the successful planning and delivery of the project.

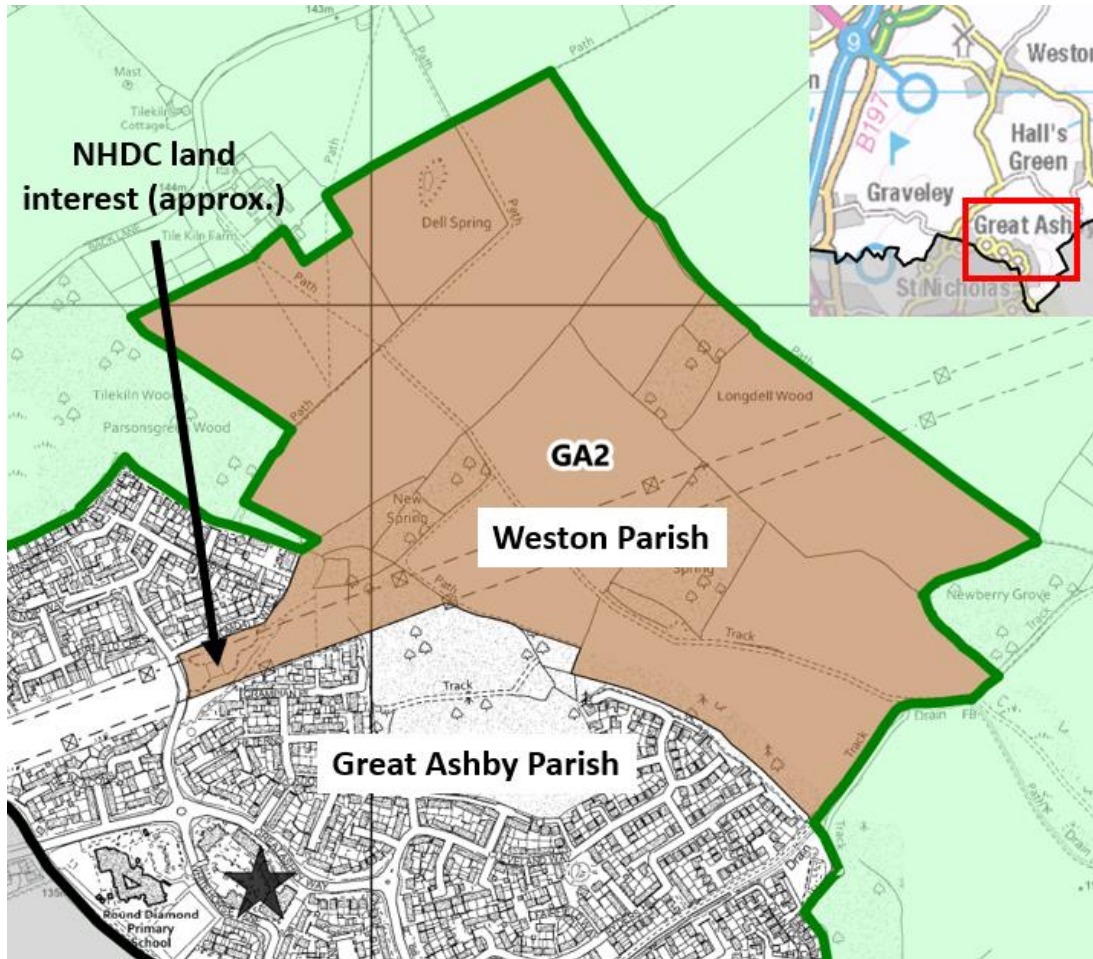


7.14. Formal regulatory approval(s) for the development will be secured through any subsequent planning permission(s). However, the masterplan has been guided by, and considered against, the key requirements of relevant policies in the Local Plan. Similarly, although it is not a formal planning decision in its own right, any concerns or objections to any masterplan should generally be framed against relevant policies and considerations or made on valid planning grounds.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1. Site GA2 consists of approximately 53 hectares of predominantly agricultural land sited to the north-east of Great Ashby. The significant majority of the site is within Weston Parish. The proposed access corridor from Mendip Way lies within Great Ashby Parish and the development is planned as a functional extension of this neighbourhood which, in turn, adjoins and links into neighbouring Stevenage Borough. The Council has a land interest in part of the access corridor adjoining Mendip Way. This will be subject to a separate report to a future meeting.
- 8.2. The site contains and is bordered by areas of established woodland, some of which are classified as Ancient Woodland. The proposed development will mark a new outer limit to Great Ashby. An annotated extract of the Local Plan Policies Map is shown below.
- 8.3. The masterplan for GA2 has been produced by Picture Estates Ltd. Picture Estates are landowner for the significant majority of the allocated site. Separate commercial negotiations are ongoing with the Council's Estate's team and other landowners in the access corridor to ensure control of the site to the relevant highway boundaries and connection points. This does not preclude progress or consideration of the masterplan or any subsequent planning application; it is for any applicant to ensure they are able to implement any scheme they might apply or receive planning permission for.
- 8.4. It is Picture Estates' intention to obtain outline planning permission for the site. However, they are not a developer or housebuilder. At some stage, it will be necessary for the Council to negotiate the details of the scheme with a party or parties who are currently not involved in the project. This has informed the level of detail that officers consider appropriate. This masterplan includes less information on, for example, the street network within the site or detailed design principles than the masterplan for North of Stevenage (which is subject to a separate report to this meeting).

The masterplan recognises that the formal planning processes allow for further development and refinement of its proposals. This should be borne in mind when considering the masterplan and the level of detail it contains; it is not an 'absolute fix' of the proposals.



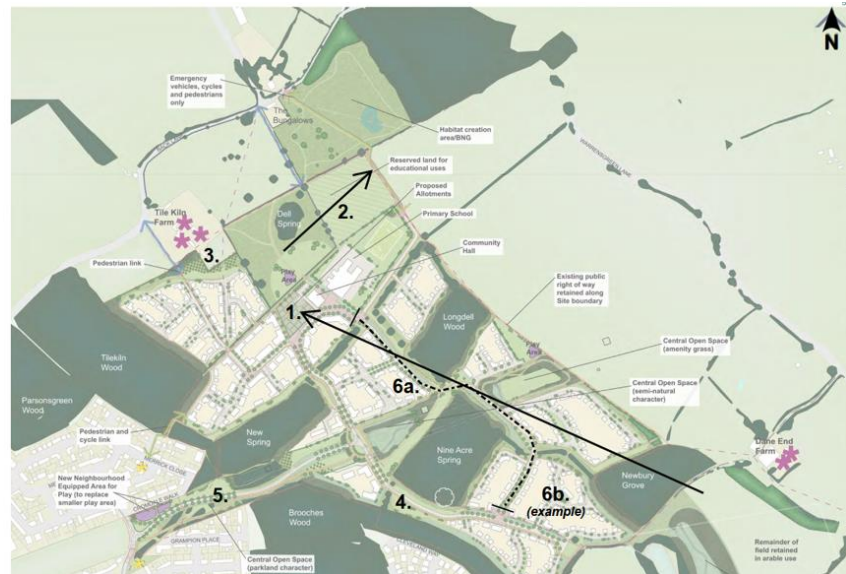
8.5. Production of the masterplan has followed the key stages set out in the Council's approved masterplanning guidance. This has included

- Establishing an officer group with representatives from the District Council and Hertfordshire County Council supported by external capacity and expertise on key issues;
- Agreement of a masterplan brief for the site setting out key issues
- Preparation of a multi-disciplinary evidence base on matters such as ecology, landscape, heritage and transport & access to inform proposals
- Consideration and testing of key spatial options for the masterplan including (but not limited to) options for the location and / or alignment of:
 - i. Land for the school and reserve education provision land
 - ii. Allotments
 - iii. Drainage basins
 - iv. The bus route / internal road loop
 - v. The access corridor from Mendip Way

- Presentation to the Council's Project Board at draft masterplan stage
 - Independent design review by Design South-East
 - Public consultation; and
 - Refinement of proposals in response to the steps above to produce the final masterplan.
- 8.6. The landowner team have worked with officers from the District and County Council (and their representatives) under a Planning Performance Agreement (PPA) since March 2023 to develop the masterplan.
- 8.7. The draft masterplan was presented to the Council Project Board in March 2024. The Project Board endorsed the work undertaken to that date as an appropriate basis for public consultation recognising that further refinement of the proposals would need to be undertaken.
- 8.8. Emerging material from the masterplan framework was subject to formal Design Review by Design South-East in May 2024 using their North Hertfordshire-specific panel of experts (DRP). The DRP's feedback informed further development of the draft scheme. The DRP report has been published [on the Council website](#).
- 8.9. Consultation included a public exhibition at Great Ashby Community Centre in May 2024. Invites were sent to local councillors, stakeholders and residents. This was accompanied by a website (<https://shapingga2.co.uk/>) which has remained available since with the consultation material and contact details. A summary of the consultation and key outcomes is published [on the Council website](#).
- 8.10. The Council project team provided feedback on a full written draft of the masterplan document at the start of September 2024.
- 8.11. Following consultation, and Design Review, the landowner and Council have worked together to further refine the masterplan and address issues raised. Changes, a number of which are shown on the plan extract below, include:
- Bringing the proposed allotments into the centre of the site to create a community heart alongside the school, community hub and Dell Spring
 - Changing the route of the proposed emergency access so it does not pass through the sensitive area at Dell Spring
 - Increasing the set-back / buffer between the proposed edge of the development and the listed buildings at Tile Kiln Farm
 - Removing proposed housing to the south of Nine Acre Spring woods and replacing this with additional green infrastructure
 - Rationalising and realigning the transport infrastructure in the access corridor to separate the pedestrian and cycle route from the highway and minimise impacts on surrounding habitat to the best possible degree
 - Amending and simplifying the suite of frameworks, particularly those dealing with access and movement to respond to Council and DRP comments, in particular reserving greater discretion around future street structure and design beyond the access corridor and initial north-west to south-east axis
 - Identifying how future development might address the standards in the Council's recently adopted Sustainability SPD

- Clarifying the relationship between the masterplan and subsequent design development through the planning process ensuring these have sufficient space to develop proposals

1. Proposed allotments moved from south-eastern edge to centre of site, replacing housing block
2. Relocation of emergency access away from Dell Spring
3. Additional set back and landscape buffer around Tile Kiln Farm
4. Housing south of Nine Acre Spring removed
5. Rationalising highway infrastructure in access corridor and separating cycle and walking infrastructure
6. Reserving design and technical specification of routes including for
 - a. bus loop through north of site
 - b. street structure in development blocks



8.12. The masterplan has focussed upon establishing an appropriate spatial framework for the site. This is demonstrated through a clear series of plans setting out proposed approaches to key matters. A summary document highlighting key plans and concepts from the masterplan document has been prepared by officers to aid Councillors' consideration and is attached to this report. The key plans in the masterplan are:

- Land Use (*Fig 5.3, pp.29-30*) – identifying the areas of the site to be used for residential, structural green space, a primary school and additional reserve education land and community hub
- Movement and Access (*Figs 5.4 and 5.7 to 5.10, pp.29-40*) – A suite of five plans identifying points of access, a hierarchy of active travel routes, leisure routes, the proposed bus route and vehicular access with illustrative design principles
- Green and blue infrastructure (*Figs 5.10 and 5.11, pp.41-46*) – identifying a series of key spaces in and around the site with associated design principles aligned to the Council's open space standards and typologies and an illustrative drainage detailing how existing surface water flows will be incorporated into a comprehensive drainage network of swales and basins
- Ecology & Biodiversity (*Fig 5.13, pp.47-48*) – identifying key assets to be retained and enhanced, buffer zones around the ancient woodland blocks within and bordering the site and proposed areas for additional woodland and hedgerow planting.
- Urban Design (*Fig 5.14, pp.49-52*) – identifying a high-level block structure, key views, key buildings and coding the anticipated built frontages into one of four categories (primary, secondary, rural edge, woodland / open space). This forms the basis of a development structure and approach to establishing character zones which will be further developed as proposals progress.

- Scale, density and massing (*Fig 5.15, p.53*) – showing variation from two-storeys at the more sensitive edges to the site to a maximum of three storeys in the core of the development. The western half of the site – which is flatter and more contained – is accepted as having capacity to absorb a (relatively) higher intensity of development with lower building heights and densities to the east.
- Illustrative masterplan (*Fig 6.1, p.55*) – showing one way in which the parameters could be combined and the site developed.
- Illustrative landscape strategy (*Fig 6.2, pp.56-58*) – demonstrating how the illustrative masterplan could be integrated into the landscape setting of the site.
- Proposed Phasing Strategy (*Fig 9.1, pp.69-70*) – splitting the site into three key phases starting with the access corridor, central-west area of the site and school land. The northern and eastern peripheries would be the final phase.

8.13. A summary assessment of the masterplan against the requirements of the relevant site-specific policy (Policy SP18) is set out below. Formal assessment of any schemes' compliance with relevant policies will be through any associated planning application(s).

- **A comprehensive and deliverable Strategic Masterplan for the entire allocation is to be prepared and agreed between the landowner/developer and the Council**

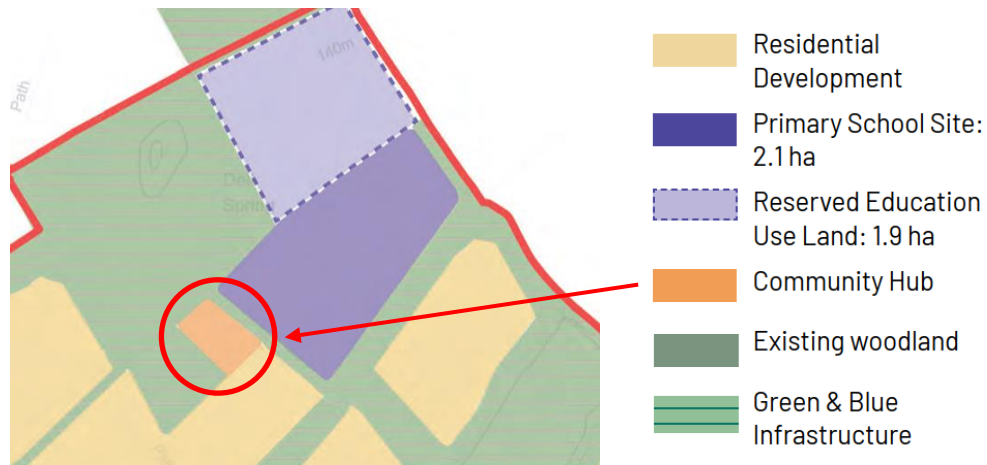
The masterplan is being presented to this meeting for consideration

- **Neighbourhood-level facilities providing approximately 500m² (net) of retail and food and beverage floorspace and other necessary medical and social infrastructure**

There have been significant changes in the retail environment since the Local Plan was prepared. Retail-led neighbourhood centres are longer viable or required at the scale that was envisaged for these developments. This is supported by the Council's recently updated evidence which identifies a substantial drop in future retail floorspace requirements compared to the figures underpinning the Local Plan.

As with the LG1 site, considered and approved by Full Council in July 2024, the masterplan therefore includes provision for a community building in the central core of the site. The detailed specification for this building will be set at a later stage in the planning process. This is considered appropriate in principle.

In this GA2 masterplan this is shown co-located close to the proposed primary school, allotments and Dell Spring open space (annotated extract below).



The masterplan identifies that detailed proposals for this centre are to be further developed but could include a range of potential uses such as indoor sport, meeting spaces, childcare facilities, café or small community shop. Should it prove feasible, the building could also be designed and used as a doctor's surgery / healthcare facility.

The Local Plan acknowledges that the cumulative demand arising from the planning development across the north of Stevenage (sites NS1, GA1 and GA2) will require two additional GPs (that is two practitioners rather than practices).

The planning system has a responsibility to ensure that sufficient, potential space for health services is made available to meet the needs arising from development either through the physical provision of on-site space or contributions towards the improvement of existing facilities. However, the planning system is not able to take operational decisions on the delivery of these services, including whether space in new community facilities is ultimately taken up.

Service planning is co-ordinated by the local Integrated Care Board (ICB). ICBs are a statutory NHS organisation responsible for planning health services for the local population. The ICB for this area, and most of North Herts other than around Royston, is the Hertfordshire and West Essex ICB.

Council officers are in regular engagement with the ICB. Until recently, the suggestion had been that the needs arising from developments adjoining Stevenage would be met through the expansion of existing practices in the town. However, more recent conversations have suggested that there may now be interest in securing a physical presence in one of these sites; most likely as a satellite of an existing practice. No firm decision has been taken that would allow for a definitive position to be set out in the strategic masterplan report.

- **Four hectares of land at the north of the allocation site, broadly bounded by Footpaths Weston 044 and Weston 027 and Dell Spring reserved for education use to accommodate 2FE of primary-age provision and 4FE of secondary age provision**

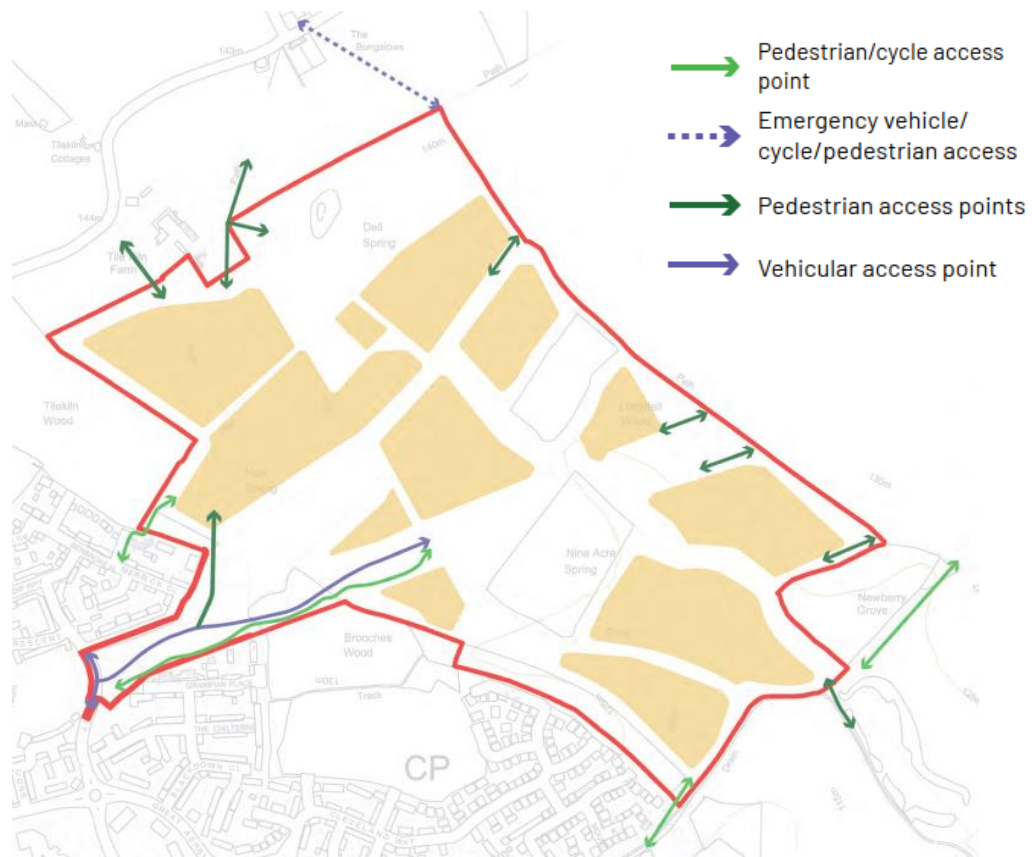
This land is identified in the masterplan in the broad location suggested in the Local Plan and shown in the extract above.

HCC have confirmed that a 2.1-hectare site to accommodate a two-form entry (2FE) Primary School is required to ensure there is enough capacity across Great Ashby as a whole to serve demand arising from the existing community, this site and the proposed GA1 development. The primary school is shown on the masterplan adjoining other facilities such as the community hub and Dell Spring open space to create a community heart to the development.

There are no proposals at this stage for on-site secondary school provision. There is presently capacity within the existing schools' estate within Stevenage Borough to meet demand for the foreseeable future. However, HCC have requested that the 'balance' of the four-hectare requirement in the local plan is held as reserve education land whilst long-term secondary education requirements are further explored, including through the reviews of Local Plans in the area. This reserved land is shown on the masterplan at the north of site adjoining the primary school site.

- **Principal access from Mendip Way with provision for sustainable modes of transport having regard to the Stevenage Mobility Strategy and comprehensive integration into the existing pedestrian and cycle, public transport and road networks**

Connection points for the development are shown on the Access Framework Plan.



A corridor from Mendip Way containing the principal access is shown on the masterplan. This includes highway access for vehicles and a proposed bus route as well as pedestrian and cycle paths.

Eleven additional pedestrian and / or cycle access points are proposed around the site. Two of these provide for 'utility' (everyday) access to / from Great Ashby; via Merrick Close at the south-west of the site and the existing Bridleway at the south-east. A further utility link will be provided to Warrensgreen Lane / Back Lane.

The remaining access points will link to the Rights of Way networks that surround and cross the site providing opportunities for leisure trips into the wider countryside beyond the site.

- **Transport Assessment to identify and secure measures to manage traffic flows arising from the development along Back Lane**

The Transport Assessment will be formally submitted and considered as part of any outline planning application. Any off-site mitigation works, or contributions towards these, will be secured at this stage through any future legal agreement.

The masterplan shows there will be no direct access from GA2 onto Back Lane for private vehicular traffic.

- **A detailed drainage strategy identifying water infrastructure required and mechanism(s) for delivery**

This will be considered as part of any outline planning application. Initial correspondence with Thames Water is provided as part of the masterplan process. This confirms that further modelling will be undertaken as the scheme progresses to identify the most appropriate solution(s). Conditions would be used to link implementation of the scheme to any upgrades or works required. This matter is not a constraint to the design of the scheme at masterplan stage.

- **At least 6 serviced plots for self-build development**

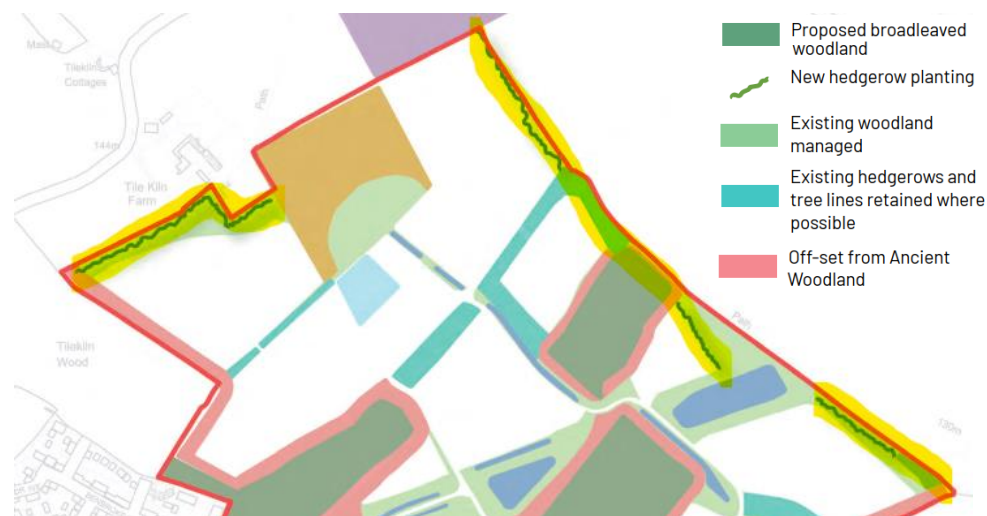
A potential location for the self-build plots is shown in the illustrative masterplan, which accepts the principle that these are required to comply with policy. They are shown at the west of the site in the proposed residential blocks near Tilekiln Wood. However, this is not fixed and the most appropriate location for the self-build plots will be further considered and fixed through the planning process.



- **Structural planting along site boundaries as informed by detailed landscape assessments to reinforce the revised Green Belt boundary and mitigate landscape impacts**

This is best shown on the Ecology & Biodiversity Framework Plan. Planting forms an integral, structuring part of the site layout. Additional planting, or the reinforcement of existing planting is proposed around much of the site perimeters.

In places a more permeable edge will be allowed to accord with the recommendations of the Council's appointed Design Review Panel. This is considered an appropriate balance between the site-specific policy and local and national design policies and advice. An extract is shown below with the relevant features highlighted.



- **Address existing surface water flood risk issues, particularly running south-east from Dell Spring to Newberry Grove, through SUDs or other appropriate solution**

The masterplan includes an illustrative drainage framework plan. The masterplan proposals are underpinned by calculations and evidence provided by the applicant's professional drainage consultant.

This shows a network of swales and drainage basins broadly following the current overland flow paths across the site. A series of swales are shown alongside key routes and / or within woodland buffer zones. This approach accords with standing advice issued by the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) and the sequential approach to SUDs provision.

The drainage proposals will be formally assessed by the LLFA at application stage.

- **Appropriate mitigation, compensation and / or enhancement of key features of biodiversity including local wildlife sites at Tilekiln Wood, Parsonsgreen Wood, New Spring Wood, Brooches Wood and Claypithills Spring Wood, identified protected species and priority habitats [and] retention of green infrastructure connectivity and corridors to the wider countryside**

The majority of woodlands within and adjoining the site have been identified as Ancient Woodland (including areas of woodland not identified on the national inventory). The masterplan includes buffers around these in accordance with national guidance and, in line with the Design Review Panel recommendations, identifies the need for appropriate long-term management proposals as the scheme progresses through the planning process. Infrastructure in the access corridor has been rationalised and realigned to minimise impacts.

Through the options testing process, opportunities to avoid or reduce impacts through the routing and broad location of the roads and bus route were explored. Two 'pinch points' – where highway widths can be reduced to single carriageway to reduce impacts – have been agreed in principle based upon the most sensitive connecting corridors between the woodland blocks.

The green infrastructure frameworks seek to protect key corridors, recognising that the introduction of development will inevitably have some adverse impacts.

The masterplan states that any scheme should deliver in excess of 10% Biodiversity Net Gain through habitat creation. The work to date demonstrates this commitment can be met including through the provision of additional complementary habitat beyond the allocation boundary but adjoining the site within the same land ownership. Due to the extent of existing habitat, GA2 needs to deliver higher quantities of habitat (in absolute terms) than other sites in order to meet the 10% requirement. An equivalent amount of habitat provision in and around the NS1 site, for example, would represent a net gain of approximately 17%.

Formal assessment of BNG will take place through the planning process and scrutiny of the statutory metric calculations.

Further, detailed exploration will continue as the site progresses through the formal application stage where a greater level of detail will be provided in the accompanying Environmental Statement and associated studies.

- **Integration of existing public rights of way within and adjoining the site to provide routes to the wider countryside including Footpaths Weston 027 and Weston 044 and Bridleway Weston 033 as features which help define the perimeters of the site [and] Footpath Weston 029 as a potential green corridor through the site**

The access framework, described above, identifies a series of connections from the development to the peripheral rights of way. Much of the alignment of Footpath Weston 029 falls within areas of green infrastructure and / or ancient woodland buffers. Precise treatments for the route will be fixed at a later stage in the planning process but could take the form of a mown path on the definitive alignment with a hard surfaced footpath following a broadly parallel route along the nearby street.

- **Provision of a green infrastructure corridor beneath the current alignment of the pylon lines to respect statutory safety clearance requirements for residential development**

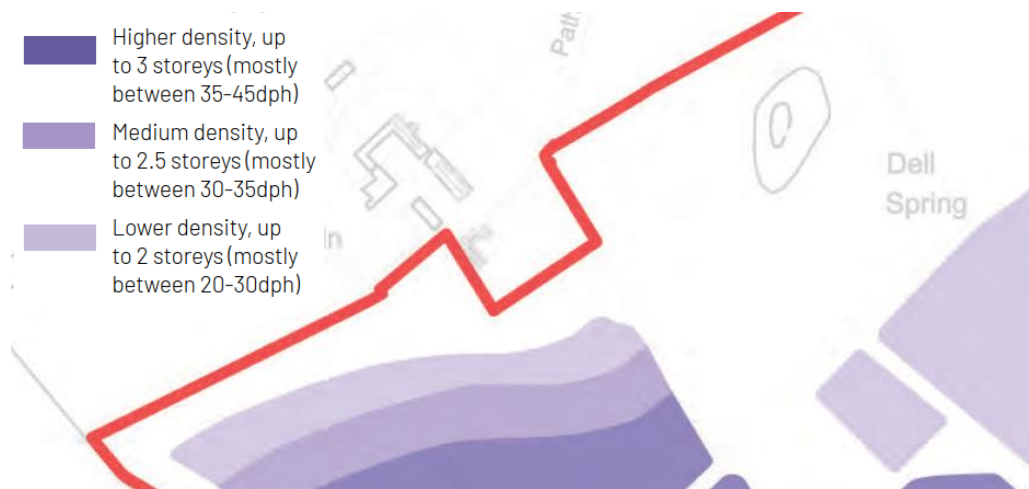
This is shown on the masterplan proposals. The corridor includes several areas of distinct character with a more park-like character along the Mendip Way access and towards the outer boundary. The central area is shown as natural or semi-natural in appearance including a drainage basin and woodland. Further detail and design intent is explained in the illustrative landscape strategy (pp.56-58; see areas 1, 2, 3, 9 and 10 as per extract below)



- **Lower intensity development and / or green infrastructure provision to the north of the site to minimise harm to the setting of listed buildings**

Through the masterplan process, the extent of the proposed built area has been drawn back from the northern boundary adjoining the listed buildings at Tile Kiln Farm (see paragraph 8.11). The Scale, density & massing framework shows the intensity of development reducing towards the edge of the development.

The importance of Dell Spring to the setting of these buildings is recognised in identifying it as a key area of open space. Following Design Review, the proposed emergency access has additionally been routed away from this area.



Sustainability

- 8.14. In September 2024, Cabinet approved the Council’s Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) which supports the local plan. This identifies a series of standards against key sustainability themes. The masterplan sets target levels of achievement against the SPD’s key themes. These are shown below.

8.15. These are targets and subject to more detailed design and viability. Ranges are also used where there are multiple components to certain themes and differing outcomes are anticipated.

Optimising passive design and fabric performance	Silver
Achieving low carbon energy	Silver
Minimising carbon footprint	Silver
Healthy placemaking	Silver
Promoting biodiversity	Bronze to Gold
Sustainable Travel	Gold
Conserving Water	Bronze
Sustainable Urban Drainage	Silver

Next steps

8.16. Subject to Full Council approval, the masterplan will be adopted as a material consideration for any future planning decisions relating to the site. Any applications will be assessed to ensure they broadly conform to and / or facilitate the implementation of the parameters and principles set out in this document. Any substantive deviation from the masterplan will need to be justified, for example if new information comes to light that isn't available at this stage in the process.

8.17. Through the joint work on the masterplan a series of actions and issues have been identified that will need to be addressed as the scheme progresses towards delivery. The masterplan provides appropriate 'hooks' to accommodate these matters. The most appropriate place for these to be resolved and secured is through the subsequent planning processes and / or once the developer(s) of the site are known:

- Developing detailed proposals for:
 - The precise nature and specification of transport routes and hierarchy within the site, including further consideration of the most appropriate treatment(s) for the proposed bus loop around the north of the site;
 - Uses to be accommodated in the community hub; this is to include liaison with the NHS to ensure sufficient GP capacity is provided across the wider Stevenage area having regard to the cumulative impact of development proposals around the town
- Production of a Design Code to establish character areas and / or detailed design instruction for reserved matters applications building on the broad design principles in the masterplan
- Determining detailed housing mix for individual phases
- Identifying specific projects for off-site contributions towards matters such as sports provision and sustainable travel improvements
- Ensuring the impacts of construction are appropriately managed and reduce impacts upon existing residents to the best of the development's ability; this is a detailed matter that will be dealt with by planning condition. However, the masterplan sets out general principles and expectations for any future Construction Management Plan .
- Considering and securing the most appropriate management and stewardship model for the social, green, blue [water] and transport infrastructure that will be provided

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. Under the Terms of Reference for Cabinet, the Constitution states that it may exercise the Council's functions as Local Planning Authority and receive reports on strategic planning matters (except to the extent that those functions are by law the responsibility of the Council or delegated to the Service Director: Regulatory).
- 9.2. Section 4.8.2(i) of the Constitution contains a general power for Full Council to receive and debate reports from Cabinet.
- 9.3. There is no statutorily set definition of a 'masterplan'. Unlike, for example, the Local Plan or any Supplementary Planning Documents, they are not formally defined or regulated through relevant planning acts or associated regulations – either in terms of content or process. This means there is discretion as to how, when and whether they are produced and / or approved on the part of both the applicant and the Council.
- 9.4. Policy SP9 of the Local Plan provides a clear policy definition within the Council's statutory Development Plan of what is expected within a masterplan and the design outcomes that should be achieved.
- 9.5. Terms of Reference for the Project Board and guidance on the approval processes for masterplans have been presented to and endorsed by Cabinet, most recently in September 2024 and published on the Council website.
- 9.6. These set out that Masterplans will be subject to formal approval by Cabinet and Full Council where a masterplan is to be adopted as a material consideration in advance of the determination of the relevant planning application(s).
- 9.7. Government Planning Practice Guidance states that a material planning consideration is one which is relevant to making the planning decision in question (e.g., whether to grant or refuse an application for planning permission).
- 9.8. Formal, regulatory approval for any development of the site will be secured through any subsequent planning permission(s). These will be considered through established processes and legislation including presentation to Planning Control Committee.
- 9.9. Any approval of the Strategic Masterplan is without prejudice to the consideration and determination of any future planning application(s).
- 9.10. PPAs are made pursuant to the Localism Act 2011 and the Local Government Acts 1972, 2000 and 2003 and under associated planning legislation and guidance, including but not limited to the 2008 Act. Section 93 of the Local Government Act 2003 allows local planning authorities to charge for providing discretionary services and the legislation is clear that, where charges are made, they must not exceed the cost of providing the service.
- 9.11. At its meeting on 16 March 2021, Cabinet resolved (item 109) as part of the Local Plan Implementation report to approve the North Hertfordshire Masterplanning Principles. Within this document paragraph 2.11 states: The Council would normally expect a PPA to be used to support the preparation of Strategic Masterplans and significant development planning applications.

- 9.12. Under the Council's constitution, paragraph 14.6.4 (ii) authorises the Service Director Regulatory to enter into contracts for the supply of services, in this case the use of consultants to act on the Council's behalf. 14.6.4 (viii) authorises the setting of fees and charges, in this case to seek to recover these costs from the Developer.
- 9.13. The PPA states that "*Nothing in the [agreement] will restrict or inhibit HCC or NHDC from exercising their statutory functions and views about the development and nothing in this agreement shall predetermine the outcome of any planning application.*"
- 9.14. The Council has a land interest in part of this site consisting of an area adjoining Mendip Way. This will be subject to a separate report to a future meeting. The Council must consider the planning merits of any proposals separately to any (potential) commercial considerations that might apply to the Council's ownership of this land and / or any potential disposal of that interest.
- 9.15. Given these twin roles, all Councillors participating in either of these decisions have a declarable interest as it is a perceived and / or actual conflict between two functions. Dispensations to participate in relevant items can be granted by the Council's Monitoring Officer under grounds set out under section 33 of the Localism Act 2011, and under Appendix C to the North Herts Councillor Code:
- without the dispensation the number of Councillors prohibited from participating in any particular business, would be so great a proportion of the body transacting the business, as to impede the transaction of the business;
 - without the dispensation the representation of different political groups on the body transacting any particular business would be so upset as to alter the likely outcome of any vote relating to the business;
 - granting the dispensation is in the interests of persons living in the authority's area;
 - without the dispensation each member of the authority's executive would be prohibited from participating in any particular business to be transacted by the authority's executive, or
 - the Monitoring Officer considers that it is otherwise appropriate to grant a dispensation
- 9.16. The Monitoring Officer, having regard to all the relevant circumstances, has concluded that a number of the above grounds would apply, because without this dispensation, the relevant business could not take place, or take place effectively at Project Board, Cabinet, Council or Planning Control Committee.
- 9.17. A dispensation has therefore been granted to all Councillors to allow them to participate as required in any discussions relating to this matter (which in any Council decision-making body would extend to remaining, debating and voting on the item). This dispensation is in place until this matter is determined, by the Council (or as relevant in any associated Council-related business as part of any review, assessment, or other process) or up to May 2028, whichever is the sooner.
- 9.18. This dispensation does not relate to any other interest that a Councillor has in relation to the GA2 site.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. The Council resources for masterplanning and implementation work are drawn from existing staff, with additional support from specialist consultants as required. The PPA seeks to recover the costs of undertaking this work. The costs will be monitored to ensure on-going cost recovery.
- 10.2. For any activities that cannot be charged through the PPA, a ring-fenced Masterplanning reserve and / or approved budgets will be used.
- 10.3. The principle of setting of fees and charges for Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) was agreed by the Service Director: Regulatory in consultation with the Service Director: Finance and the Executive Member for Planning & Transport in January 2022.
- 10.4. Funding was secured through a PPA to support the Council's input to this masterplan including the recovery of external consultancy costs.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. Good Risk Management supports and enhances the decision-making process, increasing the likelihood of the Council meeting its objectives and enabling it to respond quickly and effectively to change. When taking decisions, risks and opportunities must be considered.
- 11.2. The Council previously monitored a specific Masterplanning risk. However, this was not carried forward in the 2024/25 Council Delivery Plan; progress is dependent on third parties and council activities are considered business-as-usual. Strategic oversight continues via the Project Board and reports to Cabinet and Full Council.
- 11.3. Notwithstanding, the key risks that were identified remain pertinent to consideration of individual reports and masterplans:
 - Risk of poor scheme outcomes that do not appropriately respond to local character and context
 - Risk that strategic sites do not maximise contribution to corporate objectives and priorities of climate change, environment, economy and place
 - Risk of delay to delivery of strategic sites if masterplan process is delayed or stalled or provides insufficient information to guide subsequent planning applications
 - Failure to secure funding to resource the process
 - Reduction in pre-application income and delay to income from planning applications
 - Failure to retain/recruit sufficiently experienced officers
 - Risk of adverse appeal findings on other/non-Local Plan sites if delivery is delayed or stalled
- 11.4. Positive decisions on officer and / or Project Board-supported masterplans mitigate against many of these factors by maintaining tangible progress on key sites that are essential to delivery of the Local Plan and securing an appropriate design framework against which future planning proposals can be assessed. Adverse decisions are likely to reduce developer confidence in the process, including negative reputational outcomes for the Council, and an increase in schemes which seek to meet the requirements of Policy SP9 directly through the Development Management process.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1. In line with the Public Sector Equality Duty, public bodies must, in the exercise of their functions, give due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- 12.2. The site which is subject to this masterplan was allocated for development through the Council's adopted Local Plan. An Equality Impact Assessment was produced assessing the plan's compliance with relevant legislation and requirements and submitted to Government as part of the plan's examination.
- 12.3. No issues with the Equality Impact Assessment were raised by the examining Inspector. Paragraph 11 of their report on the plan concluded:

I [the Inspector] have had due regard to the aims expressed in S149(1) of the Equality Act 2010. This has included my consideration of several matters during the examination including the provision of traveller sites to meet need and accessible and adaptable housing.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1. The Social Value Act and "go local" requirements do not apply to this report.

14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1. The allocation of the site in the Local Plan (and the Local Plan in general) was informed by a statutory Sustainability Appraisal which considered the potential social, economic and environmental impacts of the Plan. This informed the mitigation measures contained in Policy SP9, the site-specific policy for the site and general policies on matters such as biodiversity and transport.
- 14.2. Any future outline planning application for this site will be accompanied by a statutory Environmental Statement and impact assessments. These will inform the detailed mitigation measures that will be required as part of the scheme and will be secured through any permission(s) and associated legal agreement(s).

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1 None

16. APPENDICES

- 16.1 Appendix A – North-East of Great Ashby Masterplan
- 16.2 Appendix B – North-East of Great Ashby Masterplan - Officer summary document

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18. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 18.1 [Local Plan Implementation - report to Cabinet, March 2021](#) [*including masterplanning principles and establishment of Project Board*]
- 18.2 [Local Plan adoption – report to Cabinet and Full Council, November 2022](#)
- 18.3 [Strategic Planning Matters – report to Cabinet, September 2024](#) [*including endorsement of current Project Board Terms of Reference*]
- 18.4 [North Herts Council website – North-East of Great Ashby Masterplan](#) [*including baseline summary report, statement of consultation and Design Review Panel report*]