

FULL COUNCIL
28 November 2024

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

TITLE OF REPORT: NORTH STEVENAGE STRATEGIC MASTERPLAN FRAMEWORK

REPORT OF: NIGEL SMITH, STRATEGIC PLANNING MANAGER

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

COUNCIL PRIORITY: THRIVING COMMUNITIES / RESPONSIBLE GROWTH /
SUSTAINABILITY

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Strategic Masterplan Framework for land to the north of Stevenage (Local Plan site NS1) was presented to Full Council at its meeting of 11 July 2024 (report attached as Background papers). Full Council resolved not to adopt the Masterplan as presented.

This report sets out how the issues raised in debate at Full Council have been considered, or will be addressed through the planning processes for this site as a whole. The report asks Full Council to approve the updated Strategic Masterplan Framework as a material consideration for relevant planning decisions.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. That, following the Full Council decision not to adopt the masterplan in July 2024, the additional information and clarification in this report is noted.
- 2.2. That the Strategic Masterplan Framework for North Stevenage, 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 facilitate 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 masterplan has been through multiple iterations, with each development building on specialist advice, stakeholder input and continued engagement with the applicant / developer team for the adjoining site in Stevenage ('HO3'). Officers consider that the current Strategic Masterplan Framework (hereafter 'masterplan') has been appropriately prepared. This document, along with the further reasoning and justification provided in this covering report, addresses the key issues raised at the Full Council meeting in July 2024 and, subsequently, by the Project Board in August 2024.

- 4.2. The approach taken since the July 2024 Full Council meeting accords with approved Council guidance. Consideration has been given to make further or different amendments to the masterplan in response to the matters raised. The consideration of these matters is set out in the report below. Project Board recognise that reasonable endeavours have been made by officers and the landowner team.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

- 5.1. See previous report for details of consultation prior to July 2024.
- 5.2. An update on the issues raised by Full Council was provided to, and considered by, the Project Board at its meeting of 20 August 2024. The Board requested that further investigation was undertaken. Board also 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.
- 5.3. The item was re-presented to the Board at its meeting on 15 October 2024. Ward Councillors were invited to attend the meeting. Council officers and the developer team presented the updated masterplan and addressed questions from the Board. Board accepted the officer recommendation that, subject to compliance with relevant constitutional requirements, the masterplan progresses for reconsideration by Cabinet and Full Council.
- 5.4. All Councillors were invited to an officer briefing and 'Q&A' session on the masterplan on 6 November 2024.
- 5.5. This item was considered by Cabinet at its meeting of Tuesday 19 November 2024. The Cabinet referral will be reported to the meeting.

6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This report does not contain a recommendation on a key Executive decision and has therefore not been referred to in the Forward Plan.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1. The background to the site and masterplan was set out in the report to [Full Council at its meeting on 11 July 2024](#). This is included as Background papers. Full Council resolved not to adopt the masterplan. The Council's approved [guidance on the Policy SP9 Approval Process](#) states:

1.19 In the event:

- Officers or the Board identify significant issues with the (draft) Masterplan content or process and do not, or are unable to, recommend its approval; or
 - Cabinet resolves not to recommend the approval of a Strategic Masterplan to Full Council; or
 - Full Council resolves not to approve any recommended Strategic Masterplan following its reporting from Project Board / Cabinet
- then the reasons for this decision will be documented in the meeting minutes.

1.20 The Project Board would then:

- seek to continue to work with the landowner/developer and relevant partners to escalate and resolve any outstanding issues, address concerns and (re-)present any revised masterplan; and / or
- If required as a last resort, report to Cabinet that the PPA / pre-application process has not been successfully completed.

7.2. The following outstanding issues and concerns were identified from the Full Council debate which preceded the vote and from the subsequent meeting of the Project Board:

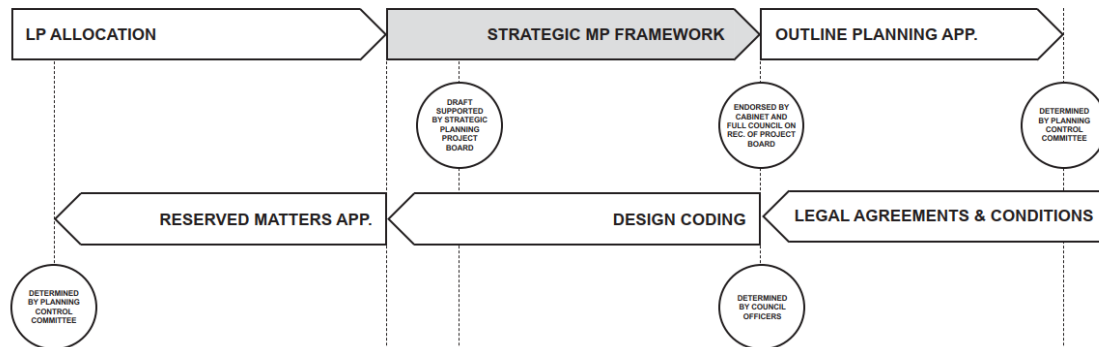
- A lack of clarity around the proposed integration of the site with the adjoining 'HO3' development in Stevenage Borough including:
 - (i) vehicular & sustainable travel;
 - (ii) the distribution of supporting social and community infrastructure including
 - a. retail;
 - b. schools;
 - c. health, particularly in relation to GP provision; and
- Means of vehicular access to/from the site to the wider highway network and associated impacts;
- Adequate community consultation

7.3. These points are addressed in turn below. In considering the issues raised and the most appropriate response(s), officers reiterate their advice to Councillors that the Masterplan be considered as a high-level design framework, as set out in Paragraph 7.8 of the appended July 2024 report:

7.8. 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. Formal regulatory approval 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.

7.4. 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.

- 7.5. 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

Integration with the adjoining 'HO3' development

- 8.1. The proposed NS1 development is co-located along the administrative boundary with new development in neighbouring Stevenage Borough that is currently under construction (the 'HO3' site). The guiding policy for the site (Policy SP16 of the adopted Local Plan) requires the development for NS1 to ensure the delivery of site-wide solutions for a range of infrastructure matters.

Vehicular & Sustainable Travel

- 8.2. At the July Full Council meeting, Councillors expressed concern over the integration of NS1 with the adjoining development in Stevenage. This was re-emphasised at the Project Board meeting in August where vehicular connectivity between the two sites was specifically highlighted. Councillors' concerns were exacerbated by the lack of detail pertaining to the HO3 site shown on the material that was presented to Full Council.
- 8.3. The applicant team have undertaken further work to display and explain these routes and connections more clearly. This includes demonstrating how walking, cycling, bus and vehicular links continue onwards into (and beyond) the HO3 site to allow future residents of NS1 to access school, retail and other facilities.
- 8.4. For context, the supporting text to Local Plan policy SP16 states:

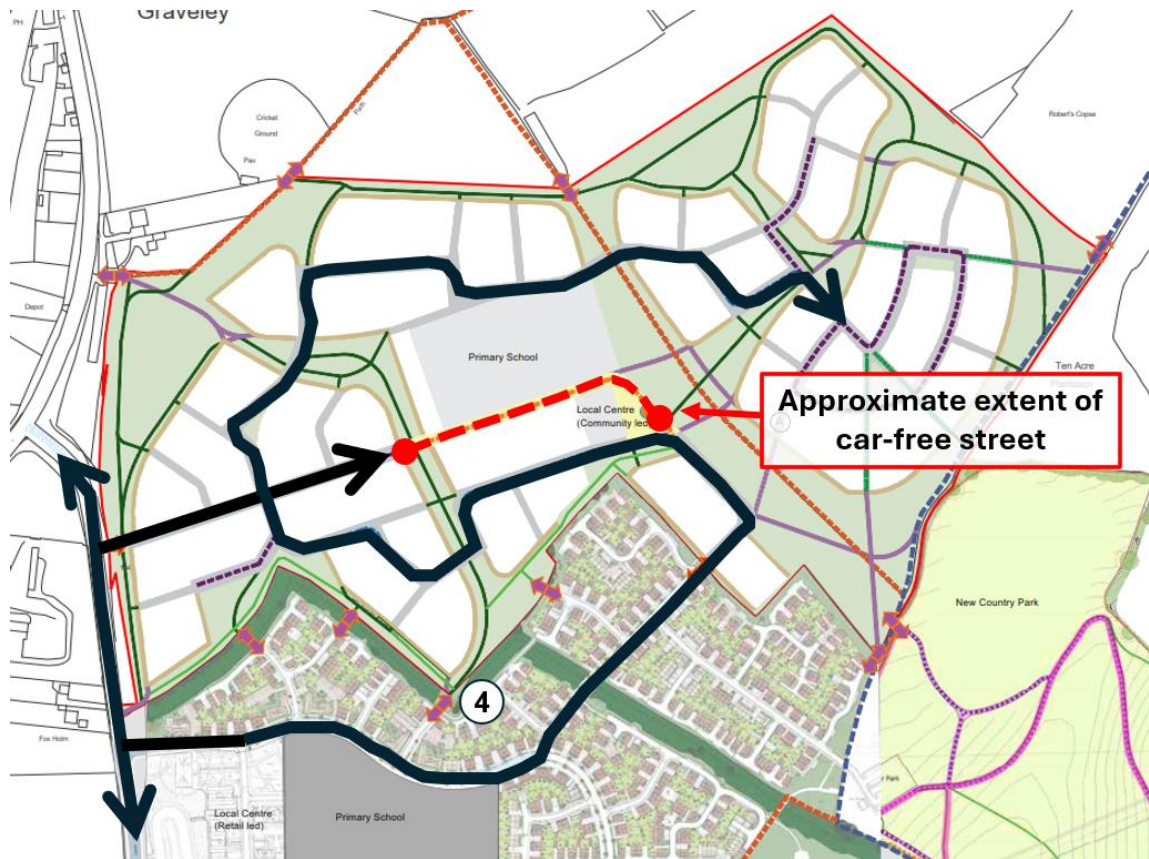
4.219 It is envisaged that principal access to the site will be in the form of a looped estate road, one end of which will be in Stevenage Borough. The northern end of this road will emerge at, or close to, the existing junction of the B197 at Graveley Road / North Road.

8.5. The masterplan identifies eight points of connection between the two sites. These have been carefully considered to ensure a balance between protecting the ecological value of the existing tree belt which serves as a wildlife corridor and ensuring permeability between neighbourhoods. Agreed points of connection are shown on the plan extracts below and (from west to east) are expected to consist of:



1. An active travel connection from the south-west corner of the site to an upgraded walking/cycling path alongside North Road, which will primarily serve residents of the western blocks of NS1.
2. A recreational footpath between residential blocks into HO3 activated with a play area to encourage walking in the direction of the primary school and retail facilities in HO3.
3. Broadly as (2). These two connections will provide direct routes from residential blocks in the west of the NS1 site.
4. A utility active travel connection through an existing field access gap between the two sites connecting onto a 3m shared footpath and cycleway in HO3 which spurs from the main loop/distribution road within the site. This connects into the western linear park in NS1 site that will include play and planting. Due to its location and the planned routes within the NS1 site, this is likely to be the most direct route for walking and cycling between many parts of NS1, the proposed facilities in HO3 and onward connections into Stevenage.
5. A recreational footpath to/from a development block in HO3 connecting into the planned street network in Stevenage Borough in the general direction of the country park and, in the opposite direction, providing access from HO3 into the green infrastructure network of NS1 with routes towards community facilities, Graveley and the wider countryside.
6. The vehicular connection between the two sites with the road width specified to accommodate buses (6m) and 3.5m shared footpath and cycleway. Locating this connection here allows for the most efficient bus circulation within the NS1 and HO3 sites, serving key facilities at the centres of both sites. In NS1, it passes through a car-free area adjoining the community hub and primary school. The route also ensures all planned new homes will be within approximately 400m of a bus stop.
7. Existing Bridleway Graveley 008 to be retained, connecting to the existing Public Rights of Way within Stevenage. These branch to the south of the administrative boundary. Bridleway Stevenage 023 passes through the western edges of the proposed country park linking to routes along the southern boundary of this site. Footpath Stevenage 017 passes through the HO3 development site connecting into the existing town edge at Granby Road.
8. Proposed recreational connection(s) joining from the proposed country park in Stevenage into the Hertfordshire Way corridor/central park which runs through the centre of the NS1 site as the key landscape feature.

8.6. It is important to be clear these connections do provide through routes for car traffic travelling to and from the NS1 development. The masterplan denotes part of the primary street for bus and active travel only. However, this will be limited to the area around the school and community centre with the precise nature and extent(s) of any restriction to be defined and secured through the planning process. Vehicular traffic will be able to route past this restriction using the secondary street to the south. It would also be possible to travel between NS1 and HO3 using the length of North Road between the sites. The key routes and connections for cars are highlighted on the plan extract below.



8.7. At the August 2024 Project Board meeting, where the outcomes of the July 2024 Full Council meeting were discussed, Councillors requested that the possibility of providing an additional vehicular access between the sites at Point 4 was investigated.

8.8. Following further investigation, Croudace have advised that an additional vehicular access in this location is no longer deliverable. This is due to the nature of the agreements with Miller/Bellway (the developers of the adjoining scheme). The possibility of delivering an additional vehicular access in this location fell away with the granting of the relevant consents for the development in Stevenage Borough and the fixing of the various connection points and their broad nature as reflected in the current masterplan. The scheme within Stevenage is now under construction with significant engineering works already undertaken to lay out and implement the scheme as permitted by Stevenage Borough Council.

- 8.9. Notwithstanding the above, officers would have significant concerns over an additional vehicular link in this location in relation to compliance with adopted site-specific, transport, design and ecology policies and this Council's declaration of both Climate Change and Ecological Emergencies. As set out above, there is already a route network which allows for vehicle traffic between the two parts of the site. A masterplan which actively facilitated additional direct, short-distance car journeys within the sites through an ecologically-sensitive corridor would run counter to these. It would likely encourage unnecessary car journeys and could attract objections from statutory consultees to any scheme based upon it at planning application stage.
- 8.10. The masterplan for NS1 has been developed in consultation with the Council's senior transport officer and officers from Hertfordshire County Council who are the statutory highway consultee for all planning applications. The permitted HO3 scheme is supportive of the access and movement network set out in the masterplan which prioritises active and sustainable modes of travel. Permeability into the adjoining site has been maximised whilst also allowing for vehicular access and appropriately respecting the ecological value of the planted corridor which runs along the west half of the administrative boundary.
- 8.11. The Masterplan document has been updated as follows:
- The Movement & Access Framework Plan (pp.36-37 of the Masterplan) now shows the detail of the approved scheme in Stevenage. This allows onward routes and connections to, in particular, the retail-led Local Centre and Primary School to be more clearly identified;
 - An additional plan has been provided (pp.48-49) detailing walking and cycling travel times from retail facilities and the planned school in HO3 (see also paragraphs 8.20 and 8.21 below);
 - A series of 'day in the life' diagrams showing how potential future occupants of the scheme may walk, cycle or use public transport to move around and beyond the site(s) in their day-to-day activities (pp.50-51); and
 - The Illustrative Masterplan (pp.72-73) also shows the detail of the approved scheme in Stevenage to aid better understanding of how the schemes will work cohesively together.
- 8.12. The design and technical specifications of the routes within NS1 (such as materiality, levels, tree planting, parking integration, etc.) will be determined through the Design Code and relevant reserved matters. At this stage, the masterplan provides high-level design intent:
- Utility active travel routes are intended for day-to-day travel, e.g. to work or school. The masterplan states these will generally 'utilise a metalled or hard 3m surface to enable cycling, walking and wheeling and take into account higher volumes of movement.'
 - Recreation routes 'will generally run through peripheral green spaces and connect to the local lanes around the development. These are envisioned to be 2m gravel surfaces taking account of the lower volumes of movement.'

Retail

- 8.13. The Local Plan expects NS1 to include “neighbourhood retail facilities subject to an up-to-date assessment of local demand and supply”. The supporting text says:

4.223 The retail forecasts supporting the plan suggest that approximately 1,300m² of A-class floorspace could be accommodated within this site to meet the needs arising from the new housing⁷⁵. Equally it is recognised that Site NS1 is located in close proximity to existing and proposed convenience supermarkets and proposed local facilities within Stevenage. Any application should be supported by an up-to-date assessment of local retail requirements to ensure provision within this site is appropriately scaled to meet the needs generated by the development.

- 8.14. This indicative amount of floorspace forms part of the Local Plan’s overall retail strategy. This identified a District-wide requirement for over 38,000sqm of additional retail floorspace over the plan period to 2031 - based upon evidence prepared in 2016. Since this time there have been substantial changes at (inter)national level which will influence these figures, a situation [addressed by the Local Plan Inspector](#):

614. Notwithstanding all the above, I have some concerns about the retail capacities identified. As the Council itself points out, retail projections are rarely reliable beyond five years, and the Retail Study is now beyond that vintage. In addition, it strikes me that there have been notable changes in the national economy since the Retail Study was produced. Any effects on retailing and other town centre businesses resulting from either the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union or the Covid 19 pandemic have not been reflected in the projections. That is no criticism of the Council or its work – these factors could not have been accounted for at the time.

615. Nonetheless, I consequently agree with the Council that the uncertainty involved should be reflected in the Plan. It is necessary for the Plan to acknowledge the uncertainty and commit to the production of updated retail studies. The site allocation policies should include a caveat that town centre use floorspace requirements are subject to an up-to-date assessment of capacity and supply. Most fundamentally, the Council’s commitment to a review of the Plan by the end of 2023 should include a pledge that the review will have particular regard to the identification of the needs for retail, leisure, office and other main town centre uses, among other things. Main modifications **MM021/FM055, MM262/FM131, MM263/FM132, MM310/FM153, MM311/FM154, MM312/FM155** and **FM190** introduce suitable changes accordingly. It is only on the basis of these modifications that I consider the main town centre use capacities and provision set out in the Plan to be justified.

- 8.15. At a local level, the Inspector also recognised that “existing proposals for shops near Site NS1 may have a bearing on what should be provided”. The adjoining HO3 site has been permitted with a local centre towards the west of the site providing 659sqm of flexible commercial and retail floorspace¹.

¹ Stevenage Borough Council application reference 22/00810/RMM granted permission 15 March 2023

The proposed entrance to NS1 is located approximately 1km from an existing Sainsburys superstore at Coreys Mill. Land opposite the NS1 site within Stevenage Borough is allocated in Stevenage's Local Plan for a further convenience store should the need arise (recognising that Stevenage's retail evidence similarly predates the matters identified by our Local Plan Inspector above).

- 8.16. The [published Baseline Evidence Report](#) accompanying the masterplan includes a summary of the applicant's retail assessment:

There is a limited quantitative need for further retail floorspace in Site NS1 as part of the proposed development... Accordingly, while a Local Centre providing services and facilities as a focus for the community is required by planning policy, there is no empirical evidence to support the position that this should provide a predominantly retail function. Alternative community/commercial uses, the nature of which should be determined through the wider planning application, should be considered... The North of Stevenage development [within Stevenage Borough] will provide a local centre of approximately 650 sqm of flexible commercial/retail floorspace. It is therefore capable of meeting the convenience retail need [from NS1]. This is not to say that an alternative Local Centre should not be provided in the Croudace scheme, but this could be focussed on providing complementary community or commercial uses instead (through a flexible planning permission for Class E/F1/F2 uses).

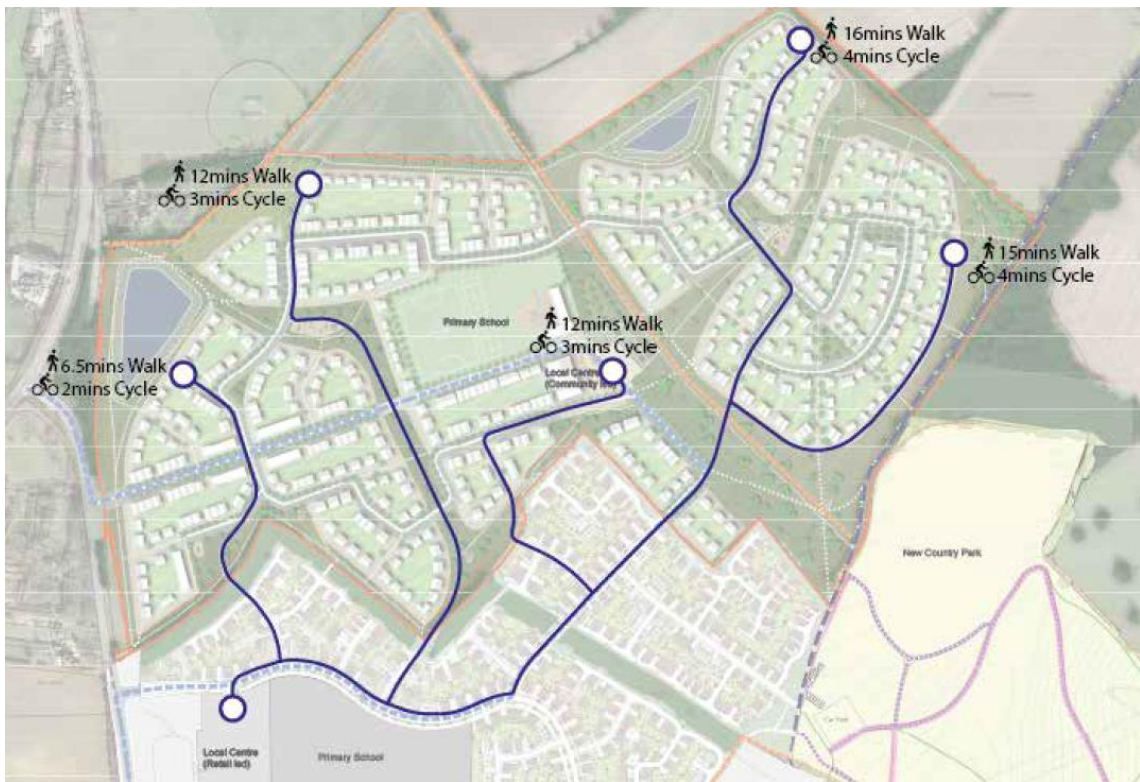
- 8.17. This position is accepted as being a robust basis for the masterplanning work and in line with the policy requirement. The masterplan identifies land at the centre of the site for a proposed community hub (2,000sqm):

The community centre will be a landmark building and accommodate community-level facilities, which may include co-working spaces, meeting rooms, a small cafe, health, childcare and community hall.

- 8.18. This approach has subsequently been reinforced by updated retail data that has been prepared for the Council by independent consultants Lichfields. This will inform the upcoming Town Centre Strategies and Local Plan Review. This work concludes that, over the period to 2036, there is now a District-wide need for just 5,000sqm of additional floorspace, significantly lower than the 38,000sqm envisaged over the Local Plan period at the time of its preparation. The majority of this is recommended to be absorbed by the reoccupation of existing, vacant units. There is only very limited additional retail demand arising cumulatively from the proposed developments around the north of Stevenage. The study advises that Strategic Sites which are not accessible to existing centres and facilities may require modest levels of on-site provision. As above, NS1 will have access to existing and planned provision which is capable of meeting these needs.

- 8.19. A number of potential uses that have been identified for the community centre all fall within the same planning use class as one another as well as retail (Class E). Any floorspace granted a 'Class E' permission would presently be able to interchange between retail, medical or health, creche/day nursery or office uses without constituting development or requiring further permissions; there is inherent flexibility which would allow any space to flex, in planning terms, to need and demand over time should circumstances change.

- 8.20. In response to Board and Full Council's concerns and the outcomes above, officers requested the landowner provide additional material to demonstrate the walking and cycling routes and travel distances from the NS1 site to the facilities proposed in HO3 would fall within acceptable parameters. This is shown below and demonstrates the furthest points of the NS1 site would be a maximum 16-minute walk or 4-minute cycle (approx. 1km) with many areas significantly closer than this. These measurements use industry-standard assumptions about speeds for walking (4.8 kilometers per hour (kmph), 3 miles per hour (mph)) and cycling (16kmph, 10mph) that would be considered acceptable in a formal transport assessment.
- 8.21. The same routes have also been tracked using a lower walking speed of 2.5mph to 'stress test' their suitability. This is a non-standard assumption, but does allow for consideration of, for example, children travelling at a slower pace. This test demonstrated a maximum 19-minute walking distance from the furthest point of NS1 to the facilities in HO3. The walk times shown above were increased by 2-3 minutes.





8.22. The approach in the masterplan is therefore considered appropriate and, following further consideration of the issues raised by Full Council and the completion of the Council's own updated retail work, this element has not been amended.

Schools

8.23. The masterplan for NS1 includes a primary school site at its centre. The approved scheme for HO3 also includes a primary school. Based upon advice from HCC, it is expected that cumulative demand for school places across the two sites will support the two schools.

8.24. The timing for delivery of the school on NS1 has not yet been determined and will be influenced by the delivery of the school on HO3, the relationship between the build schedules of the two sites and, consequently, the point at which the further capacity provided by the NS1 school will be required. Detailed arrangements for phasing and triggers will be set through the planning process.

8.25. At a masterplan level it is accepted that (elements of) the NS1 development may be delivered before the school site is required. In this scenario, residents may need to secure places at the HO3 school. The work detailed above similarly demonstrates that the HO3 school would be within acceptable walking and cycling distances of homes on NS1.

Health

8.26. As set out above, the masterplan identifies land for a community hub and identifies health as one potential use of that space. The precise layout of, and combination of uses that will be accommodated in the community hub cannot be defined at masterplan stage.

This will be set or informed through a combination of the outline permission, community consultation, legal agreement, design code and reserved matters applications.

- 8.27. 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 *practioners* rather than *practices*).
- 8.28. 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.
- 8.29. 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.
- 8.30. 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. Unfortunately, no firm decision has yet been taken that would allow for a definitive position to be set out in the strategic masterplan report.
- 8.31. Members should be reassured that proactive discussions with the ICB are ongoing and will remain so. The masterplan provides adequate flexibility and land budget for health uses to be accommodated (or, equally, not). As such, there is no requirement or need to pause the approval of the masterplan until these are fully resolved. To do so would unnecessarily delay the delivery of much-needed new housing on the site.

Vehicular access to, and impacts upon, the wider highway network

- 8.32. As above, the Local Plan states:

It is envisaged that principal access to the site will be in the form of a looped estate road, one end of which will be in Stevenage Borough. The northern end of this road will emerge at, or close to, the existing junction of the B197 at Graveley Road/North Road. A new arrangement, possibly a roundabout, will need to be provided.

- 8.33. As shown on the earlier vehicle access diagram, the masterplan layout fully complies with this anticipated approach. A single point of vehicular access from the existing highway network is provided within North Herts from the B197 North Road, connecting through the Stevenage site to two further points of access to the B197 North Road, approximately 50 and 200 metres south of the administrative boundary. It is envisaged that, once the two schemes are fully built out, the southernmost access will have a bus gate to restrict access to only buses and cycles, creating a congestion-free bus priority route through the two sites, bypassing any congestion on around 400m of North Road.

8.34. At the Local Plan stage, [indicative drawings](#) (extract shown below) showed the main access within North Hertfordshire at the northern edge of the site adjoining the current junction where North Road intersects with Graveley Road. Since then, and through the masterplan process, the proposed main vehicular entry point into the site has been moved south along North Road. This is in response to a number of factors:

- Maximising the separation (or perceived separation) between the site gateway and Graveley village;
- Topography - including the need to accommodate flood attenuation measures at the lowest point of the site in the north-west corner and to avoid significant, intrusive engineering works that would be required to accommodate an access in this location;
- Ensuring a coherent movement and development layout within the site including a more responsive approach to the northern edge and eastern area of NS1;
- Land ownership along the site/highway boundary between NS1 and the B197;
- Planned (and now implemented) upgrades and alterations to the now signalised North Road/Graveley Road junction
- Changes in national and HCC transport policies, which require junctions to be designed to be more pedestrian and cycle-friendly, and which advise against the use of roundabouts on local distributor roads.



8.35. The access strategy for the site has focussed upon prioritising and maximising opportunities for sustainable modes of travel. This responds to both the site's context, with ready access to existing cycle networks and bus services in Stevenage, and the national and local policy context. The vehicular access strategy in the masterplan is considered the most appropriate outcome for this site in terms of both holistic design, sustainability ambitions and policy.

- 8.36. Given the proximity of the approved access arrangements within Stevenage Borough, it is unlikely that an additional access onto North Road could be physically accommodated in any event and the Highway Authority have confirmed they would not be supportive of this. There are no viable alternative vehicular access points from either Graveley High St or Back Lane to the north.
- 8.37. It is accepted that development of this site, and delivery of the Local Plan in general, will result in additional traffic on the road network, which may exacerbate congestion in some locations at some times of day. However, this is not the test which determines whether or not development is considered acceptable. This was a matter directly addressed by the Local Plan Inspector in deciding that the allocation of this site, and the sites in the Local Plan in general, was appropriate:
177. Overall, it seems to me that the level of new housing growth proposed in this Plan will inescapably have some negative impacts on the road network. It is not realistic to expect that it should not. I recognise that this may lead to more congestion and delays, which will cause inconvenience for drivers. However, nothing that I have read or heard is sufficient to persuade me that any such effects will inevitably be severe in the terms of paragraph 32 of the NPPF. In any event, the critical issue here is to ensure that much needed housing is delivered. The traffic impacts likely to occur should not stand in the way of that or lead to the level of new housing in any of the proposed locations being restricted.
- 8.38. It is beyond the remit of the masterplan to fix detailed junction designs which will follow through the application(s) and legal agreement(s). However, the masterplan report confirms that the strategy is to provide signal-controlled junctions. The Highway Authority have confirmed this provides the opportunity to regulate the flow of vehicles leaving NS1 at a rate that doesn't cause unacceptable impacts on the wider network.
- 8.39. The Masterplan outlines some of the ways that residents will be enabled and incentivised to reduce the number of car trips they make: "a mobility hub will be provided in the central community hub area which will include a bus stop, car club parking spaces, e-bike and scooter hire and online parcel collection points." Research shows that a club car can replace 14–32 private cars. On average, car club members reduce their annual car mileage by 153 miles, and instead walk, cycle or take the bus for more trips.²
- 8.40. An e-bike hire scheme has recently been launched in Stevenage by Beryl Bikes working in conjunction with the Borough Council. Officers have held initial discussions with Beryl Bikes, Stevenage Borough Council and Hertfordshire County Council on extending the scheme into existing communities and planned new developments close to Stevenage.

Community engagement

- 8.41. The Council's adopted [Statement of Community Involvement](#) (SCI) says how we expect the public and other stakeholders to be involved in planning matters. This includes a specific section on masterplanning which says (among other advice):

² CoMoUK Annual Car Club Report UK (2023)

- 5.7 At draft masterplan stage, a wider public consultation event should take place. This will normally be arranged and run by the landowner / developer and supported by the Council.
- 5.8 In terms of the ways in which the community consultations will take place, these will be based on the methods of consultation set out in Table 1 above. We will work with the landowners and developers to ensure that the most appropriate methods of community consultation are used for each masterplan. The public engagement event could take the form of an exhibition or drop-in or workshops supported by a dedicated website. We will make staff available to attend such events. The landowner will be responsible for the production of materials, staffing costs and venue hire.
- 8.42. The 'Table 1' methods referred to include use of websites, social media, posters, leaflets and exhibitions. All these methods were utilised by the developer team or the Council in support of the consultation. A precis of the consultation exercise is included in the original report.
- 8.43. It is always possible to say more could have been done with regards to public consultation. However, in light of the Council's statutory, adopted SCI there are no particular grounds on which it can reasonably be said that the NS1 masterplan has failed to make adequate efforts to seek the views of the local community.
- 8.44. As set out in the developer's statement, the majority of responses at this point raised issues that fall outside the direct remit of the masterplan including comments on the overall principle of developing this site (which has already been established through the Local Plan) and matters such as transport impacts and health provision which are covered extensively above. There was very little engagement on the substance of the proposed masterplan itself in terms of the draft design and layout of the scheme within the approved allocation boundaries.
- 8.45. In officers' experience these are common themes across a number of the masterplan consultations that have occurred in the District and not isolated to NS1; it is not considered that the feedback above reflects a shortcoming in the developer team's efforts to engage with the wider public on a design framework for the site.
- 8.46. Through the engagement that has been carried out, Graveley Parish Council have expressed an interest in establishing a presence in any future community hub and discussions will continue as proposals for this area of the site evolve further.
- 8.47. There are statutory consultation requirements in relation to any planning applications which will provide additional opportunities for public and stakeholder input. Further community engagement will also take place as the Design Code for the site is prepared. This provides opportunity to receive input on some of the details of the scheme such as design guidelines for the site's open spaces and leisure routes. This engagement may take the form of a representative panel. Once development commences, it will also be important to gain the views of residents of (early phases of) the new community to ensure that facilities, green spaces and later phases of development respond to their views.

8.48. In officers' view, additional consultation at this stage would not serve any particular purpose and, as above, there are no particular grounds on which to request it. It seems unlikely it would result in significant additional or new viewpoints beyond those previously expressed that might meaningfully inform (a different approach to) the design frameworks in the masterplan.

Sustainability

8.49. Since last consideration of this matter in July, Cabinet has approved the Council's Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). This supports the local plan and identifies a series of standards against key sustainability themes. Recent discussions with the applicant team have identified which themes the development will seek to champion in terms of sustainability. These are set out in the Appendix B summary document and also shown below.

Optimising Passive Design and Fabric Performance	Silver
Achieving Low Carbon Energy	Bronze
Minimising Carbon Footprint	Bronze
Enhancing Open Space/Integrating Health into Placemaking	Gold
Promoting Biodiversity	Bronze/Silver
Sustainable Travel	Gold
Conserving Water	Bronze/Silver
Incorporating Sustainable Urban Drainage	Gold

8.50. The July report to Full Council considered the masterplan against a sustainability matrix. This approach was approved by Project Board and endorsed by Cabinet in 2022 as an interim approach pending adoption of the Local Plan and Sustainability SPD. This has now been replaced and superseded by the above. This and future masterplans and applications will monitor and measure sustainability aspirations by reference to the SPD and associated Local Plan policies.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1. As previous report (see Background Papers).

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1. As previous report. Should Councillors be minded to not support the masterplan there would be potential further financial implications arising, depending on the precise nature of any issues raised and the outcomes. These might include:

- The need to procure additional or alternate support to inform further design work;
- The need for the Council to partially or wholly fund this if the applicant was not willing to (part-)fund such an exercise through a new Planning Performance Agreement;
- Delay and/or additional officer costs in the determination of the existing outline planning application for the site;
- Failure to complete the milestones and payment triggers in existing Planning Performance Agreements for the site;

- Any potential planning appeal in relation to the existing or any future planning application(s) which includes any potential award of costs to the Council;
- Delay in the submission of any future application(s) and the receipt of planning income from them;
- Costs incurred from the consideration of applications and / or appeals on unallocated sites submitted for consideration due to the (perceived or actual) lack of progress on sites allocated within the Local Plan; and
- Delay in the delivery of new homes on the site and the receipt of Council Tax income from them.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

11.1. As previous report. Additionally, Councillors are reminded that undertaking masterplanning at pre-application stage is voluntary/discretionary on the applicant's part. This was recognised by the Inspector examining the Local Plan:

206. As put forward by the Council, the main modifications mentioned above say that "any planning applications should be preceded by and consistent with an agreed strategic masterplan". But neither national policy nor guidance require that informal discussions should take place or that agreements should be reached ahead of submitting a planning application. Indeed, there is nothing to prevent the submission of a planning application at any time. Consequently, while this is all highly desirable in respect of the strategic masterplans involved here, there is no justification for demanding that they be informally agreed before a planning application is lodged, and policies based on this footing would not be effective.

207. That said, it is reasonable to encourage the production of a strategic masterplan for informal agreement with the Council before the submission of a planning application. This approach would allow informal collaboration with key stakeholders at an early stage. Among other benefits, that could lead to a more efficient application process. That, it seems to me, is about as far as the Plan can go in this regard...

11.2. Should developers perceive there is limited benefit to pursuing the pre-application masterplan route, or that this may introduce additional delays, it is more likely that they will seek to obtain approval for any masterplans through the statutory planning process (i.e. through planning applications and, if required, planning appeals).

11.3. There may be consequential impacts on, or risks to, other service areas if there are substantial delays in the delivery of, for example, new homes or affordable housing.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

12.1. As previous report.

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. As previous report.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

15.1 As previous report.

16. APPENDICES

16.1 Appendix A – North Stevenage Strategic Masterplan Framework

16.2 Appendix B – North Stevenage Strategic Masterplan Framework – officer summary

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18. BACKGROUND PAPERS

18.1 Report to Full Council 11 July 2024 - [Council 11 July 2024 | North Herts Council](#)

18.2 [Strategic Planning Matters – report to Cabinet, September 2024](#) [including endorsement of current Project Board Terms of Reference]