

Report to Planning Services Scrutiny Standing Panel

Date of meeting: 10th January 2011

Portfolio: Leader

**Subject: Harlow Council – Core Strategy Issues and
Options Consultation Document**



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Committee Secretary: Mark Jenkins (ext 4607)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) To consider the issues and options presented in the consultation document; and**
- (2) To agree the responses to the consultation.**

Report:

Context

1. The consultation, which runs for 10 weeks from 29th November 2010 to 28th January 2011, is the first formal stage of Harlow's preparation of its Core Strategy. It was preceded by a number of informal workshops and awareness raising events and exhibitions. There will be additional opportunities to comment before the Core Strategy is adopted, the next formal stage being a "Preferred Options" consultation. This consultation is accompanied by a Sustainability Appraisal and Habitat Regulation Assessment, and all 3 documents are included as background papers to this report.
2. The exercise is proceeding at a time of significant disruption, and changes, to the planning system. These include (a) the Government's intention to abolish regional spatial strategies (RSSs) and their associated housing and employment land targets; (b) the introduction of the New Homes Bonus to stimulate housing delivery; and (c) a new tier of neighbourhood plans. The RSSs currently remain as part of the development plan, but the Government has indicated that they will be abolished at some time during the preparation of Harlow's, and this Council's, Core Strategies.

The consultation document

3. There are 5 main themes, divided into 26 objectives, each of these having several "policy areas to be considered":
 - Placeshaping – enhancing the quality of the built and natural environment (5 objectives);
 - Housing – delivering homes at the right scale, of the right type, and in the right location to meet the needs of the whole community (6 objectives);
 - Prosperity – securing economic growth and regeneration in order to improve employment and educational opportunities in the town and reflect its strategic role (7 objectives);
 - Infrastructure – ensuring growth and regeneration are supported by appropriate levels of infrastructure provision (6 objectives); and
 - Lifestyles – meeting the leisure, recreational and cultural requirements of the community in a sustainable manner (2 objectives).

4. Analysis of the policy areas helps to identify the priorities of the Issues and Options. Economic development, regeneration and promotion of the town centre as a major location for employment, retail and leisure understandably feature very prominently. Infrastructure and the related phasing of new development, and the provision of a range of housing to meet local needs are also key issues. Environmental issues such as biodiversity, built heritage, energy conservation, landscape and Green Belt are included but with much less frequency. This is not intended as any sort of criticism because inevitably the priorities of authorities, even if they adjoin, are bound to differ, but it may point to potential difficulties in agreeing the location of future developments which are not contained wholly within the boundary of Harlow. This becomes more apparent when answers to some of the consultation questions are discussed below.
5. The document recognises “the sub-regional role of Harlow which extends beyond its administrative boundaries” and that “some of the development options may (sic) require land in the adjoining authorities.” (para 2.7.1). It is not clear whether the “whole community” and the “strategic role” of the Housing and Prosperity themes are intended to include the related needs of those adjoining authorities (primarily this Council and East Hertfordshire).
6. There is also little mention or recognition of the sub-regional Green Belt location of the town (para 5.8.1), or its wider landscape setting, and there is consequently no attention given to the relevant aims and objectives of adjoining authorities which will be affected by some of the development options. Harlow obviously wants the “Green Wedges” to be protected, as these are fundamental to the overall design and sense of place of the town. However, with the Government’s intentions for the future of the planning system gradually becoming clearer, and in particular the “localism” agenda, there has to be some concern from this Council’s perspective about potentially significant loss of Green Belt land while the Green Wedges are “strengthened” (para 2.8.2).
7. The only growth option in the consultation document is the continuation of RSS target of 16,000 homes, which would mean urban extensions into the district from the south-west, south and east of Harlow. The spatial options identified in the Harlow Options Appraisal (all based on the RSS target) are included as part of the consultation. The Appraisal was considered by Epping Forest’s LDF Cabinet on 17th June when it was recommended that it be added to the Evidence Base, with the proviso that “it had been based upon and influenced by policies and targets which may not be applicable in the future and might necessitate a review of (the Appraisal) in due course.”
8. The consultation document justifies (para 6.5.1) the inclusion of the spatial options on the grounds that there was a statutory requirement for them to be in general conformity with the RSS. Some options did not satisfy this requirement, but the revocation of the RSS gives Harlow Council the opportunity to reconsider the appropriateness of them all.
9. It is disappointing that the 16,000 homes target is the only definite growth option detailed in the consultation document. An open question (number 4 in the consultation) does ask for suggestions for other scales of growth, but it is difficult to see how meaningful responses can be given by any consultee without adequate evidence to back the figures up. This is an “Option” rather than an “Options” consultation. Paras 2.9.1 (8th bullet point) and 5.3.1 indicate that there is capacity for approximately 5,000 additional houses within the town’s urban boundary, but there is no analysis of what this, in association with employment growth and infrastructure provision, could mean in terms of the Prosperity theme, or addressing the regeneration needs of the town. Officers believe that Harlow should now be revisiting the RSS figures and assumptions to determine if they are still relevant, and presenting

reasonable alternatives as described in para 4.38 of PPS12.

10. There are 31 questions based around, from this Council's perspective, the following issues (the numbers in brackets refer to the number of questions);
- General issues and themes (including other Harlow Strategies) (6);
 - Delivering regeneration (8);
 - Spatial options around Harlow (7);
 - Infrastructure and congestion (4);
 - Green Belt (2);
 - Landscape (1);
 - Local Harlow issues (2);
 - Further comments (1).

These are not the divisions used in the document itself. Instead the questions are divided into the following sections: The issues; The strategic challenge; The vision, themes and objectives; Guiding future development; Spatial options for growth around Harlow; and Developing a delivery strategy.

The questions

11. The questions are discussed below. Similar issues arise with several of the answers, but this is inevitable given the inter-connectedness of many of the issues. The Appendix to this report also lists the questions with the proposed answers, and should be read in conjunction with the following paragraphs.

12. **Question 1:** Do you think the Council has identified all the relevant issues that need to be addressed by the Core Strategy?

Question 2: If you disagree, what additional issues need to be considered by the Core Strategy?

As outlined in earlier paragraphs, officers believe that the answer to Q1 must be "No". The sub-regional Green Belt location of the town, its wider landscape setting and the lack of growth options other than the RSS figures should be included as a response to Q2. Officers also feel that while the issues of climate change and carbon reduction, energy efficiency, and use of renewable energy are mentioned in the consultation document, they appear to be dealt with in a slightly offhand manner and should be a more prominent part of the Adopted Core Strategy.

Green Belt is only mentioned in the 3rd bullet point of 2.8.5 in the context of proactive uses. There is no recognition of the wider context of the Metropolitan Green Belt, or the purposes of including land within it. These two factors are of particular importance for adjoining authorities which will be expected to take the main part of the proposed growth.

Landscape receives three mentions (2nd and 4th bullet points (bp) of 2.8.2 and 2nd bp of 2.8.3), but these all relate to local issues. The wider landscape setting of the town, and particularly its containment within the bowl of the Stort Valley, is a key issue for this Council and officers hoped that the protection of the southern ridge (effectively from Epping Long Green to Latton Park) would have been recognised in the Issues for the Core Strategy. To be fair, the ridgeline to the south of Harlow is mentioned in paras 6.7.5 and 6.7.11, but this is in the context of quoting consultants' conclusions on the possible options for distribution of the 16,000 houses.

The Options consultation effectively amounts to consideration of different spatial distributions for 16,000 houses. Officers believe that other growth options should be included with an analysis of their impact on the town's regeneration, eg what is the actual capacity for development within existing urban boundaries, and what would be the outcome if current housebuilding rates were continued for the period of the Strategy. Leaving this as an open question makes it very difficult for respondents to give meaningful or practical answers. The comments made in para 9 above apply equally here.

Phrases like “sustainable architecture and design” (para 2.2.3) and “sustainable location” (Objective 4 of para 4.5.2) are used but these need to be defined. The last bullet point of 2.8.3 seems particularly weak – “New development should be energy efficient where possible.”

13. **Question 3:** Would the provision of 16,000 new homes in and around Harlow meet the current needs of the local community and help secure the regeneration of Harlow?
Question 4: If you disagree/strongly disagree, what do you think the scale of growth should be, ensuring that the Core Strategy addresses the particular issues facing Harlow?
In answer to Q3, the Council supports the regeneration of Harlow and understands that the figure derives from the RSS which itself had an evidence base to justify the total. Nevertheless, the Government has made clear its intention to abolish the RSS and all associated targets, with future emphasis being placed on localism and greater community engagement. In this significantly changed, and changing, planning world, officers therefore believe that it is not now possible to answer this question, given that some at least of the 16,000 houses would have to be built in the district, and there has been no formal Council engagement with the local community to assess opinion. The current timetable for this Council's Issues and Options consultation is summer 2011, and it is at that point that community opinion on a range of spatial options (likely to include urban extensions to Harlow) will be sought.
Q4 - as stated earlier in this report, officers do not believe that an open question of this nature can be realistically answered without an evidence base.
14. **Question 5:** Do the visions and priorities set out in the Community Strategy, the Council's Regeneration Strategy and the Council's Corporate Plan provide the basis to develop the vision for Harlow's Core Strategy?
Question 6: If you agree/strongly disagree, what do you think the vision for the Core Strategy should be based on?
For Q5, the relevant details are listed in paras 4.2.1 to 4.2.3 of the consultation document. Officers consider that the visions and priorities, with the possible exception of “a university town” are fairly generic and uncontroversial. If they can be implemented they will help to develop Harlow's vision. As with Q1, however, it is strange that the Core Strategy does not take account of the equivalent documents of the adjoining authorities which will be expected to take some of the growth, and this gives the answer to Q6.
15. **Question 7:** Do you think the Core Strategy Themes cover the range of planning issues in Harlow?
Question 8: If you disagree/strongly disagree, what changes would you make to the Themes to ensure they address the range of planning issues in Harlow?
The Themes are listed in para 3 of this report. The answers to Qs7 and 8 are broadly similar to those for Qs 1 and 2. The Themes are essentially inward looking, and do not fully take account of the wider environmental and amenity implications of Harlow's expansion beyond its boundaries. The Themes should therefore include (a) appreciation of the regional purpose of the Green Belt, (b) the original design of the town recognising the need to contain southern growth within the landscape bowl, (c) more prominent and positive support for sustainable construction, carbon reduction and renewable energy, and (d) the need for formal co-ordinated working with other affected authorities.
16. **Question 9:** Do the Strategic Objectives provide the necessary framework to deliver the regeneration of Harlow?
Question 10: If you disagree/strongly disagree, what changes would you make to the Strategic Objectives?
The 26 Strategic Objectives are listed in paras 4.5.2 to 4.5.6 of the consultation document. The key issues in Q9 are the use of the word “strategic” and the emphasis

on delivery. “Strategic” implies coverage broader than the town itself, which would be appropriate given that some of the proposed growth would have to be located in adjoining districts. The wording of the objectives, however, is again very Harlow-centric, and some phrases (eg “local needs”, “the housing needs of the community” and “the employment needs of the town”) need to be defined. If development is to take place in adjoining authorities, there would be an expectation that some of their needs would be met in these schemes.

In general, the objectives have the same failings as identified in some of the answers above – they cannot be considered to be properly strategic until they take definite account of the adjoining authorities’ own objectives and policies. As before, this would include issues such as the Green Belt and the landscape setting of the town. It is disappointing to note that no mention is made of climate change, carbon reduction, sustainable construction, energy efficiency etc. These are surely important strategic issues which should be included in the objectives.

Delivery is obviously key to the themes of the Core Strategy, and this inevitably requires co-ordination with, and input from, other agencies and authorities. This is addressed to a limited extent in Objective 25 (Work with key providers to ensure that the infrastructure requirements ... can be met). Given Harlow’s wish to expand beyond its existing boundaries, officers believe that co-operative working should be a theme of the Core Strategy, rather than just the 25th of 26 objectives, if delivery is to be successfully achieved. The Localism Bill includes a “duty to co-operate” in relation to planning of sustainable development, and if the Bill is passed into legislation, the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 will be appropriately amended.

17. **Question 11:** Do you think the policy areas identified cover the range of issues that are relevant to the regeneration of Harlow?

Question 12: If you disagree/strongly disagree, what changes would you make to the policy areas?

The policy areas are listed in the tables in para 4.7.4 (pages 38 to 43) of the consultation document and have been briefly discussed in para 4 of this report.

Comments on these cover the same issues, eg the one area dealing with Green Belt (3rd bp of 4th Strategic Objective of Placeshaping) merely states “Definition of extent of Green Belt”. This does not imply a broader understanding of the Green Belt or its importance to the adjoining authorities. The only references to landscape (3rd bp of 1st Strategic Objective of Placeshaping, and 5th bp of 19th Strategic Objective in Lifestyles) refer mainly to the setting of the River Stort, so the importance to this Council of development not breaching the southern ridge defining the Stort Valley is again unrecognised.

Sustainable development is mentioned or addressed in four policy areas (4th bp of 3rd Strategic Objective; 2nd bp of 4th Strategic Objective; 4th bp of 10th Strategic Objective; and 1st bp of 21st Strategic Objective). Officers again feel that the subject should be more prominent and that, in particular, “sustainable location” should be defined.

The policy areas are, perhaps more understandably, Harlow-centric, but they again should reflect that development in adjoining authorities is being suggested.

18. **Question 13:** Do you agree that new development should be directed to areas that will maximise regeneration of the town?

Question 14: Please rank, in order of priority (1 high, 5 low) where you think higher densities of development should go within the District:

- Around public transport hubs
- Appropriate locations within neighbourhood areas
- Hatches
- Neighbourhood centres
- Within the town centre

Question 15: Should the Council consider underused open spaces and other undeveloped land for development before considering releasing land in the Green Belt?

Question 16: The Green Wedges have performed a variety of roles in shaping Harlow. Should the roles of Green Wedges be reviewed to meet future development needs in the Harlow area?

Question 17: Please rank, in order of priority (1 high, 8 low) the most important things that you think should direct new development in and around Harlow:

- Areas with good access to public transport and other services
- Developing underused green spaces
- Maximising the use of previously developed land
- Meeting regeneration goals
- Protecting Green Wedges
- Protecting important landscapes
- Protecting the Green Belt
- Where there is existing infrastructure capacity

These five questions are intended to help to guide future development in the town. Similar answers are suggested for Qs 13 and 15 which are essentially “Yes, but”. In the case of Q13 it is not particularly easy to answer more definitely because the areas are not specified, but it is likely to involve the employment locations identified on page 50. These include The Pinnacles site which is close to, and now prominent from, Roydon. Any further expansion or intensification of this site is likely to raise concerns about coalescence of settlements, landscape impact and traffic generation. With Q15 the answer will ultimately depend on whether the spaces have other, currently unacknowledged, value eg for wildlife or informal recreation.

Officers propose not to offer a response to Q14, as this deals essentially with development within Harlow itself which is unlikely to raise issues of concern to this Council.

The importance of the Green Wedges to the design and layout of the town is acknowledged, but officers strongly support the suggestion of review in Q16, given that the growth aspirations affect Green Belt land in this district and East Herts. For Q17, officers suggest the following hierarchy: 1 – maximise use of previously developed land; 2 – protect Green Belt; 3 – protect landscapes; 4 – developing underused green spaces; 5 – good access to public transport etc; 6 – meeting regeneration goals; 7 – existing infrastructure capacity; 8 – protect Green Wedges

19. **Question 18:** Do the existing employment areas meet current and future employment needs?

Question 19: If you disagree/strongly disagree, please explain what changes you think should be made to Harlow’s employment areas.

Question 20: How do you think Harlow Council should shape future shopping development within the town?

If it remains Harlow’s intention to grow by another 16,000 houses, it seems very unlikely that the existing employment areas can accommodate future needs. Officers understand that there is already a lot of out-commuting, and a significant amount of in-commuting, but the consultation document is ambiguous about whether current needs are being met. Para 5.9.6 indicates that consideration would be given to further employment land provision being made within the urban extensions, which would include land within this district. Officers believe that this council should be concerned about extensions to The Pinnacles, for the reasons outlined above, and for any such proposals along the southern edge of the town. The employment needs of the wider area (ie at least the two adjoining authorities) should be included in any assessment. As regards Q20, the strategy proposed in the consultation document seems appropriate, ie the Town Centre remaining the main focus as a sub-regional centre, with the neighbourhood centres and hatches being managed to meet the future needs of their communities.

20. Questions 21 to 25 seek comments on the 5 spatial distribution options investigated by consultants, and included in the Scott Wilson report “Generating and Appraising

Spatial Options for the Harlow Area”, which was considered by EFDC’s LDF Cabinet on 17th June 2010. Q26 seeks views on the consultants’ preferred option, and Q 27 asks for any other comments on the approach to growth around Harlow. All the options are shown in diagrammatic form on pages 56 to 61 of the consultation document.

21. Option A (Q21) is described as “RSS: Northern-led” and focuses almost entirely on Harlow’s expansion into East Herts – ie up to 10,000 houses with 800 in east Harlow, and 100 each to the south and west. This should be this Council’s favoured option because the greatest part of the growth will be close to the town centre and railway station and two of the main employment sites (The Pinnacles and Templefields), which should benefit Harlow’s regeneration aims, and with obvious implications for reducing the need for car travel and the promotion of sustainable transport and development. There would be minimal intrusion on the Green Belt in this district, and no threat to the southern ridge line. The main drawbacks are the (understandable) objections of East Herts and Herts County Councils, and the need for significant infrastructure provision. The latter could include a northern relief road and a new junction (7A) with the M11.
22. Option B (Q22) is titled “Policy-led 2”, which shows that it is intended to reflect the broad directional and distributional intentions of RSS policy HA1, but with a greater emphasis on regeneration. The guideline figures are 3,600 houses to the north, 3,300 east, 1,300 south and 2,800 west. The consultants state that this would not breach the southern ridgeline and that this would be a “reasonable” option if some of the west housing could be re-allocated to the east and south. Officers agree that it would be difficult to accommodate this level of growth to the west without significant adverse effect on the character of the area, but also feel that the southern ridge line would be threatened. They also share the consultants’ concerns about the proximity to J7 of the M11 encouraging the use of the car.
23. Option C (Criteria-led) is based on criteria developed by the consultants, and did not follow the general locational guidelines of the RSS. This proposes 6,380 houses in the east (some of which would come into this district), 3,520 south and 1,100 west (ie none to the north). Officers feel this option is wholly unacceptable – the ridge line would be completely breached, and not only would there be significantly increased traffic using J7, but there could be pressure for a southern bypass to Harlow. The option would be likely to require a new junction 7A to deal with the eastern expansion of the town.
24. Option D (Regeneration-led) proposes 5,720 houses to the north, 2,310 east, 2,420 south and 550 west. This again is unacceptable because of the impact to the south, but if a substantial part of the southern allocation could be re-allocated to the east, this could be a reasonable option from this Council’s perspective. The northern distribution, and the adjusted eastern total would be likely to require road infrastructure.
25. Option E is “sustainable transport-led” which results in 2,530 houses to the north, 5,390 east, none to the south and 3,080 west. This may require some development in the Sheering/Matching area of the district, but of much greater concern is the possible coalescence of Harlow west with Roydon, rightly identified by the consultants, and wholly unacceptable to this Council.
26. The consultants’ suggested approach (Q26) is for 4,000 houses to the north (eventually expanding to at least 10,000), 5,000 to the east (increasing to 8,000) and 1,000 each to the south and south-west. While this addresses most of the environmental concerns of officers (although the southern ridge line may still be threatened), neither the south nor the west locations are strongly related to Harlow’s town centre or the main employment sites, and it is likely that most of the new

occupants would use cars for commuting, unless there is a step-change in public transport provision and management within the town.

27. To answer Q27 (other comments on the approach to growth) means repeating earlier points about why the consultation is only presenting one growth option. There must be concerns that, with the introduction of localism, Harlow's expansion into adjoining districts is likely at least to be strongly resisted by affected local communities, and this in turn could influence the decisions of those authorities. If Harlow is to persist with this option of 16,000 houses with related employment and infrastructure provision, this points to the need for formal collaboration or co-ordinated working with the adjoining authorities (including both county Councils), and for this to be at Member, as well as officer, level. By restricting itself to one option, the consultation is not considering alternatives which would contain new development within the existing district boundary – but this surely has to be considered to be a realistic option if there are negative responses from the adjoining authorities.
28. **Question 28:** Do you think all the key elements of infrastructure necessary to support the emerging Core Strategy have been identified?
Question 29: If no, what additional infrastructure do you think is needed to support the emerging Core Strategy?
Para 7.1.2 of the consultation document lists the infrastructure requirements under nine general headings, and officers are satisfied that this covers all of the essentials. Again, however, the wording of some categories is Harlow-centric and this should be amended to include the infrastructure needs of the adjoining authorities.
29. **Question 30:** Please rank, in order of priority, how Harlow Council should tackle Harlow's congestion problems (1 high, 9 low)
- Encourage use of public transport for work and leisure
 - Improve access to the town centre by sustainable modes of transport
 - Improve connections from Harlow to the Strategic Road Network (M11, A414)
 - Improve walking and cycling routes within the town
 - Manage future parking provision across the town
 - Measures to improve traffic flow along strategic routes and at roundabouts within the town
 - Public transport improvements
 - Rail enhancements
 - Other, please state below
- Officers are aware that a lot of work is already underway under several of these categories with significant inputs from the County Council. Other projects are dependent on the support of external organisations such as the Highways Agency and rail operators, so whatever priority results from the consultation will still be dependent on other agencies. Officers are not proposing to reply to this question, but Members may wish to identify what they see as the priorities.
30. **Question 31:** Do you have any further comments to make, at this stage, on how Harlow should be developed?
These points have been made elsewhere in this report, but:
- there really is a need for joint or co-ordinated working, at officer and Member level, of all the affected local authorities, including Herts and Essex County Councils, in the preparation of the respective Core Strategies;
 - officers are concerned that the Harlow Options consultation has not identified reasonable alternatives as described in para 4.38 of PPS12 (Local Spatial Planning);
 - officers believe that, in the light of the forthcoming abolition of the RSS, the evidence base which sustained it should be reconsidered to determine whether a growth target of 16,000 new homes is the right figure.

Reason for decision:

To respond to the relevant questions in the consultation document to ensure that this Council's interests are considered as Harlow's Core Strategy is progressed.

Options considered and rejected:

Not to respond, but this would be a missed opportunity for the Council to state its interests and concerns.

Consultation undertaken:

Question 3 was considered at Management Board.

Resource implications:

Budget provision: From the established LDF budget.

Personnel: From existing staff resources.

Land: Urban extensions into the district, but it is unknown at this stage whether any Council land is affected.

Community Plan/BVPP reference: GU1, HN1, EP3

Relevant statutory powers:

Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004

Planning Policy Statement 12: Local Spatial Planning

Background papers:

Harlow Council Core Strategy Issues and Options Consultation Document November 2010

Core Strategy Issues and Options Sustainability Appraisal Report October 2010 (Scott Wilson), and the Non-Technical Summary

Habitats Regulations Assessment Screening Report for Core Strategy Issues and Options October 2010 (Scott Wilson) , and the Non-Technical Summary

East of England Plan 2008

Harlow Area Appraisal of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure Options 2010 (Scott Wilson) Report to LDF Cabinet Committee 17 June 2010 (LDF-004-2010/11)

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications:

Assessed in the Sustainability Appraisal and the Habitats Regulations assessment

Key Decision reference: (if required)

Not applicable