

Colchester City Council Preferred Options Local Plan Topic Paper

Site Allocations: Process

October 2025



Contents

Executive Summary	i
1. Introduction and Purpose.....	1
2. Background	3
National Context	3
Engagement	6
3. Evidence Base	7
Call for Sites	7
Desktop Study	7
Settlements Evidence	9
Sustainability Appraisal.....	10
Biodiversity Assessment.....	10
Landscape Character Assessment.....	10
Strategic Flood Risk Assessment	11
Water Cycle Study	11
Heritage Impact Assessments	11
Transport Evidence.....	11
4. Approach to the Local Plan.....	13
Agricultural land	17

Executive Summary

The Local Plan is required to plan for an appropriate level of housing growth in accordance with the “Standard Method” which is set out in national policy. The Plan needs to allocate sufficient land to meet this need. The Place Policies chapter of the Preferred Options Local Plan identify the preferred sites in each settlement which are allocated for future housing growth. This Topic Paper provides further explanation of the process that has been followed to reach the preferred proposed allocations.

An extensive set of evidence based documents have informed the recommended site allocations. A range of considerations are applied, and this must be recognised in the context of the whole of the Colchester district.

One of the first stages usually carried out in plan making is a Call for Sites, which is an essential stage in preparing local plans because it helps identify potential future uses for land. In Colchester the Call for Sites commenced on 20 October 2023 and closed on 5 January 2024. A total of 195 submissions were received. In addition to the Call for Sites and in accordance with national Planning Policy Guidance (PPG), the Council proactively identified sites for development through a desktop review which identified a further 80 sites approximately.

Having established a list of potential sites combining those promoted through the Call for Sites and those identified through the desktop study, the sites were assessed through the Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA). This is a key evidence document required in considering site allocations. The SLAA used set criteria for evaluating the development potential of land. An initial sieve, related to specific criteria, ruled some sites out at this stage, and these were not subject to any further assessment.

The sites that progressed beyond the initial sieve were then subject to further testing against a range of evidence, such as biodiversity assessment and flood risk and in relation to the preferred spatial strategy. This shortlist of sites was provided for the purpose of informing some key evidence including infrastructure, transport and water, which are location specific.

The full SLAA report is available on the [website](#). Sites received a red, amber or green (RAG) rating for each criteria/ question. A green rating was used if there were no significant issues. Amber and red ratings do not necessarily rule out a site, but identify where further consideration is needed, for example consideration of avoidance and mitigation measures.

Other evidence informed site selection, including the Settlements Evidence, which reviewed the settlement boundaries (sometimes known as village envelopes) in Colchester and assessed the comparative sustainability of places.

The Sustainability Appraisal (SA), which identifies, describes and evaluates the likely significant effects on the environment of the plan and reasonable alternatives was also used. For each reasonable alternative, i.e. all sites that passed the first sieve of the SLAA, the SA used a GIS model to appraise the likely effects of each site against the SA Framework.

A separate, Summary of Sites Assessment has been produced which gives a high level summary about the characteristics of each site, outcomes from the SLAA review and site specific considerations based on other evidence base documents. Appendix E of the SA includes an audit trail of decision making for site options considered for the Preferred Option Local Plan.

The next stage will be to further consider the evidence base and review representations made during the Preferred Options consultation. The sites will be reviewed in terms of their suitability and any site specific requirements to avoid or mitigate adverse impacts and ensure delivery of required infrastructure. This stage of the process will also assess any alternative sites submitted as part of the consultation. This will lead to site allocations in the Submission version of the Local Plan. Further consultation will then take place before the Plan and the consultation responses are submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for independent examination.

1. Introduction and Purpose

- 1.1 To help with the consideration, interpretation and consultation on the Preferred Options Regulation 18 Plan and later stages of plan making, a series of Topic Papers have been prepared which summarise the evidence base and details how this evidence has helped shape the policies in the Preferred Options Local Plan. These Topic Papers are 'live' documents and will be updated as the plan making process progresses.
- 1.2 This is the Site Selection Topic Paper. It provides explanation of the process of selecting preferred allocations for the Preferred Options Local Plan.
- 1.3 This Topic Paper summarises the relevant evidence base documents, which are:
 - Call for Sites ([Call for Sites Report February 2024](#))
 - Strategic Land Availability Assessment ([Methodology \(December 2023\)](#), [Desktop Review Report \(April 2024\)](#), [Stage 1 \(November 2024\)](#) and [Stage 2 \(February 2025\)](#) Reports)
 - Settlements Evidence [Stage 1 \(November 2024\)](#) and Stage Two (October 2025)
 - Sustainability Appraisal February 2025 ([Sustainability Appraisal Report](#) and [Appendices](#))
- 1.4 These documents provide recently prepared, comprehensive and robust evidence sources that are drawn on at various points throughout the paper and have informed the Plan. Reference is also made to other evidence base documents, which have influenced site allocations. Much of the evidence is lengthy, technical, and in part complex. The Topic Papers aim to help make the evidence clearer where necessary and also bridge the gap between the evidence and how it has informed the plan.
- 1.5 Other relevant Topic Papers include:
 - Spatial Strategy
 - Environment
 - Water
 - Infrastructure
 - Employment
 - Transport

2. Background

- 2.1 The Local Plan is required to plan for an appropriate level of growth for homes as quantified by the Standard Method for assessing local housing need set out in national policy. It is important that the housing growth is supported by jobs and infrastructure, the requirements of which are also based on evidence. The Spatial Strategy Topic Paper explains further about the evidence and approach to defining the preferred spatial strategy. Topic Papers on Housing and Employment, provide more context for the level of growth to be accommodated in the plan period for new homes and jobs.
- 2.2 The Local Plan also needs to indicate the location of the proposed growth through the allocation of sufficient land to meet the evidenced needs. The Place Policies chapter of the Preferred Options Local Plan identifies the allocations proposed in each settlement. This Topic Paper provides further explanation of the process that has been followed to reach the preferred proposed allocations.
- 2.3 The process and an explanation of the considerations are provided at a high level. Site specific context and findings are not covered in the Topic Paper, although some of the evidence referred to, may well have informed site specific outcomes.
- 2.4 It is important to note that no one piece of evidence has informed the recommended site allocations. A range of considerations are applied, and this must be recognised in the context of the whole of the Colchester district. Comparative Assessments such as the SLAA cannot be looked at solely by settlement or site-by-site, as the plan making process is considering the evidence comprehensively.

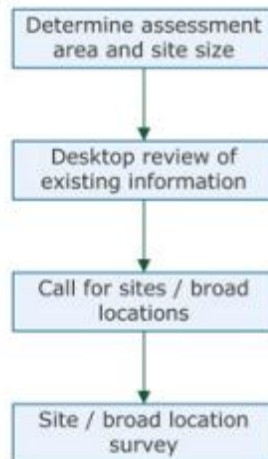
National Context

- 2.5 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that 'strategic policy-making authorities should have a clear understanding of the land available in their area through the preparation of a strategic housing land availability assessment. From this, planning policies should identify a sufficient supply and mix of sites, taking into account their availability, suitability and likely economic viability' (NPPF paragraph 72).
- 2.6 The presumption in favour of sustainable development means that all plans should promote a sustainable pattern of development that seeks to meet the development needs of the area; align growth and infrastructure; improve the environment; and mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change (NPPF paragraph 11).
- 2.7 The NPPF also recognises the importance of promoting an effective use of land in meeting the need for homes and other uses, while safeguarding and improving the environment and ensuring safe and healthy living conditions, with the

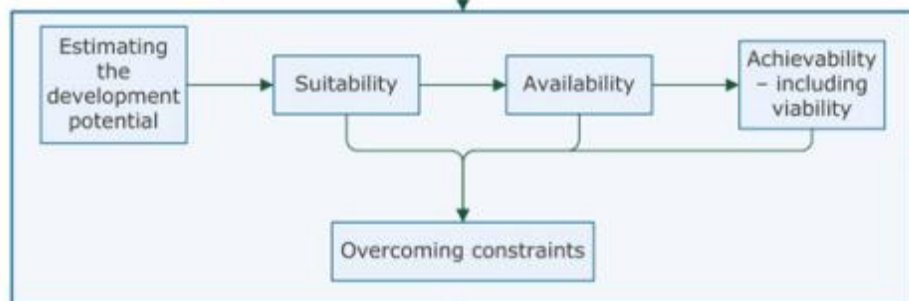
requirement for strategic policies to set out a clear strategy for accommodating objectively assessed needs, in a way that makes as much use as possible of brownfield land (NPPF paragraph 124).

- 2.8 Local plans are required by the NPPF to be justified and provide 'an appropriate strategy, taking into account the reasonable alternatives, and based on proportionate evidence' (paragraph 36b). The consideration of reasonable alternatives, which is considered through the iterative Sustainability Appraisal and documented in the Sustainability Appraisal report, which supports the Local Plan, is one of the tests of soundness and the site selection process. Assessing how sites perform against each other is therefore relevant to satisfying this test.
- 2.9 The PPG sets out the methodology for Strategic Land Availability Assessments, as shown in the flow chart below (005 Reference ID: 3-005-20190722). This methodology has been followed.

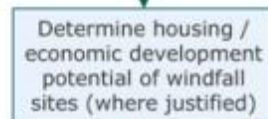
Stage 1 - Site / broad location identification



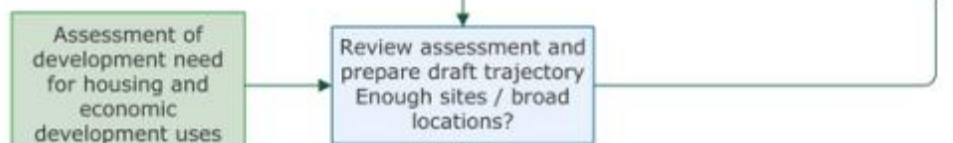
Stage 2 - Site / broad location assessment



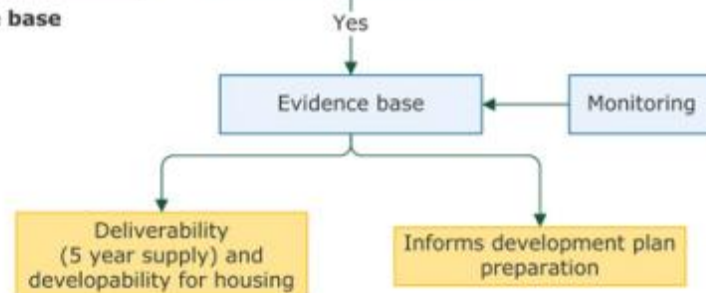
Stage 3 - Windfall assessment



Stage 4 - Assessment review



Stage 5 - Final evidence base



Engagement

- 2.10 Public engagement involving discussions with Town and Parish Councils was an important part of allocating preferred sites. Officers met with 23 Town and Parish Councils in spring/summer 2024 to discuss the Local Plan process and call for sites submissions. The majority of these meetings included a walk around the settlement and site visits to the call for sites submissions.
- 2.11 These discussions pre-dated the work which defined a preferred spatial strategy and prior to the final confirmation of the standard method housing requirement of 1300 per annum. In some cases, the location and level of growth which has been identified in some settlements in the Preferred Options Local Plan is not aligned with the desires of the Town and Parish Councils which may have been expressed at that time. The Local Plan has to plan for the Colchester district as a whole and cannot focus through the lens of individual Parishes. Had a Plan been progressed which fully reflected the wishes of all Town and Parish Councils, it would fall significantly short of the housing requirement which it needs to meet. The completion of further evidence and responses to the Preferred Options public consultation will be important in considering appropriate sites to include in the Submission Local Plan and in further refining and developing robust Place policies.

3. Evidence Base

Call for Sites

- 3.1 One of the first stages usually carried out in plan making is a Call for Sites, which is an essential initial stage in preparing local plans to help to identify potential opportunities for land which may have the potential to deliver future growth opportunities. In 2023, a Call for Sites was undertaken as an early part of the evidence base work for the new Local Plan. The Call for Sites commenced on 20 October 2023 and closed on 5 January 2024. A total of 195 submissions were received from a mixture of landowners, developers, agents, and members of the public. A full list of submitted sites was reported to Local Plan Committee in February 2024 and are set out in a report on the [Council's website](#).
- 3.2 Since the Call for Sites closed on 5 January 2024, some enquiries have been received from site promoters asking how to submit sites. Site promoters have been advised to submit sites for consideration as representations to the Preferred Options Regulation 18 consultation. Sites that are reasonable alternatives will be appraised and form part of the consideration of allocations for the Submission Local Plan.

Desktop Study

- 3.3 In addition to the Call for Sites and in accordance with the PPG (010 Reference ID: 3-010-20190722), the Council proactively identified sites and broad locations for development through a [desktop review](#) process to assist in meeting Colchester's development needs. Approximately 80 sites were identified through the desktop review. These additional sites primarily consisted of parcels of land which comprise current development allocations which were undeveloped and land in broadly sustainable locations which were not submitted as part of the Call for Sites process.

Strategic Land Availability Assessment Methodology and approach

- 3.4 Having established a list of potential sites combining those promoted through the Call for Sites and those identified through the desktop study, these sites were assessed through the Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA). This is a key evidence document required in considering site allocations. The SLAA used set criteria for evaluating the development potential of land. This criteria was subject to public consultation alongside the call for sites. The [SLAA Methodology](#) was revised and adopted by the Council's Local Plan Committee on [11 December 2023](#).
- 3.5 In order to make the SLAA proportionate and as efficient as possible, a sieving process was applied to all sites, which served the purpose of removing sites at an early stage that have either no realistic prospects of delivery, are wholly unsuitable for their proposed use, or fail to meet the required capacity thresholds

(over 0.25ha or capable of accommodating more than five dwellings). Discounting sites at an early stage avoided having to carry out a detailed site assessment and this approach is supported by the PPG (Paragraph: 014 Reference ID: 3-014-20190722). Sites were discounted at Stage One for the following reasons:

- site is below 0.25ha or does not have capacity to accommodate at least five dwellings;
- site has extant planning permission and has commenced development;
- site is allocated in the Development Plan or Neighbourhood Plan and has extant planning permission or site is allocated in the Development Plan and there is a strong likelihood a planning application will be submitted by 2033;
- the site is physically isolated in the open countryside;
- the site is wholly in Flood Zone 3;
- site is wholly located within a national or international environmental designation;
- site does not have highways access (not adjacent to a classified road).

- 3.6 The [SLAA Stage One Report](#) is available on the website This omitted 68 sites (28.1%) promoted for residential (or mixed use) development. Appendix 2 of the report lists the omitted sites and reason. Assessments were also undertaken for sites promoted for alternative uses including, employment, infrastructure and green infrastructure (open spaces). The assessments of green infrastructure sites is included in appendix B of the [SLAA Stage Two](#) report. The following sites were assessed using criteria developed from [Natural England's process journey](#): Middlewick Ranges, Rowhedge Allotments multi-use games area (MUGA), Roman River Corridor, Land north of Cymbeline Way, Spring Lane Nursery Spring Lane, Marsh Crescent Rowhedge and Blackheath Allotments/Playground, Finchingfield Way.
- 3.7 All remaining sites, not omitted as part of stage one, were considered 'reasonable alternatives' and were subject to a Stage 2 assessment, which considered suitability, availability and achievability. Development potential is a significant factor that affects the economic viability of a site and its suitability for a particular use. The PPG therefore suggests that assessing achievability (including viability) and suitability can usefully be carried out in parallel with estimating the development potential.
- 3.8 A site is considered to be suitable for development if it is free from significant constraints, or where any constraints affecting the land can potentially be overcome through reasonable mitigation. Suitability constraints include physical constraints such as the site's relationship to the existing settlement boundary and the capacity for highways access to site and environmental constraints.

- 3.9 A site is considered to be available for development when, on the best information available, there is confidence that there are no legal or ownership impediments to development. For example, land controlled by a developer or landowner who has expressed an intention to develop may be considered available. The availability of a site could be adversely affected if it is in multiple ownership and the intentions of all interested parties are not known.
- 3.10 A site is considered achievable if there is a reasonable prospect that the particular type of development will be developed on the site at a particular time and whether it is financially viable to do so. For example, a site could be both suitable and available, but the level of financial mitigation required to make it acceptable could result in the site being considered unviable.
- 3.11 The full SLAA report is available on the [website](#). Sites received a red, amber or green (RAG) rating for each criteria/ question. A green rating was used if there were no significant issues. Amber and red ratings do not necessarily rule out a site, but identify where further consideration is needed, for example consideration of avoidance and mitigation measures.
- 3.12 The SLAA provides a high-level consideration of potential future supply of land and does not in itself determine whether a site should be allocated for development. Sites with numerous green ratings are not automatically preferred allocations. The capacity of all the stage 2 SLAA sites far exceeds the emerging housing need evidence requirement over the plan period. SLAA sites were considered in combination with the emerging spatial strategy, settlements evidence, Local Plan housing and employment targets, emerging evidence on environment and infrastructure (where available) and Sustainability Appraisal.

Settlements Evidence

- 3.13 In planning terms, a settlement refers to a place where people live and establish a community. A settlement encompasses small hamlets, villages, towns and cities and sometimes includes more than one parish. The [Settlements Evidence Part One](#) reviewed the settlement boundaries of Colchester's settlements, including the city. The adopted Local Plan policies maps were the starting point for the review. The Settlements Evidence assessed the comparative sustainability of settlements to identify the most sustainable settlements and help establish the settlement hierarchy, which directs development in the first instance to the urban area of Colchester City. The Settlements Evidence does not determine how much growth should go in each settlement or locations for growth, but it establishes Colchester's sustainable settlements, which have a variety of services and facilities, and where growth can be directed. The Settlements Evidence Part Two sets out the changes to the settlement boundary for each of the settlements.

- 3.14 In reviewing opportunities for growth and expansion of settlements it is important to recognise that as a plan making exercise it considers and assesses the opportunities for settlements to be extended to accommodate growth through the Colchester area. The way in which places grow is by extending from and within the existing built form – often defined by Settlement Boundaries – this is the basis of sound planning objectives and sustainable development. Settlement Boundaries relate to the settlements rather than Parishes and in many cases the settlement patterns bear no relationship to Parish Boundaries, which may sometimes relate to other neighbouring settlements

Sustainability Appraisal

- 3.15 Sustainability Appraisal (SA) identifies, describes and evaluates the likely significant effects on the environment of the plan and reasonable alternatives. The SA was undertaken by Land Use Consultants (LUC). For each reasonable alternative, i.e. all sites that passed the first sieve of the SLAA, the SA used a GIS model to appraise the likely effects of each site against the SA Framework. The SA report summarises the findings of the appraisal of sites. A SA Topic Paper will be prepared to support the Submission Local Plan to provide more information about the SA process and how it has influenced the Local Plan.
- 3.16 For the purposes of the SA, a density of 30 dwellings per hectare was assumed for all sites. The SA appraised site options at an early stage of plan making. At this time, the Council had not considered an appropriate amount of housing per settlement or site. Some site promoters suggested an appropriate amount of housing on a site and in some cases this was supported by a concept vision for the site. However, to ensure that all reasonable site alternatives were appraised consistently, and to the same level of detail, a standard approach to density was taken for the SA.

Biodiversity Assessment

- 3.17 The Colchester [Biodiversity Assessment](#) considered all reasonable sites and identified likely harm to biodiversity. Sites identified as likely to significantly harm biodiversity have not been allocated in the Preferred Options Local Plan. A few sites identified as likely to harm biodiversity have been allocated where the evidence indicates that harm can be avoided or mitigated, for example by amending the site boundary or requiring buffers to adjacent Local Wildlife Sites.

Landscape Character Assessment

- 3.18 The [Landscape Character Assessment](#) (LCA) updates the Colchester Borough Landscape Character Assessment undertaken in 2005. It creates a comprehensive and up to date strategic-scale landscape evidence base. The LCA will be used by development management and as part of site-specific Landscape and Visual Impact Assessments. It has been used in the site

selection process to provide guidance from the LCA is written into Place policies where relevant.

Strategic Flood Risk Assessment

- 3.19 AECOM prepared a Level One [Strategic Flood Risk Assessment](#) (SFRA), which included a sequential test database that the Council has used to prepare a sequential test report. A SFRA is a live document which provides an overview of the risk of flooding from all sources, taking into the account the impacts of climate change, as well as assessing the impact that land use changes and development in the area could have on flood risk. The SFRA helped to inform the decision-making processes underpinning site selection and omission and enabled the application of the sequential test. Since the SFRA was prepared the Environment Agency has published new data on flood risk areas. The changes within the Colchester area are limited and these are shown in Appendix 2 in the Water Topic Paper. These changes do not appear to impact on the proposed allocations in the Preferred Options Plan. Any updates required to the SFRA will be prepared to support the Submission Plan.

Water Cycle Study

- 3.20 AECOM prepared a Water Cycle Study, and early findings informed site selection and an [Interim Findings Summary](#) was published in February 2025. The Water Cycle Study assesses the level of development planned for across Colchester with regard to water supply capacity, sewage capacity and any water quality issues or infrastructure upgrades that may be required, to identify any potential constraints to the water cycle which development may pose.
- 3.21 A number of the sites have been identified as having constraints in capacity for wastewater either currently or at a predicted point in time. Where this is the case, this has informed the requirement in policy and may be a factor which informs phasing of development.

Heritage Impact Assessments

- 3.22 The SLAA identified heritage assets close to sites and Historic England requested that sites with potential heritage impacts should be subject to a heritage impact assessment to help inform submission draft policies. The initial stage of Heritage Impact Assessment has informed the Preferred Options allocations, identifying heritage assets and the likely level of further assessment required. This work has been commissioned and will inform the Submission Local Plan.

Transport Evidence

- 3.23 The Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA) provided an assessment of each site based on general location and accessibility (if the site was adjacent or

in close proximity to an existing settlement boundary); access and impact on Public Rights of Way; and proximity to key services including schools and GP surgeries. The SLAA was informed by input from the Local Highway Authority. The appraisal considered a high-level assessment of the main access points to the sites and any highway constraints, for all sites assessed in Stage 2 of the SLAA.

- 3.24 The evidence from the SLAA has informed the Preferred Options allocations, identifying potential access points and any specific requirements for active travel or protection of PROWs.

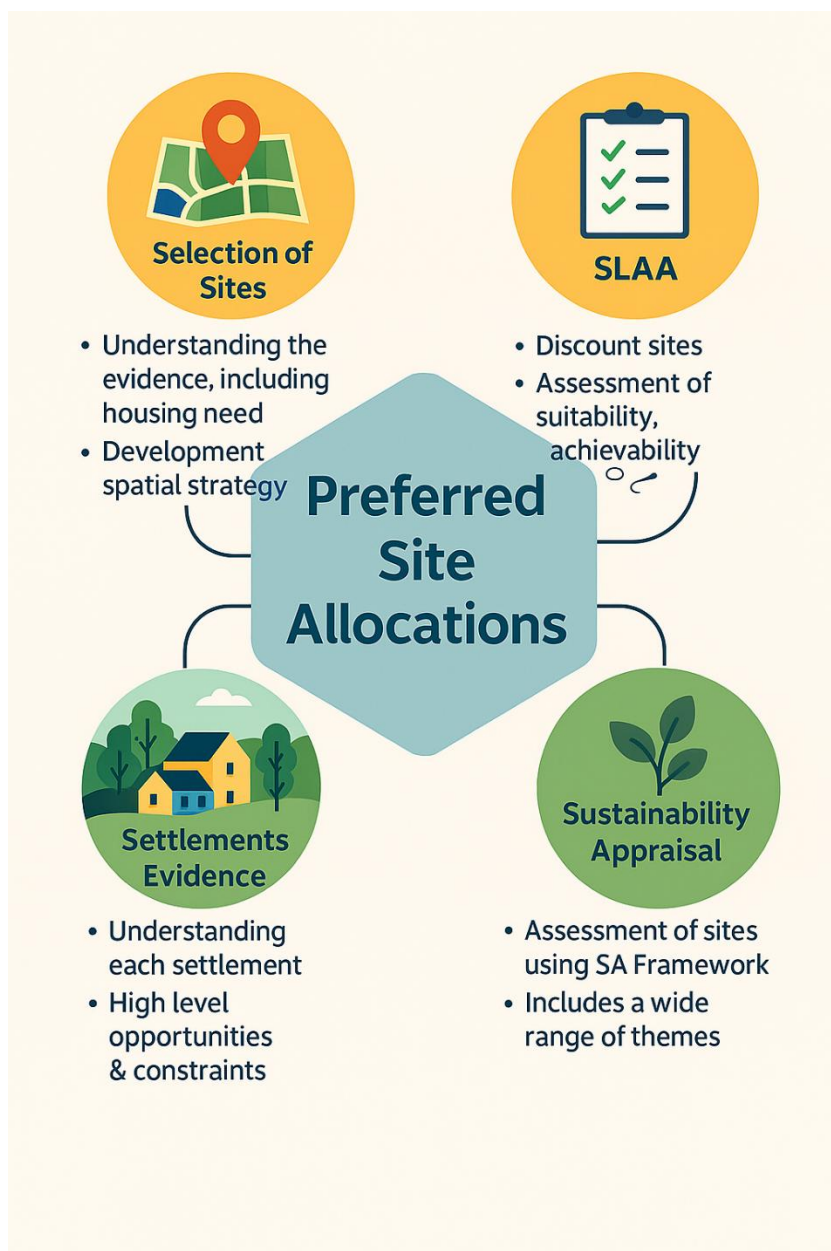
4. Approach to the Local Plan

4.1 The Colchester Preferred Options Local Plan includes a range of site allocations to meet the identified housing and employment needs in the district to 2041. The allocations are the result of appraisal and assessment through the SLAA and Sustainability Appraisal (SA) and reflect the spatial strategy, emerging evidence base and public engagement. This has resulted in preferred allocations that are in the most sustainable and appropriate locations in accordance with the spatial strategy and consider the Colchester district as a whole. In summary;

- The SLAA provided a comprehensive assessment of potential development sites. It assessed suitability, availability and achievability – see explanation in paragraphs 3.7-3.10.
- The Settlements Evidence reviewed each settlement and considered constraints and opportunities at settlement level.
- The SA comparatively appraised each site using a GIS model.
- The evidence base, including the Biodiversity Assessment, Landscape Character Assessment, Strategic Flood Risk Assessment and Water Cycle Study, assessed likely harm to biodiversity, landscape impacts, flood risk from all sources and capacity of water supply and wastewater infrastructure.
- Public engagement highlighted important issues to the local community. The plan making process allows for communities to continue to engage and help shape places as they are considered for future growth.

This is summarised in the graphic below.

Summary of Site Selection process



- 4.2 The Spatial Strategy Topic Paper provides more details on the evidence and process for defining the preferred Spatial Strategy. In order to progress the site allocations, a shortlist of potential sites in locations broadly in accordance with the preferred spatial strategy was established. This shortlist was provided for the purposes of testing some key evidence including infrastructure, transport and water. In some settlements multiple residential sites were tested, although this did not in any way signify a level of growth that may be appropriate for that

settlement. It provided for some comparative evidence which could potentially inform decisions later in the plan making process.

- 4.3 Additionally, some residential sites were tested for two or more scenarios (emerging spatial options) based on numbers or site areas (or both). Testing in this case was based on a mid-point to provide a guide. At this stage most residential sites that were tested were based on the number of dwellings which had been indicated by the site promoter as being potentially deliverable on the site. Further refinement later indicated that some sites were significantly underestimating the site capacity, whilst others over estimating. A more standard approach of 30 dwellings per hectare as a starting point with consideration of factors to vary this (higher or lower) was applied and incorporated into the Place Policies informing the approximate number of dwellings for preferred site allocations. This reflects some early feedback received about densities; there are sites in the urban area where high densities can be achieved and which then reduce the number of alternative sites that have to be found. In other instances, a lower net density is appropriate because of the site context or desire to provide other uses such as open space.
- 4.4 The Council recognises that it is important to consider how housing needs, local character and appropriate building forms relate to the density measures being used (in accordance with the PPG: Paragraph: 005 Reference ID: 66-005-20190722 Revision date: 22 07 2019). An appropriate density and approximate quantum of housing per site was considered on an individual site basis as part of the process of identifying preferred sites. The starting point of 30 dwellings per hectare was refined as the plan progressed and took into account local character, appropriate building form, provision of green spaces, landscaping, known site constraints, highways considerations and any other relevant considerations that influence density. Those sites located on the edge of, or within the urban area assumed a higher density in accounting for the approximate number of dwellings on the site. Similarly, some more rural locations assume a lower density to respond to the characteristics that apply to the location.
- 4.5 This approach led to some numbers in preferred allocations being refined as the emerging options were tested and further work informed the proposed allocations. The Preferred Options stage will continue to be tested by further evidence and consultation and any need to reflect on the outputs from these can be made in the Submission Draft Plan. The process needs to test some options iteratively in order to arrive at a point where the Local Plan can be refined and justified as being sound.
- 4.6 The approach of testing emerging spatial options which followed the preferred spatial strategy also identified opportunities and constraints which could be reflected in policy requirements for any sites which resulted in preferred allocations. A number of the sites have been identified through the evidence as

having constraints for capacity for wastewater either currently or at a predicted point in time. Where this is the case, this has informed the requirement in policy and may be a factor which informs phasing of development either in the Submission Plan or at the Development Management stage. New development will be required to provide the improvements to infrastructure to support the growth proposed. Where this is possible, an identified constraint is not a “show stopper” and may in fact present an opportunity to provide a longer-term solution to a local issue, e.g. school provision or wastewater capacity as examples.

- 4.7 Sites submitted through the Call for Sites for economic development uses were also assessed through the SLAA process. Potential site options in locations broadly in accordance with the preferred spatial strategy were then subject to more detailed testing through the Local Plan Evidence Base (Employment Study) to ensure that they were suitable locations. Further information can be found in the [Employment Study](#) (February 2025) and the Employment Topic Paper.
- 4.8 The sites selected in the Preferred Options deliver the proposed required level of growth through the spatial strategy, summarised as continuing with the existing spatial strategy, looking to urban areas first including the centre and edge of Colchester City. The spatial strategy then looks to other growth areas where opportunities are provided by transport corridors, and development in the large, medium and small settlements in accordance with the spatial hierarchy. Evidence including environmental constraints and opportunities has informed site assessment and selection. Regulation 18 Preferred Options Local Plan consultation is an important part of the process of testing the Plan and the preferred allocations. Representations from statutory consultees, infrastructure providers, Town and Parish Councils, site promoters and the public will all feed into the consideration of the most appropriate and sustainable – and justified – sites that will form allocations in the Submission Local Plan.
- 4.9 Appendix E of the [Sustainability Appraisal](#) includes an audit trail of decision making for site options considered for the Preferred Option Local Plan. Reasons are given for each site – justifying why sites are preferred site allocations or why sites proposed for development have been discounted and are not included in the Local Plan (omission sites). Where relevant, reference is made to the evidence base.
- 4.10 A separate report, Summary of Sites Assessment has been produced which gives a high level summary about the characteristics of each site, outcomes from the SLAA review and site specific considerations based on other evidence base documents such as the Biodiversity Assessment. It also explains why the sites are preferred site allocations or why sites have been discounted, as outlined above.

- 4.11 The next stage is to review representations to the Preferred Options Local Plan Regulation 18 consultation and further consider the evidence base. Site allocations will be reviewed in terms of the suitability of each site and any site requirements to avoid or mitigate adverse impacts and ensure delivery of required infrastructure, and to assess any alternative sites submitted as part of the Regulation 18 consultation. This will lead to site allocations in the Submission Local Plan.

Agricultural land

- 4.12 Paragraph 187 (b) of the NPPF states ‘Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by: b) recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland’. It requires plans to allocate land with the least environmental or amenity value, where consistent with other policies in the Framework, with a footnote that ‘where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality’ (NPPF paragraph 188).
- 4.13 The Planning Practice Guidance (Paragraph: 001 Reference ID: 8-001-20190721) explains that the Agricultural Land Classification assesses the quality of farmland to enable informed choices to be made about its future use within the planning system.
- 4.14 There are five grades of agricultural land, with Grade 3 subdivided into 3a and 3b. The best and most versatile land is defined as Grades 1, 2 and 3a. Planning policies and decisions should take account of the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land.
- 4.15 Natural England has published guidance on development on agricultural land. The guidance explains that agricultural land classification is graded from 1 to 5. The highest grade goes to land that: gives a high yield or output, has the widest range and versatility of use, produces the most consistent yield, and requires less input. Best and most versatile land is graded 1 to 3a as summarised below:
- Grade 1 – excellent quality agricultural land
 - Grade 2 – very good quality agricultural land
 - Grade 3 – good to moderate quality agricultural land
 - Subgrade 3a – good quality agricultural land
 - Subgrade 3b – moderate quality agricultural land

Grade 4 – poor quality agricultural land

Grade 5 – very poor quality agricultural land

- 4.16 Whilst the ALC splits grade 3 into subgrade 3a good quality and subgrade 3b moderate quality, this information is not available from Natural England.
- 4.17 Agricultural land within Colchester is largely high quality (very good and good to moderate), as shown on the map below (figure 3.4 of the Landscape Character Assessment). Outside of the urban area, most of Colchester is grade 2 or 3 with a small part grade 1. Poorer quality land, which the NPPF says should be preferred to higher quality land, is located to the south of the city. There is land within grade 4 and 5 and non-agricultural land to the south of the city district, with grade 5 along the Colne and Blackwater estuaries. However, the estuaries are of international importance for nature conservation (designated as Special Protection Areas, Special Area of Conservation, Ramsar and SSSI) and large areas in the south of the city district are of strategic importance for biodiversity (see the Strategic Biodiversity Assessment).
- 4.18 None of the preferred site allocations lie within land classified as Grade 1 and Policy LC1 states that development on land classified as Agricultural Grade 1 (except for renewable energy projects) will not be permitted unless a landscape strategy, which would compensate for the loss or harm, is secured or where there are overriding public benefits arising from the development.
- 4.19 Agricultural land in Colchester district totals 32,762 hectares (ha). Of this, 197 is grade 1, 12,316 ha is grade 2 and 14,308 is grade 3 agricultural land. There is a combined total of 26,821 ha of grades 1-3 – 82% of agricultural land in the district is higher quality (grades 1-3). Preferred allocations on grade 2 agricultural land total 359 ha, which is 3% of the total grade 2 agricultural land in the district. Preferred allocations on grade 3 agricultural land total 166 ha, which is 1% of the total grade 3 agricultural land in the district.
- 4.20 The SA Report (paragraph 4.174) recommended that development of higher value agricultural land (particularly Grades 1 and 2) should be avoided. However, the SA report recognised that it is notable that the district contains large swathes of Grade 2 soils to the north and west of Colchester City towards Marks Tey as well as surrounding Tiptree and recognised that it may prove difficult to entirely avoid these areas while promoting sustainable distributions of development. 38% of agricultural land in Colchester district is grade 2.
- 4.21 Development of agricultural land is necessary to meet Colchester's housing need. Whilst development of brownfield sites is maximised with the spatial strategy directing development in the first instance to the city centre, the Hythe and Magdalen Street opportunity areas, at high densities to make the most efficient use of land, development of greenfield land is unavoidable. As

agricultural land within Colchester is generally high quality with areas of poorer quality land important for nature, development of agricultural land of grades 2 and 3 is necessary.

