TOPIC PAPER

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY – DETERMINING A RURAL SETTLEMENT HIERARCHY FOR SOUTH NORTHAMPTONSHIRE DISTRICT

OCTOBER 2013
1. Introduction

1.1 A settlement hierarchy ranks settlements according to their size and their range of services and facilities. In the planning system the position of a settlement in the hierarchy is intended to inform decisions about new developments such as housing.

1.2 Settlements work by providing a range of services for their residents and for a wider area – typically the bigger the settlement the more services it has and the wider area it serves.

1.3 Policy R1 of the Joint Core Strategy gives South Northamptonshire Council the opportunity to produce its own rural settlement hierarchy for the District which will be used to determine where new housing and employment development should be located.

1.4 The Council is in the process of preparing the SNC Settlements and Development Management Local Plan which will replace the 1997 Adopted Local Plan and the 2009 Interim Rural Housing Policy. There is therefore a need to update the evidence base from the rural settlements and to prepare a new Settlement Hierarchy.

1.5 This methodology paper seeks to set out how we will prepare the hierarchy. At this point we are seeking views on the proposed methodology for the new Settlement Hierarchy. The rural survey work and discussion with Parish Councils that the methodology will entail will take place at a later stage in the Local Plan preparation process.

1.6 The new SNC Local Plan will seek:

- To define the hierarchy of rural settlements based on a range of criteria to determine their relative sustainability;
- To establish the roles that these rural settlements should play in terms of meeting housing and employment needs and retaining and improving services and facilities.

2. The Rural Settlement Hierarchy and Sustainable Villages

2.1 The new SNC Local Plan will identify development in the rural areas to meet the requirements of the strategic policies in the West Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy. It will need to reflect national guidance which seeks sustainable development bringing housing, jobs and services closer together in an attempt to maintain and promote the viability of local facilities and reduce the need to travel to services and facilities elsewhere. Sustainable communities are villages where people can have good local access to services, facilities and work. A settlement hierarchy policy can help to achieve this by concentrating housing growth in those settlements that already have a range of services (as long as there is a capacity for growth), and restricting it in those that do not. In general terms, larger settlements that have a higher population and more services and facilities are more sustainable locations for further growth.
2.2 The sustainability of rural settlements is essentially dependent upon their quality of and access to core services which underpin the quality of rural life. These factors however are also the key criteria for evaluating the rural settlement hierarchy.

3. What is a sustainable rural community or village?

3.1 A sustainable rural community is described as a place “where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all.”¹

3.2 Studies have shown that villages can only stay vibrant, living communities if they have the opportunity to grow. These include the ‘Living Working Countryside’ report also known as The Taylor Review published in July 2008. Lord Taylor’s report set out to investigate how the planning system could better support the sustainability of rural communities, focusing in on the rural economy and affordable housing to

‘further support the creation and maintenance of sustainable, socially inclusive, economically vibrant and mixed rural communities within the context of existing protection for the natural environment.’

3.3 The Taylor report made a number of recommendations to the Government and suggests the steps necessary for the planning system to play its role in realising the vision of mixed, thriving and sustainable rural communities. It recognises the complexities of rural living and comments that rural communities cannot stand still - change is inevitable and that market towns and villages are dependant on each other for labour, housing, employment and services, concluding that the right balance of housing and employment opportunities are crucial for all communities to be sustainable.

3.4 As Lord Taylor reports² “no development at all can lead to the local school, shop and pub closing for lack of custom as the community ages, or as commuters and holiday homes displace local families.” He identifies those villages where there is little or no development becoming increasingly exclusive communities of the retired and of wealthy commuters travelling ever longer distances to work, losing their services like schools and shops. He also identifies that the right balance of housing and employment opportunities are crucial for all communities to be sustainable.


4.1 National planning guidance is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework which was published in March 2012. This stresses the need for

¹ DEFRA website, 2009
² (The Taylor Report can be viewed on the DCLG website at www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/livingworkingcountryside.)
the planning system to provide sustainable development and defines sustainability as performing 3 roles:

- **an economic role** – contributing to building a strong, responsive and competitive economy, by ensuring that sufficient land of the right type is available in the right places and at the right time to support growth and innovation; and by identifying and coordinating development requirements, including the provision of infrastructure;

- **a social role** – supporting strong, vibrant and healthy communities, by providing the supply of housing required to meet the needs of present and future generations; and by creating a high quality built environment, with accessible local services that reflect the community’s needs and support its health, social and cultural well-being; and

- **an environmental role** – contributing to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment; and, as part of this, helping to improve biodiversity, use natural resources prudently, minimise waste and pollution, and mitigate and adapt to climate change including moving to a low carbon economy.”

4.2 These dimensions need to be taken into account in determining the Rural Settlement Hierarchy.

4.3 There is no specific guidance on how to undertake the study of the Settlement Hierarchy. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) does provide some key issues that need to be addressed and in paragraph 158 the NPPF states that:

> “Each local planning authority should ensure that the Local Plan is based on adequate, up-to-date and relevant evidence about the economic, social and environmental characteristics and prospects of the area. Local planning authorities should ensure that their assessment of and strategies for housing, employment and other uses are integrated, and that they take full account of relevant market and economic signals.”

4.4 The most relevant aspects of the NPPF in relation to settlement strategy and hierarchy matters include:

- The Core Principle that planning should actively manage patterns of growth to make the fullest possible use of public transport, walking and cycling, and focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable (para 17)
- To promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. For example, where there are groups of smaller settlements, development in one village may support services in a village nearby. (para 55)
  - Local planning authorities should avoid new isolated homes in the countryside unless there are special circumstances (examples given in NPPF) (para 55).
  - Planning policies should ensure an integrated approach to considering the location of housing, economic uses and community facilities and services (para 70).
Policy R1 of the Joint Core Strategy gives South Northamptonshire the opportunity to determine its own rural settlement hierarchy and to decide the scale of development that will be accommodated by individual settlements. This will determine which villages see the most development and growth, and should consider existing service provision and any opportunities to improve service provision to enhance the sustainability of the settlement. Villages will be expected to provide for local needs and to support local services.

The setting of the rural settlement hierarchy within South Northamptonshire will need to be compliant with Policy R1. However, the approach taken by the JCS provides some flexibility for the hierarchy within each area to be tailored to reflect specific local circumstances, and whilst it suggests a list of services and facilities that will be taken into account in the determination of the hierarchy South Northamptonshire Council, in consultation with local communities, may vary the importance attached to a particular service or facility or take account of additional services and facilities, to reflect local circumstances. In addition the policy recognises that each settlement functions in a subtly different way.

The JCS states that the rural hierarchy will have the following 4 categories:

a) **Primary Service Villages** – which will have the highest level of services and facilities within the rural area to meet the day to day needs of residents including those from surrounding settlements. These settlements are the most appropriate for accommodating local housing and employment needs and would be the focus for service provision in the rural areas;

b) **Secondary Service Villages** – these settlements have a more limited range of services, but still provide scope to meet some local needs for housing, employment and service provision;

c) **Other Villages** – These villages have an even more limited range of services and are more reliant on the services of larger centres for day to day needs. The scope for development within these villages is likely to be limited to windfall infill development, although some housing to provide for local needs may be suitable;

d) **Settlements which are very small and with few or no services and facilities**.

New development should primarily be situated in the more sustainable settlements which essentially will have a more built up character and contain a high proportion of services and facilities, ie the primary service villages. Such settlements are more likely to be self-sufficient, and are generally capable of absorbing development which can be well related to local services and facilities and which, together with an increased emphasis on public transport and providing better facilities for pedestrian movement and cycling, can help to reduce the need to travel, particularly by private car.

This section therefore provides information on a range of data including key services and facilities which are considered important to the function of communities throughout the District. It is acknowledged that the residents of
some settlements will also regularly travel outside of the District to access facilities in their local area.

**Existing Local Plan & Planning Policy in South Northamptonshire District**

4.10 The existing adopted South Northamptonshire Local Plan sets a hierarchy of settlements, splitting rural settlements between the classes of Limited Development Villages, Restricted Infill Villages and Restraint Villages. The definition of settlements between these criteria was originally set by the Northamptonshire Structure Plan.

4.11 In 2009 the Council introduced its Interim Rural Housing Policy (IRHP). Under this policy sites have been developed for housing that would otherwise have been considered unacceptable under current planning policy. It is important to note that the majority of these developments have been in a limited number of villages in South Northamptonshire. The IRHP only considered that 16 villages were sufficiently sustainable to be considered appropriate for some development to meet the wider needs of the District. It is important that the remaining villages in the District do not become fossilised and that, in accordance with national guidance set out in the Framework, all communities will be expected to meet objectively assessed local housing needs for both market and affordable housing.

4.12 In particular the IRHP was based on the availability of key services and facilities within villages which was used as the basis for ranking them within a settlement hierarchy of sustainability. However, it is recognised that this does not provide a comprehensive assessment of their sustainability and provides no indication of the accessibility of towns and villages and their residents, how towns and villages function in reality, or the interrelationship between various settlements. Settlements need to be sustainable socially, environmentally and economically. The methodology for revising the rural settlement hierarchy for the new Local Plan therefore aims to compile information on the availability of services and facilities, employment opportunities, public transport accessibility, settlement character, local needs and the wider role of settlements and their relationship with surrounding settlements and hinterland.

5. **The Proposed Methodology**

5.1 Policy R1 of the JCS sets 5 criteria for determining the rural settlement hierarchy:

- The presence of services and facilities to meet the day to day needs of residents, including those from surrounding settlements;
- Opportunities to improve service provision and enhance the sustainability of settlements;
- Accessibility, particularly by public transport, to the main towns;
- Evidence of local needs for housing, employment and services; and
- The suitability of settlements to accommodate development in terms of environmental, infrastructure and other constraints.
5.2 These will form the basis of the analysis of rural settlements in order to determine the settlement hierarchy. Council officers will examine the criteria for each settlement and will devise a scoring system, for example based on the importance of the service and the availability and provision of each of the services and facilities within each settlement. The results of the analysis will define which of the types of settlement each village should be situated in, and thus defining the amount of development each village should have.

A. Services and Facilities

5.3 The first criteria relates to the presence of services and facilities, or the accessibility to services and facilities in surrounding settlements if not available within the village being examined.

5.4 A study will also be undertaken of contextual and demographical information about each of the rural settlements, eg population, number of dwellings within a village, and household characteristics based on the data available from the latest 2011 census.

5.5 Population gives an indication of a settlement's size and sustainability. Generally larger settlements can support a wider range of services and facilities.

5.6 The JCS points to the need to base the hierarchy on a robust analysis of services and facilities either within a particular village or as part of a defined cluster of settlements. A list of services and facilities is suggested in Policy R1, although the supporting text does give this Council, in consultation with local communities, the opportunity to vary the importance attached to a particular service or facility or to take account of additional services and facilities to reflect local circumstances. The presence of services and facilities within a village will help to provide a picture of its social and economic sustainability.

5.7 The suggested services and facilities are listed as follows:

a) **Most Important Services and Facilities**: Secondary School, Primary School, GP Surgery, General Food Store, Post Office, Village Hall/Community Centre, Public Transport (quality of service) and Public House/restaurant

b) **Important Facilities and Services**: Other Shops/Takeaways, Local Employment Provision, Libraries/Outreach Centres and Pre-school Provision

c) **Other Facilities**: Play Area, Sports Ground and Allotments.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most important services and facilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School</td>
<td>Access to Secondary Schools is important for young people, and in many cases they provide facilities for the wider community. Reduces the need for children to travel long distances. Only publicly funded schools are being considered within this study since they meet local need.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary School</td>
<td>Primary schools are an important amenity for families with children and have an important role</td>
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<td>Criteria</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Most important services and facilities</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>GP Surgery</td>
<td>Access to a doctor is important to provide for the ongoing health needs of residents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>General Food Store</td>
<td>A general convenience store with a range of food and general goods is seen as a basic requirement and important in determining the sustainability of a settlement. Important for day to day needs and weekly shopping trips.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Office</td>
<td>Post offices have traditionally provided a valuable service to communities in rural areas allowing access to a wide range of services particularly financial and communication. Especially important to the elderly who may not be able to easily travel outside the settlement and/or may not have access to internet services. Unfortunately some of these have closed in recent years and some that continue to exist are threatened with closure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Village Hall/ Community Centre</td>
<td>Provides a location for community activities and events. Village halls are important community facilities, often providing a base for local organisations and community events.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Transport</td>
<td>(see Accessibility)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public House/ Restaurant</td>
<td>Provide residents with a choice of food outlets &amp; places to meet others. Pubs can often be the heart of a local community. In smaller more isolated settlements pubs may be able to diversify and provide other essential services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Important services and facilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other shops/ takeaways</td>
<td>Provides resource that will reduce travel to other settlements. May provide limited opportunity for community to interact. Would generally indicate a higher level settlement providing service to surrounding villages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local employment provision</td>
<td>The availability of employment within close proximity to homes can reduce the need to travel. The economy is a key component of sustainability. Level and type of provision, proximity of alternatives; including :- Range of local opportunities Number of economically active residents Availability of public transport to alternative locations Degree of self containment – how many people live and work locally. Information on the ‘jobs density’ of a settlement will be obtained from the 2011 Census. This comprises the total number of jobs within the settlement divided by the resident working-age population of that area. An alternative measure</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Most important services and facilities</strong></td>
<td>is the ratio of jobs (employment) to residents aged 16 to 64, which is monitored by the Office for National Statistics (NOMIS data series). A higher job density illustrates more local employment opportunities. The information includes home working but does not necessarily reflect wider job opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Libraries/ Outreach centres</td>
<td>A local community service provides information, allows people to make informed decisions, supports education and provides affordable access to literature and other media services.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-school provision</td>
<td>Important for childcare provision and child development.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other Facilities</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Play area</td>
<td>Social and community infrastructure, recreational facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports ground</td>
<td>Provides green space and recreational facilities for all and includes playing fields, nature reserves, bowling greens, equipped play areas, tennis courts, and sports pitches with changing rooms etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allotments</td>
<td>Provide opportunities for people to grow their own produce as part of the long-term promotion of sustainability, health and social inclusion. Provide a source of recreation &amp; make a wider contribution to the green and open space network.</td>
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5.8 The Council will use the following sources for information on services and facilities:

- site visits to each village
- discussion with Parish Councils
- websites eg Yell, postoffice.co.uk or Northants County Council website.

**B. Opportunities to improve service provision and enhance the sustainability of settlement**

5.9 In addition to identifying what services and facilities already exist within the settlements, an essential part of assessing the growth potential of the District’s settlements is to identify their individual needs, this can often be related to the opportunities that development can bring. The quality of the services and facilities that exist in a particular settlement will be important including for example the capacity of these to absorb the needs from new developments. The future development of villages can lead to the improvement of service provision.

5.10 Parish Councils will be asked if there are any local priorities and/or needs which if carried out would improve the quality of life for their respective communities as a way of seeking to improve social sustainability. Discussions
will also take place with Parish Councils to see where new development could result in improvement of service provision, for example public transport, schools and community facilities. For example could local employment opportunities be provided that would improve the sustainability of the settlement? Any new residential development within a village in the future has the potential to contribute through S106 developer contributions/Community Infrastructure Levy towards affordable housing and improved recreational facilities for the community.

C. Accessibility, particularly by public transport

5.11 Settlements which have good public transport access to higher order centres are seen as more sustainable, as they provide residents with travel choices and improved accessibility to jobs, services and facilities to meet day to day needs. A key component of sustainable communities is the accessibility to services and facilities by walking, cycling and public transport. Minimising the need to travel by car will increase sustainability through reducing carbon dioxide emissions and protecting the environment, and increasing opportunities to exercise and contribute to community life and social cohesion.

5.12 Information on travel to work and public transport availability for villages can give an indication of the roles settlements have in providing services for neighbouring settlements, and indicates where residents (and workers) are likely to access services.

5.13 Data will be collected on:

- Journey to work within a village whether by private car or public transport from the 2011 Census
- the availability of public transport within villages for purposes such as accessing higher order centres, jobs, health facilities and education
- the distance that residents have to travel to access local services to meet day to day needs, and the ease of accessibility to these.

5.14 The Council will use the following sources of data:

- 2011 Census
- Public transport timetables including the details of bus services available for each settlement together with their frequency and main destination
- Information on community transport schemes.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>Bus Service</td>
<td>Where a settlement has a more frequent bus service, it can be considered more sustainable as they provide residents with a higher level of accessibility to urban areas.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bus service suitable for daily commute</td>
<td>A bus service that runs from Monday to Friday and arrives within a main town before</td>
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5.15 An important element of need is housing, of an appropriate type, for those who live and/or work locally, and this will be affected by the affordability of housing. Other components of local need include schools, health facilities, shops, community and recreation facilities.

5.16 The Council will seek information from Parish Councils (based on village surveys and documents such as Parish Plans which play an important role in flagging up local issues and needs) to identify specific local needs within settlements which could benefit from some development opportunities. It may be that some services are close to capacity and could not cope with additional residents, or the local school roll could benefit from additional families in the locality.
Housing

5.17 The Council will use the following sources of information:

- Village Housing Needs Surveys undertaken by the South Northamptonshire Council on a 5 year rolling programme which work out if further provision of affordable housing is required. Indicators to be used in defining local need within the parish or group of parishes could include:
  - The need for affordable housing should be quantified through a local housing needs survey or the Council's housing needs register as appropriate. Local is defined as being the parish or immediately adjoining parishes forming a contiguous group around a central parish.
  - Existing residents needing separate accommodation in the area (new couples, people leaving tied accommodation on retirement);
  - People whose work provides important services and who need to live closer to the local community;
  - People who are not necessarily resident locally but have long standing links with the local community, (eg people who needed to move back to a village to be near relatives);
  - People with the offer of a job in the locality, who cannot take up the offer because of lack of affordable housing; and
  - Existing residents who would otherwise qualify for housing or re-housing under the criteria used by the District Council in respect of its housing register including those who by reason of age, infirmity or disability are in need of special housing.

Community

5.18 Community needs can relate to a wide range of services and/or facilities such as recreational provision, improved village halls or the presence of a GP surgery. The National Planning Policy Framework identifies that the planning system can play an important role in facilitating social interaction and creating healthy, inclusive communities. Therefore seeking ways of meeting the community needs identified by the parishes is seen as essential in maintaining and creating the sustainability of the settlements.

5.19 The Council will use the following sources of information:

- Discussions with the District’s Community Services section
- Leisure Needs Assessment
- Parish and Village Plans,
- Other local surveys.

Education

5.20 The Council will use the following sources of information:

- Northamptonshire County Council School Organisation Information
Economy/Employment

5.21 The Council will use the following sources of information:

- SNC Local Employment Survey which is being carried out to provide evidence for this Local Plan together with SELA
- Employment land review
- Broadband speed & availability

Health

5.22 The Council will use the following sources of information:

- Discussions with the relevant primary health care providers to determine future aspirations and proposals to take into account capacity of services.

E. Environmental, infrastructure and other constraints

5.23 When assessing the sustainability of the villages and their potential to accommodate new development the Council will identify the environmental constraints, both natural and built heritage, in and around each settlement that may restrict their future growth. The existence of environmental designations may limit the opportunity for future development and growth of the settlement due to potential negative impacts on ranges of habitats, flora and fauna.

5.24 Environmental Constraints that will need to be taken into account:

- Areas of Flood Risk (especially land within Flood Zone 3 as defined by the Environment Agency - it is necessary to ensure that new development is not at direct risk from flooding, and that development in flood risk areas or elsewhere in catchments does not create or exacerbate flood risk to other land, therefore development within land at risk of flooding should be avoided)
- Heritage assets such as Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings, and Archaeological sites including Scheduled Ancient Monuments;
- Landscape character and sensitivity (this will be obtained through a study that the Council is having undertaken examining the constraints around each settlement)
- Nature conservation designations, eg
  - Sites of international, national and local designation including:
  - Special Protection Area (SPA);
  - Special Scientific Interest (SSSI);
  - Local Nature Reserves;
  - County Nature Conservation Sites;
  - Ancient Woodland.

6. How the Information will be used

6.1 To produce the hierarchy Council officers will rank and categorise the settlements according to their score. This will identify groups of settlements
with similar scores and similar levels of services. An element of local knowledge and judgement will also be used to guide the grouping of settlements. As well as officers completing detail needed under this methodology information will also be requested from Parish Councils, for example the services and facilities accessible in each locality, the local need, and environmental constraints, and the aspirations of the local community.

6.2 The resulting methodology will be used to:

- identify the current role and functional relationship of settlements and their potential future roles;
- provide recommendations on settlement classification (within the classes adopted/defined within the JCS).

| Do you agree or disagree with the methodology for selecting the hierarchy? |
| Are there other factors that should be taken into account when determining the rural settlement hierarchy? |
| Should all the rural settlements be included in the rural settlement hierarchy or do you think that small hamlets should be excluded? |