
STRATEGIC PLANNING SUB-COMMITTEE

9th NOVEMBER 2026

TITLE: Strategic Development Plan Position Update

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1. To provide Members with an update on the position reached with the Strategic Development Plan (SDP).

2. DECISION SOUGHT

- 2.1. That Members note the content of this report.

3. REASON FOR THE DECISION

- 3.1. To bring Members up to speed with the progress with the SDP.

4. BACKGROUND AND RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1. Members will recall from the update report to the last meeting of this Sub-Committee that reference was made to emerging work relating to an audit of available existing evidence that could prove useful to the preparation of the SDP, as well as to identify gaps and further work that is required to provide the most up to date evidence to support development of the plan.
- 4.2. The Corporate Joint Committee have engaged consultants Ove Arup following a tender process, to carry out this work on behalf of the Committee, and they have now provided a draft Evidence Audit Report for consideration and comment. The draft report has also been shared with the Policy teams of each Local Planning Authority in North Wales for their views, as in essence it presents the outcome of a review of the adequacy, consistency and coverage of current evidence they hold for Local Development Plan work. A further benefit to sharing the report is to allow Local Planning Authorities to understand the recommendations for further work and to allow them to potentially align with this work and the stage reached in reviewing respective Local Development Plans, in order to draw potential benefits from the work and/or developing the brief collaboratively with the Corporate Joint Committee.
- 4.3. The evidence gathering stage is critical to the subsequent stages of plan preparation and the robustness of the outcome in terms of strategic policies or proposals in the plan, are directly related to the comprehensiveness and robustness of the evidence base. This is a key test of soundness in terms of the preparation and Examination of the SDP.
- 4.4. Whilst the evidence audit is not yet in the public domain, this report aims to present Members with a meaningful summary of its main findings and recommendations for further work. Once comments have been fed back and the report finalised, and Pending endorsement by the

Corporate Joint Committee, it will then form part of the formal evidence base for the SDP and be made publicly available.

- 4.5 In Summary the audit concludes that North Wales has a substantial and generally robust evidence base from local authorities, regional bodies and national organisations. There is sufficient evidence to commence preparation of the SDP; however, much of the evidence was developed for local planning purposes and is not yet aligned to support a single regional strategy. The principal challenge is therefore the integration, updating and standardisation of evidence rather than the absence of it. A programme of additional regional studies will be required to establish a consistent evidence base capable of supporting strategic decisions on growth, infrastructure, housing, the economy, environmental protection and the Welsh language.

Key Findings

- 4.6 The audit identified existing areas of strength in the evidence base as follows:

- Transport and connectivity.
- Energy generation and distribution.
- Minerals and waste planning.
- Climate change and decarbonisation.
- Flood risk and water management.
- Biodiversity and environmental issues.
- Tourism and visitor economy.
- Welsh language considerations.
- Economic development and employment.

- 4.7 In particular, regional work already undertaken through the Regional Transport Plan, Regional Energy Strategy and existing minerals and waste arrangements, provides a strong foundation for SDP preparation.

- 4.8 While evidence exists across most policy areas, the audit found several issues with the evidence:

- Variations in the age of evidence across authorities.
- Different methodologies used for forecasting and assessment.
- Inconsistent approaches to settlement hierarchies and growth planning.
- Variable levels of infrastructure evidence.
- Differences in Welsh language assessment approaches.
- Limited evidence prepared specifically at a North Wales regional scale.

Key Evidence Gaps

- 4.9 The most significant gap identified is the absence of a comprehensive regional spatial evidence framework capable of informing:

- Growth distribution across North Wales.
- Strategic development locations.
- Settlement hierarchy.
- Cross-boundary planning decisions.
- Strategic policy formulation.

- 4.10 In addition, further evidence is required to:

- Test alternative growth scenarios.
- Assess infrastructure implications.
- Compare social, economic and environmental outcomes.
- Develop and justify a preferred regional growth strategy.

4.11 Finally, there is a need for evidence to ensure compliance with Future Wales policy requirements, particularly around:

- Potential Green Belt designation in the Wrexham and Deeside area.
- Strategic Green Infrastructure planning.
- Nature recovery and ecological connectivity.

Recommended Programme of Work

4.12 The report recommends a programme of further regional studies to provide the necessary evidence to support the SDP. These studies are presented in the following table and have been phased to recognise the order in which they need to be prioritised and prepared, to fit in with the Delivery Agreement programme and timetable. That said, the recommended work is likely to take at least 18 months to complete which contrasts with the Delivery Agreement timing for the preparation of the Preferred Strategy, which is just over a year away.

Phase 1: Strategic Foundations
• Strategic Spatial Evidence Framework.
• Settlement Hierarchy Study.
• Welsh Language Assessment.
• Green Infrastructure and Nature Recovery Framework.
• Water, Flood and Coastal Resilience Study.
Phase 2: Growth and Deliverability
• Strategic Housing Market Assessment.
• Economic and Employment Needs Assessment.
• Infrastructure Capacity Assessment.
• Regional Gypsy and Traveller Assessment.
• Viability Assessment.
• Tourism and Retail Studies.
Phase 3: Strategy Development
• Candidate Sites Assessment Programme.
• Strategic Site Assessment.
• Spatial Options Assessment.
• Preferred Growth Strategy Development.

4.13 Further work is therefore ongoing to challenge the need for, and content of these recommended studies which will result in a refined and hopefully more focused programme. The benefits of this are to ensure work is done that is absolutely necessary in order to both keep to timetable, and to align with the budget allowances made for consultancy work in the three-year medium term financial plan which has been prepared for consideration and approval by the Corporate Joint Committee.

4.14 The ability to define this work and to complete it in a timely manner therefore present a key risk at this stage of plan preparation. Added to this is the need to ensure that if the further work is to be commissioned with consultants (highly likely to be the case) then this needs to be procured in the most efficient way to avoid administrative delays that place a burden on plan preparation.

Conclusion

- 4.15 The audit concludes that North Wales is well positioned to commence SDP preparation. Existing evidence provides a strong starting point, but additional work is required to create a coherent regional evidence base that can support strategic choices on growth, infrastructure, environmental protection and sustainable development. Early commissioning of priority studies will be critical to maintaining progress against the SDP timetable. North Wales does not face an evidence deficit; it faces a regional integration challenge. The immediate priority is to develop a consistent, up-to-date and regionally aligned evidence base capable of underpinning the Strategic Development Plan.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. Costs will be drawn from existing North Wales CJC budgets where provision has been made to support this work, with the necessary support from the CJC's Legal and Finance teams. The CJC will also seek to secure all opportunities for further funding support from Welsh Government.

6. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. The specific requirements and steps to produce a Strategic Development Plan are set out in The Town and Country Planning (Strategic Development Plan) (Wales) Regulations 2021.

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1: None

STATUTORY OFFICERS RESPONSE:

i. Monitoring Officer:

"The CJC has a statutory duty to prepare a Strategic Development Plan and the statutory framework has been considered by this Committee. The recommendations are for noting only and do not approve any substantive policy position, preferred strategy, site allocation or consultation document.

As the SDP progresses, future reports will need to further identify the relevant statutory stage, consultation requirements, assessment duties, etc. Informal Member workshops may assist the development of the SDP, provided they are used for engagement and discussion only, with any material outputs fed into the formal reporting and decision-making process."

ii. Statutory Finance Officer:

"I have no objection to the decision sought and the estimated costs of delivering the Strategic Development Plan is under continuous consideration. It will be included in our work as part of the regular budget reviews, annual budget process as well as in the medium-term financial plan."