

Greater Norwich Local Plan 2025–2045 Settlement Hierarchy Topic Paper

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1. Summary and local context

The settlement hierarchy is an integral part of local plan preparation as it helps to guide the location and distribution of growth across the plan area. Traditionally, a settlement hierarchy is produced by ranking, classifying, and ordering settlements (from villages to cities) based on their size, population, and availability of services. This helps to determine which areas are the most sustainable for development, with a typical focus on growth in the higher tiers of the hierarchy as they have better connectivity, accessibility, and infrastructure. Establishing the best approach to be taken to update the settlement hierarchy will be a key element of the Greater Norwich Local Plan 2045 (GNLP 2045) and work to set out the hierarchy will need to take place before the growth strategy can be determined and allocations made.

The 2024 GNLP includes a policy relating to the strategy for the distribution of growth (Policy 1) which includes an outline of the current settlement hierarchy, which is defined as the Norwich Urban Fringe, Main Towns, Key Service Centres and Village clusters. This settlement hierarchy is then translated into site specific allocations through Part 2 of the 2024 GNLP, the South Norfolk Village Clusters Housing Allocations Plan (VCHAP) and Area Action Plans (AAPs).

The settlement hierarchy in the 2024 GNLP is broadly the same as the hierarchy approach taken in the previous Joint Core Strategy (JCS) with changes in relation to the approach to villages (the JCS split villages into service villages, other villages and smaller rural communities and the countryside compared to the 2024 GNLP village clusters approach).

This topic paper looks at the current settlement hierarchy approach in the 2024 GNLP in relation to the draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2025 and the new local plan making system and outlines the work that will need to be undertaken for the GNLP 2045 to look at whether the current hierarchy remains appropriate, whether any changes may need to be made or whether an entirely new approach should be taken potentially utilising the Department for Transport Connectivity Tool. This will then establish a solid position under which to devise the growth strategy and ultimately make allocations in the new plan.

2. Coverage in current Policy, the draft NPPF and Implications for the GNLP 2045

Current policy

The adopted local plan for the three authorities which comprise Greater Norwich consists of a suite of policy documents. Primary among these is the Greater Norwich Local Plan (GNLP), alongside the Development Management (DM) policies for each district, Area Action Plans (AAPs) and several Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs).

The JCS adopted in 2011 (amendments 2014) set the basis for the current settlement hierarchy in the 2024 GNLP, though with some refinements. DM policy and AAPs are based on the JCS settlement hierarchy as they were adopted prior to the 2024 GNLP.

GNLP Policy 1: Strategy for Areas of Growth (Table 7) sets out the Sustainable Growth Strategy for housing and employment including the settlement hierarchy approach and strategic growth locations for housing and employment. Policies 7.1 – 7.4 provide details of the distribution of growth set out in Policy 1 following the settlement hierarchy approach. Site allocations are distributed according to the settlement hierarchy by: Strategic Sites, Norwich urban area and fringe parishes, Main Towns, Key Service Centres and Broadland Village Clusters.

The South Norfolk Village Clusters Housing Allocations Plan (VCHAP) sets out site allocations for South Norfolk Village Clusters.

Area Action Plans (AAPs) for Long Stratton, Wymondham and the Growth Triangle also allocate sites in line with the settlement hierarchy.

Development Management Policy Documents (DMPDs) dating from 2015 for each district guide the sustainable location of new development, linked to the JCS settlement hierarchy. For Broadland, the relevant policy is GC2, while for South Norfolk it is DM1.3.

A full list of policies relevant to the settlement hierarchy is set out in Table 3 of the Appendices. These existing policies have been assessed against the draft 2025 NPPF, with full conclusions available in Table 4. Details of implementation into the new GNLP 2045 are provided in Table 5.

Draft NPPF

The draft NPPF 2025 places a stronger emphasis on achieving sustainable development through a genuinely plan-led system that directs growth to the most appropriate and sustainable locations. Whilst the draft NPPF does not explicitly require local planning authorities to prepare a settlement hierarchy, it establishes a framework in which plans must set out a clear spatial strategy, identify suitable locations for growth and support the delivery of homes, jobs and infrastructure in a sustainable manner.

The revised approach to sustainable development places greater emphasis on positive plan-making, requiring development plans to meet identified development needs as a minimum and support long-term economic, social and environmental objectives. Development plans are expected to plan positively for future growth and change, identify sufficient land to accommodate development needs, and establish clear expectations regarding the location of development, settlements and settlement boundaries.

The draft NPPF also reinforces the importance of sustainable patterns of development by directing growth towards the most sustainable locations, supporting the vitality of rural communities, enabling villages to grow where this would sustain local services, and considering sustainable transport opportunities from the outset. The introduction of a stronger vision-led approach to transport planning and the emphasis on evidence-led spatial strategies suggest that accessibility and connectivity should play a greater role in determining the suitability of locations for growth than has traditionally been the case.

Taken together, the draft NPPF supports a settlement-based approach to growth, but with increased emphasis on robust evidence, transport connectivity, spatial planning and the delivery of sustainable development outcomes. This aligns with a more dynamic understanding of sustainability that considers not only the facilities available within individual settlements but also how people can access homes, employment, services and infrastructure across the wider area through sustainable modes of transport.

Implications

Although the draft NPPF does not actual refer to the need to produce a settlement hierarchy the implication of the guidance is that a settlement hierarchy will be an important part of the evidence base needed to inform and support the growth strategy in the new plan.

To be effective the settlement hierarchy will need to be based on up-to-date evidence of the services and facilities within settlements across the plan area and how people access and move between them.

The settlement hierarchy will need to focus on sustainability and help to guide growth to the most sustainable settlements whilst retaining the vitality of more rural communities at the lower end of the hierarchy.

The changes to achieving sustainable development in the draft NPPF suggest that the GNLP 2045 should place greater emphasis on the relationship between settlement hierarchy, accessibility and connectivity. Future evidence may need to consider not only the presence of services and facilities within settlements, but also how residents can access those services through sustainable transport networks. This supports further investigation of the Department for Transport Connectivity Tool and other evidence sources that can help demonstrate how the spatial strategy contributes to sustainable development objectives.

Implementation

For GNLP 2045, the current development management policies on the location of development will be integrated into a single strategic policy covering the distribution and location of growth across Greater Norwich. This would supersede Broadland Development Management DPD Policy GC2 and South Norfolk Development Management DPD Policy DM 1.3 and bring the approach into one up-to-date policy framework.

This approach would align the plan with the draft NPPF, which expects local plans to set out a clear spatial strategy, supported by proportionate and up-to-date evidence, and to identify the most appropriate locations for development. A single strategic policy would provide a clearer basis for decision making than relying on separate legacy district policies that were prepared under an earlier planning framework.

In practice, this means the GNLP 2045 will need to express clearly how the settlement hierarchy, or any revised approach to classifying places, informs the location of development, the scale of growth in different settlements and the relationship with site allocations and settlement boundaries. The policy will need to be supported by a robust evidence base, including any updated services audit, connectivity-based assessment or combined methodology, and should be prepared alongside the wider growth strategy and site assessment work.

3. Early policy direction of thoughts

Table 1: Early policy direction of thoughts

Policy theme	Initial direction of travel (post-2025)
Settlement Hierarchy	A number of options for updating the settlement hierarchy are being considered and currently no final decision has been made. It is likely that the GNLP 2045 will move away from the traditional settlement hierarchy approach based primarily on an audit of available services and facilities. Although this is a well-established process with a known scope and resource commitment which allows consistency with previous plans, it is now out of date in the context of the new planning system and government guidance. Looking at individual settlements in isolation is limiting as it can quickly become out of date as the services and facilities within a settlement change over time. This traditional approach does not look at the connectivity between places and how people may choose to access everyday services in a different place near to where they live by using sustainable modes of transport. In addition, the traditional settlement hierarchy approach is unlikely to be responsive to changes that may affect the sustainability of individual settlements e.g. infrastructure provided as a result of growth, new/improved public transport, the opening of the NDR, dualling of the A47, Long Stratton bypass etc. An alternative approach could be to use the Connectivity Tool published by the Department for Transport to develop the settlement hierarchy. The connectivity tool gives an overall connectivity score for settlements based on ability to access everyday services, employment and social engagements via public transport and active travel. This use of this tool is supported by MHCLG. One example of an authority who have explored the use of the connectivity tool in developing their settlement hierarchy is Shropshire Council. They have developed a draft Shropshire Community Hierarchy based on a combination of population, number of dwellings and

	connectivity score. Potential advantages of an approach based on using the connectivity tool: • A fresh approach for a new plan using a tool being promoted by government. • Links to the government agenda for digital local plan making. • Looks more holistically at the connectivity between settlements and how people actually access services and facilities, not just the services and facilities available in the place where they live which are subject to change over time. Potential disadvantages of an approach based on using the connectivity tool: • Could look very different from the traditional settlement hierarchy challenging conventional thinking. • Changes to the hierarchy could impact on monitoring, making it more difficult to look at patterns over time. • Level and complexity of the work is unknown, further investigation of the Connectivity Tool and how it operates would be required. More work needs to be done to explore the options available and to understand how the connectivity tool works. Thought needs to be given to establishing connectivity score thresholds that reflect the current settlement hierarchy categories. The final settlement hierarchy for the GNLP 2045 is likely to be based on one of the following options: 1) use the connectivity tool in isolation 2) use the connectivity tool alongside other sources of information on services and population It seems likely that option 2 will be the most favourable solution based on current knowledge. Whichever option is pursued the following aspects will need to be considered: 1. Are there settlements which should change their
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	position within the current GNLP settlement hierarchy based on recent levels of growth or changes in the level of services and facilities? 2. What approach should be taken to the bottom level of the hierarchy? Should there be a continuation of the 2024 GNLP village cluster approach, something similar to Service Village/Other Village approach in JCS or something else? Should allocations be considered within villages or would a criteria-based policy be preferable? 3. New settlements – how does the potential inclusion of new settlements impact the hierarchy? Should they be included within the hierarchy or considered separately? 4. How does the settlement hierarchy inform the growth strategy? e.g. the amount/scale of growth at each level of the hierarchy. Once the settlement hierarchy is agreed something similar to the 'Towards a Strategy' document produced for the 2024 GNLP will be required. This document identified different overall options for growth partly based on varied scales of growth at different levels of the hierarchy.
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4. Evidence – what we have and what we need

Table 2: Existing evidence/strategies

Evidence	Status	Lead	What it informs	Notes/links
Potential updated Services Audit review	Not started	Internal piece of work	The classification of settlements, particularly at the lower end of the hierarchy.	Need to consider if this remains appropriate. If appropriate: • Is this a light touch review or something more comprehensive? • What is the timescale to fit with growth strategy and site assessment work? • What services and facilities should be included in the audit and what criteria should be used to classify settlements? • Need to establish a methodology for undertaking the work and the resources required.

Evidence	Status	Lead	What it informs	Notes/links
Potential connectivity based assessment	Not started	Internal piece of work	The classification of settlements, particularly at the lower end of the hierarchy.	Need to consider the implications of undertaking this piece of work. Further investigation needed regarding the Connectivity Tool and how it can best be used in conjunction with other information. What is the timescale to fit with growth strategy and site assessment work? Need to consider the criteria to be used to classify settlements Need to establish a methodology for undertaking the work and the resource required.

5. Spatial strategy linkages and cross-boundary issues

The settlement hierarchy work has linkages with other key areas of work including:

- Strategy for the distribution of growth across the hierarchy
- New settlement work
- Updated HELAA (site selection) methodology and site assessment process
- The settlement boundary review.

Appendices

Table 3: List of relevant policies, guidance documents and other evidence

Source	Relevant policies
Greater Norwich Local Plan (GNLP)	Policy 1: The Sustainable Growth Strategy Policy 7: Strategy for the areas of growth
Related Development Management (DM) policies	Broadland Development Management DPD GC2 South Norfolk Development Management DPD DM3.1
Area Action Plan (AAP) policies	Broadland District Council AAPs Growth Triangle Area Action Plan South Norfolk Council AAPs Long Stratton Area Action Plan Wymondham Area Action Plan
Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs)	None

Table 4: The draft NPPF and Implications for the GNLP 2045

Topic aspect	Draft NPPF position	Implications for GNLP 2045
Settlement Hierarchy	The draft NPPF does not implicitly mention settlement hierarchies. However, the policies best related to using the settlement hierarchy to support a sustainable pattern of growth are as follows:	A settlement hierarchy is needed to inform and support the growth strategy.
PM2: Local Plans	Local plans should set out a positive vision and spatial strategy as well as specific proposals for accommodating development needs.	The new plan will need to set out a clear and positive vision and spatial strategy. The settlement hierarchy will have an important role to play in the development of the spatial strategy and guiding the distribution of growth.

Topic aspect	Draft NPPF position	Implications for GNLP 2045
PM8: Evidence for plan making	The preparation of Development Plans should be underpinned by evidence that is 'relevant... proportionate... and drawn from suitable and reliable sources that are sufficiently up to date'.	To be effective the settlement hierarchy will need to be based on up-to-date evidence on the service and facilities available within settlements and how people access them in a sustainable manner.
PM9: Identifying land for Development	Development plans should be informed by an assessment of the land available in their area including the identification of the most appropriate sites for development.	The new plan will be informed by an assessment of land availability and the identification of appropriate sites for allocation. An updated settlement hierarchy will be needed to inform and support the growth strategy.
S1: Positive Plan Making	The development plan should plan positively for future growth and change and seek to meet the development needs of their area as a minimum.	The settlement hierarchy will have an important role to play in the development of the spatial strategy and guiding the distribution of growth.
S2: Producing a Spatial Strategy	The development plan should set out a spatial strategy setting clear expectations for the location of development and settlements within the development plan area and their boundaries.	The settlement hierarchy will have an important role to play in the development of the spatial strategy and guiding the distribution of growth.

Topic aspect	Draft NPPF position	Implications for GNLP 2045
S3: Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development S4: Principle of development within settlements S5: Principle of development outside of settlements	The policies reinforce that growth should be guided toward the most sustainable settlements and require decision makers to support sustainable locations unless adverse impacts outweigh benefits. Only certain forms of developments should be approved outside settlements.	The settlement hierarchy will help to guide growth to the most sustainable settlements. Local policy may be considered appropriate to assess the suitability of new development outside settlement limits
HO3: Providing land for homes HO4: Land for large scale residential and mixed use development HO6: Planning for a diverse mix of sites	To support the delivery of a sufficient supply of homes, Development Plans should identify a sufficient supply and mix of sites to meet or exceed the housing requirement and meet the needs of different groups. This should include supporting the vitality of rural communities and enabling villages to grow and thrive, especially where this will support local services and allocating at least 10% of the housing requirement in GNLP 2045 on sites no larger than one hectare and a further 10% on sites between 1 and 2.5 hectares.	The settlement hierarchy will have an important role to play in the development of the spatial strategy and guiding the distribution of growth, including supporting the vitality of rural communities.
TR1: Vision-led approach to planning for transport	Development plans should consider sustainable transport opportunities from the outset.	A settlement hierarchy based on the DfT Connectivity Tool will help with the consideration of sustainable transport opportunities.

Table 5: Integration of current standards into GNLP 2045

Item / standard	Current source	Proposal for GNLP 2045	Rationale / evidence
Broadland Development Management DPD (2015) Policy GC2 – Location of new development South Norfolk Development Management DPD (2015) Policy DM 1.3 Sustainable location of Development	DM policy	These policies will be superseded by GNLP 2045 and the location of development will be covered by one strategic policy	The draft NPPF adopts a more permissive approach to development outside of settlement limits. Local requirements may be considered appropriate to assess the suitability of new development outside settlement limits.