

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

Report of the Strategic Director - Transformation to the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 1 – 20th AUGUST 2008

BRECKLAND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK: CORE STRATEGY STRATEGY FOR THE RURAL AREA

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This purpose of this report is to provide an analysis of those larger villages in Breckland which have the potential to accommodate sustainable growth as part of the Core Strategy for the Breckland Local Development Framework (LDF). Revisions to National Planning Policy and the emerging Regional Spatial Strategy (Regional Plan) recognises that larger villages can have a role in providing employment, services and housing to meet local needs. Work to date on the Core Strategy has consistently proposed that there are a number of Local Service Centre villages in Breckland. This has drawn significant comment at the various stages of consultation. It is important this locally determined element of the LDF is considered and a view given on what forms the basis of the forthcoming submission of the Core Strategy to the Planning Inspectorate.

2. Recommendations

- It is recommended that the Overview & Scrutiny Panel:
- 2.1 Consider the policy response to Local Service Centre villages in Breckland as the basis for submission to the Planning Inspectorate in November 2008.
- 2.2 Consider the role of non-Local Service Centre villages and the strategy for the rural area in general.

Note: In preparing this report, due regard has been had to equality of opportunity, human rights, prevention of crime and disorder, environmental and risk management considerations as appropriate. Relevant officers have been consulted in relation to any legal, financial or human resources implications and comments received are reflected in the report.

3. Information, Issues and Options

3.1 Background

- 3.1.1 A key function of the Breckland Local Development Framework (LDF) Core Strategy is to determine the broad location of new housing and employment necessary to meet the District's requirements. A sound Core Strategy will ensure that development is sustainable and is directed to locations that can support and deliver development within existing infrastructure and environmental capacity. It is important for a rural district such as Breckland that the sustainability of rural services is supported by appropriately located development while at the same time ensuring that the environment and landscape of the wider rural area is protected and issues around rural isolation, inaccessibility to services and reliance on the private car are not exacerbated.
- 3.1.2 Whilst the significant majority of new development will generally be directed to the market towns to maintain and enhance their function, changes to National and Regional planning policy now assist Local Planning Authorities who wish to support the service role of their larger villages. This is not without qualification and there are criteria to ensure that the focus remains on identifying the sustainable larger villages where there is already a good level of service provision.

3.1.3 Work to date on the Core Strategy has involved three rounds of public consultation following decisions of this authority. Drafts of the LDF Strategy have consistently proposed that there are a number of Local Service Centre villages in Breckland. This has always drawn significant and mixed comment at the various stages of consultation. The last round of consultation was undertaken in January-March 2008 and a key issue to which people responded was around the number and role of Local Service Centre villages in Breckland.

3.1.4 This Report seeks to appraise Members of the overall strategy for the rural area and sets out the latest evidence around the proposed Local Service Centre villages in Breckland, and the additional options that have been promoted and to seek a view on how Breckland proceeds with this strand of the Core Strategy in preparation for submission to the Planning Inspectorate.

3.2 CONTEXT FOR THE STRATEGY FOR THE RURAL AREA

3.2.1 For the past 20 years or more, the strategic planning framework has sought to strictly control development and only allow for strategic housing, employment and retail development in rural districts, such as Breckland, at the market towns. This position was embedded in existing Norfolk Structure Plan and Breckland Local Plan and in their preceding documents. Recent alterations in the last 3 years at the National and Regional strategic planning level have acknowledged that larger villages with a good level of services can accommodate further development, especially where it would support the sustainability of local services and meet local housing and employment needs. In a very rural district like Breckland it is important in addressing issues such as access to services and significant local housing need that the LDF Strategy considers the strategic role of those villages that genuinely function as immediate service centres for the surrounding rural areas.

3.2.2 Recently, National planning policy contained in PPS3 'Housing' (2006) refers to the need to maintain sustainable, mixed and inclusive communities in all areas, both urban and rural. Paragraph 38 of PPS3 requires Local Planning Authorities to take account of the need to provide housing in rural areas, including market towns, **local service centres** and smaller rural settlements. The emphasis in rural areas remains that new housing development must have good access to local services and to be of a sufficient size and mix to sustain and enhance community facilities, infrastructure and services. Local Service Centre villages present the best option to achieve this.

3.2.3 Additionally, National planning policy contained in PPS7 'Sustainable Development in Rural Areas' (2004) states that "away from larger urban areas planning authorities should focus most new development in or near to **local service centres** where employment, housing (including affordable housing), services and other facilities can be provided close together". The PPS also states that such centres should be identified in local development documents as part of the LDF.

3.2.4 The concept of Local Service Centre villages is now set in Government Policy and regarded as a legitimate tier to accommodate sustainable development as part of the spatial strategy for an area. Further policy on Local Service Centres is provided in the Regional Spatial Strategy and a key test of soundness when the LDF is examined will be around conformity to National and Regional policy.

3.2.5 There is also a growing need to balance environmental sustainability (particularly in terms of transportation and access to services) with economic sustainability and social justice. In response to these challenges the Council is developing a suite of policies within the emerging Core Strategy that can provide for specific forms of development in the rural areas to support rural life and ensure that rural communities remain vibrant places to live and work. These include policies relating to the provision of affordable housing, conversion of rural buildings, supporting new community facilities and protecting existing key services. The Breckland Core Strategy seeks to strike a delicate balance between the requirements of national and regional policy, and supporting economic and social development in the countryside.

This is set against the requirement to ensure that the Core Strategy is found 'sound' through an Examination in Public, and the Council is still bound by the requirements of national and regional policy in developing its strategy.

- 3.2.6 The Council recognises that the rural areas of the District are more than the preserve of the wealthy or economically inactive and are a key part of a diverse economy. However, it is noted that there are still concerns that the smaller rural villages will stagnate or decline due to a restrictive approach in the LDF. The Council recognises that smaller villages continue to suffer from rural isolation (as a result of poor access to services), a lack of affordable housing and limited employment opportunities. The strategy that the Council has been developing over the course of the LDF production seeks to ensure that the Core Strategy in relation to the villages does not become a victim of a 'sustainability trap' whereby those villages that do not have services will never be able to develop due to ongoing policies of restraint. The Council's emerging Strategy for all villages including local service centres seeks to protect, and where possible, enhance facilities. This will make a positive contribution to ensuring that villages can be strengthened for the future.
- 3.2.7 The Mathew Taylor Report: Living, Working Countryside reported to Government in July highlights a number of tensions between different elements of national policy that exist in relation to development in the rural areas. The report makes a number of recommendations to the Government; however no changes have been made to national policy in respect of the rural areas at this time. One of the key findings of the Taylor report is that there is a low supply of affordable housing in rural areas. The emerging Core Strategy policy sets out a positive approach to providing for affordable housing in rural villages (with a population of less than 3,000). This approach will help to improve the supply of affordable housing in villages by allowing schemes solely for this purpose to be developed in areas where allocations of market housing are not being made. In addition, the emerging strategy recognises that windfall development will still take place within the settlement boundaries of rural villages and this is expected to deliver some 3,000 additional dwellings in the rural area to 2026.
- 3.2.8 The policies that have been developed over the course of the preparation of the Core Strategy for the identification of Local Service Centres provide more genuine choices as to the modes of transport that residents can use to access employment as well as higher-order services and facilities. This approach represents an environmentally sustainable way of providing for growth in villages and will provide much needed support for existing communities that wish to strengthen their position as service hubs within the rural areas. Local Service Centre villages also have a number of basic services that people need on a day-to-day basis and the strategy seeks to strengthen the role of these villages for the future. In response to the challenge of enhancing the overall sustainability of Local Service Centre villages, the proposed strategy for these settlements will see a greater scale of housing growth being allocated to them than was previously identified in the outgoing Local Plan (only Hockering and Stanfield had positive allocations).
- 3.2.9 The strategy that has been developed is supported by key actions as set out in the Council's Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS). Throughout the lifetime of the Core Strategy to date the policies developed reflects the key actions from the SCS, including strengthening neighbourhood/community services in market towns and Local Service Centres, minimising impact of climate change by those living and working in Breckland and reducing environmental impact of travel. The Council's recently adopted Environment Strategy also sets out the commitment to achieving a carbon-neutral district. The LDF also reflects the aims of the Environment Strategy which states, inter alia, to ensure the LDF adequately addresses key strategic environmental aims. Therefore, the strategy for new development in the LDF reflects these key Council documents.

3.2.10 REGIONAL CRITERIA FOR ASSESSMENT

3.2.11 The Regional Spatial Strategy (Regional Plan) has now been adopted (May 2007) and introduces at a strategic level the opportunity for Local Planning Authorities through their LDFs to consider whether some larger villages function as “Key Service Centres”. The rationale behind the designation of “Key Service Centres” is to maintain a level of services and employment to not only serve the village itself but also surrounding rural communities. The Regional Plan recognises that housing, particularly to meet local needs, is also considered important in supporting the sustainability of existing local services. At a local level, this Panel has previously agreed that Key Service Centres should be referred to as Local Service Centres in the Breckland context.

3.2.12 As mentioned above, the Regional Plan has now been adopted and Policy SS4 of the document states:

“They (Local Development Documents) should also consider the potential of other key service centres to accommodate development which is sympathetic to the local character and of an appropriate scale and nature in relation to local housing and employment needs.”

3.2.13 The Regional Plan sets out at paragraph 3.17 a number of criteria which define Key Service Centre villages. Essentially they are large villages with a good level of services, which might include the following:

- (1) A primary school within the settlement and a secondary school within the settlement or easily accessible by public transport;
- (2) Primary health care facilities;
- (3) A range of retail and service provision capable of meeting day-to-day needs, in particular convenience shopping;
- (4) Local employment opportunities; and
- (5) Frequent public transport to higher order settlements

3.2.14 These criteria for Key Service Centres are very similar to the criteria previously published in the Draft Regional Plan in 2004. This provides for consistency of assessment in the background work and analysis behind the Breckland Local Development Framework. A full copy of the Regional Plan text and Policy SS4 is provided at Appendix A.

3.2.15 Satisfying the Regional Criteria listed above is the starting point in assessing which larger villages should be identified as Local Service Centre villages. The Council’s evidence reveals that whilst a number of villages meet the majority of the Regional Plan criteria, only a very limited number have satellite Doctors surgeries/ primary healthcare facilities. Therefore, many of our larger villages would not be able to meet the full range of criteria. In order to more closely reflect Breckland’s local circumstances, it is considered that identified Local Service Centres must meet at least **four** of the Regional Plan criteria, with the presence of Primary healthcare facilities being afforded slightly less weight in terms of satisfying the criteria as this is considered to be less critical in meeting day to day needs. Additional factors have also been taken into account in determining the number and policy response to Local Service Centres. These are:

- (1) Community views (including Parish Plans/Appraisals)
- (2) Environmental factors (such as Biodiversity, landscape, flood risk)
- (3) Infrastructure capacity; and
- (4) Existing levels of committed development.

3.2.16 ANALYSIS OF LOCAL SERVICE CENTRE VILLAGES

3.2.17 A detailed analysis of how candidate Local Service Centre villages perform against

the Regional Plan criteria and the additional local criteria listed above is provided at Appendix B. The list of candidate villages has been developed over the past 3 ½ years including various considerations by this Panel and its predecessor, the Council's Policy Task and Finish Group.

- 3.2.18 The first paper concerned with selection and definition of local service centre villages was produced in 2004 and reported to the then Policy Task and Finish Group. The paper sought to identify villages that had a shop a post office, some form of community facility such as a village hall, a range of employment opportunities, a primary school and a reasonable level of public transport (they met the preferred level of service for settlements of 1,000 population as defined in the Norfolk County Council Norfolk Bus Strategy). These criteria were based on the then draft East of England Plan policy SS9.
- 3.2.19 This first paper, attached at Appendix C, included a pre-selection stage that sought to rigorously select the number of villages that were put forward as Local Service Centre villages. This stage set a population threshold of 1,000 people which limited the number of Breckland villages to 20. In addition to these villages it was decided to include Litcham. Although Litcham does not have a population of 1,000, it has a number of services as is a key village in the North West of the district, in an area which would otherwise have been considered to be under-represented.
- 3.2.20 The results of this initial paper were that 12 villages either meet or come very close to meeting the five Regional Plan criteria and were therefore candidates for designation. The 12 villages were then included in the draft Strategy and Core Policies at the initial Preferred Options Stage in October 2005 in a report agreed by this Panel at its meeting on 23rd September 2005. In addition, earlier research considered the possibility of grouping villages together, which could, in combination meet the criteria for Local Service Centre status. It was considered that there are no groups of villages in Breckland that would meet the criteria.
- 3.3.21 The initial Preferred Options stage and associated consultation included discussions with a number of the villages identified as Local Service Centres. It was evident from much of the discussions that a number of the villages were concerned about this status and were not convinced that it was the best option for their village. The main problem at this time was that the policy was not sufficiently detailed enough to give people a clear view of what this designation would mean for a village. The Preferred Options had concentrated on housing growth but did not include any specification as to how many houses would be built.
- 3.2.22 As a response to the consultation results from the 2005 Preferred Options consultation, Development Choices (2007) and Preferred Options (2008) and from discussions with Parish Councils it became clear that some communities wanted to have 'Local Service Centres' status but were not comfortable with a positive allocation of housing growth. The consequence of this option would be that the LDF could give extra weight to the protection and promotion of service provision in these communities without further growth or development in this Core Strategy. Table 1 below lists those Parish Councils who want to be considered as Local Service Centres for service provision only.

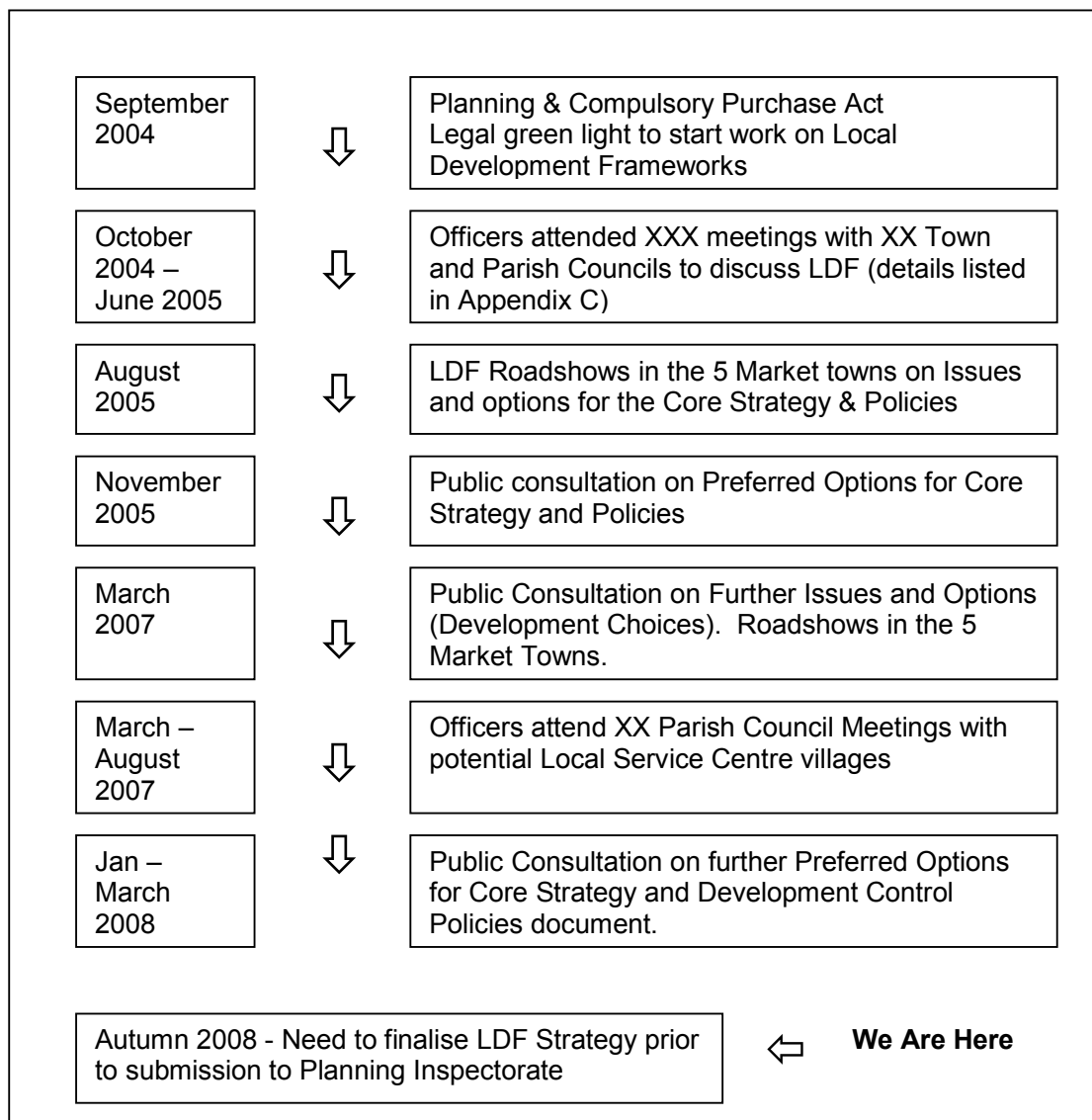
Table 1: Local Service Centre Villages that do not want growth

Village	Reason(s)
Banham	Concerns regarding scale of development that has already taken place.
Mattishall	Village has grown over recent years and has reached a level where the village can support its services Concerns over local infrastructure.
Necton	Village has grown over recent years Planning permission remains for 143 houses Poor access onto A47

3.2.23 In addition, there has been some uncertainty over the identification of North Elmham as a Local Service Centre. Initial consultation indicated village did not want to be a Local Service Centre; however this view has now changed as the later stages of the Core Strategy consultation process have been reached. The Parish Council have indicated that they would now like to be identified as a Local Service Centre, but only for service protection in this LDF. Therefore, North Elmham has been included in the list of villages for service protection.

3.2.24 The option of a two tier Local Service Centre approach, identifying those villages for growth and those for service provision only was taken forward in the further Issues and Options document "Development Choices". This Panel considered the 'Development Choices' LDF consultation document at its meeting on 13th March 2007 and agreed its content for public consultation. Since that meeting the consultation has been undertaken and additional evidence has been gathered from infrastructure providers, Parish Councils and local residents. The two tiered service centre approach was maintained in the Core Strategy Preferred Options consultation.

Figure 1: Process to date



3.2.25 Figure 1 above summarises the process to date in selecting the candidate Local Service Centres. In addition to public consultation on the LDF this Panel has had the opportunity to hear from and scrutinise a number of key service providers

including the Education Authority (18th October 2006), Primary Care Trust (13th March 2007), Anglian Water and Environment Agency (28th November 2006) and various transport agencies. In addition to these Panel meetings your Officers also attend regular meetings with the above agencies to establish infrastructure capacity in Breckland and strategy responses.

3.2.26 Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in the rural areas introduced the concept that groups of villages could be identified as Local Service Centres. The Council has previously considered this approach, and can find no evidence to suggest that there are any groups of villages in Breckland that have clear functional relationships and would meet the criteria to be identified as a Local Service Centre. This approach has been discounted through the previous rounds of consultation on the emerging Core Strategy and it considered that to introduce such an approach at this late stage in the process may potentially give rise to soundness issues at the submission stage.

3.2.27 POLICY RESPONSES TO LOCAL SERVICE CENTRE VILLAGES

3.2.28 To date there has been a number of consultations around the emerging Breckland LDF and potential Local Service Centre villages (see Appendix B). These consultations have always elicited a considerable response including the Development Choices consultation in Spring 2007, and the Preferred Options consultation in 2008. In preparing the LDF there has been some support for a two-tier system of Local Service Centre villages. However, in preparing the submission document it is considered that all Local Service Centres that meet the criteria are identified, however the determining factors for whether a village has a positive allocation for growth in this LDF will be those set out in paragraph 3.2.15 above.

3.2.29 Other options include identifying villages for growth against public opinion and/ or environmental constraints, or introducing further villages. To introduce additional villages the Authority would need to be satisfied that they represent a sustainable option in terms of meeting the Regional Plan criteria and local environmental factors as outlined earlier in this report. This would require a relaxation of the number of criteria required for identification as a Local Service Centre. Members should note that introducing additional villages at this stage will need to be robustly evidenced as they have not formed part of the earlier 3 rounds of consultation on the LDF. There is also a risk that doing so may result in the need to undertake additional consultation prior to submission with a consequential delay in the submission process.

Table 2: Summary of comments regarding Local Service Centres

Summary of comments received at Preferred Options stage (2008)	Response
Suggestion that Banham has capacity to support growth in the Core Strategy.	No additional evidence provided to support suggestion other than recognising lack of healthcare provision.
Some strong local objection to Great Ellingham being identified for growth, Norfolk County Council expressed concern to Great Ellingham being identified as an LSC for growth, limited support for village to have Local Service Centre status	Concerns expressed from consultation about growth in Great Ellingham. Village does not meet criteria for growth.
Support for East Harling being identified as a LSC for growth	Support reflects previous comments received in respect of growth.
Suggestion that Kenninghall should have some status in the Core Strategy.	No additional evidence provided to suggest that Kenninghall meets the criteria for LSC status
Representations made that Litcham should be a LSC for growth	No additional evidence provided to suggest that Litcham meets criteria that other LSCs for

	growth can meet.
Support for Necton being identified as a Local Service Centre	Comment not suggesting additional growth.
Support for identification of North Elmham as a Local Service Centre	Comments note that village would meet criteria for identification as an LSC.
Proposal for Old Buckenham not being an LSC for growth	Comment reflects view from previous consultation.
Support Mattishall for service protection	Comment is consistent with the views from the village over previous rounds of consultation.
Support for Shipdham being an LSC for growth. 1 Comment suggesting that village could accommodate 200 dwellings.	No additional evidence provided to suggest this level of growth could be supported.
Proposal for Bawdeswell to be identified as an LSC for growth	Village has been discounted in previous consultations as it does not meet criteria for LSC status. Village has no primary healthcare facilities, very limited employment within the Parish, and no Post Office.
Developers support for Weeting as LSC for growth, Norfolk County Council expressed concern about Weeting being identified as an LSC for growth.	Support for growth in village has been expressed through previous rounds of consultation, but concerns regarding lack of primary healthcare noted.

3.2.30 Table 2 above provides a basic summary of responses made in relation to Local Service Centres from the Preferred Options consultation (2008). Responses to the identification of Local Service Centres were mixed, however there has also been some concern expressed regarding the evidence presented to justify the identification of villages in a particular tier. Subject to the advice/ recommendations of this Panel, a further response will be developed as part of the Core Strategy (Regulation 26) debate.

3.2.31 The proposals set out in this paper seek to enhance the overall 'soundness' of the approach taken to development in the rural areas in preparation for submission to the Planning Inspectorate. However, the starting point is to proceed to submission as per the Preferred Options (2008) but recognising the comments made at the previous stage and their potential implications on the soundness of this area of the development strategy. Therefore, in response to the issues raised in this report, in taking forward the issue of Local Service Centre villages there are four options available. These are as follows:

(1) Harling, Narborough, Shipdham, Swanton Morley and Weeting are identified as Local Service Centres that will be allocated new growth, with Banham, Great Ellingham, Litcham, Mattishall, Necton, North Elmham, Old Buckenham and Saham Toney identified but with no new allocations.

(2) Harling, Narborough, Shipdham, Swanton Morley are identified as Local Service Centres that will be allocated new growth, with Great Ellingham, Mattishall, Necton, North Elmham and Weeting identified but with no new allocations. Banham, Old Buckenham, Litcham and Mundford and Saham Toney are not identified as Local Service Centres as they no longer meet the criteria.

(3) Amend the list of villages as Local Service Centres for growth from all those that meet the criteria. This would mean identifying Mattishall, North Elmham and Necton for additional growth.

(4) Do not remove any villages from the existing Local Service Centre for growth list even if these no longer meet the criteria. This would mean retaining Great Ellingham as a Local Service Centre for growth.

(5) Introduce additional villages as Local Service Centres status either for service protection or additional housing growth based on comments made at Preferred Options stage (Regulation 26).

3.3 Options

3.3.1 Members are requested to provide a view on the strategy for the rural areas including the number and status of proposed Local Service Centre Villages. This is based upon the evidence in this Report and that this view provides the basis for finalising the policies for the Breckland Core Strategy and Development Control Policies Document in preparation for submission later this year.

3.3.2 Members do not provide a view at this stage on the strategy for the rural areas and Local Service Centre villages and consider the issue as part of wider discussions on the entire Breckland Core Strategy and Development Control Policies Document at a full Council meeting.

3.4 Reasons for Recommendation(s)

3.4.1 To enable progress in finalising a Strategy for the Breckland LDF for submission later this year, Members views on this issue are requested. This will enable your Officers to utilise this information to gather additional evidence if necessary and ensure that the latest views of Members and the community are considered in developing this important element of the LDF Core Strategy.

4. **Risk and Financial Implications**

4.1 Risk

4.1.1 I have completed the Risk Management questionnaire and can confirm that risk has been given careful consideration, and that there are no significant risks identified associated with the information in this report.

4.2 Financial

4.2.1 None

5. **Legal Implications**

5.1 None

6. **Other Implications** [*Insert statement or confirm 'none' as appropriate at each sub-paragraph*]

- a) Equalities: There are no Equalities implications
- b) Section 17, Crime & Disorder Act 1998: None
- c) Section 40, Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act 2006: None
- d) Human Resources: None
- e) Human Rights: None
- f) Other: None

7. **Alignment to Council Priorities**

7.1 The matters raised in this report fall within the following Council priority:

- A well planned place to live which encourages vibrant communities

8. **Ward/Community Affected**

8.1 Will affect all rural Wards in Breckland.

Background Papers

*Overview and Scrutiny Panel 1 - Local Service Centres – 18th September 2007
The East of England Plan (Regional Spatial Strategy) (adopted May 2008)*

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Key Decision Status (Executive Decisions only):

This is not a Key Decision.

Appendices attached to this report:

Appendix A – Policy SS4 and supporting text from the adopted East of England Plan (2008)

Appendix B – Analysis of candidate Local Service Centre villages

Appendix C – Original long list of potential Local Service Centre Villages, considered by Policy Task & Finish Group (2004).