

Topic Paper:
Rural Parish Hierarchy



Breckland Local Plan Update (July 2025)

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This Topic Paper has been produced to support the update of the Breckland Local Plan specifically the rural parish hierarchy.
- 1.2 The purpose is to identify and justify a rural parish hierarchy that will inform the distribution of new housing development during the next plan period (2024 – 2042). This topic paper sets out the methodology used to assess rural parishes and determine where they should sit within the new hierarchy.
- 1.3 The sustainability of rural services needs to be supported by appropriately located well-designed development, whilst protecting the environment and wider rural area. Issues around rural isolation, inaccessibility to services and reliance on the private car also need to be considered in any development strategy for a rural area such as Breckland.
- 1.4 The Council has decided to review and update the parish based village settlement hierarchy to understand the size of growth which parishes can accommodate. The Council considers that it is important that existing services in parishes are supported by some growth, particularly village schools. In Breckland, there are a number of villages with schools which are well-below pupil capacity.
- 1.5 It should be noted that the 5 Market Towns are not included in this assessment.

2 Background

Adopted Breckland Local Plan (2019)

- 2.1 The adopted Breckland Local Plan includes a rural parish hierarchy that was based on evidence as set out in the supporting evidence base¹... This informed the Settlement Hierarchy (Policy GEN 03) of the adopted Local Plan (2019) that was as follows for the rural areas.
 - **Local Services Centres:** Ashill, Banham, Bawdeswell, Garboldisham, Great Ellingham, Harling, Hockering, Kenninghall, Litcham, Mattishall, Narborough, Necton, North Elmham, Old Buckenham, Shipdham, Sporle, Swanton Morley, Weeting.
 - **Villages with Boundaries:** Beeston, Beetley, Carbrooke, Caston, Gressenhall, Griston, Hockham, Lyng, Mundford, North Lopham, Rocklands, Saham Toney, Thompson, Weasenham, Shropham, Eccles Road (Quidenham), Clint Green and Yaxham.

Breckland Local Plan Update (2023 – 2024)

¹ <https://www.breckland.gov.uk/local-plan/housing-evidence-base>

- 2.2 As part of the Update to the adopted Local Plan, the Council prepared a topic paper to identify Local Service Centres and Villages with Boundaries within the District (March 2024²), in order to identify those which had appropriate provision of services which could support further development and in turn that development could support those existing services.
- 2.3 The methodology used in the 2024 work was based on the 2017 methodology which was used to support the Local Plan adopted in 2019 and this methodology was considered sound at examination.
- 2.4 Villages were classified according to the quantity of the provision of 5 key service criteria. Receiving one point for each criterion.
- A primary school- this was considered a key service
 - A village shop
 - Public transport to a higher hierarchical settlement which was sufficient for an appointment or to do some shopping
 - A community facility e.g., pub, village hall, café
 - Employment- 20 businesses, at least 2 of which must employ 10+ people
- 2.5 Villages that had all 5 criteria were classified as Local Service Centres, villages with 3 or more of the criteria were classified as Villages with Boundaries and the rest were “other villages”. These classifications determined in descending order the amount of development that these villages could sustainably support.
- 2.6 The Topic paper Breckland Local Service Centres 2023 updated 2024 and Topic Paper Breckland Villages with Boundaries 2023 and updated in 2024 were based on this methodology. Villages with Boundaries were also renamed as Secondary Villages. These papers formed the Breckland Village Settlement Hierarchy and identified the following:
- **Local Service Centres:** Ashill, Banham, Bawdeswell, Beetley, Garboldisham, Great Ellingham, Harling, Hockering, Kenninghall, Litcham, Mattishall, Mundford, Narborough, Necton, North Elmham, Old Buckenham, Shipdham, Sporle, Swanton Morley, Weeting³
 - **Secondary Villages:** Beeston with Bittering, Beetley, Carbrooke, Caston, Gressenhall, Griston, Hockham, Lyng, North Lopham, Eccles Road (Quidenham), Saham Toney, Shropham⁴, Thompson, Yaxham and Clint Green

² <https://www.breckland.gov.uk/article/19942/Local-Plan-Full-Update-2024-2042>

³ Weeting although has 5 out of 5 services categorising the village as a Local Service Centre, it is constrained by the stone curlew buffer therefore its development growth is limited.

⁴ Although Shropham only has 2 out of the 5 criteria, due to its significant employment opportunities, it is considered that it has the capacity for greater growth

Feedback from the Public Consultation

- 2.7 The proposed village settlement hierarchy went out for public consultation in 2024. The feedback response was that the methodology was too crude and simplistic in its scoring. It was thought that some key services should be included e.g., GP services and proximity to towns and key roads. There were also queries around the weighting of the criteria, in particular equal weight being given to all the services e.g., a pub carried the same weight as a village shop and that there was no accounting for the number of services in a village e.g. the number of shops.
- 2.8 There were some concerns about what had been included in the criteria as well. Some residents were concerned that the flexibus had been included within public transport and felt it was unclear at what level of bus service was considered to be sufficient to meet the criteria for this provision. For employment, residents viewed that the criterion was too broad in its inclusion of part-time employment and types of work e.g., pub work. There were further comments around the walking distance to services beyond 800 metres and that safety was not considered.
- 2.9 The key concern raised by residents in respect to the methodology was within the Local Service Centre category, there were some very large villages providing significant service provision e.g. Narborough and Harling in the same group as some much smaller villages such as Rocklands and Bawdeswell, but all having the same level of growth applied to them.
- 2.10 The Council has considered this feedback as well as taken into account the significant uplift in mandatory housing targets. For Breckland this increased the target from 625 dwellings per annum to 903.

3 Breckland Local Plan Update (2025)

New Methodology

- 3.1 Based on the feedback from the public consultation from earlier stages of the preparation of the Local Plan the Council has adopted a parish hierarchy methodology that entailed a revised scoring system for services with score weighting based on using a median average of the service provision across parishes which created criteria bands between high, medium and low provision. Further review using local-based knowledge developed a new rural parish hierarchy containing 4 categories: Key Service Parish, Primary Parish, Secondary parish, Tertiary Parish with remaining parishes identified as Other Parishes.
- 3.2 Eight criteria were identified including some new criteria: population size, proximity to infrastructure (railway station, key connecting roads) and Market Towns, health provision (GP surgery or pharmacy.) and leisure facilities such as a playing field or a gym/sports hall. The presence of a school was

considered to still be a key service within a parish, but this provision was extended to provide additional scoring for the presence of secondary education, pre-school or special needs school, each receiving a score.

- 3.3 The previous methodology did not include medical services and neither did the 2017 settlement hierarchy as it was considered that GP practices in rural areas typically provided for a wide geographical area not just the parish they were based in. However, the public consultation feedback considered that these services were essential and added to the sustainability of a parish as it would reduce the reliance on private cars for medical appointments and would help GP practices plan for growth.
- 3.4 The topic of public transport generated many responses from residents, and it was noted that the provision of buses had decreased since 2017 and although new on-demand services had been put in place, the feedback was that these did not adequately replace the services lost. However, it was considered that public transport is important to the sustainability of villages, and its use should be encouraged where there is already good provision. Taking this into consideration, and following the methodology of other local authorities, scoring was based on the frequency and times of the buses that ran to higher settlements. The weighting on the score was based on an analysis of the provision of bus services across parishes, providing a higher score for parishes which had good above average public transport provision. (Higher frequency). Additional weighting was also given to parishes containing a rail station, providing daily or request stop services into Norwich and West towards Cambridge and Peterborough, with these parishes receiving an additional point.
- 3.5 The feedback around the employment criteria was that the scoring was too simplistic and didn't pick up the difference between a large employer within a parish compared to a small employer such as a pub or school providing part-time work, which could be as little as a few hours a week. The employment criterion was based on the ONS 2023 information on registered businesses within a village and was increased from 20 to 30 registered businesses. Further scores were given for the business size based on the number of employees. Parishes containing 4 or more businesses which employ 10 or more people, and/or if a parish has 1 or more business which employs 100 or more people receiving an additional point. The weighting of the scores was based on an analysis of the employment provision across parishes providing a higher score for those parishes which had good above average for the district employment provision.
- 3.6 Feedback from public consultation also indicated that development should be located where there was sufficient road infrastructure or in close proximity to market towns. Based on local-knowledge those parishes with settlements that were adjacent to an Arterial Road (A roads) such as the A47 or A11 were given a higher score followed by a 10-minute or less journey to a market town, 1 point was given if a good Distributor road (B-road) connected a village within a parish to other larger settlements.

- 3.7 There was also a need to treat smaller parishes differently from larger parishes when considering growth so population size was brought into the mix. Population size for each parish was obtained from the 2021 census and plotted on a graph, bands were identified with large parishes being in the higher quartile and characterised by having populations above 1,800, mid quartile parishes had populations between 800 to 1800 and all other parishes were below 800. Points were weighted accordingly
- 3.8 It is important for local businesses to continue to thrive by providing some growth to the parish community. Key conveniences such as local shop and post office were scored along with a new criteria of EV charging as we move away from fossil fuel driven cars. Having more than one shop was considered to be important and through an analysis of the provision of shops over the various parishes providing a high, medium and low provision, a scoring system was created.
- 3.9 Those services which provide community cohesion were provided with a separate criteria and additional points were provided for quantity. Additional elements of playing pitches and leisure was added as it was considered that these activities encouraged social interaction and encouraged healthy an engaged communities.
- 3.11 The table below provides a summary of the criteria and scoring

Criteria Summary	Detail		Scoring
Schools	Secondary		2 points
	Primary		2 points
	Pre-School		1 point
Medical Provision	GP Surgery		2points
	Pharmacy		1 point
Public Transport	a: High frequency (sub hourly & daily)		5 points
	b: Hourly service daily		3 points
	c: Every 2 hours		2 points
	d: a few services a day		1 point
	e: train connection		1 point
Employment	a: 30 registered businesses		1 point for each
	b: 4 businesses with 10+ employees		
	c: businesses with 100+ employees		
Convenience	a: shop b: Post office c: EV charging	Level of convenience a: 7 or more b: 4 to 6 c: 3 or less	1 point for each convenience 4,2 and 0 for amount
Road Access	a: an A road through or adjacent to the main settlement within the parish		3 points
	b: a B road through or adjacent to the main settlement within the parish		1 point
			0 points

	e.g., B1108 c: accessible by minor roads only d: close to a market town (10 min journey)	2 points
Population	a: High above 1800 b: Mid between 800 and 1800 c: Low less than 800	2 points 1 point 0 point
Community Cohesion and Leisure	a: Pub b: Village Hall c: Playing Field d: Leisure Facilities	1 point for each

- 3.12 The methodology was further refined by evaluating which services were most essential to large parishes and to smaller parishes, as well as the overall scoring. It was considered that schools and medical services with good daily convenience provision, good connections to higher parishes and more than 25 points were the deciding factors for a parish to be a Key Service Parish. Schools, convenience provision, good connections and between 18-24 points provided the key criteria for a Primary Parishes with Secondary Parishes requiring a school, good connections and between 11 and 17 points, and Tertiary Parishes requiring a school or 1 key indicator, and a score between 6 and 10 points. Any parish with less than 6 points falls into Countryside Parishes. The banding was analysed across all parishes and divided at into 4 bands which naturally aligned with the village categories created.
- 3.13 It was decided to divide the former local service centre category into Key Service Parish and Primary Parish to address the issue of some small parishes being grouped with some very large parishes. This has created groups of parishes that have more similarities between them in the provision of services within their locality.
- 3.14 This assessment was undertaken in Spring 2025 and parishes were asked to check and confirm / comment on the survey information. The Assessment was completed in June 2025
- 3.15 A summary of the criteria and the results of the assessment is provided below

Criteria	Parish Category	Parishes
Essential: School, Medical Services, Good Daily Convenience, Proximity to market town and good road access, good public transport Plus 25 points	Key Service Parishes	Harling, Mattishall, Necton, Shipdham, Weeting ⁵

⁵ Weeting is severely restricted for development due to its proximity to the Brecks SPA. The village will therefore be excluded from any growth policies attributed to the Key Service Centres

Essential: School, daily convenience, public transport, proximity to market town and good road access Plus 18-24 points	Primary Parishes	Banham, Bawdeswell, Great Ellingham, Kenninghall, Litcham, Mundford, Narborough, North Elmham, Old Buckenham, Swanton Morley,
Essential: School and proximity to other market town or good road access 10-17 points	Secondary Parishes	Ashill, Beetley, Besthorpe, Carbrooke ⁶ , Caston, Fransham, Garboldisham, Gressenhall, Griston, Hockering, Hockham, Lyng, New Buckenham, North Lopham Rocklands, Saham Toney, Scarning ⁷ , Sporle, Yaxham,
Has one key indicator School, major Employer or good road access	Tertiary Parishes	With Schools: Beeston & Bittering, Brisley, Colkirk, Garvestone, Gooderstone, Great Dunham, Mileham, Quidenham (Eccles Road), South Lopham, Thompson, Weasenham St Peter. Shropham has Norfolk Poultry Foods with 400+ employees Weasenham Villages. Weasenham All Saints lost its school in 2023, it is on the A1065
Other Parishes	Beachamwell, Billingford, Bintree, Blo Norton, Bradenham, Brettenham, Bridgeham, Bylaugh, Cockley Cley, Cranwich, Cranworth, Croxton, Didlington, East Tuddenham, Elsing, Foulden, Foxley, Gately, Great Cressingham, Guist, Hardingham, Hilborough,, Hoe, Holme Hale, Horningtoft, Ickburgh, Kempstone, Kilverstone, Lexham., Little Cressingham, Little, Dunham Little Ellingham, Longham, Lynford, Merton, Narford, Newton by Castle Acre, North Pickenham, North Tuddenham, Ovington, Oxborough, Riddlesworth, Roudham & Larling, Rougham, Scoulton, Snetterton, South Acre, South Pickenham, Sparham, Stanfield, Stanford, Stow Bedon, Sturston, Tittleshall, Tottington, Twyford, Weasenham All Saints, Wellingham, Wendling, Whinburgh, Whissonsett, Wretham.	

⁶ Carbrooke has been identified as a Secondary Village but it is so close to Watton, it was considered that it should be excluded from any growth policies attributed to Secondary Villages

⁷ Development will be considered as part of Dereham

3.17 The full results of this assessment are set out in Appendix 1. The Key Service Parishes all have a good range of established services and facilities and scored over 25 points. The Primary Parishes are those that scored between 18 and 24 points and have a School, daily convenience store, public transport, proximity to market town and good road. These are considered to be essential day-to-day facilities that help define our larger villages. The Secondary Parishes scored between 10 and 17 points and have at least a School and proximity to other market town or good road access Tertiary Parishes have at least 1 key indicator (School, major Employer or good road access). All other parishes have been categorised as Countryside. This reflects the limited availability of services and facilities in these settlements.

Appendix 1: Comparison of Parish Hierarchy from the adopted Local Plan, 2024 Regulation 18 Draft Plan and current proposal

Score	Parish	Proposed Category	Category in Regulation 18 Draft Plan (2024)	Category in adopted Local Plan (2019)
30	Necton	KSP	LSC	LSC
28	Harling	KSP	LSC	LSC
28	Shipdham	KSP	LSC	LSC
27	Mattishall	KSP	LSC	LSC
26	Weeting	KSP	LSC	LSC
24	Mundford	PP	LSC	VWB
24	Narborough	PP	LSC	LSC
24	North Elmham	PP	LSC	LSC
23	Gt Ellingham	PP	LSC	LSC
23	Swanton Morley	PP	LSC	LSC
21	Bawdeswell	PP	LSC	LSC
20	Old Buckenham	PP	LSC	LSC
19	Banham	PP	LSC	LSC
19	Scarning	PP	SV&H	SV&H
19	Kenninghall	PP	LSC	LSC
19	Litcham	PP	SV	LSC
17	Garboldisham	SP	LSC	LSC
17	Hockering	SP	LSC	LSC
16	Ashill	SP	LSC	LSC
16	Griston	SP	SV	VWB
15	Fransham	SP	SV&H	SV&H
15	Rocklands	SP	LSC	VWB
14	Beetley	SP	LSC	VWB
14	New Buckenham	SP	SV&H	SV&H
14	Saham Toney	SP	SV	VWB
14	Sporle	SP	LSC	LSC
14	Lyng	SP	SV	VWB
13	Caston	SP	SV	VWB
13	Yaxham	SP	SV	VWB
12	Carbrooke	SP	SV	VWB
12	Gressenhall	SP	SV	VWB
12	Hockham	SP	SV	VWB
12	North Lopham	SP	SV	VWB
9	Brisley	TP	SV&H	SV&H
9	Beeston with Bittering	TP	SV	VWB
9	Colkirk	TP	SV&H	SV&H

Appendix 1: Comparison of Parish Hierarchy from the adopted Local Plan, 2024 Regulation 18 Draft Plan and current proposal				
Score	Parish	Proposed Category	Category in Regulation 18 Draft Plan (2024)	Category in adopted Local Plan (2019)
9	Garvestone, R&T	TP	SV&H	SV&H
9	Shropham	TP	SV	VWB
9	Thompson	TP	SV	VWB
8	Quidenham	TP	SV	VWB
8	Mileham	TP	SV&H	SV&H
7	Weasenham St Peter	TP	SV	VWB
7	Gooderstone	TP	SV&H	SV&H
7	Great Dunham	TP	SV&H	SV&H
Key				
KSP	Key Service Parish	LSC	Local Service Centre	
PP	Primary Parish	SV	Secondary Village	
SP	Secondary Parish	VWB	Village with Boundary	
TP	Tertiary Parish	SV&H	Smaller Villages & Hamlets	

Score	Parish	Healthcare		Public Transport		Education			Retail				Community & Social			Leisure		Employment	Proximity	Population	Recommendation
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	
30	Necton	2			5		2	1	1	4	1	1	2		1	1		2	5	2	Key Service Parish
28	Harling	2	1	1	2		2	1	1	4	1		2		1	1	1	3	3	2	Key Service Parish
28	Shipdham	2			3		2	1	1	4	1		2		1	1		3	5	2	Key Service Parish
27	Mattishall	2	1		3		2	1	1	4	1		2		1	1	1	2	3	2	Key Service Parish
26	Weeting				2		2	1	1	4	1	1	2		1	1		3	5	2	Key Service Parish
24	Mundford				3		2	1	1	4	1		2		1	1		2	5	1	Primary Parish
24	Narborough	2			5		2	1	1	2			2		1	1	1		5	1	Primary Parish
24	North Elmham	2			3		2	1	1	4	1		2		1	1		2	3	1	Primary Parish
23	Great Ellingham	2			2		2	1	1	2	1		2		1	1	1	3	3	1	Primary Parish
23	Swanton Morley	2			3		2	1	1	2	1		2		1	1		2	3	2	Primary Parish
21	Bawdeswell				5		2	1	1	2	1		2		1	1		1	3	1	Primary Parish
20	Old Buckenham				2	2	2	1	1	2	1		2		1	1		1	3	1	Primary Parish
19	Banham				2		2	1	1	4	1		2		1	1		3		1	Primary Parish
19	Kenninghall	2			2		2	1	1	2	1		2		1	1		3		1	Primary Parish
19	Litcham	2			1	2	2	1	1	2	1		2		1	1	1	1	1		Primary Parish
17	Garboldisham				1		2		1	2	1		2		1	1		2	3	1	Secondary Parish
17	Hockering				3		2		1		1		2		1	1			5	1	Secondary Parish
16	Ashill				3		2	1	1				2		1	1		2	2	1	Secondary Parish
16	Griston				3								2		1	1		2	5	2	Secondary Parish
15	Fransham				5					2			2		1				5		Secondary Parish
15	Rocklands				2		2	1	1	2	1		2		1	1			1	1	Secondary Parish
14	Beetley				3		2	1					2		1	1			3	1	Secondary Parish
14	New Buckenham				2				1	4	1	1	2		1	1			1		Secondary Parish
14	Saham Toney				3		2	1					2		1	1	1		2	1	Secondary Parish
14	Sporle				2		2	1	1		1		2		1	1			2	1	Secondary Parish
14	Lyng				1		2	1	1	2	1		2		1	1		1		1	Secondary Parish
13	Caston				3		2	1					2		1	1			3		Secondary Parish
13	Yaxham				3		2						2		1	1			3	1	Secondary Parish
12	Carbrooke				1		2	1					2		1	1			2	2	Secondary Parish
12	Gressenhall				3				1		1		2		1	1			2	1	Secondary Parish
12	Hockham				1		2	1					2		1	1			3	1	Secondary Parish
12	North Lopham				1		2	1					2		1	1			3	1	Secondary Parish
9	Brisley				2		2						2		1	1			1		Tertiary Parish
9	Beeston with Bittering				1		2						2		1	1		2			Tertiary Parish

Score	Parish	Healthcare		Public Transport		Education			Retail				Community & Social			Leisure		Employment	Proximity	Population	Recommendation
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	
9	Colkirk				1		2						2		1	1			2		Tertiary Parish
9	Garvestone, R&T				1		2						2		1	1			1	1	Tertiary Parish
9	Shropham												2		1	1	1	2	2		Tertiary Parish
9	Thompson						2				1		2		1	1			2		Tertiary Parish
8	Quidenham			1		1	2						2		1	1					Tertiary Parish
8	Mileham				1				1		1		2		1	1			1		Tertiary Parish
7	Weasenham St Peter				1						1				1	1			3		Tertiary Parish
7	Gooderstone				1		2						2		1	1					Tertiary Parish
7	Great Dunham				1		2						2		1	1					Tertiary Parish

Key to Table:

- A: GP Surgery/ Dentist
- B Pharmacy
- C: Rail
- D: Bus Frequency
- E: Secondary
- F: Primary
- G: Pre-School
- H: Convenience Store
- I: Daily Convenience Store
- J: Post Office
- K: Petrol/EV Charging
- L: Community Hall and Village Services
- M: Library
- N: Place of Worship Providing Community
- O: Playing Field
- P: Gym, Pool, Sports Hall
- Q: Businesses or other employment
- R: Road Access & Travel Time to Market
- S Census