

## **DESIGN REVIEW PANEL**

### **3 August 2006**

**PROPOSAL:** North Staffordshire Core Spatial Strategy – Preferred Options Report

**LOCATION:** Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme

**LOCAL AUTHORITIES:** Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council

**REF NO:** 045

#### **Introduction**

The North Staffordshire Core Spatial Strategy Preferred Options report is the principal development plan document in the Local Development Framework for North Staffordshire. It is being jointly produced by Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, and covers an area of over 300km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 360,000 people. It will provide a single strategic planning framework for the future development of the North Staffordshire conurbation looking forward to 2021.

The vision posited by the plan is one of transformation: economic diversification, renewal of the housing market, expansion of community capacity, and sustainable development. The plan's vision is that "North Staffordshire will become the city region of choice for 1 million people by 2021."

The Core Spatial Strategy is based on five Spatial Principles:

- To strengthen the area's role as a key regional gateway with Stoke-on-Trent City Centre (Hanley) as the primary commercial centre and Newcastle-under-Lyme Town Centre as the complementary strategic centre.
- To create thriving and distinctive town centres with complementary roles to play.
- To enhance the green space network to provide a setting for high quality sustainable development.
- To improve accessibility and linkages throughout the area.
- To renew the urban and rural areas, and particularly the inner urban core, to enable people to live close to places of employment, leisure and other facilities by encouraging mixed use developments close to existing centres.

The Core Spatial Strategy has twenty Strategic Aims which seek to deliver the plan's vision by focussing on the main settlements, sustainable living, good linkages between centres, and areas identified for priority intervention by Renew North Staffordshire, the housing market renewal pathfinder. The plan also seeks to manage organic growth outside the priority areas to deliver the target of almost 20,000 new houses within the two local authority areas by 2021.

The plan sets out core policies for various topics, including Environmental Quality which has policies for protecting and enhancing natural environmental assets, improving the recreational value of the green space network, and designing a high quality built environment.

Public consultation on the Core Spatial Strategy Preferred Options report ends on Monday 7 August 2006. The document will be amended in the light of comments received and will be delivered to the Secretary of State in February 2007 for final determination.

The Panel received a brief presentation of the background to the North Staffordshire Core Spatial Strategy Preferred Options report from representatives of Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council before commenting on the plan.

### **General Comments**

The Panel welcomed this opportunity to review the Core Spatial Strategy for North Staffordshire. This was probably the first time a design review panel had considered such a document. The Panel welcomed the decision by Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council to produce a joint document, and was pleased to hear that work on a joint Supplementary Planning Document on design covering both local authority areas would commence later in the year.

Overall the Panel considered that the Core Spatial Strategy starts from sound principles that would aid the delivery of national and regional planning policy at local level and that would address the critical issues of economic, social and physical regeneration and renewal currently facing the North Staffordshire city region.

However, the Panel had a number of concerns about the presentation of the Core Spatial Strategy and thought there was a loss of focus and lack of consistency in how the themes find expression as more specific policies for the built environment.

The first question the Panel wished to ask is what sort of document has been produced? The new Local Development Frameworks are an opportunity for a fresh approach to planning with more visionary and aspirational spatial plans, expressed in ways more accessible to the public. The Core Spatial Strategy has very few illustrations - its presentational style is that of a text-heavy planning policy document. Opportunities have been missed to present themes graphically. There is no visual sense of purpose or illustration of positive change. The plan does not yet give a positive and inspiring vision of the future of the place. This could be resolved partly by better graphics providing, for example, visual expression of aspirations for walkable city and town centre neighbourhoods, and also by more attention to exploring and explaining the lifestyle and physical characteristics that are being planned for.

The Panel were concerned that throughout the plan, monitoring proposals emphasise numerical indicators which deal only with the quantum of development, and not with achieving quality.

Achieving higher quality outcomes is fundamental if the strategy is to achieve a step change for North Staffs. The Core Spatial Strategy Preferred Options Report measures success solely in hectares of land developed or numbers of units built. Such a crude approach does not give any confidence that quality will be at the core of implementing the strategy. Gross figures for employment land or housing numbers could be easiest met by a few uninspiring projects for large floorspace users or mass-produced housing, and such developments will not achieve the transformational change that should be at the heart of the Core Spatial Strategy. The panel wanted to see more emphasis on creating the fine-grained urban forms of development that will provide a wider choice of housing, accommodation for small businesses and creative industries, and will nurture a more intricate and human scale urban economy. This will need to be brought out in other more detailed development plan documents, but the principle must be clearly expressed in the Core Spatial Strategy and quality yardsticks should be established.

There is a need to develop indicators of success which enable the qualitative outcomes of the plan to be monitored systematically. Such indicators could include surveys of public opinion or investor perceptions, or by the winning of awards, national benchmarking schemes, or other forms of external recognition of urban quality. The nature and type of development sought should be better explained in the Core Spatial Strategy and the outcome evaluated against that. The Panel were concerned that if there are no quality indicators then only quantity will be assessed.

Mindful of recent edge-of-centre retail proposals in North Staffordshire the Panel thought that there is a need to define the desired nature of new town centre expansions and other peripheral developments in terms of the urban grain and mix of uses that should be created. The development of retail sheds on the periphery of centres provides a car-based form of development which can undermine the success of the adjoining centre, because a car-orientated site layout makes it easy for people to arrive and leave by car without visiting the established shopping area nearby. On the other hand extensions to centres which create an urban grain which is human in scale and well linked to a mix of other town centre activities and to an attractive 'public realm' can complement the established centre and add to its economic vitality and viability. The Core Spatial Strategy needs to define the type of environment it seeks to create, so that the quality of the outcome can be assessed.

In regenerating City and town centres it is important to look at how uses fit together to support each other and achieve a revitalised place that is more than the sum of the parts. This means new jobs, good quality housing, attractive retail, leisure and cultural facilities, a high quality physical environment, and good schools have to be seen as a joined up package, not just as separate policy issues. This approach is evident in Manchester, Birmingham and other UK cities, and should be explicitly recognised. The Core Spatial Strategy should be the platform for a North Staffordshire lifestyle offer, and not just as a tool to achieve certain housing, retail or employment numbers. The Panel considered that the Core Spatial Strategy should include a strategic aim of "making places" with illustrations, which bring the policies and vision to life.

The Panel considered that the fact that the vision is not well illustrated and does not 'draw the reader in' will leave developers and local people unclear as to what is intended.

The Panel then reviewed specific core policies, prioritising those they felt most relevant to design. Given limited time the panel was unable to review all of the policies.

## **Built Environment**

The Panel considered that CP24 was basically a very solid policy, but questioned how well it reached the rest of the document. Design is a cross-cutting theme and there is a need to make reference to it under most if not all of the plan's topic headings. There is also a need to acknowledge the degraded environment in parts of the conurbation and the vital role that good design can play in transforming this.

The Panel thought that the contribution of good design in attracting investment, promoting social inclusion, and delivering sustainable development should also be recognised in the explanatory text.

The Panel thought that CP24 should make it clear that good landscape design is part of structuring high quality development, not just a supporting aspect to fill in 'space left over'.

CP24 should specifically state that creative and innovative design will be welcomed.

The Panel considered that reference should be made to large scale urban design. The topography of North Staffordshire is special with many strategic views out of the urban area into the country hillsides beyond. There is also a need to identify places where high buildings would make a positive contribution to the skyline and places where low development would be more appropriate.

The plan should make reference to design and access statements and explain what these are for. The need for high quality design and good accessibility near to parks, waterfronts and open spaces should also be emphasised, with the aim of creating a fashionable place to be.

The monitoring indicators should be reconsidered. At present they relate solely to the historic environment and do not relate to the policy's aspirations. There is a need for a more imaginative approach to setting and monitoring design quality, referring to design awards, public opinion, visitor surveys, external recognition, and other indicators of the nature and character of the place.

## **Urban Renaissance**

The Panel endorsed the broad intention of this section to focus most major investment and development on the urban core and existing centres. However, Policy CP4 largely comprises a schedule of Renew's priority areas. As a consequence, notable omissions include the City Centre, the University Quarter and Burslem. The Panel thought that the Core Strategy should start with a more strategic view of regeneration than housing market renewal considerations alone. The City Centre should be the number one priority for urban renaissance. As currently presented the policy seems to imply that housing market renewal is the primary or even the sole driver of strategic regeneration in North Staffordshire. It was noted that the City Centre and Newcastle Town Centre, and in due course other town centres, are to have Area Action Plans produced, and the Panel considered that the Core Spatial Strategy should state the authorities' broad aspirations for these centres as part of the overall urban renaissance strategy in order to set the scene for subsequent Action Plans.

The Panel were mindful of the fact that North Staffordshire's principal economic problem is not unemployment, but low average household income and a shortage of better paid jobs, and that this structural economic flaw needs to be addressed under the urban renaissance heading. Urban

renaissance is not only about where regeneration investment should be located, but also crucially about the qualities of what is delivered by this investment.

The Panel thought that the monitoring indicators for successful urban renaissance should also be reconsidered. Quality indicators are fundamental to urban renaissance and need to form part of the monitoring process.

### **Hierarchy of centres**

The Panel supported the effort to define complementary roles for the city and town centres, as set out in Table 1 *Centres*. However, the Panel considered that this did not go far enough in expressing each centre's distinctive and special role. For example, the aspiration for the City Centre ought to be higher: it is not just the main commercial centre for the sub-region, it should be a cultural and entertainment hub into the evening, a place where 'city living' supports a community of city centre business services, and a place closely linked to education and training developments.

### **Sustainable communities**

The Panel considered that the Core Spatial Strategy should look at the nature of the area's future housing requirements and to define what is necessary to achieve a diverse range of housing types, including the sort of urban housing which is becoming more popular in the UK's larger cities, and also some other elements of aspirational market housing.

Quality of offer is the key issue, if the housing market is to be renewed. The monitoring indicators given in the plan for housing are entirely numerical and 'top down', but few people would regard the Core Spatial Strategy as successful if the planned number of houses were built but the quality and character of those houses was poor.

The Panel thought that, if the concept of sustainable communities is to be systematically delivered, then the quantum of new housing in specific areas should also reflect a 'bottom up' analysis of what can be accommodated at high quality standards within walking distance of existing centres. This would require the consideration of densities, because housing and other development can be more intensive within and near to centres providing it is designed well.

The Panel also considered that there needs to be an indication given of where a limited amount of low density housing would be appropriate, in order to provide a balance of housing types to cater for all social groups including those seeking larger family properties with gardens in low density areas.

The Panel were concerned that the plan says little about housing quality. They thought there should be an aspirational statement within the Core Spatial Strategy to set out the local authorities' quality aspirations for new housing. National standards, such as Building for Life, BREEAM, and the achievement of national design awards, are available as reference points for assessment of quality and can be referred to in the monitoring of such a policy.

### **Economic prosperity**

The Panel considered that the plan's emphasis on quantity rather than quality risked encouraging large scale out-of-town commercial developments that would further undermine the viability of the city and town centres which are already under economic pressure from the area's many retail

parks. There is no employment target for the centres themselves, which could allow the majority of economic development to 2021 to be delivered outside existing centres. Whilst certain forms of employment use, for instance large floorplate logistics buildings, would be most appropriate next to motorways or trunk roads on sites which the urban core could not provide, the Panel was strongly of the view that B1 and other high quality employment uses should be encouraged firstly in the city centre and town centres, and that the plan's policy and its monitoring indicators should reflect this.

The Panel fully supported the Core Spatial Strategy's emphasis on the expansion of education and medical facilities in driving the regeneration of the local economy. The Panel thought that the flagship potential of these developments is a strategic issue and that there should be a requirement that the associated buildings are of high design quality in order to demonstrate economic transformation.

The Panel considered that the emphasis on large scale employment monitored in hectares of land developed ignored the vital role played by the conversion and adaptation of existing buildings, particularly historic buildings, for small businesses, business start-ups, cultural and high-tech industries, and economic diversification, by providing a wide variety of low-cost accommodation. The Panel thought that for economic and sustainability reasons there is a need to emphasise promoting the re-use of the existing building stock, especially historic buildings, for their vital role in economic regeneration.

### **Vitality and Viability of Centres**

The Panel wished to make the point that the most successful city and town centres have a tight urban form with characterful buildings relating well to street frontages and a wide variety of uses accessible from a network of attractive streets. The Panel were concerned that unless strategic guidance is given about the form required of major development in and next to centres there is a possibility that large-scale retail and commercial developments may be enclosed and inward-looking with blank exterior walls, adding little to the life and character of the surrounding area.

If the various centres are to function well and have vitality and economic viability, they will all need to provide a broad range of uses including housing as part of balanced mixed use packages. The relationship between uses needs careful attention (e.g. concentrations of some uses like drinking establishments can exacerbate anti-social behaviour and make certain areas unpopular with the majority of people). These issues can begin to be addressed by promoting and defining a suitable balance of uses in and around centres sharing a context of high quality public realm and good town centre management.

The Panel considered that the vision for centres needs to achieve competitive reasons to go to North Staffordshire to invest, to shop, to seek recreation or to take up employment, instead of going further afield to Birmingham, Manchester or Chester, which are the current city centres of preference for the economically mobile.

The Panel thought the fact that the area has a multiplicity of centres should be explicitly acknowledged. An overall vision for this polycentric conurbation should be expressed, and within that vision a complementary role for each centre should be defined. If this number of centres is to function successfully, then the majority of commercial and business investment in the future

should take place within those centres and should not be allowed to leak out to intermediate or peripheral areas.

The Panel considered that the fact that certain smaller town centres are losing their traditional shopping role needs to be recognised and a new purpose for some such centres needs to be defined .

### **Environmental quality**

The Panel recognised that the North Staffordshire conurbation is favoured with a large quantity of green space, and that the quality and useability of green space is the primary issue. The Panel were advised that a green space audit is currently underway, which will deal with both quality and quantity, and will include a needs assessment. The outcome of the audit is expected to be a green space strategy which will enable the quantity to be rationalised and the quality to be improved.

The Panel considered that the Core Spatial Strategy should emphasise the importance of achieving a strategic quality green space structure by including statements of the roles that green space should play and how the edges of new and existing development can relate well to it. Policies CP22 and CP23 are generalised statements for protection and enhancement, but the situation in North Staffordshire is unique in terms of quantity and potential. The aim here should be to establish and enhance a comprehensive strategic green space network as an asset for the long term future, including completing linkages and adding to green space where this is needed, not just focusing on what now exists.

### **Transport**

If North Staffordshire's polycentric conurbation is to work efficiently and effectively, the Panel thought it imperative that the main centres are linked by a high quality sustainable transportation system. The Panel noted that the detail will be for Transport Plans but thought that the Core Spatial Strategy should promote a step change improvement in the conurbation's public transport system and refer to relevant transport changes that can be co-ordinated with new development.

The Panel considered that CP25 should highlight the opportunity offered by the green space network for a comprehensive system of cycleways and footways. It should express the aim of completing such a system where necessary during the plan period.

### **Summary**

In the light of the government's aspiration that the new planning system would see a radically different approach to plan-making with a new emphasis on spatial planning, the Panel was disappointed at the way the document is presented. The Core Spatial Strategy Preferred Options report has the form and appearance of a policy plan document with lists of aims and policies with accompanying written explanations. There is very little illustrative material and no three dimensional representations to convey a sense of the place that the plan aims to create.

The Panel considered that the vision in the plan is generic and could easily be applied to many cities in the country. In order to test the thinking underlying the vision in the Core Spatial Strategy, the Panel asked how many people currently regard North Staffordshire as the city region of choice, i.e. is there current baseline information that would enable an assessment of whether or not the headline aspiration has been achieved by the end of the plan period? If this cannot be

demonstrated, then it raises the question of whether the vision is firmly founded and has real meaning. The Panel thought that the vision for North Staffordshire should be expressed in a way that is more aspirational and ambitious, setting a course for definite outcomes that can be proven, and which have a distinctive local flavour. This would express a more specific idea of how the area could develop in physical terms and would enable inspiring graphical representations of the conurbation in 2021 to be created.

The Panel thought the Core Spatial Strategy does not deal adequately with the issue of quality. The plan's monitoring indicators are almost entirely numerically based and as a result there is a serious danger that the quality of outcomes, which is vitally important in transforming this city region, could be ignored in the drive to achieve the plan's quantitative objectives.

Design is essential in delivering high quality physical development; PPS1 *Delivering Sustainable Development* says that good design is indivisible from good planning (para. 33). The Panel therefore suggest that appropriate references to built environment design quality should appear throughout the Core Spatial Strategy, i.e. in the vision, spatial principles, strategic aims, and the various topic areas. This is particularly important for North Staffordshire where the quality of the built environment is lacking in many key areas, and the omission of design as a primary consideration could seriously undermine the success of regeneration initiatives.

The Panel felt that the Core Spatial Strategy does not successfully capture the crucial role of the City Centre in delivering urban renaissance for North Staffordshire and in transforming the area's image. Considerable investment is proposed for the City Centre over the coming years, but the plan does not use the primary importance of this as the driving force for the regeneration of the urban core. Housing market renewal is important, but it will not fully succeed if the City Centre is not transformed in line with the aims of the plan.

Whilst CP24 covers most of the relevant aspects of design, the Panel considered that the strategic importance of high quality design for successful economic regeneration, housing market renewal, social inclusion, and cultural development does not come across strongly enough in the Built Environment section of the plan. Paragraph 3.154 does not provide sufficient explanation of the crucial role of high quality design in increasing inward investment, improving the area's image, and in setting the scene for a broader range of better paid jobs.

The plan does not mention or describe the area's special distinctiveness, or make reference to the North Staffordshire Assessment of Historical Significance study which will help define that distinctiveness. The historic environment requires a dedicated policy to deal properly with all its aspects and to set the scene for future detailed policies and proposals. North Staffordshire has a unique industrial and cultural heritage, which not only gives the area its special character, but also generates tourism and has inspired some of the most creative regeneration initiatives of recent years, such as the Hothouse, the Cultural Quarter, Burslem, and the Barracks Workshops. These successes should be held up as models for dealing with other historic buildings and areas currently at risk from neglect. At present CP24 is the longest policy in the plan and it would aid clarity if it were divided to deal with new design and the historic environment separately.

The Core Spatial Strategy does not say much about what the local authorities are going to do to deliver the aims of the plan. Local authorities and other key public agencies have an important role in setting an example to the private sector and in showing the local community that the

public sector as a whole is united in the movement to regenerate North Staffordshire. A statement making this clear near the start of the document would give confidence that the public authorities are ready to play their part.

PPS1 states that “Planning is a tool for local authorities to use in establishing and taking forward the vision for their areas as set out in their community strategies.” (paragraph 11) However, from a procedural point of view the Panel did not see how the Core Spatial Strategy links to the Community Strategies for Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme, or how the local authorities intend to engage hard-to-reach groups in the consultation process. The Panel thought that the latter might be achieved through special workshops, focus groups, or other methods of front-loading the process with an early input from external sources.

Overall the panel thought that there is considerable scope to improve the plan as it progresses from preferred options stage through to a final draft document and hoped that these opportunities will be taken.

The Panel wished to make the following recommendations in order to give design and the built environment a more effective role in the Core Spatial Strategy:

#### **Recommended Actions:**

- 1 The vision for the Core Spatial Strategy should aim for a more specific and highly aspirational outcome with a distinctive local character, in order to convey the idea of a unique and attractive North Staffordshire lifestyle offer.
- 2 The Core Spatial Strategy should adopt a more graphical presentational style which uses forward-looking three dimensional illustrations and visualisations to provide a positive and inspiring image of the place that the plan aims to create.
- 3 The Core Spatial Strategy should incorporate qualitative as well as quantitative indicators for all core policy areas, including design awards, public opinion and visitor surveys, externally recognised standards, and other ‘self-assessment’ indicators of the nature and character of the place.
- 4 Design is a cross-cutting theme and has a vital role in securing successful urban regeneration and the transformation of the city region. An appropriate reference to built environment design quality should appear at every level of the Core Spatial Strategy, i.e. in the vision, spatial principles, strategic aims, and the various topic areas.
- 5 The core policies for Urban Renaissance should give pre-eminence to the leading role of the City Centre in spearheading the regeneration of the North Staffordshire city region.
- 6 The complementary roles of the City Centre and the town centres should be defined in greater detail. The decline of a traditional shopping role by some of the smaller towns, e.g. Burslem, should be acknowledged and a new purpose for such centres identified.

- 7 The Core Spatial Strategy should express the nature, type and quality of the new housing that is required, and should adopt indicators which quantify the amount of the different types of housing to be delivered during the plan period.
- 8 An analysis of the amount of housing that can be accommodated at high quality within walking distance of centres should be undertaken, involving consideration of appropriate densities in these central locations, in order to establish numerical and qualitative 'walkable town centre neighbourhood' housing targets for each centre.
- 9 Some sites for low density housing should be specifically identified, in order to provide large family houses as part of a comprehensive housing offer.
- 10 Specific employment targets and quality environments for new businesses should be formulated for the City Centre and the town centres, in order that most B1 and other high value employment uses can be attracted to existing centres.
- 11 The Core Spatial Strategy should state that flagship projects for education, medical and all other significant developments must be of high design quality in order to provide a visible demonstration of economic transformation.
- 12 The plan should promote the sustainability benefits and economic potential of the re-use of existing buildings, and especially historic buildings, for new employment opportunities, business start-ups, creative industries and a wide variety of low-cost accommodation.
- 13 The Core Spatial Strategy should give strategic guidance for the nature and form of town and City Centre expansion, in order to ensure that a pedestrian-friendly street pattern with active frontages onto the public realm is created.
- 14 An appropriate balance of mixed uses should be defined for each of the centres, in order to encourage vitality and to establish limits for uses that are anti-social when allowed to proliferate.
- 15 The Core Spatial Strategy should state the purpose of the North Staffordshire greenspace network and express a clear commitment to complete and extend the network within the plan period.
- 16 The Built Environment section should make clear the strategic importance of high quality design for successful economic regeneration, housing market renewal, social inclusion, sustainable development, and cultural development by explaining this in the text and by including additional links to Strategic Aims SA6, SA8, SA14, SA15, SA16 and SA20.
- 17 Core policy CP24 should require landscaping proposals to make a positive contribution to the environment and not merely fill in the spaces left after development.
- 18 Core policy CP24 should make it clear that creative and innovative designs will be welcomed in appropriate places.

- 19 Core policy CP24 should address large scale urban design issues such as views and skylines, stating that important views will be protected and indicating areas where high buildings would be appropriate.
- 20 The explanatory text to the Built Environment section should refer to design and access statements and state their purpose.
- 21 The Built Environment section should make reference to the assessments of the historical significance of the North Staffordshire conurbation that are being produced, and the role of urban characterisation studies in providing baseline information for master plans and Area Action Plans.
- 22 CP24 could be revised to focus solely on new design. A new additional core policy could be formulated to deal exclusively with the historic environment, including economic and sustainability considerations (point 12 above).
- 23 The Core Spatial Strategy should promote a step change in the quality of the public transport system that will be developed in North Staffordshire over the plan period.
- 24 The Core Spatial Strategy should state what the two local authorities and other public agencies are going to do to deliver the plan.
- 25 The Core Spatial Strategy should explain the linkages to Community Strategy and state how hard-to-reach groups are being consulted.