

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

20 June 2007

PROPOSAL: North Staffordshire Core Spatial Strategy – Revised 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 Panel considered the first draft of the North Staffordshire Core Spatial Strategy Preferred Options report on 3 August 2006, and recommended 25 actions to strengthen and improve the strategic and local design implications of the document. The Preferred Options report has now been redrafted in the context of the revised Regional Spatial Strategy and the experiences of other Staffordshire local authorities in producing the country's first Core Spatial Strategies, and in the light of some 925 representations received in response to the first Preferred Options report. The Panel had the benefit of a presentation by planning officers from Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council on behalf of the joint planning team responsible for producing the Core Spatial Strategy, which includes Stoke-on-Trent City Council.

Panel Comments

The Panel welcomed the fact that a single strategic plan was being produced for North Staffordshire as a joint exercise by the two urban local authorities. This will enable the conurbation to be dealt with as one entity, giving the plan greater consistency and coherence, and improving its long-term effectiveness.

The Panel strongly supported the general thrust of the Core Spatial Strategy, which is to target development and the regeneration effort on North Staffordshire's main urban centres and the re-use of the area's brownfield land.

The Panel was pleased to see that certain of its recommendations in relation to the first Preferred Options report had been acted on, either wholly or partially. A response to the revised Preferred Options report, dealing with each of the Panel's 25 previous recommendations in the light of its recent comments, follows.

- 1 The vision has been recast in order to be more specific and aspirational, and be less generic than the first draft. Whilst this is a step in the right direction the Panel thought the vision is still not yet visionary enough, nor is it sufficiently locally

distinctive, and that it should express an ongoing active process which engages all sectors of the community in creating a vibrant, attractive and successful urban region.

- 2 The Panel was strongly of the view that the final Core Spatial Strategy document should be illustrated, at the very least with photographs showing the built character of key areas, but preferably with drawings to inspire those using the plan with a sense of direction and a vision of the future of the area. Despite efforts in the introductory summary to present an interesting perspective on the planning process, the present document is still dominated by technical language which, although necessary, needs to be tempered and explained in a more visually accessible way, if the Core Spatial Strategy is to play a proactive role in shaping the future of the area.
- 3 The Core Spatial Strategy does not yet contain any qualitative indicators. Whilst accepting that many of the indicators are determined by central government, these are all quantitative, and the Panel remains firmly of the view that there is a need to use some local indicators that aspire to higher quality standards, such as the number of design awards or design commendations won in the plan period, the number of architectural competitions held, the proportion of visitors and local people who believe the area's built environment is improving in quality, etc. If quality is not integral to delivery, there is every possibility that the plan could deliver the required numbers of dwellings and the target amount of employment land, but still fail to stem population loss, transform the local economy, and change the image of the area.
- 4 The Panel's recommendation that design should be referred to at every level of the Core Spatial Strategy has been partially adopted. The reference to an attractive place to live, work, etc. in the vision, and to its role in creating a more sustainable urban environment in the strategic aims, are supported. However, the Core Spatial Strategy contains no explicit statement of the strategic importance of high quality design in transforming the image of the area, in stimulating high value investment, in creating the conditions for better paid jobs, and in renewing the housing market. As a cross-cutting theme the role of high quality design should be recognised as a strategic aim in itself.
- 5 The emphasis on the primary role of the City Centre with complementary roles for North Staffordshire's town centres is fully endorsed. The Panel thought that North Staffordshire's historic urban form of multiple town centres is not only inescapable but also desirable and a defining part of the area's local distinctiveness, and that the recognition of this in the Core Spatial Strategy by seeking complementary roles for individual centres is the right approach.
- 6 The roles for the towns set out in Table 1: Centres are descriptive rather than prescriptive: the Panel thought that this does not convey a sense of the history of the towns and their intrinsic attributes being used to create a picture of the whole conurbation in which each centre proactively develops its own complementary role.
- 7 The Core Spatial Strategy makes provision to monitor the type, size and tenure of new dwellings being constructed, but does not say what the target for each of these is. Consequently it will be difficult to judge whether the plan is successfully achieving its aims in this regard.

- 8 The Panel welcomed the emphasis on new housing development being required to support the existing urban centres. This is fundamental for sustainable development.
- 9 However, for the area to be able to offer a full range of housing types, sites for a limited amount of low density housing ought to be identified. In the interests of a balanced housing offer there is a case for a finite amount of low density housing in defined areas, perhaps adjacent to enhanced green spaces.
- 10 The Panel supported the focus on siting most office developments within the urban centres. However, the employment monitoring indicators do not specify targets for the amount of new employment in the city centre and town centres, making it difficult to ensure that the right balance is struck in favour of the centres.
- 11 A considerable amount of regeneration investment is programmed for North Staffordshire in the coming years. For this to have the desired effect – economic regeneration, population stabilisation, and an improved housing market – it is essential that flagship projects are delivered to the highest possible design standards. It should be a strategic aim of the Core Spatial Strategy to require all major development projects to demonstrate that they are achieving high design quality because, if they do not, other strategic aims will be undermined.
- 12 The Panel was pleased to see a specific policy on the historic environment. However, the reasoned justification for this policy omits mention of the contribution of the historic environment to sustainable development, its role in economic regeneration, and its cultural, educational and social benefits.
- 13 Policy CP4 *Vitality and Viability of Centres* responds to some degree to the Panel's previous suggestion that guidance should be given as to the required nature and form of expansions to these centres. However, this guidance should be clear that what is required are pedestrian-friendly streets with active frontages which extend or repair the existing urban grain, not large floorplate developments dominated by the needs of cars and service vehicles.
- 14 The Panel was pleased to see that a mix of uses is encouraged within centres. However, it should be pointed out that sustainable development requires this mix to be balanced and limits to be put on potentially anti-social uses. Definitions of an appropriate balance of uses and the maximum level of anti-social uses should be provided.
- 15 Policy CP29 *Green Network* responds well to the Panel's previous suggestion that a commitment be made to completing and extending the green space network where required.
- 16 The supporting text to Policy CP30 *Design and the Built Environment* brings out many of the benefits of good design, as recommended by the Panel previously. The links with Strategic Aims SA5, SA6, SA7, SA8, SA10, SA13, SA15, SA17, SA18, SA19, SA20, SA21, and SA22 should be stated, because if these aims are not underpinned by high quality design, they will not succeed.
- 17 The Panel would like to reiterate its previous recommendation that Policy CP30 *Design and the Built Environment* should require the landscaping provided as part of any development proposal to make a positive contribution to the environment and

not merely fill in the spaces left over, or screen buildings that should not have been approved in the first place.

- 18 Whilst good design is contextual, it is not a wholly reactive process. The Panel considered that CP30 *Design and the Built Environment* should make it clear that creative, innovative and sometimes even challenging designs will be encouraged. There is a need to convey the sense that today's good design is tomorrow's heritage, and that North Staffordshire wishes to enhance its heritage, and not merely play safe by copying or being subservient to the past. One of the great drivers for 21st century architecture will be the need to make new buildings environmentally sustainable by giving them a zero-carbon footprint. It is the view of the Panel that eco-design should be positively embraced as a means of progressing towards a greener future for North Staffordshire.
- 19 CP30 *Design and the Built Environment* now makes reference to some of the large scale urban design issues raised previously by the Panel, namely views and landmarks. The Panel thought that this policy would be improved by including skylines, particularly in relation to the city centre (Hanley) which has the distinction of being located on a hill where the addition of some beautiful high buildings would aid legibility and emphasise its role as the primary commercial centre in the conurbation.
- 20 The explanatory text to CP30 *Design and the Built Environment* now makes reference to the new statutory requirement for Design and Access Statements. However, it does not make clear what the purpose of a Design and Access Statement is, namely to provide an explanation of how the proposed design has been derived from the brief for the development and the nature of the site and its environment. It should be emphasised that a Design and Access Statement is not there to justify a proposed design done previously or in isolation.
- 21 Policy CP25 *Historic Environment* makes reference to heritage characterisation as a technique for assessing the historic value of an area. However, the study referred to in the Core Spatial Strategy has been superseded, as a characterisation study of the whole of the North Staffordshire conurbation was completed in December 2006, which provides baseline data for master planning, Area Action Plans and other area regeneration initiatives, and contains other recommendations for making use of this information.
- 22 The Panel noted that new design and the historic environment are now dealt with through separate policies, as suggested previously. However, the rationale for CP25 *Historic Environment* would be considerably strengthened by adding further justifications as described in 12 above. The Panel had the impression that the Core Spatial Strategy does not demonstrate that the history of Stoke-on-Trent in particular has been fully understood in developing the vision, aims and policies of the plan, and that the potential for developing the special character of the conurbation and utilising it as a magnet for tourists and high value new development has not been taken.
- 23 The Panel endorsed the aspirations in CP31 *Transport and Accessibility* for a significantly improved system of sustainable transportation across the conurbation, and considered it absolutely vital for economic regeneration and sustainable development that the centres of North Staffordshire are well connected by environmentally friendly modes of transport. The Panel wished to point out that the construction of the new A50 and the improvement of the A500 open up the

opportunity to convert the old A50, which connects seven of the conurbation's centres, to a dedicated sustainable transport route used by hydrogen buses (for example), cycles and pedestrians only. Spurs or loops from this linear route could link to the towns of Stoke and Newcastle, and to other key locations such as Festival Park and the proposed strategic park and ride sites. The Panel urged the local authorities to investigate the feasibility of this proposal, as part of an overall improved transport strategy for the conurbation.

- 24 The Panel supported the kind of area-based approach to delivery proposed in CP34 *Integrated Approach to Delivery*, rather than an unfocused, dispersed approach reacting to random opportunities as they arise. However, it should be pointed out that the priorities mentioned in CP34 are organised largely around the needs of housing market renewal, rather than being a result of setting criteria for prioritising areas based on economic, social and environmental impact. Whilst housing market renewal is very important, the future economic purpose of North Staffordshire is more important, as this will determine whether the area can flourish again or will continue its long term decline.
- 25 The Panel noted that the redrafted Core Spatial Strategy now contains a table showing the linkages to the Community Strategy for Stoke-on-Trent; however, the same information was not apparent for Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Conclusion

The Panel was broadly supportive of much in the Core Spatial Strategy Preferred Options report. The targeted rather than dispersed approach to regeneration, references to the need for high quality design, the desire to promote the city centre as the principal focus and develop strong complementary roles for the other centres, the emphasis on the importance of improving the housing offer, the recognition of the strategic role of the greenspace network, the aspiration to significantly improve the transportation system – all of these will help create a better city region and make North Staffordshire more attractive to visitors, investors, and residents alike.

The Panel's views in respect of a number of key issues which remain to be resolved are set out in the paragraphs above. Since its previous consideration by the Panel the Core Spatial Strategy has changed for the better, although further work needs to be done. A leading priority in this will be to refine and illustrate the vision for the area so that it conveys a clearer sense of where the area is heading in a way that is accessible to developers and citizens alike. The historic qualities of North Staffordshire should be called on to inform this, as should the strategic economic vision currently being developed for the city region by the Work Foundation: together these will reveal how the area is moving from its industrial past to a more knowledge-based economic future.

As the Core Spatial Strategy is developed further the Panel thought that every effort should be made to find ways of introducing illustrations of the future North Staffordshire that the plan aims to create. This will enliven the document, giving it wider appeal, and also aid understanding which will enable it to be more readily implemented. The Panel thought that the Core Spatial Strategy should convey a stronger sense of the history of the area, of where it is coming from, in order to better understand and visualise its potential to move forward in the global economy.