

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

4 October 2007

PROPOSAL: Staffordshire Moorlands Core Strategy – Summary of Issues and Options
LOCATION: Staffordshire Moorlands
LOCAL AUTHORITIES: Staffordshire Moorlands District Council
REF NO: DR 077

Introduction

The Staffordshire Moorlands Core Strategy will be the key document in the Local Development Framework for Staffordshire Moorlands District Council, setting out the Council's broad approach to the quantity and location of new development in the district up to 2026. The Core Strategy will include a spatial vision of what the area will be like, strategic objectives which state how the vision will be achieved, a development strategy setting out how different parts of the district should develop, core policies containing the basic principles for development covering a range of subjects, and a monitoring and implementation framework.

The District Council has published a summary of the issues and options which will need to be addressed in the Core Strategy, as the basis for consultation with local people and relevant bodies in order to achieve a broad consensus on the nature, scale and location of new development over the plan period. The Panel received a presentation from the District Council's Planning Policy Manager prior to commenting on the issues and options summary paper.

Summary of Issues and Options

The West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy will determine the amount of new housing required in the District over the plan period. It is anticipated that a minimum of 2,200 and a maximum of 4,200 new homes will be required by 2026, with declining household size and high levels of in-migration currently making the higher end figure look the more likely. In dealing with these pressures there is a need to provide for a rising elderly population and ensure that sufficient affordable housing is available.

At the same time there is a need to enable the economy to modernise and diversify, to help existing centres to thrive, and to improve access to and the quality of social and recreational facilities.

The protection and enhancement of the countryside and the built and natural environment will be a key issue in maintaining the attractive qualities of the district. The need to tackle climate change and to ensure that new development is truly sustainable will become increasingly important over the plan period, as will the need to maximise accessibility and promote sustainable modes of travel.

Panel Comments

The Panel thought that the Issues and Options Summary paper was a well structured document, clearly written and user-friendly in its presentation. An impressive amount of evidence has been gathered to inform the work to date. The overall result is an accessible publication which identifies the majority of the key issues facing the District Council in preparing its main strategic plan for the next 20 years.

1 Spatial development

Of the four spatial development options contained in the Issues and Options paper the Panel considered that Option 3 Distributed development to be the least acceptable. It would reduce local distinctiveness by allowing new development to become widespread. It would not facilitate sustainable development, because it would generate more vehicle movements. It would not support the vitality and viability of existing centres, because it would disperse rather than focus population.

The Panel favoured an option which would concentrate the majority of new development in the three main towns. The Panel accepted the need to ensure that the rural areas retain their viability, but thought that any development in villages should be of infill nature only and should not involve any peripheral expansion. This would ensure that any adverse impact on the landscape is kept to the absolute minimum. Subject to this proviso the Panel thought that a carefully defined version of Option 2 would offer the best balance between the different spatial development possibilities.

2 Identifying, protecting and enhancing the character of the area

The Panel thought that the greatest strategic asset of Staffordshire Moorlands is the quality of its physical and natural environment. This attracts residents and visitors, providing the basis for a vibrant and affluent local economy and a rich social life. Whilst new development offers an opportunity to support the local economy, it also presents a threat to the character of the towns and villages in which it takes place. This is especially true for new housing, where the tendency is to provide residential units with generic “anywhere” designs which have little regard for local distinctiveness. This primary issue needs to be given greater emphasis in the Core Strategy because, unless it is explicitly recognised as being absolutely fundamental to the future success of the district, there is a risk that other policies may allow the special local distinctiveness of the area to be undermined.

The Panel considered that character studies should be carried out in all the areas where development is likely to take place, in order to define precisely and systematically the special qualities of those areas. From this understanding appropriate policies should be formulated which enable the character of those areas where development is likely to take place to be protected and enhanced, so that their environment is improved and not degraded. Master plans should then be produced to show how the agreed levels of new development will be physically integrated within the each town so as to preserve and enhance its character.

3 Re-use of redundant industrial buildings

The Panel commented that the character of Leek, and certain other settlements, is in large part derived from the mill buildings which had provided much of the employment and economic vitality of the district. Global economic change has rendered most of these buildings redundant, with many of them now standing vacant with no clear future. The Panel thought that if these buildings, which contribute so much to local distinctiveness, are to survive, then the balance between conversion of existing buildings and the exploitation of new development opportunities should be weighed in favour of conversion.

In the experience of the Panel developers will tend to take the easiest option which almost invariably means new build on a green field site. Brownfield development and the re-use of historic buildings are more difficult options, despite being more sustainable and more beneficial to the character and attractiveness of the area. The Panel considered that the Core Strategy should provide a bigger vision for the re-use of the area's mills and other historic buildings, which is reflected in a framework of strategic objectives and core policies that facilitate the retention and beneficial re-use of the industrial heritage and brownfield land and constrain the easier opportunities presented by greenfield sites.

4 Design

The Issues and Options paper recognises the need for high quality design in new development. Whilst fully supporting this principle, the Panel thought there is a need to define more precisely what is meant by good design. Where local distinctiveness is such a special quality, there is a danger that new development is forced to follow the styles of the past, with the result that creativity is stifled and insipid imitations of historic buildings are produced. This approach undermines the value of genuine historic buildings and fails to provide new buildings of true quality which will become tomorrow's heritage.

The Core Strategy should include strategic objectives and core policies which encourage creative new design which respects but does not imitate its context.

Conclusion

The Panel welcomed this opportunity to comment on production of the Staffordshire Moorlands District Council Core Strategy. The Issues and Options paper provided an attractive, accessible and readily understandable introduction to the process of plan preparation. The consultation document includes most, if not all, of the key issues and factors likely to influence the future development of the district. However, the Panel thought that to fully realise the potential of the area there is a need to give greater emphasise to the protection and enhancement of the district special character and to provide a policy framework that favours the re-use of important heritage

buildings and constrains new development. New development should be focused in the main town centres, and positive encouragement should be given to creative high quality design.

Recommendations

- 1 The Preferred Option for spatial development in Staffordshire Moorlands should be to focus development in the three main town centres and to restrict it elsewhere to infilling within the existing boundaries of established settlements.
- 2 Character studies should be carried out in each town and settlement where significant development is envisaged, to support policy formulation and underpin master planning.
- 3 The Core Strategy should recognise the strategic importance of the area's industrial heritage and should include core policies which favour the retention and re-use of historic buildings and constrain the opportunities for green field development.
- 4 The Core Strategy should include a core design policy that promotes creative new design that is sensitive to its context, and discourages imitations of past architectural styles.