

Planning Committee

19 November 2008



**Sedgefield Borough Council:
Spennymoor Town Centre Area Action
Plan: Public Participation
(Issues and Options)**

Report of Rod Lugg, Head of Environment and Planning

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To advise the Committee of a consultation by Sedgefield Borough Council on the Spennymoor Town Centre Area Action Plan: Issues and Options report. Members are asked to endorse the comments in paragraphs 8, 9 and 10 of this report and in the attached schedule in Appendix 2 as the County Council's formal response. Copies of the consultation report have been placed in the Members' Resource Centre.

Background

- 2 The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 introduced major changes to the planning system in England. The Act requires all Councils to prepare new style spatial planning documents to replace existing Local Plans and agree the programme of plan preparation with Government in a Local Development Scheme which must be kept up to date. The Borough Council's Local Development Scheme (March 2008) specified the preparation of a Town Centre Area Action Plan for Spennymoor and consultants were employed to progress the document several months ago. The intent was that, once finalised, the Area Action Plan would form part of the Local Development Framework for the area.
- 3 Consultation on the Town Centre Area Action Plan has now been overtaken by events. Local Government Review necessitates the preparation of a single Local Development Framework for County Durham. An agreed Local Development Scheme for the new Unitary Council has to be submitted to Government by December 31 2008, under the Local Government (Structural Changes) (Transitional Arrangements) Regulations 2008 (expected to be enacted by the end of November). A draft Scheme is scheduled for consideration by Cabinet to meet the deadline for submission. The Town Centre Area Action Plan was published for consultation before the draft Local Development Scheme had been finalised. It is now proposed that a wider Area Action Plan is required for the Spennymoor area to deliver the development identified in the South and East Durham New Growth Point programme. The Plan will still include measures to regenerate and revitalise Spennymoor Town Centre.

- 4 Area Action Plans are used to provide the planning framework for areas where significant change, for example regeneration or conservation is needed. A key feature of Area Action Plans (AAPs) is to focus on implementation. In response to the Government's 2007 Housing Green Paper, the Durham Housing and Neighbourhood Partnership was successful in bidding for a new growth point for South and East Durham. The Growth Point seeks to deliver accelerated housing and employment growth, in order to address economic and regeneration needs within these communities. The proposals as set out in the bid still need to be tested through the Local Development Framework process. As a result policies and sites for the Growth Point area will be identified within three AAPs, one of which will be for Spennymoor.

Spennymoor Town Centre Area Action Plan: Issues and Options Report

- 5 The intention of the Town Centre Area Action Plan is to support the Borough Council's aspiration to create a vibrant and progressive town centre positioned to provide the facilities and services demanded by the Town's growing population. A comprehensive planning framework is needed to attract investment into Spennymoor Town Centre, by encouraging new development and long term regeneration, whilst complementing the development opportunities being considered elsewhere in Spennymoor, including the South Spennymoor urban extension (accommodating up to 1,000 new dwellings), the Durham Gate, near Thinford (comprising 45,000 square metres of office floor space) and potentially a new secondary school. A proposal to bring together Spennymoor and Tudhoe Grange schools in a single new school has already been the subject of extensive public consultation in the town and at its meeting on 18th September Cabinet considered a report on the outcome of the consultation and agreed to move this proposal forward. The new school is scheduled to open in September 2013.
- 6 The Town Centre Area Action Plan summarises the relevant national, regional and local policy context, including the Regional Spatial Strategy for the North East which identifies Spennymoor as a regeneration town in the Durham Coalfield Regeneration Area. The document explains the strategic context for the regeneration of Spennymoor. It contains a socio-economic analysis, considers the performance of the town centre and contains a place analysis which highlights the key issues and challenges for the town centre. The document includes a vision with supporting objectives and sets out a range of potential options in relation to the town centre boundaries and three specific development sites in the town centre:
- Festival Walk shopping centre and environs,
 - Former Gas works Site; and
 - Cheapside.

The document also considers further issues and options relating to the public realm. The County Council's detailed response to these options is provided in Appendix 2.

- 7 The most significant issues within the Town Centre Area Action Plan relate to how the proposed South Spennymoor urban extension, south of the A688 Spennymoor Bypass can be integrated with the town centre and how access routes can be engineered from the town centre to the urban extension area. Three options are proposed:

- Option 1: the maximum growth scenario – integrate major southern extension;
- Option 2: medium growth scenario – integrate with more modest urban extension; and
- Option 3: limited growth scenario with no major changes being required to the highway network.

The medium and maximum growth scenarios are illustrated with two maps (page 49 of the consultation report). These maps propose moving the A688 Spennymoor Bypass to a new alignment to the south of the existing bypass (Option 1) and transforming the A688 bypass by converting it to single carriage way with new town access roads (Option 2).

- 8 While the merits of the proposed south Spennymoor urban extension and the Growth Point will need to be considered and tested through the preparation of the County Durham Local Development Framework, the strategic transport implications of both Options 1 and 2 are considered unacceptable to the County Council as Highways Authority. The A688 is recognised as the main strategic east-west route across the County. The County Council's priorities are to preserve and enhance this route. To date this has been achieved through targeted investment to improve the A688 i.e. the A688 West Auckland Bypass and the A688 Wheatley Hill to Bowburn link road. While acknowledging the growth point potential at Spennymoor, the County Council's view is that no major changes must be made to the highway network which would affect the strategic role of the A688.

- 9 It is considered that the stated transport implications of the medium growth scenario (to transform the bypass into a single carriageway) would undermine the role of the A688 and would not provide the vehicular capacity required for this important east-west route. In addition traffic flows are likely to increase through future development in Spennymoor and South and East Durham associated with the Growth Point. It is also considered that the stated transport implications of the maximum growth scenario (moving the bypass) would undermine the strategic role of this strategic highway link, create additional severance issues and potentially compromise elements of the South Spennymoor urban extension. A further significant issue is funding. No evidence or business case has been put forward by the Borough Council to demonstrate that moving the bypass is affordable or viable.

- 10 Members should note that the issue of integrating the South Spennymoor urban extension with the town centre has been already acknowledged through the growth bid to the Department for Transport for Community Infrastructure Funding (CIF). The CIF bid identified measures to improve two public rights of way that cross the A688 by way of an existing underpass and the B6288 Merrington Lane at-grade in separate locations. If additional improvements are needed in addition to the measures identified in the CIF bid, potentially further links could be considered, via an additional underpass or road bridge. Additional improvements would, however, need to be properly investigated and a business case made.
- 11 The County Council's suggested response to the issues raised are covered in paragraphs 8, 9 and 10 above and Appendix 2.

Conclusions

- 12 The publication of the consultation report is welcomed. Spennymoor has long been recognised by the County Council as one of the County's main towns and a focus for new development. More recently it has been identified as a 'regeneration town' by the Regional Spatial Strategy for the North East, where regeneration and development for sustainable growth will be supported. Consultation on this document has however been overtaken by the decision to prepare a wider Area Action Plan to deliver the South and East Durham Growth Point. The comments the Borough Council receive on this document will contribute to the new County Durham Local Development Framework, including the wider Area Action Plan to deliver the South and East Durham Growth Point.

Recommendation and Reasons

- 13 The Committee is recommended to endorse the comments in paragraphs 8, 9 and 10 and Appendix 2 as the County Council's formal response to Sedgfield Borough Council's Spennymoor Town Centre Area Action Plan: Issues and Options.

Background Papers:

Spennymoor Area Action Plan Public Participation (Issues and Options)

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Appendix 1: Implications

Local Government Review

Does the decision impact upon a future Unitary Council?

The Government has urged local authorities in areas affected by Local Government Review not to delay the preparation of LDF's. The County Council needs to respond to this remaining District Council consultation which will feed into joint working on the programme of plans for the Unitary Authority.

Finance

None.

Staffing

None.

Equality and Diversity

None.

Accommodation

None.

Crime and Disorder

Improving the environment of the town centre offers significant opportunities to help design out crime and provide a secure environment.

Sustainability

The creation of a vibrant and attractive town centre for Spennymoor will help ensure that the settlement is sustainable.

Human Rights

None.

Localities and Rurality

The Issues and Options consultation addresses issues and options for the development and use of land in Spennymoor town centre.

Young People

The planning system promotes community involvement including that of young people.

Consultation

The consultation period for this document ran until 17 November. Due to the Council's Planning Committee cycle it was not possible to take a report prior to this date. The Borough Council have however confirmed that they will treat any representations after that date as 'duly made'.

Health

None.

Appendix 2: Durham County Council's Response to Sedgefield Borough Council Town Centre Area Action Plan

Q1. Do you think that the issues and challenges described above are accurate and represent an adequate evidence base on which to develop an Area Action plan for the town centre? Please explain.

The issues and challenges (outlined on page 25 of the consultation report) appear to summarise the main issues and challenges facing the town centre. Given that a wider Area Action Plan for Spennymoor will now be prepared to deliver the South and East Durham Growth Point, it will be necessary for a revised set of issues and challenges to be produced encompassing both the town centre and the wider area. This new Area Action Plan will require a wider range of evidence to be considered including the Major Centres Studies (2004 and 2006) commissioned by the County Durham Economic Partnership (CDEP) and in addition the Experian report into shopping patterns and retail which was produced in 2006.

In reconsidering issues and challenges and developing the new evidence base for the wider Growth Point Area Action Plan regard should be paid to the wider context and role of Spennymoor as a main town within County Durham and its complementary role and relationship with nearby major centres including Durham City and Bishop Auckland. Furthermore given Spennymoor's role as a main town serving its hinterland, identified issues and challenges should consider Spennymoor's role in relation to the smaller settlements it supports such as Tudhoe, Ferryhill, Croxdale and Cornforth.

Q2. Are there any other issues which you think are relevant?

The issue of sustainability and how future development can be designed and delivered in ways which meet acknowledged sustainability criteria such as those set out in 'Building in Sustainability: A guide to sustainable construction and development in the North East' should be fully considered.

The policy context does not address transport considerations sufficiently. While a number of local policy documents are reviewed the Area Action Plan fails to consider the County Durham Local Transport Plan². This is a key omission given the role of the Local Transport Plan which sets out the 5 year transport strategy for the County. Further analysis of the transport implications and the impacts of how people travel and move within a redesigned town centre would be very useful. The CDEP Major Centres Study highlights that a third of Spennymoor residents have no car and that the majority of town centre users walk into town. This has impacts on the design of the town centre and connectivity with the surroundings, but these are not adequately considered. There is also a need to consider how to reduce car use in and around the town rather than simply viewing vehicular restrictions as having a negative effect on the town's vitality (see p46). Any proposals to amend/adjust existing 'vehicle restrictions' to the High Street should only be considered and proceed with the full support of Durham County Council's Southern Area Traffic Engineer.

Q3. Do you agree with the vision?

The document states that the vision is based on three core propositions, but could be clearer in articulating a more locally distinctive vision for the town centre. The vision also needs to consider how it can prevent Spennymoor from becoming a 'clone town' and how it will improve its vibrancy. Proposition 1 refers to Spennymoor's role as a 'sub-regional district shopping centre'. The use of this term is confusing in relation to the regional hierarchy of centres in the RSS (Policy25) which defines Newcastle as the regional centre, Sunderland, Darlington and Middlesbrough as sub-regional centres for retail and leisure uses, followed by Durham City, as an important centre for retail, leisure, and other services and facilities serving a wide hinterland. Town centres within the regeneration areas, such as Spennymoor, should be given particular priority and "development should be consistent with their scale and function to maintain and enhance their health and vitality". The future role of Spennymoor town centre and its relationship with Bishop Auckland and Durham City needs to be further considered.

The final sentence of the vision is based on good intentions, but needs to be strengthened. The Major Centres Study highlights that the majority of people perceive Spennymoor's built form to be of poor quality. Overcoming these perceptions could be a fundamental objective of the AAP. The AAP team should strive for BREEAM excellence in the built environments and it is recommended that the team work with One NorthEast and CABE to ensure the AAP is based on principles of design excellence and the promotion of social and environmental sustainability.

Q4. Do you agree with the objectives?

The identified objectives appear to be appropriate for the town centre, but will need to be reconsidered in drafting the wider Growth Point Area Action Plan for Spennymoor. Consideration should also be given to how individual objectives will be implemented with clear targets to facilitate monitoring. With respect, to objective 5 'Improve access and movement patterns in and around the centre', the County Highways Development Control Team has advised that any adjustments/amendments to the High Street vehicle restrictions must be supported by Durham County Council's Southern Area Traffic Engineer.

Q5. Are there any other objectives that you feel require incorporating into this further?

See response to question 4.

Q6. Do you agree that the options represent the most appropriate scenarios for meeting the vision and objectives of the AAP?

The proposed issues and options need to be reconsidered in light of future work associated with the wider Area Action Plan to deliver the South and East Durham Growth Point. Nevertheless, the County Council's detailed response to the proposed options is set out in question 7. Please note the Council's objection to proposals to transform or move the A688 Spennymoor Bypass, as set in full in paragraphs 8, 9 and 10 of the County Council's Planning Committee Report.

Q7. Please indicate which options you prefer?

Town Centre Boundary Options

The proposal to expand the town centre boundaries to allow for the enlargement of the town centre, bring forward the former 'Gas Works' site and create a Gateway site to the town centre and introduce core and secondary retail areas appear to all have merit and provide the basis for measures to help regenerate the town centre.

Development Site Options

The County Council acknowledges the apparent redevelopment potential of the three identified sites, 'Festival Walk shopping centre and its environs', 'former gas works site' and 'Cheapside'. Given the strategic planning role of the County Council and the detailed nature of the options it is not appropriate for the County Council to distinguish between these options. One of the local Members has provided detailed comments and these will be forwarded to the Borough Council.

Public Realm

Given the strategic planning role of the County Council and the detailed nature of the options for these, it is not appropriate for the County Council to comment on which options is preferable. The County Council does however support measures to improve the public realm.

Access and Movement

The County Council does not agree with the identified issue in relation to lack of vitality caused by 'over engineered' street and vehicular restrictions. No evidence has been put forward to demonstrate that this issue is soundly based. The preferred options under 'Access and Movement' must be acceptable to Durham County Council's Integrated Transport Unit and in particular Durham County Council's Southern Area Traffic Engineer, who may ultimately be left with the legacy of policing any future scheme.

The County Council does not agree with transport implications of the strategic access and movement issue. Please refer to paragraphs 8, 9 and 10 of the County Council's Planning Committee Report. The A688 bypass to the south of the Town Centre must be left untouched by any of the Town Centre proposals.

Q.8 Please indicate if there are any other options that you think require consideration?

No further options are apparent.