

Local Policy Forum 6th April 2006

Topic Paper 1: The Role of the Local Policy Forum

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Background

The Borough Council is committed to stakeholder involvement to shape its policies and proposals. The Council is moving along the path to improvement through its CPA assessments. The Planning service has recently been subject to external audit. The audit commission considered the service to be good, with good prospects for improvement. However, improvement can only be achieved with full stakeholder involvement and consensus. Options for future development must be fully open and transparent.

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, 2004 introduces a new planning system, overhauling the old Development Plans regime. It replaces Regional Planning Guidance with a Regional Spatial Strategy. Structure Plans are abolished, and Local Plans replaced by Local Development Documents. These documents are quite different from Local Plans. They start by developing issues and options. These are then refined through consultation to Preferred Options, which are then further refined through consultation to a submission document for Examination. The expectation is that there will be significant consensus by the final draft and the Inspector's Report is binding.

The new planning system offers significant challenges, but it also offers opportunity. For the first time consultation takes place on development options. This may include additional options put forward at consultation stages. All options including sites must be environmentally appraised. The outcomes of these appraisals must also be made public. The system is frontloaded, with early debate and stakeholder input.

The Borough Council considers that the establishment of a Forum allows for ongoing debate and discussion. The outcomes of the Forum will be used to inform and shape drafts of the various Development Plan Documents that the Council are to produce. The Forum is an ongoing venture. It is not intended to be political. It draws on a range of interests who all have an equal right to be heard, and whose views carry equal validity. It is a means of helping to achieve, and demonstrate full participation.

Previous Forums

The Borough Council's experience is that the Forum approach works well. The Adopted Wiltshire and Swindon Waste Local Plan developed consensus through a facilitated Forum, which was one of the first of its kind. Forums have

more recently been used to inform the review of Minerals and Waste Plans. The outcomes of the Minerals and Waste Forums informed the Issues and Options draft Minerals and Waste Development documents, helping to build consensus over strategies and options for wider consultation, and in developing options for identifying sites for minerals and waste developments.

These Forums have been independently facilitated. It is the Council's intention to use independent facilitators for future Local Policy Forum meetings. The tenders for facilitation are currently being evaluated. However, timescales for the production of the Local Development Framework are tight. The Council considers the production of more formal guidance for Swindon's Central Area to be imperative. This will be Swindon's first Local Development Document. (*see Appendix 1 – extract from Swindon Borough Council's 'Local Development Scheme', (2006)*). To ensure that the production of the document is not held up, this first introductory Forum will not be independently facilitated.

The Forum – House Rules

The Local Policy Forum must play an important role in helping to shape planning policy by considering options and building consensus on policies and proposals. The Borough Council's draft 'Statement of Community Involvement' highlights the use of Forums as an important step in developing 'Issues and Options' for consideration and consultation. To achieve this, the Forum will need to operate within certain boundaries.

- Members of the Forum should act in an objective manner when contributing to the Forum and appreciate that policies and proposals within Local Development Documents must reflect national and regional planning policy. Proposals in conflict with strategic policies will fail the Inspector's tests of soundness, and the Plan will not be allowed to proceed to examination.
- Every Forum member has the right to be heard. Members of the Forum must respect individuals' views, even though they may not agree with them. Views and opinions must be allowed to be expressed without fear of aggressive challenge.
- Members of the Forum who represent a particular group or organisation should accurately portray the viewpoints of that group.
- Core membership of the Forum is restricted to those members that have stated an interest in advance of the first meeting.
- For the Council's part we will endeavour to provide a summary of the outcomes of the Forum to all members as soon as practicable after the meeting. Any formal outcomes of the Forum process will be attributed to the Forum as a whole. Individuals' opinions or viewpoints will not be

included in any report of the Forum's work, or in documents for wider consultation.

Forum Meetings

The Forum will be convened at key stages in the preparation of the Council's Local Development Documents. This meeting seeks to introduce the concept of the Forum and to discuss the main issues and options associated with the first Local Development Document – the Central Area Action Plan. Future facilitated meetings will take place in the development of issues and options for a review of the Local Plan's 'Core Strategy' and 'Site Allocations'. Forum members will be informed of future meetings, and their purpose well in advance of the meeting. Depending on content and subject matter, future meetings could be either half, or all day events.

Format of Forum Meetings

Future Forum meetings will be independently facilitated. They will be issue specific and will usually start with an explanatory presentation of the issue. They may also include group work on policy or option development, site considerations or problem solving. Outcomes will be reported to the group, and summaries of each session will be distributed to Forum members. These summaries are for the Forum Members' own information, and do not constitute formal aspects of plan or policy development.

The Council will consider all issues raised by the Forum in an objective and transparent manner. Recommendations of the Forum will be constructively evaluated to aid drafting of Local Development Documents. The Council will ensure that its consideration of the Forum's outcomes are clear and are reported to its decision makers. The Forum's recommendations will ultimately form part of the Council's body of evidence to the Inspector for independent examination.

The First Forum Meeting

This meeting serves to both explain the role and purpose of the Forum, and to develop options for updating the Central Area policies of the draft Local Plan, and The New Swindon Company's Regeneration Framework. This is the first Local Development Document to be produced by the Council and will help deliver regeneration in Swindon's Central Area.

Although the Local Plan policies provide a broad context to regeneration, they lack specific detail. Much work has been done to master plan certain areas within the central area, lead by The New Swindon Company. The Central Area Action Plan must re-evaluate the Local Plan's policy context, and the detailed master planning. Although these existing policies are likely to provide

the basis for an option, other options may exist, covering both areas for improvement and protection. We must ensure that the right land uses are planned in the right place, that development complements the best of what already exists and that it works in land use, social, environmental and economic terms.

The Central Area Action Plan provides the opportunity to ensure that we have the correct suite of policies to deliver regeneration and renewal. This is your chance to influence the issues and options consultation exercise.

Richard Bell
Acting Forward Planning Group Leader
March 2006

Appendix 1 – extract from Swindon Borough Council’s ‘Local Development Scheme’, (2006).

Swindon Central Area Action Plan

What is its purpose?

- To provide a more detailed policy context to shape the regeneration of central Swindon covering development in the short and medium term.
- To ensure that the major project areas within the central area are developed in the most appropriate manner to the highest quality and
- To provide certainty to all stakeholders.

What geographical area will it cover?

The Major Project Areas within Swindon Central Area, including much of Swindon Town Centre, subject to the outcome of the Inspector’s Report into the Swindon Borough Local Plan, 2011.

What is the Chain of Conformity?

With the Swindon Borough Local Plan, 2011

What are the links to the Community Strategy \ Corporate Plan?

Community Strategy – Creating a Swindon for the Future; An Economically Prosperous Place; A Place which values its Environment and Safeguards it for Future Generations; (and also A Healthy and Caring Place and Keeping Swindon Safe)

Corporate Plan – An Economically Prosperous Place (incl. the need to regenerate the heart of Swindon); An Environmentally Friendly Place;

Swindon 2010 – Working alongside TNSC, to regenerate the town centre into a vibrant heart of the town and Borough, including a new library, unique shopping environment with a market square and new leisure, commercial and residential facilities;

Other Council Plans \ Strategies – Housing Needs Survey; Open Space Audit and Assessment; Schools Organisation Plan; Local Transport Plan; Culture and Leisure Strategy; TNSC’s ‘Regeneration Framework’.

Will it be a Development Plan Document?

Yes.

Will The Borough Council work in partnership with another LA?

No, but the document will be prepared in partnership with The New Swindon Company.

Project Managers

The Project Managers for the Swindon Central Area Action Plan will be the Forward Planning Manager, Swindon Borough Council and the Planning Manager of The New Swindon Company.

Internal Partners

The principal internal partners for the preparation of the Swindon Central Area Action Plan will be:-

- Director of Environment and Property
- Director of Education and Community
- Director of Law and Corporate Governance
- Transportation Planning Manager,
- Development Manager
- Head of Property and Technical Services

External Partners

The principal external partners for the Swindon Central Area Action Plan will be;

- TNSC (prepared in partnership with SBC)
- ODPM and DEFRA via GOSW
- Planning Inspectorate
- English Heritage
- South West Regional Assembly
- South West Regional Development Agency
- Swindon Chamber of Commerce
- Swindon Developer Forum
- English Partnerships
- Local Councils and Central Area community groups
- Landowners and Developers with an interest in the central area

Resources, Staffing and Budgets

Staff resources are primarily the Local Policy team within the Forward Planning Group and at The New Swindon Company. It is expected that the AAP will be led by the Forward Planning Group, in partnership with TNSC who will be expected to undertake much of the technical work and provide justification. The project will be supported by the shared resource of a GIS Technician. In addition to the progression of the Swindon Central Area Action Plan, the Forward Planning team are also responsible for the progression of the Local Plan, MWLDDs, (in partnership with Wiltshire County Council), the SCI and SPG\SPD and the Annual Monitoring Report.

Financial resources must be identified to cover the preparation of the AAP for inclusion in the Borough Council's short and medium term budget plans. The preparation of an AAP is likely to be undertaken largely 'in house' and is expected to necessitate the procurement of external resources only to undertake a SEA \ SA of the proposals, unless there is a need to fill temporary vacancies. The Departmental Finance Officer has been informed of the need to prepare LDDs to review and update local policy.

Constraints, Risk and Contingencies

The main constraints on the preparation of the Swindon Central Area Action Plan are the Inspector's Report into the Swindon Borough Local Plan, 2011, which may amend central area policy; and the loss of permanent staff. Currently, recruitment of experienced and able staff is difficult for planning departments in general. This would be a particular concern if experienced staff were to be lost once work on the AAP has commenced. The only realistic contingency open to the Borough Council in the event of staff losses would be to seek the employment of temporary staff or use consultants if budgets are maintained for this purpose. Other existing staff are fully occupied meeting other priorities.

Community and Stakeholder Involvement

All relevant stakeholders will be informed of the document with key stakeholders (determined through the SCI) involved from the outset in shaping an initial 'issues and options' document. The main features of public involvement are likely to be:-

- The use of a local forum (or similar) to carry out consultation at the start of the process
- Public consultation at the pre-submission stage on key issues and preferred options
- Formal public consultation at the stage of draft submission to the ODPM.

At all stages, the Borough Council will keep all interested parties up to date on progress through the Local Plan Newsletter, which will be distributed to stakeholders, and public buildings around the Borough.

Justification for Preparation

There is an urgent need to provide a more detailed policy context to facilitate and enable central area regeneration than is currently provided by the Swindon Borough Local Plan, 2011. This context can best be developed through an AAP that will provide the necessary

detail to inform the submission of detailed development schemes and provide a context for the subsequent consideration of applications.

Key Milestones

Informal Issues and Options (Reg 25) Consultation	May 2006
Preferred Options (Reg 26) Consultation	Aug 2006
Report to Cabinet and Full Council	Nov 2006
Submission to SoS and consultation	Dec 2006
Pre-Examination Meeting	Jan 2007
Public Examination	May 2007
Inspectors Report	Aug 2007
Report to Cabinet and Full Council	Sept 2007
Adoption	Oct 2007

When will the document be reviewed?

The Plan will serve the purpose of guiding the regeneration process in Swindon's central area and in the determination of subsequent planning applications. It will remain 'live' until the major schemes in the central area have consent. Review will occur if there is a need for amendment if certain policies within the Plan become redundant.