
Meeting: Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date: 11 June 2012
Subject: Draft Development Strategy for Central Bedfordshire
Report of: Cllr Nigel Young, Executive Member for Sustainable Communities – Strategic Planning and Economic Development
Summary: The report follows the Committee’s consideration of the draft Development Strategy on 16 May 2012. Additional material is presented for consideration and the Committee is asked to consider whether it has further comments to make in the light of this material.

Advising Officer: Richard Fox, Head of Development Planning and Housing Strategy
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All in Central Bedfordshire
Function of: Council

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

1. The Development Strategy, as an overarching planning policy document, has the potential to contribute to each of the five Council priorities. The main focus of the document is to achieve the Council Priority to manage growth effectively, but the document also deals with the remaining 4 priorities to some degree.

Financial:

2. The report to the Executive on 4 October 2011 included detail on the costs associated with producing a Development Strategy and the costs of not producing one. The Executive agreed that there was a need to produce a Development Strategy, with the associated financial implications.

In terms of this current report, the Committee is being asked for its view on the content of the draft document prior to public consultation. There is a financial cost of the public consultation but this consultation would need to take place whatever the final content of the document.

Legal:

3. Once adopted the Development Strategy will form part of the statutory Development Plan and will be the basis for consideration of planning applications. Until this happens the existing adopted documents will continue to set the planning framework.

Risk Management:

4. The process of producing a Development Strategy and other planning policy documents is long and complex and high quality project management and risk management skills are required. A Project Board has been established to oversee the work.

Among the risks being monitored by the Board is the risk of being inundated by a larger number of comments through the consultation process, which could jeopardise the timetable moving forward. Rather than limit the opportunities to comment or restrict the circulation of documents, this risk has been managed by trying to establish key issues at as early a stage as possible, mainly through the questionnaire and workshops. If views are taken on board early in the process, there is often less need for people to comment during later stages of consultation.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

5. Not Applicable.

Equalities/Human Rights:

6. The Development Strategy will be subject to a specific Equality Impact Assessment and the results will be reported back to Members before the document is submitted.

Public Health

7. The Development Strategy could have a number of benefits in terms of public health and wellbeing. There is a specific section of the document that seeks to summarise the interactions between strategic planning and public health. These include promoting healthy lifestyles through enabling walking and cycling and through appropriate leisure and open space provision. Health infrastructure and securing appropriate developer contributions towards such provision are also important aspects, in association with the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).

Community Safety:

8. Various policies within the Development Strategy address community safety issues, particularly those relating to standards for new development.

Sustainability:

9. The Development Strategy has as its underlying basis the achievement and delivery of sustainable development. The Development Strategy has been subject to a specific Sustainability Appraisal/Strategic Environmental Assessment in order to comply with the relevant regulatory requirements. The initial results of this work for key policy areas were attached at appendices B to E to the OSC report on 16 May 2012. The full appraisal work will be published for comment alongside the Development Strategy.

Procurement:

10. Not applicable

RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the additional material attached at Appendix A and Appendix B. The Committee is asked to advise the Executive Member for Sustainable Communities (Strategic Planning and Economic Development) and the Assistant Director (Planning) of any further comments to make in the light of this material.

Background

11. The report presented to the Committee on 16 May set out the background to the Development Strategy and the process followed thus far. The Committee considered the draft document and Sustainability Appraisal technical note and gave a number of views in order to advise the Executive Member and relevant Assistant Director in exercising their delegated authority to approve the draft document for consultation purposes. A number of amendments to the draft Strategy have been put forward in response to the Committee's views, including in relation to the impact of new development on infrastructure and amendments to the Settlement Hierarchy.
12. Since the meeting on 16 May a number of issues have been raised that may affect the Committee's previous consideration. In order to ensure the advice given to the Executive Member and Assistant Director is as complete as possible, the Committee are asked to consider the additional material and comment as appropriate.

Site Selection process

13. A key issue with any strategic plan of this type is the distribution of development and the analysis of the various alternatives available. The advantage of using a set of criteria for site assessment purposes is that it brings rigour and clarity to what can otherwise be a difficult and complex process. At the previous meeting it was pointed out by the Committee, and acknowledged by officers, that the presentation of material on the assessment of sites was perhaps not as clear as it could have been.
14. It was also the case that the previous Sustainability Appraisal technical note did not contain information on certain sites that could have been included to help the Committee come to a view on the draft Development Strategy.
15. Appendix B to this report contains a revised site assessment section to the Sustainability Appraisal Technical Report. The main differences are:
 - Updated and expanded section on the methodology for site selection
 - Revised scoring and summary tables for each site
 - New section explaining how the results of this process have been considered, what other issues have also been factored in and how the overall conclusions have been reached.

16. In presenting this additional material, officers are not recommending any changes to the draft Development Strategy considered by the Committee at the last meeting. The revised scores and the addition of several new sites have not altered officers' overall conclusions on the recommended package of sites.
17. Members are invited to consider the additional material at appendix A and put forward any further comments for consideration by the Executive Member and Assistant Director.

Consultation findings

18. At the previous committee meeting a number of comments were made in relation to the informal consultation carried out during February and March 2012. The findings of this consultation were important in informing the content of the draft Development Strategy. However, comment was made that there was no specific material presented to the Committee on its conclusions. There is now the opportunity to present the findings from this consultation and be more specific as to how the results have fed into the draft Strategy.
19. The draft Consultation Statement attached as appendix B to this report summarises what consultation activity took place and what respondents said were their key issues. The full set of appendices to the Consultation Statement will be published alongside the Development Strategy but to help the Committee's consideration the two most relevant appendices – G and H – have been included here, which summarise the results from the informal questionnaire and the workshops respectively.
20. As can be seen from this material many of the comments and priorities expressed have been able to be incorporated in some form within the Development Strategy. However, there were occasions when issues were not able to be taken fully on board. The most high profile of these issues was in respect of overall housing provision. Appendix B explains why the housing provision level was recommended at the level it was and refers to the housing technical paper and Sustainability Appraisal results. It is also worth noting that the results of the workshop were much more balanced than those from the questionnaire, suggesting that having discussed the issues and heard presentations on the evidence findings, people came to a different view.
21. The upcoming consultation on the draft Development Strategy will give people a further opportunity to reflect on the issues and respond accordingly. The results of this consultation will feed in to the revised version of the Development Strategy due to be considered by Executive in November.
22. Members are invited to consider the additional material at appendix B.

Statement of Community Involvement

23. Alongside the draft Development Strategy, a draft Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) will also be published for consultation. The SCI sets out the requirements and processes for consulting on all types of planning documents, including Neighbourhood Plans and planning applications. There is no requirement to publish the draft SCI for widespread comment but it was felt appropriate to link it with the Development Strategy consultation in order to add further robustness to the document.

24. Unlike the Development Strategy, the SCI is a purely procedural document and is based on previous SCIs for the north of Central Bedfordshire and the joint SCI produced by the Joint Committee. On this basis, it was felt more appropriate to gain Overview and Scrutiny Committee input following the public consultation rather than before. The SCI will then be considered by Executive for adoption in October 2012.

Timetable and next steps

25. The timetable for future stages of work on the Development Strategy was set out in the report to the 16 May meeting. The additional step of reporting back to Overview and Scrutiny Committee was not included within the previous timetable and so will lead to a short delay in the start of the consultation. However, subject to the comments made by this Committee and formal sign-off by the Executive Member and Assistant Director under delegated authority, the public consultation is expected to begin on 20 June, some 9 days later than previously planned. This short delay unfortunately takes the end of the consultation period into the school summer holiday period. While there are no Bank Holidays during this period and not everybody will be on leave at that moment, it is still felt appropriate to add a further week to the usual six-week consultation period. The consultation period is therefore expected to run from 20 June until 8 August.
26. Following the consultation period, the revised document will need to be reported to Executive, programmed for November. Without knowing the number and scope of comments made during the consultation period it is difficult to predict how long it will take to respond to the consultation and produce a revised draft. The short delay to the consultation will reduce the time available to respond to representations but is unlikely to lead to a delay in reporting back to Executive. As stated above, the key determinant of reporting times will be the number and scope of representations made during the consultation period.
27. It is worth reiterating that the Development Strategy to be published in June will be a draft. While every effort has been taken to ensure it is as complete a document as possible, inevitably there will be issues that arise from the consultation period and further technical work. This step is just one in a series leading up to the Submission of the document next May.

Appendices:

Appendix A – revised Sustainability Appraisal technical note (“Strategic Site Assessment Methodology” section only)
Appendix B – Draft Consultation Statement

Background papers and their location: (open to public inspection)
None