

SPECIAL COUNCIL MEETING – 21st NOVEMBER 2007

CORE STRATEGY – CONSULTATION

REPORT BY TOWN CLERK

1. Introduction

- 1.1** All Members have received a copy of the District Council's Core Strategy Development Plan Document - Preferred Options. The purpose of the Core Strategy is to set out the District Council's planning policies for that part of the District outside the National Park for the next 20 years.
- 1.2** The key purpose of the Plan is to address the needs of residents and in particular those relating to housing, employment and transport whilst ensuring the quality of the natural and built environment is not compromised.
- 1.3** The purpose of this report is simply to identify key issues raised by the Town Council previously both for its own volition and as a response to comments made by residents to Councillors and to ascertain whether the Strategy will deal with the problems identified.
- 1.4** There is no new information in this report. It is a summary of decisions and comments made previously by the Council which it is hoped will help Members to consider whether in reality the Visions and Objectives can be met by the proposed Strategy and Core Policies and whether the Strategy will deal with the serious issues facing the town's residents.
- 1.5** It should also be remembered that the Government has emphasised that Town & Parish Councils should represent the views of the community in order to ensure an improvement in the quality of life of residents. Town and Parish Councils are continually being encouraged to be innovative and take a fresh look at existing problems and where it is believed that the District Council's existing policies and practices do not fulfil the needs of the residents, then the Town and Parish Councils should act as the voice of the residents.

2. Core Strategy

- 2.1** It is suggested that those sections of the Core Strategy from the Introduction through to the section on The Plan's Vision and Objectives represent a very fair summary of the existing situation. They identify the attractiveness and the unique character of the New Forest but also identify a serious shortage of housing accommodation particularly at the low end of the market, how the local economy is underperforming and how jobs are skewed towards those that are generally considered to be lower skilled occupations, poorly qualified and lowly paid. The Core Strategy shows, how these factors have led to some local employers finding it difficult to fill vacancies, local house prices are high and how there is a shortage of young people in the New Forest economy in the 16-44 age group. Since the existing housing, employment and the economy policies have all been implemented in line with the existing District Local Plan, it is reasonable to question whether that Plan met its objectives or was designed to achieve the difficulties currently being encountered.

3. Core Strategy Vision

- 3.1** The Vision and Objectives of the Strategy state that “by 2026, the towns and villages will provide for the social, economic and community needs of all residents, securing healthy, fulfilled and safe lifestyles” (para 5.2).
- 3.2** The Plan also claims that it will give opportunities for local people to find affordable accommodation (para 5.5), and promises a whole variety of ways in which the environment will be protected, travel will be reduced and the economic performance of the area will be enhanced.
- 3.3** All of these objectives are exceedingly sound, and, based on decisions made by the Town Council and representations received from the public, should be supported. It is necessary however to ascertain whether the Strategies outlined in the document issued for consultation will enable those very worthy objectives to be achieved.

4. Analysis of Proposals

- 4.1** The following are the issues brought particularly to the Town Council’s attention previously and on which the Town Council has also expressed a view previously. The summary shows how the District’s proposals will deal with the issues raised in the town.

5. Housing

- 5.1** The preamble to the proposals shows quite clearly that there is a significant shortage of housing within the town. The existing Local Plan provision provides for something between 20 and 30 new dwellings per annum. This includes both houses for sale and for rent. It is known from data supplied for Ringwood by the District Council that there are almost 1,000 people on the housing waiting list for Ringwood and that a person with a reasonable priority in terms of points awarded can expect to wait 11 years before they may be offered a rented property.
- 5.2** The Core Strategy proposes that in the Plan period for Ringwood a total of 510 dwellings of all tenures should be constructed. This amounts to 25 per annum. On that basis it is quite clear that if the number of new dwellings proposed are erected, and all are properties for rent, only half of the persons on the existing waiting list will be offered accommodation within the next 20 years. This will still leave 500 people from the current waiting list without accommodation. Therefore no provision is being made to provide housing for young local people or others with local ties and also takes no account of any additional homeless persons parachuted into the area under Government policies.
- 5.3** The Core Strategy makes little or no provision for the allocation of additional land that would have a significant impact on housing deprivation in the town. Instead in line with the District Council’s housing policies most of the land needed for the 25 new homes each year (para 5.1 above) will have to be built on “brown field” sites.

- 5.4** In Ringwood this will in practice lead to incremental back land development; i.e. use of back gardens for new housing. In turn this leads to a subtle and much disliked change to the existing lower density urban heartland of the town outside its historic core. Thus this type of development inevitably changes the character of long established street scenes close to the town centre.
- 5.5** Government and others suggest that good design can alleviate the problems of high-density development. But this misses the point since such developments are not flexible enough to accommodate ambitions for changing lifestyles and aspirations. It is also difficult to see how such “city” level densities within a market town can possibly meet the Plan’s objectives referred to at paragraph 3.1 above.
- 5.6** The overall effect of the above is that young people will either have to live at home much longer, move out of the town for accommodation or rely upon substantial financial assistance from within the family in order to get a foothold on the housing market.
- 5.7** This shortage will force the outward migration of the younger people except those with substantial independent financial means. It will also mean that the age structure of residents in the town will increase which will lead to greater pressures on social and welfare services. In-town commuting from outside the area will increase, which in turn will put greater pressure on the transport infrastructure and also be contrary to the Government and District’s policies for reducing greenhouse gases.
- 5.8** In relation to housing therefore Members are invited to consider whether the proposals in the Strategy will in practice improve the situation or serve to be a continuation of existing arrangements and whether such policies are supported by the vast majority of residents within the town.

6. Employment

- 6.1** Virtually all of the land currently allocated for employment purposes within the town is already used. The Core Strategy proposes that additional employment opportunities will be created by greater intensification of use of the existing employment sites and the bringing in to use of the final reserve site in the town.
- 6.2** With regard to addressing the problems for the 16-44 age group, and the over reliance on low paid jobs, the District Council’s Economic Strategy proposes that these problems should be dealt with by the conversion of farm buildings; development of a local economy based on small business; local distinctiveness; knowledge based and low impact types of business. Effectively this will create an insular employment base whereby employers will not be competing with the national market and will exclude national employers. This will not facilitate career progression and continuing professional development for employees or lead to the provision of higher value jobs in the town.
- 6.3** Access to the existing allocated employment sites is through a road network designed to deal with far less traffic than currently uses the roads. This has caused a constant stream of complaints about inappropriate use of residential

streets for access to employment sites and yet no attempt has been made to look at those employment sites afresh and relocate them to an area giving direct access to a major dual carriageway (the A31). The Town Council has previously requested the District Council to undertake a thorough review of employment sites in the town with a view to the utilisation of the land known as Lynes Farm with direct access off the A31. The Council believes that this would provide an opportunity for a gradual improvement of employment opportunities in the town particularly by the creation of high value, high tech employment opportunities and also then reduce the use of residential streets for access to inappropriately sited employment sites.

- 6.4** Members are invited to consider whether the Core Strategy will, if implemented, enable the District Council to meet its long term employment objectives during the period of the Plan.

7. Transport

- 7.1** In the preamble to the Core Strategy, reference is made to the transport infrastructure. It identifies that there are currently no definite proposals for major improvements. The Town Council has consistently pressed the District and County Councils to acknowledge the difficulties caused by the major inter-change of the A31 near the town centre and the environmental blight that the volume of traffic in that area has on the inappropriate town centre highway network. The Town Council has long pressed for a relief road to the east of the main urban settlement to link the main A31 with the A338 away from the major urban settlement. This would reduce the usage of roads such as Eastfield Lane, Hightown Road and Crow Lane as rat runs. In addition it would remove some of the traffic from the main A31/A338 junction which should lead to considerable road safety benefits in that area.
- 7.2** Members should now consider whether or not the Council should continue to press for the relief road in order to move traffic away from the town centre.

8. The Green Belt

- 8.1** Throughout the Core Strategy documentation there are many references to the Green Belt. Regrettably the Strategy does not give the proper description of the Green Belt, indeed there is only passing reference to its purpose.
- 8.2** This lack of an explanation of the Green Belt does give rise to a misconception about the Green Belt and a belief it has some special characteristics. The correct definition, as described in Government publications, is that the Green Belt is an undeveloped area between two urban areas intended to avoid urban sprawl. There are clearly benefits in retaining a Green Belt.
- 8.3** However, within the Core Strategy the District Council has determined that the preferred option is to maintain the general extent of the existing Green Belt in order to “check the sprawl of the built up areas of and Ringwood and prevent these settlements from merging”. Whilst it is clearly desirable to prevent Ringwood from merging with any neighbouring urban area, it is suggested that such areas are so far distant from the current built up area of Ringwood that the wording within the Strategy is at best misleading and gives the phrase “Green Belt” a different meaning in this area.

8.4 In line with previous decisions of the Council, which was reaffirmed at Planning, Town & Environment Committee at its last meeting, Members may wish to highlight the need for the District Council to ensure that firstly the public fully understand the purpose of the Green Belt and secondly reviews that part of the Green Belt boundary within the Ringwood area to enable more appropriate planning policies to be adopted for the benefit of the town and its residents.

9. Infrastructure Provision

9.1 Whilst the Town Council supports the general principles outlined as the preferred option to ensure delivery of an adequate infrastructure, it has to be noted that the housing and employment development allowances within the Core Strategy will not generate sufficient private sector contributions to mitigate the shortfalls in existing road structures or support new facilities for sport and recreation.

10. Conclusions

10.1 The Town Council's representations and concerns expressed previously and as outlined above have arisen as a result of discussions over a long period of time on the Planning Policies contained within the current Local Plan. An examination of the Core Strategy Preferred Options tends to suggest that the District Council is, broadly speaking, seeking a continuation of existing policies of restraint. Whilst many in the area support those policies Members will need to determine whether or not they are appropriate to meet the core vision of providing for the social, economic and community needs of all residents, securing healthy, fulfilled and safe lifestyles.

11. Recommendation

11.1 It is RECOMMENDED that:

Following consideration of the issues identified in the Core Strategy Development Plan Document – Preferred Options an appropriate response be made to the District Council.

For further information, please contact:-

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