

**REPORT FOR FINANCE & POLICY COMMITTEE – 16<sup>th</sup> JULY 2008**

**COMMUNITY PLANNING**

1. As Members will know, the structure recommended by the Government, the District and County Councils for preparation of Town and Village Plans, now also often known as Community Plans, requires the establishment of an unelected body which is set up at a public meeting. The idea behind this structure was to ensure that ordinary members of the public became involved in the process. This unelected group, effectively a quango, was to be responsible for establishing the vision and future shape of towns and villages. This is commonly known as a 'bottom up' approach. Town and Parish Councils were also encouraged to appoint two representatives to such bodies.
2. When the Town Council decided to initiate preparation of a Town Plan, a number of alternative approaches were discussed informally between Members and Officers. As a result of these discussions, it was considered that the structure referred to above could lead to a situation where there would not be full consultation with all sections of the community and the process could well be driven by persons, who although well intentioned, could have a pre-disposition to a particular outcome in preparation of the Plan. In addition, it was felt that such groups could produce a Town Plan which had not been properly debated by the public and could lead to an unobtainable vision and unachievable outcomes (projects). This could lead to tension between those involved in the project and the statutory agencies who would be expected to provide or organise the major part of the funding for many of the projects identified in the Plans. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that this has happened elsewhere.
3. Arising from these informal discussions, a basis of a way forward was identified. This provided for the project to be led by the Town Council on the basis of the Town Council acting as the democratically elected 'honest brokers' that ensured that all views of all sections of the community were canvassed and obtained. A copy of the report outlining the proposed structure is attached as Appendix 1.
4. The structure prevented any individuals or pressure groups exerting undue influence. It also preserved the Town Council's legitimate democratic role of leading the project, but not directing the outcome. This fully 'bottom up' approach was sustained throughout the exercise and, importantly, whilst the Town Plan sets out the vision of Ringwood for the future, the Strategic Implementation Programme fully reflects the content of the Town Plan and identifies a structured way forward for consideration of individual projects. It includes details of all other partners who would need to be involved in any projects.
5. It was acknowledged from the very start of the consultation on the Town Plan that that document could well include some proposals which would, at best, be difficult to achieve. However, the Plan represents the public's vision for the Town. Whilst it is believed that the structure that the Government suggested for preparation of the Plan is flawed, the underlying message is

that the Plans must not be influenced by public bodies and that they should represent the views of the public. The structure adopted at Ringwood enables that to be achieved. The Strategic Implementation Programme summarises the Plan proposals and gives a full opportunity for all of those proposals to be considered in depth by both the statutory authorities and the individuals involved before implementation or rejection.

6. The District and County Councils now appear to be having some difficulty in dealing with Town and Village Plans produced under the structure they have recommended for use in the New Forest. It appears that these plans included proposals that may not be achievable or realistic and, because of the structure of the documentation, are causing District and County Councils some problems. The e-mail attached, as Appendix 2, from the District Council's Community Planning Officer outlines an approach which she believes could overcome these problems.
7. The proposals would help to overcome the problem. However, it is reactive and will simply serve to prop up a structure which has caused the problems in the first place. The Government is looking for full community involvement in preparation of Town Plans. The imposition of a process which brings the County Officers into discussions at Draft Plan stage will effectively produce a top down structure rather than a bottom up structure. This is directly in conflict with the Government's intentions. It is suggested, therefore, that the structure of the process, supported by the District and County Councils, should be reviewed. This Review should allow for Town and Parish Councils to lead, but not direct the process, and should provide for advice on how to involve the public in a proper and effective manner. The revised process would allow full public involvement and provide for a vision document, supported by public authorities, showing the aims and aspirations of the community. Implementation would then be dealt with as a separate issue, taking account of practicality and economic factors. This arrangement balances hopes and aspirations of the public with economic reality and it is suggested fits in better with the Government's overall aims.
8. In view of the above, it is suggested that the response to the three questions raised by the Community Planning Officer should be based on the fact that, whilst the Town Council is prepared to be involved in the pilot suggested, the problem is not the preparation of the Town Plans, but the structures advocated by the County and District Councils in preparation of those Plans. The District should be encouraged to revisit their advice so that the problems they are now seeking to resolve do not occur in the future.

**For further information, please contact:**

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## **TOWN PLAN CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE – 22 DECEMBER 2005**

### **PROPOSED STRUCTURE OF DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

As members are aware, the Countryside Agency's Healthcheck Handbook for Market Towns strongly suggests an operational structure for the Healthcheck that leads to the adoption of Action Plans.

Whilst accepting all of the basic principles in the Healthcheck, including the full involvement of the community, the Town Council has identified a significant weakness in the recommended approach. This weakness is the absence of an 'honest broker' that ensures that the views of all sections of the community are sought out, rather than allowing a situation to arise where particular sections of the community hold sway.

In order to ensure that a fully balanced approach is adopted, the Town Council has opted to undertake the role of 'honest broker' and also to act as primary funders of the project.

In all areas the Council's staff and in particular the Project Officer will support both the Committee and other arrangements established to deliver the healthcheck and the Town Plan.

#### **2. DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES**

The Council has appointed a Town Plan Co-ordinating Committee to oversee the Healthcheck and the preparation of the Town Plan. This comprises of six Councillors and in legal terms would, apart from the Council or any duly authorised officers, be the only body that can make executive decisions that bind the Council.

Notwithstanding the legal constraint referred to at paragraph 2.1. it is possible to implement a structure that provides for a meaningful input from all sections of the community. Indeed, if the Partnership Committee approach recommended in the Healthcheck Handbook is adopted, that partnership body has no binding executive decision-making powers unless it can obtain funding support for any projects that need to be undertaken. In essence therefore, the approach proposed by the Town Council is not significantly different from the Handbook model in so far as decision-making is concerned but does have a major advantage in relation to ensuring equal representation of all groups.

In order to achieve this representation and a fully balanced Project Team, it is suggested that the structure implemented to deal with the project should be as shown in the attached Annex.

The Appendix provides arrangements that will enable the Town Council to make the final decisions on major issues but for its Co-ordinating Committee to be responsible for the day-to-day management of the project. Feeding into that Co-ordinating Committee, there should be a Partnership Steering Group

comprising all members of the Co-ordinating Committee together with say eight/nine representatives of the different interests in the community. These will range from representatives of the industrial and commercial sector, the schools, the Church organisations and sports and community groups. That Steering Group would take overall responsibility for organising the Healthcheck and the initial preparation of the formal documentation leading up to adoption of the Town Plan.

A partnership Steering Group will not provide in itself adequate means of consultation with the wider community.

This wider involvement will need to be achieved through the establishment of a number of working groups/focus groups. The Healthcheck Handbook divides the assessment of the vitality of an area into four separate categories viz. environment, economy, social and community, and transport and accessibility. It has been suggested that in addition to these four groupings, there should be a fifth relating to children and young persons. It is suggested that taking account of the Town Council's overall responsibilities, it would be appropriate for the Council to adopt a semi-cabinet style arrangement for dealing with this project. This will provide for one member of the Co-ordinating Committee to act as Chairman of that Committee and also the partnership's Steering Group. The role would be one of ensuring overall coordination of activities and chairing the two meetings. The remaining five members of the Committee could take specific responsibility for each of the project areas and effectively act as the Portfolio Holder for those areas and lead all discussions on them in the individual working or focus group meetings.

The working groups will be responsible for undertaking the major parts of the research and public consultation on all elements of the Healthcheck and the preparation of the Town Plan. Membership will need to be fluid and would not be pre-selected by the Town Council. The working group should comprise of persons within the town both as individuals and as persons representing specific community and other groups.

The five working party/focus groups should be encouraged to have in membership any individuals or representatives of particular interests who can contribute towards the debate. In addition, these working groups should be encouraged to consult through press releases, press articles, direct contact mail shots and also specific events such as public meetings, training days or even through rent of a stall at the weekly market.

The work of all of the groups will to some extent overlap. The lead members will need to ensure that where there may be any overlap or conflict, the appropriate issues are brought to the Partnership Steering Group and then on, if necessary, to the Town Plan Co-ordinating Committee.

### **3. CONFLICTS**

Within Ringwood, the Town Council has already identified a potential area of conflict with other local authorities. This relates largely to the District and

County Council's public position that all growth for housing, industry/commerce and shopping should be severely constrained. The policies are not worded in exactly that manner but the effect of the policies are one of restraint.

One of the most critical issues that the Town Council must address and seek the views of the public on relates to this restrictive land use policy. None of the five topic areas referred to above specifically addresses this problem. It is therefore suggested that whilst the major areas of discussion for each of the five groups outlined above should remain as recommended in the Handbook, some adjustments should be made, particularly to the role of the economic and environment groups to provide a cohesive structure specifically tasked with consulting on this difficult area.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended: -

- 1) That in order to ensure that all sections of the community are fully involved in the Market Town Healthcheck and the preparation of the Town Plan, the overall structure outlined in this report be approved.
- 2) That the structure provides for a Councillor to be Chairman of the Town Plan Co-ordinating Committee and that that Councillor also be appointed Chairman of the Town Plan Partnership Steering Group.
- 3) That subject to consideration at the meeting as to the precise areas of operation of each topic group, five topic groups be appointed, namely economic; environment; social and community; children and young persons; and transport and accessibility.
- 4) That the principle of the remaining five members of the Town Plan Co-ordinating Committee taking the Chairmanship of, and the lead role as Portfolio Holders, of each of the five topic areas be approved.
- 5) That either the economic or environment topic area be specifically charged with consulting on land use planning within the town and its hinterland and;
- 6) That a member of the Committee be appointed to lead in each topic group area.

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