

Report of the Strategic Director (Services)

CORE STRATEGY AND DEVELOPMENT POLICIES, ISSUES AND ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Synopsis:

This report informs Members of the public responses to the core strategy and development policies, issues and alternative options consultation.

Commentary:

Consultation Methods

1. The consultation period ran for six weeks, from the 16th September to the 31st October 2005, and consisted of the following methods;
 - The consultation documents and a long questionnaire (36 questions) was sent to 453 organisations and persons on the LDF consultation database, which is a mix of statutory consultees, plus other organisations and persons who have asked to be consulted on the local plan review/LDF since 2001.
 - Nine of the 36 questions were also repeated in a short questionnaire which was sent to all households in the District and distributed at consultation events. This questionnaire was aimed at the general public with little or no knowledge of or interest in the LDF.
 - The above documents and questionnaires were made available on the Council's website for viewing and down-loading, although it was not possible to complete the questionnaires on line.
 - A ten minute DVD promoting the LDF consultation was produced, and copies sent to all town/parish councils and the three market town community partnerships, and made available at consultation events.

- There was a consultation display in the reception area of the main Council offices in Mildenhall, which was transferred to a manned display at the Rookery shopping centre in Newmarket and the community centre in Brandon for a day at each town.
- Four workshop sessions were held for any one on the consultation database who wanted help understanding the consultation documents and completing the questionnaire.
- Young people were identified in the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) as a 'hard to reach group'. Therefore youth workers were given copies of the short questionnaire for distribution, and the Forward Planning Manager went to Mildenhall Upper School and got sixth formers to complete the short questionnaire.

Summary of the Consultation Response

2. A total of 106 long questionnaires and/or letters were returned, which is 23% of the consultation data base. A total of 269 short questionnaires were returned which is around 1% of households in the District. Due to the proactive measures to involve young people (under 19 years of age) 49% of respondents to the short questionnaire were in this age group. Any further responses received will be reported verbally at the Working Group meeting.
3. The main intention of this stage of the consultation was to gain an impression of the weight of public opinion on a range of specific questions. Therefore, the questionnaire consisted mainly of tick box options, which could simply be added up to determine this weight of opinion. There was no requirement for the respondent to give their name and address, on the basis that each tick had equal weight irrespective of who the respondent was.
4. Most responses were anonymous and consisted only of ticking boxes. However, some organisations did make themselves known and this was usually because they also submitted comments as part of the questionnaire, or more often comments in a separate letter or supporting document. In fact, four developers submitted specific development proposals of a strategic nature consisting of relatively lengthy documents.
5. The attached working paper analyses the responses by setting out the number and percentages of ticks in each of the questionnaires, and by summarising the additional comments/ letters. When the name of the organisation making these comments is known, then it is listed.

Implications of the Consultation Response

6. The responses provide the following three main indications which the District Council will need to consider before progressing to the next stages of LDF preparation:
 - An indication of the general weight of submitted public opinion on a range of options;

- The comments of statutory consultees, who because of their status and importance in the planning process have significant weight.
- An indication of the major, strategic development proposals likely to be promoted by developers during the LDF process.

In some cases there are tensions between these three broad indicators which will need careful consideration over the next few months.

7. In terms of the weight of public opinion the clearest indications are summarised in question order as follows:

- Q1 - The leisure based vision is the lowest priority;
- Q2 - Development mainly in the three main towns is the most popular location, particularly in response to the main questionnaire;
- Q3 - Most respondents thought that greenfield permissions should be refused if the 60% target for brownfield development is not met;
- Q4 - Most respondents thought small villages should have development boundaries rather than be designated as countryside;
- Q6 - The majority of respondents did not agree with trying to promote more managerial, professional and administrative jobs;
- Q9 – The majority of respondents thought home working should be promoted;
- Q10 – Most respondents thought that industrial/office sites should be redeveloped for residential, retail or leisure uses;
- Q11 - Most respondents thought there should be new retail development allocated in Brandon and Mildenhall. However, there was a difference in response between the short and long questionnaires in relation to Newmarket;
- Q12 – Most respondents thought there should be new leisure development allocated at Brandon, Mildenhall & Newmarket;
- Q13 - The majority of respondents thought that the siting of telecommunication masts should be restricted;
- Q15 - Most respondents thought that developers should be given detailed guidance on housing type and mix;
- Q16 - The majority of respondents did not agree that housing development should be within the national guidelines of 30-50 dwellings per hectare;
- Q17 - Overall most respondents thought that 30% affordable housing was about right, although the majority of young people thought it was too low.

- Q18 - The majority of respondents thought that horse racing employees should be recognised as key workers;
- Q20 – Most respondents thought that low impact dwellings should be allowed in the countryside;
- Q21– The majority of respondents thought that strategic improvements to the national/regional transport network should not be funded by development on the scale of a new town;
- Q22 - Most respondents thought that car dependency is best reduced by controlling the location of development;
- Q23 - The majority of respondents considered that there was the need for a bypass at Brandon but not at Mildenhall;
- Q24 - Most respondents thought that the preferred routes for the Brandon and Mildenhall bypasses should be reviewed;
- Q25 - The majority of respondents thought that over night lorry parking in the District needs to be controlled;
- Q26 - Most respondents thought that heathland is more important than agricultural land or commercial woodland as a Brecks landscape;
- Q28 - The majority of respondents considered that horseracing land/buildings in Newmarket should be protected to preserve the unique character and economy of the town;
- Q30 - In terms of competing demands for water resources, leisure use was considered the lowest priority;
- Q31- The majority of respondents thought that additional sports and leisure facilities should be focused on local rather than regional facilities.
- Q32 - Most respondents considered that greater use should be made of town and village halls, rather than building additional venues and facilities.
- Q34 - The majority of respondents thought that housing developers should be required to contribute towards new health facilities and services.

In relation to the other questions not listed, then the response showed no significant preference (less than a 10% majority for any option).

8. The response to Q16 is clearly in tension with national and regional guidance, as is to a lesser degree the response to Q18. The responses to Q10 and Q20 are calling for a different approach to existing local plan policy. All of these will require particularly careful consideration. Also the responses to Q6, 11 and 12 will need to be considered in conjunction with background studies on employment land review and town centre need assessments for Brandon, Lakenheath, Mildenhall and Newmarket being or about to be undertaken by consultants.

9. The responses to Q1, Q2, Q3, Q21, Q30, Q31 and Q32 all indicate a lack of public support for the Corporate Plan aspiration for new regionally important sports/leisure facilities, the 'Watermark' proposal as submitted to the Regional Plan, or the idea of an even larger new town to fund transport infrastructure improvements.
10. The following statutory consultees have responded:
- GO-East
 - Countryside Agency
 - Environment Agency
 - English Nature
 - Highway Agency
 - Network Rail
 - Suffolk County Council
 - Norfolk County Council
 - St Edmundsbury Borough Council.
 - Exning Parish Council
 - Mildenhall Parish Council
 - Moulton Parish Council
 - Newmarket Town Council
 - Tuddenham Parish Council
 - Other Parish Councils may have submitted questionnaires anonymously.

Suffolk County Council (SSC) have given the most comprehensive response, GO-East have merely given procedural guidance, and the others have tended to focus only on their particular topics of interest. The Countryside Agency's interest is quite wide and relevant to a predominately rural District such as Forest Heath. In terms of the overall vision (Q1) SCC consider that only the employment led vision is in general conformity with the draft East of England Plan. To date no response has been received from the East of England Regional Assembly (EERA). Given that the LDF must be in general conformity with the Regional Plan published by EERA, then it is considered important that we do receive a response from EERA, and your officers will seek this. St Edmundsbury Borough Council have expressed concern about the potential impact of the 'Watermark' proposals.

11. In terms of responses by developers/landowners submitting proposals for major strategic development, the following four were submitted:
- Mixed use urban expansion of Newmarket on land owned by the Earl of Derby at Hatchfield Farm, Fordham Road, a location identified by the Council for possible expansion in the 2001 Issues Report on the Local Plan Review;
 - The 'Watermark' proposal, a summary of what has already been submitted to the Regional Plan by Orion Land & Leisure.
 - A mixed use northern expansion of Red Lodge involving 5,000 additional dwellings, schools, shops, regional sports facilities and an employment area submitted by Crest Nicholson and Wrenbridge Land Ltd.

- A mix of residential and employment development on the 15 acre former Friskie Pet Food site on the western edge of Kentford, but just in Moulton Parish, now being called 'Kennett Park', submitted by Wrenbridge and Hopkins Homes.

Conclusion

12. Over the coming months your officers will have to consider how the responses, together with the emerging background studies, will effect preparation of the Core Strategy Preferred Options and the Site Allocations Issues and Options, both scheduled for consultation next March. Some tensions are arising on certain issues between stated public opinion, development proposals and higher level policy guidance. The weight of public opinion needs to be compared and balanced with other aspects of the evidence base, and conformity with national and regional planning guidance or policy. Your officers will seek guidance from GO-East on procedures and practice to best try to reconcile such tensions. This may involve some further consultation on specific issues if necessary.
13. This report and working paper has been prepared quickly after the end of the consultation period to give Members an early indication of the responses. There may be some errors, omissions, additional late responses, improvements to the clarity of the presentation that can be made, prior to a final report on the consultation being published on the Council's website.

Finance/Budget/Resource Implications

14. £41,120 allocated for Local Plan/LDF preparation 2004-05. Further resources for professional fees and community consultation may be required as the process evolves in subsequent years.

Policy Compliance/Power

15. There is a statutory duty to prepare a Local Plan/LDF. Corporate and Community Plans. Best Value Performance Plan.

Performance Management Implications

16. Best Value Indicator

Legal Implications

17. Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.

Human Rights Act Implications

18. The Government has confirmed that the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 is compatible with The Human Rights Act 1998.

Crosscutting Implications

19. Corporate and Community Plans.

Risk Assessment

20. Without proper community engagement in the LDF process, a LDF will not proceed to adoption. The preparation of an up to date planning policy framework is a statutory requirement and the subject of a Best Value Performance Indicator. The lack of such a framework militates against the proper planning of the District and could place the Council at risk of Planning Appeals being upheld with the possible award of costs against it.

Council Priorities

21. The delivery of Planning, Building Control and Local Land Charges services is the 10th item in the "Highest Priorities" category of the Council's priorities for the future. The preparation of a LDF for Forest Heath to provide up to date planning policies is an integral part of the delivery of the Planning service.

Recommendation:

- 22. It is recommended that Members;**
 - 1. Note the contents of this report and working paper;**
 - 2. Authorise Officers to consider the responses in the preparation of further LDF consultation documents;**
 - 3. Delegate to Officers to make any necessary corrections, up dates or additions to this report and working paper before it is published on the Council's website.**

Documents Attached

1. Working Paper - Summarising the consultation responses

Tony Pierce
Strategic Director (Services).
8th November 2005.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. Documents attached.
2. Full copies of the completed questionnaires, letters and supporting documents are available for both Members and the public to view, please contact Planning Services

CONTACT OFFICER

John Smerdon