

DEVELOPMENT IN HERTFORDSHIRE: RAISING THE QUALITY

Report of the Director of Environment

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1. Purpose of Report

To seek the Cabinet's support for

- a) a range of initiatives to improve the quality of development in Hertfordshire
- b) the draft Masterplanning Principles for development West of the A1(M)

If Cabinet support these, the report will be referred to the Environment Select Committee in January. The Select Committee's comments will be passed back for Cabinet and the Executive Committee to take into account when decisions are taken.

2. Summary

Since the Structure Plan was adopted in 1998, there has been an ongoing debate on how to make Urban Renaissance happen and, more widely, how to achieve quality and environmental performance in all new developments.

The County Council has taken a proactive approach to emerging local plans in the County to try and ensure that development in Hertfordshire is undertaken in a sustainable manner.

For the County Council, North Hertfordshire District Council and Stevenage Borough Council this has included the development of Masterplanning Principles for West of the A1(M) in accordance with Structure Plan Policy 8. Environment Committee considered the Masterplanning Principles at its meeting on 11 July 2000 and raised several issues that would need to be considered prior to their adoption. In particular, Environment Committee determined that before finalising the Principles Members should visit examples of innovative developments and consider the impact of Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 (PPG3).

The Sustainable development debate has recently been fuelled by a raft of publications which seek to improve the overall quality of development. These have included “By Design” published by DETR and the “Urban Design Compendium” published by English Partnerships. The issue of quality urban environment and the role that the planning system can play was picked up most notably in the publication of the Urban White Paper “Our Towns and Cities : The Future”.

In parallel with these publications, the County Council has been progressing its Town Renaissance Campaign to assist in the Urban Capacity Study, that is being undertaken as part of the Structure Plan roll forward. The Campaign has revealed that a wider initiative is necessary to achieve high quality development in Hertfordshire.

This report considers the impact of these initiatives, documents and site visits and outlines a way forward for the County Council.

3. Conclusions

Since the Structure Plan was adopted there have been a range of initiatives and guidance which have served to increase the importance of design and sustainability in how development is undertaken. They all have a bearing on how this is to be achieved. For Hertfordshire, however, the challenge is to identify practical mechanisms which will make things happen. The integration of the sustainability statement/checklist approach into local plans is a crucial first step in seeking to ensure that the vast majority of development in the County takes sustainability fully into account. However, its potential will be limited unless it is supported by detailed guidance on how the issues should be addressed and put into practice.

Whilst design is itself an integral element of sustainability, its importance is such that Hertfordshire needs an appropriate tool to ensure that high quality design is delivered. The Structure Plan Alterations provide an opportunity to place increased emphasis on the importance of design and there is potentially a significant role for a new Structure Plan policy, accompanied by a commitment to the production of design guidelines. In addition, there is also the potential for the Hertfordshire Town Renaissance Campaign to broaden its remit to cover design and sustainability issues.

With regard to the Masterplanning principles for the development to the west of the A1(M) at Stevenage, in the absence of detailed design and sustainability guidelines, these could be viewed as an important interim measure in providing a framework in which to achieve the best form for any development at this location.

1. Background

- 1.1 Since the County Council adopted the Structure Plan, the issue of Urban Renaissance and achieving quality development have been the subject of much debate. Emerging guidance and good practice have attempted to focus local authorities, developers, and other stakeholders on the tools and implementation mechanisms necessary to make development more sustainable.
- 1.2 The County Council, in accordance with Policy 8 of the Structure Plan, has been working, in partnership with North Hertfordshire District Council and Stevenage Borough Council, on a set of Masterplanning Principles to guide development West of the A1(M).
- 1.3 At its meeting on 11 July 2000, Environment Committee considered the Principles that had been agreed by an informal Joint Member Group arrangement of the three authorities in May. At the time of this consideration, PPG3 had just been issued and Members expressed a need to assess its impact and also to gain an understanding of innovative developments in the South East.
- 1.4 The process for identifying development locations set out in PPG3 (sequential test) is being applied to the Structure Plan review process over the next year.
- 1.5 Members of the County Council have undertaken two site visits to Poundbury in Dorset and the Millennium Village in Greenwich, South London. These visits have emphasised the need for planning authorities to be explicit and proactive in their requirements of development for design and sustainability issues.
- 1.6 Since the adoption of the Structure Plan, and particularly over recent months, there have been several publications that are intended to assist local authorities and others in creating quality environments focusing particularly on the role of development.
- 1.7 In implementing the Structure Plan, the County Council has taken an innovative and proactive approach, through representation on local plans, to the integration of sustainability into the location, design, construction and future use of development.

2. Analysis

- 2.1 This section seeks to analyse the impact of a range of initiatives on how the County Council should be seeking to influence development.

Urban White Paper

- 2.2 The Urban White Paper “Our Towns and Cities: The Future” was published on 16 November 2000. It is a wide-ranging document that seeks to provide a framework for cities, towns and suburbs to offer a high quality of life and opportunity for all. In doing so, it focuses on planning and highlights a series of initiatives to achieve the objective. In particular, it focuses on providing development that is both attractive and environmentally friendly. An explicit intention to revise PPG1 is set out in the White

Paper, aimed at explaining how we should plan for sustainable communities. It is intended that the revised PPG1 will ensure that planning policies fully support the drive for an urban renaissance. The Government also proposes to improve the planning obligation process and will be consulting on changes to this in the near future. The White Paper declares that a further five “millennium village” type developments will be brought forward over the next eighteen months. It also highlights the importance of Master Plans and seeks to encourage their development for all significant projects. Initiatives to modernise building regulations and construction methodology are also highlighted, as are measures to increase the use of brownfield sites, for example by changes to taxation.

“By Design” - Urban design in the planning system: towards better practice

- 2.2 Published in May 2000, this document seeks to provide practical advice for local authorities and developers in order to achieve better quality built environment. It stresses the need for good design in all circumstances in order to create successful environments. The role of the planning system, in particular the need for a Development Plan to provide a vision and context, is seen as crucial backed up by the use of Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) in order to achieve the desired performance and quality.

The Urban Design Compendium

- 2.3 This was published by English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation in August 2000. The Compendium is designed to be used for all stages of the development process. It provides cases studies and examples of good practice to be used by local authorities and developers.

Planning for Sustainable Developments : Towards Better Practice

- 2.4 Published by DETR in October 1998, this guide provides assistance for local authorities and the planning system to achieve quality development in existing urban areas, new settlements and rural areas. It focuses on the need for local authorities to provide context through the Development Plan and, where appropriate, Development Briefs.

PPG3: Housing

- 2.5 A revised PPG3 on Housing was published by DETR in March 2000. As well as introducing the new ‘plan, monitor and manage’ approach, the revised PPG3 emphasises the importance of action to improve design. In particular, the Government stresses the role of better design in achieving its objectives to make more efficient use of land by increasing development density and to help create a better sense of community. A new section entitled ‘Creating Sustainable Residential Environments’ outlines key aspects of good design. This states that applicants for planning permission for housing development should be able to demonstrate how they have taken account of the need for good design and how their proposals reflect the guidance in PPG3. Significantly, new PPG3 states that local planning authorities should reject poor

design, particularly where their decisions are supported by clear plan policies and adopted supplementary planning guidance (SPG).

Hertfordshire Town Renaissance Campaign

- 2.6 Launched in January 2000 this County Council initiative, supported by a Co-ordinating Group of 14 different organisations (including 6 district councils), is currently assisting the Structure Plan Panel in its work on urban housing capacity. Five events have been run so far to facilitate debate with a predominantly technical audience, on a range of issues arising from the Urban Capacity work. To engage the wider community of Hertfordshire on these issues, a 'Renaissance Roadshow' is being planned, which will visit 30 different locations across the County during January and February next year.
- 2.7 A consistent message to emerge from the events to date is that the urban housing capacity is but one element and considerable effort needs to be put into achieving quality as well as numbers. It would be an appropriate development of the Campaign, following completion of the urban capacity work, to pick up with other stakeholders how quality development could be achieved.

Local Government Act 2000

- 2.8 This legislation seeks to improve the connections between local people and local authorities. A particular element of the legislation is the requirement for local authorities to provide leadership and to develop community strategies in partnership with local stakeholders. This will provide an opportunity for local communities to express their perceptions of quality development in their areas.

Masterplanning Principles

- 2.9 Developed in partnership with North Hertfordshire District Council and Stevenage Borough Council, the Masterplanning Principles are a requirement of Structure Plan Policy 8. The Masterplanning Principles reported to Environment Committee in July are reproduced in Appendix 1. While the County Council is committed to restricting development at this location to the unavoidable minimum it is also bound by its obligations in the current Structure Plan.
- 2.10 In the context of providing sustainable development at this location, the principles represent a significant first step – and their adoption as SPG will provide local authorities with an important safeguard against the submission of inappropriate development proposals at this location. However, they do not provide sufficient detail to ensure that the types of sustainability initiative and quality of design viewed by Members on their site visits are achieved. Further Hertfordshire-wide work on design and sustainability is needed to achieve this, and as the Masterplanning Principles have always been looked on as dynamic, it will be possible to complement them following this work.

Site Visits

- 2.11 Members of the County Council have visited innovative developments at Poundbury and the Millennium Village in Greenwich. These developments have very different characteristics, but both emphasised the importance of proactive local authorities and innovative developers. Poundbury particularly highlighted how quality development can be achieved through design, and the Millennium Village highlighted how development can be made more environmentally sustainable. Both of these achievements have occurred because these intentions were set out explicitly in masterplans and detailed design briefs before any development took place.

Structure Plan Panel consideration of Design and Sustainability

- 2.12 Policy 2 of the current Structure Plan ‘Design and Provisions of Development’ states that the ‘design and provisions of development will be expected to help achieve the sustainability aims and objectives of this Plan’. Implementation to date has primarily involved promoting the inclusion of a policy in local plans requiring applicants for planning permission to submit a sustainability statement with their planning applications. The matters to be covered in these statements cover some 71 sustainability issues contained within a checklist to be included within the local plan. The 71 issues are reproduced in Appendix 2 to this report.
- 2.13 The approach proposed by the County Council has already received the support of the Inspector presiding over the Three Rivers Local Plan Public Inquiry and it is hoped that this will set a precedent for other local plans in the County
- 2.14 The work programme of the Structure Plan Panel is currently focusing upon alterations to be made to the Plan for the period up to 2016. It has already given consideration to the approach described above and has come to the initial view that it should be fully integrated into the Alterations.
- 2.15 In preparing the Alterations, consideration is also being given to how to ensure development undertaken in Hertfordshire is of the highest possible quality. This could entail a new policy on the importance of design and potentially a commitment to the production of design guidelines. This might best be taken forward by the local authorities in Hertfordshire, working collectively under the auspices of the Hertfordshire Technical Chief Officers Association, to produce detailed guidance on the issues in the checklist in the form of Supplementary Planning Guidance.

Local Authority ‘design and sustainability guides’

- 2.16 Kent County Council, the London Borough of Enfield and other local authorities have produced and started to promote guides to achieving sustainable development that cover both design and sustainability issues in order to improve the quality of development overall. A review of the work being carried out by other authorities could therefore provide a very useful contribution to the preparation of a countywide approach in Hertfordshire.

3. Financial Implications

There are no immediate financial implications arising from this report. However, following consultations with the District Councils the County Council may need to consider its resources and overall level of design expertise. This review may highlight future financial implications.

Background material used by the author in compiling this report

Urban White Paper, DETR, November 2000

'By Design', DETR, May 2000

'Urban Design Compendium', English Partnerships and Housing Corporation, August 2000

'Planning for Sustainable Developments: Towards Better Practice', DETR, October 1998

PPG3 Housing, DETR, March 2000

Report to Environment Committee on Masterplanning Principles – July 2000

HCC Proof of Evidence to 3 Rivers DC and Dacorum Local Plan inquiries, 1999

Rivers Local Plan Inquiry Inspectors report, December 2000