

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

**Held on Monday, 6 December 2010 at 1.30 pm in the
Norfolk Room, The Conference Suite, Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke, Dereham**

PRESENT

Mr J.P. Cowen (Chairman)	Mr R.G. Kybird
Mr A.J. Byrne	Mr K. Martin
Mr K.S. Gilbert	Mrs S.M. Matthews
Mrs D.K.R. Irving	Mr J.D. Rogers
Mr A.P. Joel	Mr B. Rose

Also Present

Mr P.D. Claussen
Mr M.A. Kiddle-Morris

In Attendance

Natalie Beal	- Planning Policy Officer (Growth Point)
Phil Daines	- Development Services Manager (Capita Symonds for Breckland Council)
Helen McAleer	- Senior Committee Officer
Jane Osborne	- Committee Officer
Rory Ringer	- Elections and Scrutiny Manager
David Spencer	- Principal Planning Policy Officer (Capita Symonds for Breckland)
Mark Stokes	- Deputy Chief Executive

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115/10 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTES

Apologies were received from Mr Chapman-Allen, Mr Goreham and Mr Balaam. No substitutes were present.

116/10 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

117/10 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Mr Kybird declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 5, Policy TH6 on page 44, as it referred to buildings regularly worked on by his business.

Mr Cowen declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 5 as an architect in practice in the District.

118/10 NON-MEMBERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING

Mr Claussen and Mr Kiddle-Morris were in attendance.

119/10 THETFORD AREA ACTION PLAN (AGENDA ITEM 5)

The Principal Planning Policy Officer introduced Natalie Beal, Planning Policy Officer (Growth Point). Together they gave Members a

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presentation showing the evolution of the Thetford Area Action Plan (TAAP) and focussed on the key opportunities and issues for Thetford.

It was reaffirmed that the TAAP was a Breckland Council document which would leave a good legacy over the next 15-20 years.

The timeline of the document could be traced back to 2007 when studies were commissioned to identify the infrastructure needs. In 2008 the Issues and Options document was published and following the analysis of comments received, the Preferred Options document had been published for public consultation in 2009.

The responses received to the Preferred Options consultation were combined with further detailed evidence base to produce the Draft Final TAAP. The document had then been released, in bite-size pieces, to officers and stakeholders over the summer.

Turning to the Preferred Options map, it was pointed out that the majority of growth was proposed to the north of Thetford. The main change was the removal of the previously proposed Country Park. This change had been made due to the Stone Curlew issues and because of the town's proximity to Thetford Forest. Work could focus on improving access to those.

There had been considerable consultation already and there was also an enhanced understanding of what was technically deliverable. The Plan was still at the Preferred Options stage and another document would be produced for further public consultation before submission to an independent inspector.

The Geographic Information System (GIS) had been used to map layers of constraints to inform the proposals. These constraints included such things as landscape features, environmentally sensitive areas, stone curlews, etc. Due to these constraints, large areas were not available for development.

The main area for development was about 200 hectares (ha) in size of which about 120 to 135ha would be available for the residential development of 5,000 new homes. This would lead to an average density of 37.5 dwellings per hectare. Originally 6,000 dwellings had been proposed but this would have led to much denser development of 60 dwellings per hectare, which had been considered inappropriate.

The overarching vision of the document was to guide growth and regeneration of areas such as the railway station, town centre and existing residential areas.

The Government's support for the dualling of the A11 put Thetford in a strong position as a sustainable location with good economic prospects. One key issue was the Transport Study by Norfolk County Council. Details were due out later in the week.

From the evidence gathered it was clear that there was currently a significant reliance on the private car and for the plans to work there would need to be a modal shift. Ways to achieve that shift would include improving internal and external bus services and the promotion of walking and cycling. A cycling network of 'loops' was included within

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the document.

The five existing junctions on the A11 around Thetford would be improved and upgraded by providing larger roundabouts and introducing traffic light control. This overcame the need for flyovers which would have been a much more expensive option.

The internal road network would also be improved; particularly the two key routes of the Norwich Road and the Croxton Road which would link the new development to the town centre.

A variety of uses would be encouraged into the buildings at the railway station and a wider area of search would seek car parking and access improvements. It was also recommended that the train services through Thetford would need upgrading; some changes were due to be implemented in mid-December.

There were key opportunities for town centre improvements and the Policies in the document were predicated to maintaining viability and encouraging increased footfall in the High Street. Pedestrian areas could be enhanced and there would be additional signage provided.

The Inset Map for the town centre showed the generous boundary which was proposed to focus activity in the primary shopping area. This boundary included the new bus interchange and took advantage of the river frontage.

There was a raft of proposals for the Thetford Urban extension. These included:

- 5,000 dwellings
- 22ha of new employment land - this was in addition to the 18ha of land at the Thetford Enterprise Park (TEP).
- three new primary schools,
- expanded secondary education facilities
- additional playing fields and children's play areas
- maintenance and enhancement of existing landscape features
- a local centre and shopping parade
- allotments
- bus, walking and cycling networks.

The draft Masterplan indicated a broad mix of land uses. The blue line showed the primary bus network and included proposals for a crossing over the railway line. There was also the potential to set aside land for a possible future second railway station.

The proposed phasing of the development was explained and the officers concluded by indicating the timetable for the Plan which would go to the Moving Thetford Forward Board on 15 December 2010, Cabinet on 11 January 2011 then out for four weeks public consultation before formal submission in Spring/Summer 2011.

The Executive Member - Economic and Commercial noted that there had been some concern about the TEP but this was now progressing in a different way due to the loss of funding. He said it was an essential development for Thetford.

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The Chairman agreed, saying it was an integral part of the employment provision.

A Member asked if the delay in the receipt of the Transport Study was likely to affect the timetable and the Development Services Manager advised that they were confident that the Study would be received on Friday 10 December. Once its content was known they would be in a position to decide if the timetable needed amending. Some information had already been presented, concerning the junctions of the A11 and it now seemed that those issues had been overcome. He confirmed that the highway proposals were not reliant on the dualling of the A11.

A Member asked how many children could be expected from the 5,000 houses and how much money had been allocated for the school plots.

The Principal Planning Policy Officer said that they had been advised to plan for three, 420 place primary schools (each of about 2.4ha land). Between 3.5 and 9ha of land would be needed for the high school extensions.

The Chairman was concerned that only potential expansion of the high schools was mentioned. With all the additional primary school children expected he thought it was obvious that they would need to expand. It was noted that this was being reviewed by NCC Education Department and was dependant on the decision about the Academy.

The Development Services Manager explained that it was unclear whether money for education provision would be provided by Section 106s or Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) or possibly a combination of both.

The Executive Member - Planning Health & Housing, advised that Norfolk County Council had provided input to the Thetford Learning Group who were informing the Moving Thetford Forward Board on these issues and that that information had been included in the TAAP.

A Member suggested that the bus service between Thetford, Attleborough and Norwich should be improved as currently the only timetabled bus was the airport service. Officers believed that with the growth in Thetford and Attleborough and the development of Snetterton, there was a case to reintroduce a bus service.

A Member considered that the Plan for improved roundabouts and junctions would provide excellent access points and was a 'brilliant scheme'.

Another Member said that the Plan was an amazing piece of work and congratulated all those who had put it together. He asked if there was a timetable for work to start and if any developers had expressed an interest.

The scheme was not likely to start until 2013 as there was still more infrastructure work to be done and a new electricity sub-station to be constructed. Some key intervention sites across the town centre might come forward earlier although a Masterplan could provide a comprehensive and holistic way forward.

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The Executive Member – Commercial and Economic was able to advise that there was a developer interested in taking on all 5,000 dwellings. Construction of the dwellings and infrastructure would be phased. He was also aware that Norfolk County Council was looking at a site for the single site academy which would cost about £32million to develop. The electricity sub-station would serve the Urban Extension and the TEP.

The Chairman asked if any developers were lined up for the employment land as both housing and commercial had to be developed together.

The Executive Member – Commercial and Economic said that Snetterton Heath, which was a prime area, was suffering in the economic climate, as was the TEP. £6.7million was needed to connect to the Grid. An application would be made for £10million growth funding for water and electricity infrastructure.

The Executive Member – Planning, Health & Housing noted that an advertisement for commercial development erected at the TEP had resulted in 27 enquiries in just 24 hours. To have such a show of interest, during the recession and before the A11 dualling had been announced, gave confidence that developers could be found.

A Member asked if the town centre Masterplan would be a further Policy document and it was confirmed that it could be a Supplementary Policy Document (SPD). He welcomed the proposals to improve access to Thetford Forest.

Another Member suggested that a small cottage hospital would be a worthwhile addition to the proposals, particularly for the elderly, to save them having to travel further afield for treatment.

The Principal Planning Policy Officer explained that NHS Norfolk had been consulted and they had felt that existing facilities at the Norfolk & Norwich and the West Suffolk Hospitals were sufficient.

The Chairman asked that the explanation of how the figure of 5,000 homes had been reached should be included in the document, as people might be confused as several different figures were mentioned.

He was also concerned about the increase in retail provision proposed in the Urban Extension area and its effect on the town centre. He asked if the reduction in housing numbers would compromise the retail potential.

The Principal Planning Policy Officer explained that although the new allocation was for 5,000 homes, over the 25 year period of the Plan there would actually be about 6,500 homes delivered.

The recent Retail Study had been used to benchmark the amount of additional retail space required. The vast majority would be accommodated in the town centre. He agreed that careful planning would be needed to protect the long term health of the town centre.

A Member asked if the trend for on-line shopping had considered by the Retail Study and this was confirmed.

David
Spencer

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With regard to Policy TH28 on page 78 of the agenda, Members were asked for their views on a potential second railway station in the Urban Extension area.

A Thetford Member said it would indeed require a modal shift as most people travelled out of the County by car. The existing railway service ceased at 9pm. Improved service connections would require lobbying to bring them about. Parking would still be an issue as people were only willing to walk short distances. He thought it would be a good idea to have a stop in the Urban Extension area.

Another Member suggested that the existing Station would need work as it was not a good place to be at night.

The Chairman, who was the Council's representative on the Strategic Rail Partnership supported and echoed the comments. There was currently no provision for disabled passengers. If there was an opportunity to improve the quality of the railway station it would need to include better crossing facilities.

The Development Services Manager suggested that Policy TH 28 needed enhancement at point C, but felt that the proposals were beyond the scope of the TAAP. Lobbying to support the document would help.

David
Spencer

The Chairman agreed and said the problems were caused by restricted network capacity which was not within the scope of the TAAP. He supported the suggestion for lobbying at a higher level to introduce a Stansted link which would benefit both Norfolk and Breckland.

A Member noted that some Policies were missing in this version of the TAAP. He asked if they would be used in the town centre Masterplan. The Growth Point Officer confirmed this and said that they had tried to amalgamate nine Policies into one – TH23. She asked for Member's feedback on that.

The Chairman noted that there were a number of unresolved issues and items to follow. He asked how much had yet to be produced.

- the PPA Objectives were being worked on by ATLAS;
- consultation comments would be added to the Housing Topic Paper;
- the Monitoring Implementation Framework – Breckland's infrastructure requirements were being prioritised; and
- the Sustainability Appraisal (a legal requirement) was almost ready.

The Principal Planning Policy Officer was confident that everything would be ready to meet the timetable.

A Member pointed out that reference was made in the Plan to an extension to the Police Station, he questioned whether this was going to happen and the Growth Point Officer explained that she had met with the police and been told that they had a PFI scheme with Bury St Edmunds and probably had enough room on site to expand for their needs.

A Thetford Member asked about design standards. He asked who would be the arbiter of such standards and was concerned that no reference was made to using local materials. He also did not want such a policy to preclude modern design.

The Growth Point Officer agreed to discuss that point with colleagues to try to strengthen the Policy.

The Chairman concluded the meeting by saying that the TAAP was a comprehensive and very good document. He urged Officers to meet the timeframe.

The report was noted.

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Natalie
Beal

The meeting closed at 3.00 pm

CHAIRMAN