

Shropshire's LOCALised planning approach

It is perhaps easy to forget when looking at their recent track record that Shropshire Council was only formed in 2009. Since then the Council has raced ahead to become one of only a handful of west midlands authorities to secure a Sound Core Strategy, they are the first to have an approved CIL charging schedule, they have no less than five neighbourhood planning front runners and their innovative Place Plans have been shortlisted for a national planning prize.

Sharing a good model

It would be all too easy to say "well they can do that in Shropshire – but it's different here", but this would be missing an opportunity to learn from their evident successes and acknowledged mistakes. Shropshire's approach is likely to be of interest to many other local authorities as a successful model of integrating spatial planning with other disciplines, for putting communities in the driving seat, and for relating developer contributions to locally determined infrastructure priorities. As with many successful innovations, its strength lies in its simplicity, flexibility and adaptability. The approach is straightforward and can be easily applied elsewhere.

The localism agenda

It is a matter of design rather than accident that with an innovative Core Strategy in place and as a frontrunner on both the CIL and Neighbourhood Plans, Shropshire has been well placed to respond to the localism agenda. The Place Plan approach has reignited community interest in planning, linking development with infrastructure, generating an ongoing dialogue that is aimed at ensuring that community priorities are identified and delivered alongside new development.

The approach has helped shift the discussion with communities towards the positive benefits that development can bring, away from "Do you want this development?" and towards "How can we work together to improve your neighbourhood?"

Place Plans

Sustainability in Shropshire is seen as being based on many different factors and it is acknowledged that what is needed to make and maintain a sustainable community in one place may differ in another. The Place Plans are 'live' documents that are informed by each community's own requirements expressed in Parish/ Town Plans, Community Toolkit Events and Neighbourhood Plans, in addition to local evidence on infrastructure requirements from infrastructure and service providers themselves. On a place by place basis, the Plans (18 covering the whole of Shropshire) bring together the 'top down' essential infrastructure and investment requirements coupled to growth levels identified within the LDF, with the 'bottom up' community priorities and aspirations, critical in effectively targeting investment to achieve local community benefit. Place Plans are simultaneously, Shropshire's LDF Implementation Plan, the Infrastructure Delivery Plan and the HCA Single Conversation document. They will also fulfil part of the Councils annual monitoring role as communities are updated on both policy implementation and project progress. They may not be wholly statutory adopted documents, but are already being viewed as material planning considerations by all parties in the development

process.

CIL as part of an integrated package

Shropshire Council received a clean bill of health from the examiner of its Draft Charging Schedule in September 2011, and is set to be one of the first local authorities to bring the Community Infrastructure Levy into effect. CIL is however only one of four aspects of developer contributions, the other three being on-site design, affordable housing and site-specific planning obligations. All four aspects need to be considered in the round if development is not to be rendered unviable. Therefore decisions on the use of CIL monies are to be fully integrated with other decisions on site design, affordable housing and on-site planning obligations. The Place Plans facilitate this integrated approach.

Local infrastructure priorities

In Shropshire, 90% of CIL monies will be spent on local infrastructure that has been identified by the local community as their priority. This “meaningful proportion” ensures that there is a very strong link between development and its contribution to the local community’s infrastructure needs, as defined by them. Communities will be asked annually by Members to identify their priorities for receiving community benefits from development, using the freedom that CIL introduces in the use of developer contributions.

An action-centred tool

As a corporate tool, Place Plans are helping service managers across the Council to get closer to communities, providing welcome integration at a time when financial constraints may suggest increasing centralisation. Place Plans have readily been taken up by Councillors and the Development Management Team as a tool to guide developer and community conversations about the needs of places and how development can ‘help’ to deliver those wider needs. Perhaps most importantly to their success, they are being seen as a delivery focussed tool, bringing together the public, private and voluntary sectors around an agreed agenda for action.

