



Committee and date

Council

24 February

12.00pm

Item No

17

Public

Shropshire Core Strategy: Inspector's Report

Responsible Officer Andy Mortimer

Email: andy.mortimer@shropshire.gov.uk

Telephone: (01743) 252566

Summary

The Core Strategy is the key strategic plan that drives Shropshire's sustainable development, economic recovery and response to climate change. It sets out the framework for public and private investment. The Shropshire Core Strategy was subject to a Public Hearing in November 2010 in front of an independent Planning Inspector. The Council has now received the Inspector's Report which is binding on the Council and states that the Core Strategy is 'sound' and should be adopted.

Recommendations

- A. That Council adopts the Shropshire Core Strategy subject to the Inspector's recommended changes to become effective on 31 March 2011.
- B. That responsibility is delegated to Corporate Director, Places in conjunction with the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning to make any additional minor editing changes.

Report

1. The Core Strategy is the principal document in the Local Development Framework LDF that will guide future development in Shropshire over the next 10-15 years. The Core Strategy is a high level, strategic document that must be grounded in the Sustainable Community Strategy. It sets out a distinctive spatial vision and strategy for Shropshire to 2026.
2. The Core Strategy sets out the vision, objectives and approach to planning policy in Shropshire by closely aligning with the Sustainable Community Strategy as well as other strategies such as the Housing Strategy and the Local Transport Plan that influence the way land is used, managed and developed. We have worked so far to a very challenging timetable to comply with the statutory process and produce a "sound" Core Strategy for adoption,

- the first of any of the new forming Unitary councils. It is imperative that the Core Strategy is in place as soon as possible, in order to replace the increasingly outdated former local plans and slippage beyond April would unfortunately involve the council in a recalibration of its evidence base.
3. The Inspector held a Pre-hearing Meeting on 29th September and conducted the examination through written exchanges and a Hearing held between 16th and 26th November. The purpose of the examination is to establish whether the Core Strategy is 'sound' and legally compliant. To be sound the Core Strategy should be justified, effective and consistent with national policy.
 4. During the Hearing itself, as expected, the main areas the Inspector focussed on, and where changes had been proposed in response to the arguments and discussion, were those policies largely concerned with the overall strategy and delivery of new housing. This was further complicated by the uncertain and changing status of the Regional Spatial Strategy.
 5. Under the 2004 and 2008 Planning Acts the Inspector's Report contains recommended changes that are binding on the Council; that is they are changes that *must be made* to the Core Strategy. In practice the changes had already been proposed by the Council prior to the Hearing or put forward and discussed during the Hearing sessions. All of the changes have been published on the Council's web-site and notified to all representors. All the changes recommended in the Report are based on proposals from the Council in response to points raised and suggestions discussed during the examination. The view of the Inspector is that these changes do not alter the thrust or basis of the Council's overall strategy.

Main Conclusions of the Inspectors Report

6. The main conclusion to be drawn from the report is its positive support for our strategic approach and encouraging endorsement of the way we are seeking to deliver the localism agenda through the planning framework in Shropshire. The Inspector has accepted our view that the Core Strategy is a high-level strategic plan supported by an extensive robust evidence base which embraces the emerging localism concept. The Inspector is clear (as are we) however, that the next part of the LDF for Shropshire the SAMDev document has a crucial role to play in delivering detailed guidance and enabling detailed decisions to be made.
7. The Inspector has endorsed our procedural approach to delivering the Core Strategy confirming that it complies with national policy, meets the requirements for consultation, is aligned with the Sustainable Community Strategy and has been subject to the necessary Sustainability Appraisal and Habitat Regulations assessment. The report also emphasises the quality and scope of the evidence base prepared in support of the Core Strategy.
8. Support is also expressed for the approach taken to the identification of the Sustainable Urban Extensions in Shrewsbury and Oswestry and the strategy set out for the other market towns and key centres. The approach to development outside these centres through the 'Hubs and Clusters' concept and the tie-in with the delivery of community infrastructure/benefits through developer contributions is seen as important in supporting rural communities

to meet their aspirations and reflect their social and economic functions. This endorsement is particularly welcome.

9. The Inspector reserves particular support for our novel approach to the delivery of affordable housing, especially the use of the Dynamic Viability Index which is viewed as offering a *“sounder approach than that of a fixed and immutable target in a Core Strategy for a period of the plan”*. Our approach is regarded as consistent and transparent and reflects the particularly distinctive local circumstances in Shropshire.
10. The delivery and monitoring of the Core Strategy through the Implementation Plan and the Place Plans also receives particular endorsement. These are seen as *“impressive living documents”* that set out the delivery mechanisms, funding and timescales for the infrastructure required to implement the Core Strategy. The arrangements for monitoring and delivering the Core Strategy are considered to be effective, clearly set out and soundly based.

Overall Level of housing development

11. Shortly before the hearings commenced the High Court ruled that Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) were still part of the planning framework and therefore a consideration for the Core Strategy hearing. This effectively nullified the Council's original change proposed whereby the policy was changed to say *“up to 27,500 homes if required”* as the RSS target had seemingly been removed. However the Inspector confirmed that the Core Strategy has to deliver the RSS figure which has resulted in a return to the original policy wording of *“delivering around 27,500 new homes”*.
12. The Inspector accepts that the 27,500 target is Shropshire's own target to meet future housing needs and supported by a robust local evidence base. In response to arguments for a lower target the Inspector considered this would exacerbate housing shortages, increase house prices reduce the level of affordable housing and impact on Shropshire's economy. The Core Strategy has mechanisms in place to manage and monitor the release of housing land and new housebuilding so the Inspector has concluded that the overall provision of *“around 27,500 new homes”* is soundly based and appropriate.
13. The **only** change required by the Inspector in his report that has not previously been agreed relates to an attempt made to shift some of the flexibility that was being sought within the headline housing figure to the rural areas. Your officers sought the addition of *“if required”* to the 35% of housing to be allocated to the Hubs and Clusters as part of our drive for rural rebalance. The Inspector concluded that this would introduce vagueness rather than flexibility and that the original term *“around 35%, to meet local needs and reflect community aspirations”* provides sufficient flexibility and clear guidance to communities to enable the precise amount and distribution of development within the rural area to be established as part of the SAMDev process.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does

not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

Core Strategy Final Plan. A 'track changes' version has been placed in the members library.

Human Rights Act Appraisal

The recommendations contained in this report are compatible with the provisions of the Human Rights act 1998

Environmental Appraisal

The Core Strategy has been subject to Full Sustainability Appraisal (incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment) and Habitat Regulation Assessment under EU law at earlier stages.

Risk Management Appraisal

If the Core Strategy is not adopted there will be considerable delay in delivering a consistent Shropshire-wide planning framework to replace out-of-date Local and Structure Plan policies. Further costs would be incurred through consultation and another Hearing as well as delaying preparation of SAMDev and undermining delivery of the Council's objectives and priorities especially those in the Sustainable Community Strategy.

Community / Consultations Appraisal

Consultation is an integral part of the Core Strategy process and it has been subject to 4 earlier stages of consultation. The Inspector has found the community engagement and consultation undertaken to meet regulations and requirements. This is not a consultation stage.

Cabinet Member

Malcolm Price

Local Member

All

Appendices

Appendix A: Inspector's Report

Appendix B: Annexe A Changes Required for Soundness

Appendix C: Annexe B Minor Changes