

TAUNTON DEANE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE – 8TH DECEMBER 2004

REPORT OF THE FORWARD PLAN MANAGER

TAUNTON URBAN EXTENSION STUDY

(This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Bishop)

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To consider the Taunton Urban Extension Study (UES), following the receipt of the final report from consultants Terence O'Rourke.

2.0 SUMMARY

- 2.1 The two options for an urban extension are at Monkton Heathfield and at Comeytrowe. Consultants have assessed the options against environmental, sustainability and delivery criteria. They conclude that the preferred location for a sustainable urban extension to Taunton is at Monkton Heathfield. This area has potential for 3,000 dwellings and 15 ha employment in addition to the 1,000 dwellings and 16 ha employment allocated in the Local Plan. It supports the economic objectives of the PUA and has transport, sustainability and community benefits that outweigh the loss of higher grade agricultural land.

3.0 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 In September 2001 the Regional Planning Guidance for the South West (RPG10) designated Taunton as a Principal Urban Area (PUA), one of eleven in the region. Policy SS5 requires urban extension studies for seven of the PUAs including Taunton. Such studies to produce long-term sustainable development strategies are to include transport and infrastructure needs.
- 3.2 In response to its PUA status the Vision for Taunton was produced in October 2002 in partnership by TDBC, SCC and the South West of England Regional Development Agency (SWERDA). In March 2003 the partners then commissioned consultants to carry out three studies: an Urban Design Framework (UDF) for the town centre; an Urban Extension Study (UES) for Taunton; and Taunton Transport Strategy Review (TTSR).
- 3.3 The underlying strategy to the commission is founded on that of the Local Plan and the objectives of the Vision for Taunton. That is to give top priority to the regeneration of previously developed land in the urban area, putting the river at the heart of the town and thereby minimising the need for greenfield development. Rather than a scatter of sites too small to deliver community facilities, greenfield development is based on large community expansions that provide homes, jobs and all the necessary community facilities, transport

and infrastructure. We wanted the studies to be informed by an assessment of the economic potential of Taunton, rather than by housing trends. An integrated approach to economic development, land use planning and transport is required.

3.4 In November and December 2003 there was public consultation on the emerging UDF and UES work and in March 2004 there was public consultation on the TTSR.

3.5 In June 2004 the Somerset Joint Structure Plan Alteration 1996-2016 Deposit Draft included in Policy STR3 Taunton:

“Within and beyond the plan period, expansion of the urban area will be required in order to fulfil Taunton’s potential as a Principal Urban Area. This should be made to the north east side of the town.”

The proposal was illustrated on the Key Diagram Taunton Inset.

3.6 The UDF, UES and TTSR will inform important emerging strategies such as the Regional Spatial Strategy, the Taunton Sub Area Study, LTP2 and the Taunton Deane Local Development Framework (LDF). The priority components of the LDF are the Core Strategy and the Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan that will facilitate delivering the Vision for Taunton. After these key elements are in place it will be necessary to focus on an Urban Extension Action Area Plan and the development document dealing with other allocations, which will identify sites for development after 2011.

4.0 TAUNTON URBAN EXTENSION STUDY

4.1 The consultant’s report will be sent to all members on a CD Rom. The study approach has four stages:

Stage 1- Identifying housing requirements

- Economic forecasts
- Population growth
- Urban capacity
- Need for an urban extension
- Land requirements

Stage 2- Options for Urban Extension

- Overview of environmental constraints
- Defining appraisal criteria
- Strategic sieving exercise
- Local environmental appraisal

Stage 3- Detail option appraisal

- Defining the options
- The appraisal process
- Comparison of options

Stage 4- The preferred option

- Priority issues for Taunton
- The preferred option

- Implementation
- 4.2 Stage 1 identified scope for about 80,000 sqm of office floorspace, about 50,000 sqm of retail and leisure floorspace and 2,200 dwellings in the town centre. Scope for an urban extension of around 3,000-4,000 dwellings and the need for 10-15 ha of employment land with access to the strategic highway network was identified giving rise to a broad land requirement of 150-200 ha.
- 4.3 Stage 2 assessed the areas around Taunton against the following environmental, sustainability and delivery considerations:
- Floodplain
 - Agricultural land quality
 - Landscape quality
 - Natural heritage
 - Cultural Heritage
 - Land use effects
 - Infrastructure and services
 - Transport / accessibility
 - Socio-economic factors
 - Commercial / market delivery
- A number of appraisal criteria were established under these headings and assessed as to their strategic or local importance. On the basis of this strategic consideration only the areas of floodplain to the east and west of the town were ruled out for an urban extension
- 4.4 A more detailed local environmental appraisal was then carried out. This showed two areas sufficiently free from environmental constraints:
- Land to the north-east of Taunton at Monkton Heathfield, and
 - Land to the south-west of Taunton at Comeytrowe.
- 4.5 Stage 3 involved a more detailed comparison of these options, using the appraisal criteria set out above, with the exception of flooding, since all floodplain areas had been removed from consideration at the earlier stage. Each criterion is considered in turn.
- 4.6 Agricultural land is of a lower quality at Comeytrowe (grades 3a, 3b and 4) than at Monkton Heathfield (grades 2 and 3a), a clear benefit for development at Comeytrowe.
- 4.7 In landscape terms both options would involve the loss of open countryside visible from the hills and it is considered that Monkton Heathfield would have more landscape impact, though the difference between them is finely balanced.
- 4.8 On natural heritage and cultural heritage there is no basis for differentiating between the two options.

- 4.9 On land use issues an extension at Monkton Heathfield provides opportunities for comprehensive planning alongside the existing housing/employment commitment, and the existing communities, including schools and other facilities. This gives greater flexibility in terms of housing numbers required to support community facilities, local centres and bus services, and means that the viability of existing facilities should be enhanced. By comparison an urban extension at Comeytrove will need to be more self-contained. There is therefore more potential for effective land use at Monkton Heathfield.
- 4.10 In terms of transportation Monkton Heathfield possesses significant advantages in terms of:
- Access to the strategic highway network
 - Its location in an existing public transport corridor with frequent bus services
 - Proximity to an existing cycle / public footpath network that has direct links to the town centre
 - Its accessibility to the town centre and major employment sites
 - Its ability to support new park & ride facilities
- As a result an urban extension at Monkton Heathfield is more able to deliver the infrastructure needed to support the growth in housing and employment and is more likely to promote the use of non-car modes of transport.
- 4.11 On infrastructure no problems are anticipated in supplying either of the areas. An extension at Comeytrove would require the upgrading of the existing medium gas pressure network and an extension at Monkton Heathfield would require a significant upgrading of the existing sewerage network. It is not considered that these issues provide a basis for differentiating between the two options.
- 4.12 On socio-economic issues Monkton Heathfield provides the opportunity to plan comprehensively for community facilities including education and health, giving community benefits and economies of scale. Its strategic location also makes it more likely to attract a wider range of employment opportunities than Comeytrove.
- 4.13 Monkton Heathfield is better located to establish links with residents in the most deprived wards in the town, Halcon and Lyngford. The promotion of bus priority measures to the town centre and new employment opportunities could also benefit residents in these areas. There are therefore socio-economic benefits associated with Monkton Heathfield.
- 4.14 On market delivery the substantial demand for housing in the Taunton area provides no basis for distinguishing between the options. However, in relation to employment Monkton Heathfield is a more attractive location with access to the strategic road network. It is therefore more likely to support a range of employment opportunities than Comeytrove, and to provide a more sustainable mixed use extension.

- 4.15 The consultants conclude that the main advantage of Comeytrowe is on agricultural land. It also has some advantages in relation to landscape and visual impact, but these are finely balanced. Against this Monkton Heathfield has significant advantages in terms of accessibility to employment and services, promotion of non-car modes of transport, attracting new employment and making the most effective use of land by comprehensive planning for infrastructure provision.
- 4.16 It is considered that the ability to support the economic objectives of PUA status, the transportation opportunities and other potential benefits associated with Monkton Heathfield are significant enough to outweigh the loss of higher quality land at the site. It is considered to provide the most appropriate location for a major urban extension to Taunton.

- 4.17 Stage 4 assesses the specific land use requirements for an urban extension at Monkton Heathfield as follows:

Housing (3,000 –4,000 dwellings)	75-100 ha
Employment	10-15 ha
Education (primary and secondary)	4-10 ha
Open space	16-20 ha
Community / local centre	10 ha
Total	115-155 ha

This does not include land that is currently allocated in the Local Plan. Highway and public transport infrastructure is also identified. If land in the Green Wedge is not considered suitable for recreation, then a further 20 ha of open space would need to be provided within the development area. In this scenario it is more likely that about 3,000 additional dwellings would be provided.

- 4.18 The urban extension can be implemented without requiring or prejudicing the provision of a new motorway junction (24a) at Walford Cross and/or a 20 ha strategic employment site adjacent to it, if the demand for either can be demonstrated. Neither facility forms part of the proposed urban extension, nor does it prejudice proposals for a Northern Outer Distributor Road which would facilitate better vehicular access between the M5 and West Somerset. It is important that the current Local Plan proposals for Monkton Heathfield have due regard to the longer term potential for the urban extension and enable subsequent phases to developed in a sustainable manner.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The two options for an urban extension are at Monkton Heathfield and at Comeytrowe. Consultants have assessed the options against environmental, sustainability and delivery criteria. They conclude that the preferred location for a sustainable urban extension to Taunton is at Monkton Heathfield. This area has potential for 3,000 dwellings and 15 ha employment in addition to the 1,000 dwellings and 16 ha employment allocated in the Local Plan. It supports

the economic objectives of the PUA and has transport, sustainability and community benefits that outweigh the loss of higher grade agricultural land.

6.0 CORPORATE PRIORITIES

6.1 The UES has been prepared as a result of the PUA role of Taunton and it will inform the emerging Regional Spatial Strategy and Taunton Deane Local Development Framework. As such it assists with delivering the Vision for Taunton, the Borough Council's top corporate priority. It guides longer term economic investment, land use planning and the development of the transport network. It takes account of environmental conservation, contributes towards developing safer and stronger communities, and facilitates the development of healthier lifestyles.

7.0 RECOMMENDATION

7.1 Members are recommended to resolve that the Taunton Urban Extension Study be subject to public consultation in order to inform the decision-making process.

Background Papers

The following documents have informed the content of this report:

- Taunton Urban Extension Study November 2004
- Taunton Deane Local Plan
- Somerset and Exmoor National Park Joint Structure Plan Alteration 1996-2011 Deposit Draft - June 2004
- Regional Planning Guidance for the South West (RPG10) September 2001

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