Spatial Strategy
Topic Paper No 7 – Summary

Introduction

The role of the planning system is to manage the development and use of land in the public interest and to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. A key characteristic of the planning system is that it is 'plan led' i.e. decisions on planning applications are made in accordance with the development plan unless material planning considerations indicate otherwise.

It is important that the LDP is based on a clear vision as to what the Plan is seeking to achieve (either in terms of what sort of place the County will be at the end of the Plan period, or in terms of a particular aspiration such as economic growth). This must be accompanied by a strategy which sets out the objectives of the Plan and how these are expressed spatially on the ground i.e. 'the spatial strategy'. A clear spatial strategy which is based on a robust evidence base will inform the preparation of strategic and detailed policies and proposals, both within the written statement and on the proposals maps.

This is one of a series of Summary Topic Papers which provide an overview on a range of planning topics and issues. This Strategy Topic Paper will have links with many of these Topic Papers and in particular the Population, Household Growth and Housing Topic Paper.

Context

Flintshire is at the gateway to North East Wales and forms an important part of the sub-region along with Wrexham, Cheshire West and the Wirral. It is important to the economy of Wales given the presence of Deeside Industrial Park and key employers such as Airbus and Toyota and this reflected in the recent grant of Enterprise Zone status. The Deeside area takes the form of a developed area comprising several settlements at the intersection of the A494(T) and A548 and two railway lines, and along the Dee Estuary. Elsewhere the County is largely rural in nature with a series of market towns and smaller settlements. It features the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley AONB which is a landscape of national importance and also the Dee Estuary which is of international ecological importance. It is this great contrast, and the diverse nature of the County which makes formulating a spatial strategy a challenging task.

The Wales Spatial Plan, in terms of North East Wales, identifies an urbanised and industrialised border including the Wrexham-Deeside-Chester hub, the coastal belt and the rural hinterlands. It identifies the following key elements in realising the vision for North East Wales:

- Strengthening key hubs as a focus for investment in future employment, housing, retail, leisure and services. Outside the hubs, strong sustainable communities will be fostered within coastal, border and rural towns and villages to provide locally accessible jobs and services across the area
- Developing sustainable accessibility between hubs, coastal and border towns and rural parts of the area. Improving accessibility on key road and rail corridors to maintain economic growth and provide development opportunities to the west

- Improving the quality and diversity of the economy, with a focus on high value manufacturing and services, including a high quality year-round tourism sector
- Developing, in a focused and strategic manner, the skills and education of the current and potential workforce. It is vital that the area's children and young people develop the basic education, skills, wider knowledge and aspirations to enable them to access good job opportunities and meet the needs of local employers
- Promoting sustainable development, which is at the heart of the strategy, in part driven by the wealth of natural and built heritage within the area. The need to protect and enhance this is paramount along with the need to address and respond to climate change.

The role of the Plan

The LDP needs to provide for the development needs of the County over the 15 year Plan period (2015 to 2030). It must reflect national planning guidance but also have regard to the needs, characteristics, and diversity of the Plan area. There will be different ideas and views as to what the spatial strategy for the Plan should be and therefore a series of spatial strategy options will need to be devised and tested as the Plan progresses.

The Plan should set out:
- the issues addressed in its preparation
- a vision as to what it is seeking to achieve
- a series of objectives
- a spatial strategy expressing the vision and objectives geographically
- strategic land use policies which set out the major policy direction of the Plan
- land use proposals which allocate land for development e.g. housing
- land use policies which identify major areas of constraint e.g. green barrier or flood risk
- land use policies on a range of topics which provide a framework within which decisions on individual planning applications can be made.

Welsh Government advises that *'The LDP should address the unique economic, environmental and social characteristics, opportunities and issues of the area. It should be based on a vision of the future which should be clear, realistic and based on the objectives and priorities of the relevant community strategy/ies…'.*

Welsh Government further advises *'The strategy should indicate the broad locations for development including:*
i. substantive growth areas, including individual major and strategic developments likely to have a significant effect on the plan area (e.g. a large urban expansion);
ii. locations for specific types of substantive developments (e.g. housing, leisure, employment and waste sites); and
iii. areas of restraint on development (e.g. green wedges, sites of nature conservation importance)'.

Key Waste Plans and Strategies

Whilst the LDP is a new Plan for Flintshire, it will need to be developed within a framework of existing plans, guidance and strategies and these will include:

- Wales Spatial Plan
- Planning Policy Wales
- Technical Advice Notes
- The UDP
- West Cheshire / NE Wales Sub Regional Spatial Strategy
- The Flintshire Community Strategy
- Regional Transport Plan
- Wider international, national regional and local evidence base

The Plan also has to have regard to:
- The existing pattern and form of built development
- Existing planning permissions
- The availability and capacity of infrastructure
- Constraints to development such as flood risk
- The UDP Inspector's Report

In terms of the objectives of Welsh Government , PPW advises that planning policies, decisions and proposals (in so far as they are relevant to the Plans strategy) should:

- Promote resource-efficient and climate change resilient settlement patterns that minimise land-take and urban sprawl, especially through preference for the re-use of suitable previously developed land and buildings, wherever possible avoiding development on greenfield sites
- Locate developments so as to minimise the demand for travel, especially by private car
- Minimise the risks posed by, or to, development on or adjacent to unstable or contaminated land and land liable to flooding (including managing and mitigating the consequences of climate change)
- Play an appropriate role in securing the provision of infrastructure to form the physical basis for sustainable communities
- Contribute to the protection and improvement of the environment, so as to improve the quality of life, and protect local and global ecosystems
- Ensure that all local communities – both urban and rural – have sufficient good quality housing for their needs, including affordable housing for local needs and for special needs where appropriate, in safe neighbourhoods
- Promote access to employment, shopping, education, health, community, leisure and sports facilities and open and green space, maximising opportunities for community development and social
- Foster improvements to transport facilities and services which maintain or improve accessibility to services and facilities, secure employment, economic and environmental objectives, and improve safety and amenity
- Foster social inclusion by ensuring that full

advantage is taken of the opportunities to secure a more accessible environment for everyone that the development of land and buildings provides.

- Promote quality, lasting, environmentally-sound and flexible employment opportunities
- Contribute to the protection and, where possible, the improvement of people's health and well-being

PPW advises that development plans need to provide a framework to stimulate, guide and manage change towards sustainability. Plans should secure a sustainable settlement pattern which meets the needs of the economy, the environment and health, while respecting local diversity and protecting the character and cultural identity of communities. In their land allocation policies and proposals, local planning authorities should:

- promote sustainable patterns of development, identifying previously developed land and buildings, and indicating locations for higher density development at hubs and interchanges and close to route corridors where accessibility on foot and by bicycle and public transport is good;
- maintain and improve the vitality, attractiveness and viability of town, district, local and village centres;
- foster development approaches that recognise the mutual dependence between town and country, thus improving linkages between urban areas and their rural surroundings;
- locate development so that it can be well serviced by existing infrastructure;
- ensure that development encourages opportunities for commercial and residential uses to derive environmental benefit from co-location;
- locate development in settlements that are resilient to the effects of climate change, by avoiding areas where environmental consequences and impacts cannot be sustainably managed. Where

development takes place in areas of known risks, ensure that the development is designed for resilience over its whole lifetime;

- ensure that tackling the causes and consequences of climate change is taken into account in locating new development

Issues to be addressed by the Plan

In drawing up the LDP it is not possible to start with a blank piece of paper as to some extent the strategy will be informed by the strategy within the UDP, the existing pattern and form of built development and existing transport and other infrastructure.

A key starting point is to review the strategy within the UDP and to learn lessons from its implementation. The UDP sought to direct development based on a three tier settlement hierarchy, each with indicative growth bands. However, as a result of the Inspector's recommendations on the Plan's strategy, based on concerns about the spatial distribution of growth not focussing sufficiently on main towns, the approach was modified in the adopted plan as follows:

- most new development to main towns (category A settlements),
- development in semi urban villages (category B settlements) up to a growth threshold of 15% (over the Plan period) above which development must be justified on the grounds of housing need
- development in small villages (category C settlements) up to a maximum growth of 10% (over the Plan period) with all dwellings being to meet proven local needs

The implementation of the Plan has highlighted a number of issues:

- the majority of development has not been developed in category A settlements
- a greater proportion of development has been accommodated in category B settlements
- development was spread too thinly across too broad a range of settlements

thereby failing to bring about community and infrastructure benefits

- there were too many settlements in the settlement hierarchy, many of which did not contribute to the Plan Strategy
- creating the expectation that all settlements should deliver growth
- creating the expectation that growth bands are 'targets'
- settlement boundaries were drawn too rigidly based on historical plan approaches and did not look ahead
- the indicative growth bands, which were only ever intended to act as a guide, are now rigidly applied as part of a policy approach (HSG3) which is complex and difficult to implement.

The UDP Inspector's Report provided useful feedback on a number of issues and considerations that need to be addressed by the Council.

Settlement Hierarchy:
3.5.31 'In principle I am satisfied that the spatial distribution of growth should be based on a hierarchy of settlements with more growth taking place in the larger settlements. This is in line with both national and the plan's underlying sustainable objectives. However, I have some reservations and share some, but not all, objectors' concerns about the particulars of the strategy'.

Growth Bands
3.5.33 '…., I am not entirely clear about the Council's justification for selecting the actual percentages of the growth bands ….there is no further information about the capacity of individual settlements to justify the levels set'.

Settlement Boundaries
3.5.35. 'In principle there is nothing wrong with a settlement policy which is based on the historic settlement pattern. However, that settlement pattern was developed when there was less personal mobility and significantly different social/economic conditions. These factors meant people tended to work, rest and play close to home and communities

were relatively independent. The ever decreasing facilities and services within the rural settlements is evidence that things have changed significantly'.

i) Rural Settlements

3.5.36. 'As a consequence I do not consider it acceptable that development per se should be encouraged in the category C settlements where the strategy is permissive of up to 10% development. By definition these scattered villages are not in sustainable locations and have extremely limited facilities. To promote the expansion of such settlements is not in accord with the underlying sustainable principles of the plan. That being said I do recognize there may be occasions where there is a local (by which I do not mean a personal) need for one or more houses. It may be for low cost housing or to accommodate rural workers. In such circumstances small scale development of up to 10% could well be acceptable ….'.

ii) Urban Areas

3.5.37. 'Turning to boundary definition. In some instances settlements which were once separate entities now form part of a continuous built up area and share facilities. However, they are allocated in the plan as different settlements and can be within different categories such as Mynydd Isa and Buckley. This is illogical and backward rather than forward looking. A settlement boundary on a plan does not define the identity or cohesion of a community, that will remain, despite the boundaries drawn'.

3.5.38. 'In principle with such circumstances I consider it would be better if the spatial strategy had regard to built up areas as well as historic settlements. This would get rid of apparent inconsistencies where what appears to be accessible land in close proximity to facilities and services is excluded from settlements and protected by countryside/green barriers/open space policies. I do not find the argument that an accessible area which has recently been the subject of significant development needs a period of respite, to be a good reason to prevent development if the infrastructure is or can readily be made available. Accommodating growth inevitably brings change'.

LDP

3.5.40. 'This [the LDP} is intended to be a far speedier process and will be based on up to date information including a thorough examination of settlement capacity. For the spatial distribution of growth it should also consider what should constitute a settlement/built up area'.

In her covering letter, the Inspector sums up her comments on the Plan's spatial strategy and this forms an important part of the evidence base for the LDP:

'The Council has undertaken a review of both the green barrier and settlement boundaries. Whilst I have accepted the generality of the reasoning put forward, I do nevertheless have some concerns, for instance the majority of development will not take place in category A settlements. I consider the time is rapidly approaching when the matter of detailed boundaries and the strategic function of the countryside in some localities needed to be looked at critically and in depth. Until that can take place as part of the LDP process I have recommended the spatial distribution of growth, as guided by the settlement strategy, should become even more focused on the towns and larger villages with growth / new development in the smallest least accessible villages and areas of open countryside severely restricted'.

In devising spatial options for the LDP there are a number of key considerations:
• the need to look ahead and take a long term view of sustainable locations for future development
• the need to move away from identifying individual settlements in planning terms, recognizing sustainable urban areas and settlement grouping
• the need to review the existing settlement hierarchy and categorisation based on an assessment of the services and facilities of each settlement and whether it is a sustainable location to accommodate further growth

- the need to understand where there is infrastructure capacity or scope for improvements
- the need to understand where it is viable to develop in order to deliver development on the ground, and to contribute to infrastructure and community benefits.
- Deciding on the nature and scale of development sought by the Plan
- The degree to which specific locational factors such as the potential for development within sustainable transport corridors and hubs, or locating development close to centres of employment, should influence the identification of spatial options
- the need to have regard to the close relationship between Flintshire and CWAC in terms of housing and employment
- The degree to which rural areas and villages are able to accommodate growth in a sustainable manner.
- the need for the strategy to have sufficient flexibility to be able to withstand changes as it progresses to adoption

Examples of spatial strategy options, which will need to be addressed as part of the Plan preparation, include:

- **Sustainable distribution** – developing a settlement hierarchy which allows for a proportional distribution of development based on sustainability principles
- **Focused urban growth** – directing most development to urban centres which have the capacity and infrastructure to accommodate development
- **New Settlement** – the identification of a new settlement based on a sustainable transport corridor
- **Dispersal** – distributing development evenly to settlements across the County
- **UDP Strategy** – repeating the UDP strategy and settlement hierarchy
- **No strategy** – decisions on new development would be made on an ad hoc basis according to their individual merits
- **Market led** – a free market approach whereby

development would take place in those areas of the County where viability is greatest

Potential Land Use Policies / Proposals

Within the UDP the strategy is expressed in terms of strategy themes, a vision, strategic aims and functional aims which are then expressed spatially. The strategy is then translated into Part I strategic and Part II detailed policies. As part of the LDP it is considered that a simpler more structured approach can be developed comprising a vision, one set of objectives and a set of strategic policies. It is likely that these strategic policies will set out:

- The broad spatial distribution of growth
- Key allocations / growth areas
- Key areas of protection / constraint