

**ABERDEEN CITY AND SHIRE STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE: 28  
SEPTEMBER 2007**

**THE PROVISIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE ABERDEEN CITY AND SHIRE  
STRUCTURE PLAN**

**1 Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 To allow Members to identify those elements of spatial options which should be taken forward for further consideration for potential inclusion in the strategy for the draft structure plan and to dismiss from further consideration elements which have not performed well under the assessment criteria.

**2 Background**

- 2.1 The development plan scheme for the Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan was published on 14 February 2007 with the notice of intent to prepare a Structure Plan to mark the formal start to the structure plan preparation process. The development plan scheme sets out the approach that the two authorities are taking to the production of the Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan. It also details the consultations proposed to be carried out.
- 2.2 This document proposed that the preferred spatial strategy would be published in September 2007, along with our reasons for choosing it. It also proposed that in the period to September 2007 we were to consult with a wide range of community, private sector and public sector groups on the alternative strategies being considered.
- 2.3 The Committee was invited to comment on the method proposed to identify the “preferred strategy” at a seminar held on 19 December 2006. It was explained at that time that the strategy itself was being seen as three components: an element of scale (how much development); an element of location (where development should take place); and timing (when development should take place).
- 2.4 It was also explained that a further three components would contribute to the decision on the preferred strategy: a focused engagement with stakeholders and communities; a technical evaluation; and an assessment of the options against the draft vision for the plan, to ensure that the strategy contributes to the attainment of the vision.
- 2.5 At this seminar the Committee was also asked to comment on the strategic options, which were being put forward as the basis for engagement with stakeholders and communities. 8 models for development in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire were proposed, developed from a significantly longer list and informed by consultation with Community Council Forums and the Aberdeen City Land Use Forum. Options for the scale and timing elements of the

strategy were also presented. These options were subsequently worked up in detail for the engagement exercises and, as an aid to understanding how these options could be implemented, a number of alternative distributions of development were presented. The detailed descriptions of the options, as used in the engagement with stakeholders, are attached to this report as **Appendix 1.**

- 2.6 During March to August of this year engagement has taken place with stakeholders on these options with the objective of identifying which options had popular support. However, rather than just being a simple choice between options, the engagement events held were designed to capture consensus on the reasons why particular options were popular. Stakeholder engagement took place with a wide range of interests including specific interest groups (for example, the Scottish Rural Business and Property Association, the house building industry, and Environmental Forums in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire), other environmental groups, community groups and Councillors. In total 37 workshops have been held and an analysis of the outcomes of this engagement is provided in **Appendix 2.**
- 2.7 Concurrent with this a technical assessment of the 8 spatial options was undertaken. This involved assessment of the infrastructure requirements, constraints, opportunities and risks associated with the 8 options. This has resulted in an “interim technical assessment” which is reproduced at **Appendix 3.** This technical assessment also includes an “appropriate assessment” of potential impact on sites of European nature conservation interest.
- 2.8 Some criticism has been received on the basis that we did not undertake the technical assessment before consulting stakeholders on just the viable options. The method employed was implemented to speed up the plan preparation process and in the belief that all the options presented were, on the face of it, implementable. Criticism has also been made that the engagement process was not fully public and was only focussed on known community groups and business interests. However, an “open door” policy was adopted and invitees to the meetings were asked to consider who else within their community might have an interest and wish to attend. This was part of the “scaling up” process agreed in the Development Plan Scheme of increasing engagement as the plan becomes more tangible. We remain of the opinion that public meetings are a more appropriate vehicle for the later stage of engagement on the draft plan itself.
- 2.9 At the meeting of this committee on 25 June 2007 instruction was given to start the process of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the Structure Plan. Assessment of the strategic options has been undertaken against the SEA objectives so as to inform the choice of strategic option. A summary report of the findings from this assessment is presented as **Appendix 4.**
- 2.10 Finally, officers have undertaken an assessment of the options against the principles identified in the draft vision. These assessment criteria were agreed by the joint chairs of this committee on 7 September 2007, as instructed by the committee at their meeting on 25 June 2007. This assessment is presented as **Appendix 5** to this report.

- 2.11 With information from the four strands of stakeholder preference, technical feasibility, delivery of the vision and SEA, it is now possible to come to a provisional view on the preferred strategy on which the draft structure plan could be based.

### **3 Discussion**

#### **Scale of development**

- 3.1 In relation to the question of scale two specific issues were raised with stakeholders:
- What the overall scale of development should be. The options given were:
    - a low-growth scenario (based on current forecasts – the forecasts being used as an example were the 2004 forecasts, but with clarity that the most recent forecasts available would be used);
    - a medium-growth scenario (based on historic housing completion rates of the take-up of land); and
    - a high-growth scenario (based on growth in excess of current completion rates).
  - Whether the plan should:
    - seek to accommodate all the growth for the area within a prescriptive spatial strategy; or
    - allow a greater degree of flexibility outwith the strategic growth areas.
- 3.2 A high degree of consensus was expressed for a medium / high growth scenario in order to overcome issues of land availability and to stimulate economic development. The need to accommodate local aspiration and need was widely recognised, particularly in rural areas, where allocations in excess of current development rates were advocated. Very few stakeholders advocated an approach based purely on forecasts to identify the land requirement, due to a recognition that such forecasts are likely to be unreliable.
- 3.3 The technical assessment assumed a high growth scenario as a base case, but also considered any implications from both medium and low growth scenarios. No such implications were identified that could not be overcome through spreading development more widely within the pattern being promoted. Some facilities, notably education, were dependent on large allocations in order to justify new facilities.
- 3.4 Comparison against the vision suggests that high growth has greater negative impacts on sustainability and quality of life than medium or low growth. However, there economic well-being and social inclusion benefits of a higher rate of growth. This might suggest that, as the plan develops, there is a role for mitigation measures in addressing these negative impacts.

#### **Location of Development**

- 3.5 The need for the majority of new development to be based in or very close to Aberdeen City was widely recognised by stakeholders. In addition, development in major settlements across Aberdeenshire (growth poles) and development in the existing road / rail corridor (existing transport corridor) proved to be very popular. A strategy based on new settlements was notably

unpopular. However, it must be recognised that these views represent stakeholders' aspirations for what development in particular areas may achieve without the benefits of access to the technical assessment, and any analysis of risks involved if a particular strategy is adopted.

- 3.6 In this context the popularity of the strategy that includes growth poles was firmly rooted in the belief that allocation of land in these locations would stimulate these local economies and reduce commuting to more central areas. Elements of the technical assessment dispute this perception and identify growth-pole-based strategies as the least environmentally and economically sustainable options, a view that the SEA supports. Nonetheless, the needs and aspirations of each settlement have to be considered, and we believe that it is possible to meet these by reserving a percentage of development for local growth in areas outwith the strategic growth areas.
- 3.7 The technical assessment gives most support to the majority of strategic development being in or around Aberdeen, with significant development either in the existing transport corridor, or within edge of city communities, or within new settlements. Development in a 'new' transport corridor (Aberdeen to Peterhead) was concluded by the technical assessment only to be an option that could be explored for the long term, given the scale of infrastructure improvements required (with no detail at the current time regarding their nature or deliverability) and the tailing away of marketability (housing and employment land) in the northern portion of the corridor.
- 3.8 When compared against the vision for the plan, a strategy incorporating growth poles also features poorly, particularly on issues associated with environmental sustainability and economic wellbeing. Strategies that did not include the majority of development in Aberdeen City consistently demonstrated a worse "fit" with the vision, reinforcing the conclusions from the technical assessment. When the majority of development was focussed on Aberdeen City, options involving either development in edge of city communities or new settlements were perceived to deliver fewer elements of the vision than options involving either development in the existing transport corridor, or development in the new transport corridor.
- 3.9 In the stakeholder engagement exercise it was suggested that combinations of spatial options would deliver additional benefits, such as combining most of the development in Aberdeen City with significant development in the transport corridor **and** either growth poles, or the new transport corridor. These scenarios were also tested against the vision for the plan. Significant improvement in fit with the vision was achieved with combining growth in the city with growth in the existing transport corridor **and** the new transport corridor.
- 3.10 While a strategy based on new settlements was unpopular with stakeholders, it may also be possible to combine an element of this idea as an element of the delivery of the other options, for instance one based principally on development in the city or the existing transport corridor. However, this would require further examination as part of the fuller exploration of the provisional option agreed.

### **Timing of development**

- 3.11 Stakeholder engagement consistently identified a desire to see development of land promoted early in the plan period, rather than retaining land allocations for future use. Reasons given for this included the need to stimulate economic development and to overcome a perception of a backlog of development aspiration.
- 3.12 However, the technical appraisal identified that the scale of infrastructure required would likely complicate “front-loading”, particularly with the “new transport corridor” based option.
- 3.13 Despite this caveat the appraisal against the draft vision suggests that a degree of front-loading is a desirable strategy to adopt, since any future sustainability benefits from delaying development (through improved building standards) are unknown, and have to be weighed against the immediate economic benefits of “catching the wave” of current prosperity, as well as the value of providing clarity to the development industry. However, once again mitigation measures (such as high standards of environmental performance in new development) may be identified during plan preparation process which address these sustainability issues.

#### **4. The preferred strategy**

- 4.1 The above section allows conclusions to be drawn as to which elements should be subject to detailed technical assessment with a view to taking them forward provisionally as the preferred strategy for the Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan. It is clear that there is a consensus amongst stakeholders that any strategy which promotes a scale of development only to meet our forecast needs is undesirable and there is an aspiration for a rate of development greater than that which has been seen in recent years, in order to stimulate economic development and address issues of land availability. Likewise there is a consensus that development should be weighted towards early delivery and greater certainty on the long term location of development. Both of these choices support the vision, but the interim technical assessment identifies that there may be problems with early delivery of major infrastructure. On the other hand this very requirement suggests the need for early confirmation of sites so that these problems can be addressed with confidence.
- 4.2 In terms of scale, therefore, the conclusion is that the Plan should allow for a high or medium to high growth rate. Insufficient work has been carried out to put forward a range of housing numbers or volumes of employment land which could be allowed for in the Plan. However, to take housing as an example, it is clear that a rate of growth higher than that seen over recent years should be provided for and that there should be an element of front loading of this. Projecting current completion rates would mean an average growth rate of over 2,200 new dwellings per year (55,000 over the 25 year period).
- 4.3 The publication of the 2007 Strategic Forecasts (prepared in parallel with the work on the Structure Plan) will be important to factor into the analysis to determine the precise scale of growth that should be planned for and that exercise has not yet been fully carried out. Equally, the amount of “headroom flexibility” desirable has not yet been assessed and perhaps most importantly the aspirations for growth beyond the ‘need’ and ‘headroom’ calculations and the allowance that should be made for these aspirations have not been factored in. Therefore, the final housing allowance over the 25

year period is likely to be significantly in excess of 55,000. A similar exercise is required before a figure is put on the amount of business land required in the Plan period.

- 4.4 The evidence from the engagement with stakeholders, the interim technical assessment and the assessment of the strategic options against the vision suggests that the area's interests would be best served by promoting the majority of development in or around Aberdeen. Likewise these assessments identify that, while popular with stakeholders, promoting strategic levels of development on the "growth pole" model would be counter-productive, harming both the economy and movement towards sustainability.
- 4.5 Strategies based largely on new settlements or edge of city communities can be observed to be limited in the benefits they bring, while basing development in a new transport corridor has considerable merits, but will inevitably be constrained by the long lead-in time required for implementation. Development within the existing transport corridor is consistently identified as a good approach to take.
- 4.6 Four strands are therefore identified as comprising the provisional strategic option, which require to be worked up and refined for inclusion in the draft structure plan:
- The major element of the growth, or about 50% of the new housing and business land over the next 25 years, would be in or around Aberdeen.
  - A significant supporting element of the growth would be identified within the arc described by the road and rail corridor from Huntly to Laurencekirk (so as to provide the widest possible benefits from development). Further technical work will be undertaken to determine the optimal distribution of development in this pattern. Technical assessments will also seek to determine whether a small new settlement within the corridor would be desirable as a means of delivery.
  - A further supporting element of the growth would be promoted for the medium to longer term in the Peterhead / Ellon / Aberdeen corridor, subject to review in the light of progress with the planned provision of major improvements to the transport network in this area.
  - In addition it is proposed that the draft plan makes provision for new housing and business land outwith the strategic growth areas to accommodate local needs.

## **5 Recommendation**

**It is recommended to the Committee;**

**1 That the following strategy is adopted on a provisional basis for further testing and refinement with a view to development into the draft Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan:**

- **Rates of growth in excess of that seen in the area over the recent past;**
- **An element of front-loading of the development opportunities towards the start of the plan period;**

**Item:            Page:**

- **Around half of all new development allowed for in or around Aberdeen;**
- **Significant development allowed for within the Huntly to Laurencekirk road and rail corridor;**
- **An exploration with partners of the option of additional strategic development opportunities in the longer term within the Peterhead / Ellon / Aberdeen Corridor; and**
- **Additional development opportunities outwith the strategic growth areas for business and housing land to meet local needs.**

**Dr Christine Gore  
Director Planning & Environmental Services  
Aberdeenshire Council**

**Dr Margaret Bochel  
Head of Planning & Infrastructure  
Aberdeen City Council**

Report prepared by:  
Piers Blaxter, Team Leader, Structure Plans  
10 September 2007