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Draft Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan maps out vision of high-quality growth across region

A new draft Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Structure Plan will go out for public consultation this spring.

City and Shire planners are drawing up the draft document to ensure the region maintains and enhances its attractiveness and continues to develop sustainably over the next 20 years.

The 22-page draft plan – which will be discussed by City and Shire councillors before the launch of the public consultation period – aims to map out a framework for the delivery of the new homes, businesses, transport infrastructure and facilities which will ensure continued prosperity.

The document stresses that the North-east must aim high – and earn a reputation for top-quality design and construction in all new development, of which local people and the whole country can be proud.

The draft plan states: “Aberdeen City and Shire is currently an attractive place to live and work, with a high-quality environment, high average incomes and low unemployment.

“However, there are disparities in wealth and opportunity between some of the region’s communities, and future events – for example, changes in North Sea oil and gas production, the impact of climate change, and global resource depletion – will threaten the prosperity of all if no action is taken.

“By 2030, Aberdeen City and Shire will need to have adapted to a very different world. The challenges ahead need to be faced up to so as to maintain and enhance the attractiveness of the region as a place to live and do business.”

The new draft plan marks a radical departure from previous structure plan documents by focusing hard on development needs over the next 20 years.

It lays out objectives, targets, delivery mechanisms and monitoring arrangements to ensure the policies and proposals contained in the plan are achieved.

And it stresses throughout that development must be driven by the principles of sustainability to make sure that growth enhances the environment and is a credit to the region.

The plan aims to:

- deliver a robust framework for investment decisions to deliver economic growth and diversification;
- address the urgent challenges of sustainable development and climate change;
- ensure the region has enough people, homes and jobs to support the level of services needed to enhance quality of life;
- protect and enhance the area’s natural and built environment;
- create sustainable mixed communities in growth corridors, regeneration areas and in existing shire settlements, employing the highest standards of design and construction;
- make the most efficient use of the transport network to ensure travel is minimised, and make walking, cycling and public transport attractive choices.

Spatial strategy

The document emphasises that all parts of the North-east will be involved in delivering the plan’s vision but says different areas will play different roles.

The strategy has been developed to promote environmentally sustainable development in the locations which best cater for business needs – and where there is clear potential for public transport growth, and opportunities for significant public and private sector investment in schools, community facilities, roads and railways.

Three Strategic Growth Areas (SGAs) have been pinpointed as the prime focus for 75-80% of development by 2030:

- **Aberdeen City** – earmarked for 50% of all new development over the plan period, with preference given to brownfield sites but where more than half will need to be accommodated on greenfield sites;
- **Huntly to Laurencekirk** – in line for significant development along the 66-mile road/rail corridor, where Crossrail proposals should deliver new stations, more frequent trains and increased rail capacity;
- **Aberdeen to Peterhead** – pinpointed as a prime area for economic growth and diversification, where initially modest levels of new home-building could be stepped up in the second half of the plan period as demand increases.

Further growth is proposed in Regeneration Priority Areas (RPAs) to ensure they realise their potential, with economic renewal targeted on: the coastal communities between Peterhead and Fraserburgh and beyond; from the Angus border to Inverbervie; and within Aberdeen City.

RPA priorities include:

- creating public, private and voluntary sector partnerships to drive redevelopment;
- regenerating brownfield sites with high-quality development which improves the environment;
- improving economic performance, infrastructure and transport connections;
- realising tourism potential.

Beyond the three SGAs and the RPAs, the draft structure plan envisages modest growth in existing settlements, with a focus on mixed housing, smaller homes for sale or rent, and high levels of affordable homes – respecting at all times the character of each area.

The finalised structure plan will not pinpoint specific sites for development. Land allocations and localised development policies will be detailed in Local Development Plans, which will be drafted from early 2009.

Economic growth

The draft structure plan says that, while oil and gas will continue to be important to the North-east economy, diversity will be essential to guarantee future prosperity.

New business ideas will be sought from the city's universities, a high-speed fibre-optic or equivalent telecommunications infrastructure will be developed, and retail provision will be enhanced.

A marketable supply of at least 60 hectares of employment land will be available at all times in Aberdeen, along with 60 hectares within the SGAs in Aberdeenshire (and further employment land in Aberdeenshire to meet local needs), with a proportion of sufficient quality to attract company headquarters.

Sustainable development and climate change

The structure plan's objective is to lead the way to a reduction in the consumption of resources, cuts in CO2 emissions and adaptations to cope with climate change.

New developments will have to use resources more efficiently and reduce the region's global footprint – with the aim of all new buildings achieving zero net carbon dioxide emissions by 2016 and no new development on land at risk from flooding.

Sustainable energy sources must be tapped more effectively and the environmental performance of new buildings will have to demonstrate a step change from older structures.

New water efficient technologies will be employed to protect the River Dee – the region's main source of drinking water – from over-exploitation. And measures will have to be stepped up to reduce landfilling of waste.

Population growth

The draft structure plan maps out mechanisms to boost the North-east population from 443,000 to 480,000 by 2030 – because a falling and ageing population deters investment, impacts on service quality and delivery, and depresses the local economy.

The draft plan states: “A falling population is inconsistent with the achievement of our vision and aims. A stable population is the minimum requirement – but to fully realise the vision, population growth is required to enable the economy of the area to fulfil its potential.

“Increasing the population by almost 40,000 over 24 years will be a significant challenge for the North-east and it will only be achieved if an integrated approach is taken to delivering it.

“This will only be acceptable if the development delivered is of the highest quality, development that the whole community can be proud of.”

Achieving population growth will require an increase in housebuilding from recent 2,200-per-year average levels to 3,000-a-year over the plan period.

The draft structure plan calls for “rapid progress with the preparation of Local Development Plans in both City and Shire” and the “release of land as quickly as possible at the start of the structure plan period, consistent with appropriate levels of consultation and scrutiny”.

Housing allowances for Aberdeen City are proposed to be 11,900 units on brownfield sites up to 2030, 5,000 in regeneration areas and 19,100 on greenfield sites.

In the Shire, three options are presented which give different weightings of development to different areas. In each case, however, land for some 36,000 new homes will be required.

Environmental quality

The draft plan emphasises the vital need to secure development which enhances the environment.

The document states that the natural, built and historic environments of the North-east are among its key assets – and that causing damage or decline would undermine the high quality of life that the region offers its residents and businesses.

The draft plan states: “The natural and historic environment is a valuable and finite resource. It is important that development does not lead to the progressive decline of the North-east’s natural and historic assets. Habitats have become more fragmented and focus should be given to their enhancement and augmentation.”

Sustainable mixed communities

For too long, the plan says, development in the North-east has failed the tests of sustainability, diversity and community focus.

The document states: “This must not be allowed to continue. If we are to achieve our vision, we need to cultivate a reputation for quality and this can only be done by setting the highest standards for urban and rural design, the mix of accommodation provided, the efficiency with which land is used and the reuse of previously developed land.”

Future communities need to offer mixed house types, sizes, tenures and prices – on greenfield, brownfield and regeneration area sites, to begin to close the gap between prosperous and disadvantaged areas. They must also offer a range of services, facilities and shops to be sustainable and reduce the need to travel.

Implementation

An action programme will be developed to ensure the aims and visions are achieved.

This will involve mapping out timescales for major developments, masterplanning exercises, guidance for developers to help them deliver the programme, annual monitoring reports, and two-yearly reviews of progress.

The plan recognises that the capacity of roads, schools and sewers must increase to accommodate the proposed new development, and that investment is needed in community facilities.

The document points out that completing key developments already in the pipeline will be vital to delivering the structure plan vision, including:

- Aberdeen city centre redevelopment and Union Street pedestrianisation;
- the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route;
- rail improvements (increased frequency and new stations), and improvements at the Haudagain roundabout and the Bridge of Dee;
- the 3rd Don Crossing;
- a community stadium;
- continued joint work by Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, the University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon's University to contribute to the knowledge economy.

A provisional draft Aberdeen City and Shire Structure Plan is due to go in front of Aberdeenshire Council area committees through April, to Aberdeen City Council's Policy and Strategy Committee on April 29, and to Aberdeenshire Council's Infrastructure Services Committee on 8 May.

Aberdeen City and Shire Strategic Planning Committee (ASCCPC) members will consider the finalised draft on May 16 or 23.

If approved, the six-week period of public consultation will be launched before the end of May. Details of where to view the document and the ways in which people can respond during the consultation period will be published closer to the launch date.

It is expected that a Finalised Structure Plan will be submitted to Scottish Ministers by the end of 2008 for approval.

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