

Marr Community Council Forum

Burnett Arms hotel, Banchory

7 March 2013

Local Development Plan Process and Identification of Main Issues

At this meeting 7 members from Community Councils in Marr were briefed on the Local Development Plan (LDP) preparation process and the current stage of identifying main issues to be included in the Main Issues Report (MIR). Piers Blaxter (PB) the Policy Team Leader was available to answer questions and Alan Davidson (AD), the Senior Policy Planner and Katie Crerar, Policy Planner for Marr took the meeting note.

Summary of Issues raised

Discussion throughout the presentation focused on a number of issues including the transparency of the LDP process, the role of the Strategic Development Plan, protection of sites, housing allocations in relation to the strategic growth areas and affordable housing.

The first issue that was raised was in relation to the procedures used in the development of the last plan. It had been felt that changes had been made to site allocations between the MIR and proposed plan stage without any communication with community groups. An example was given where comments in relation to one settlement were omitted from the previous MIR and concern was raised that the changes had been influenced by developer lobbying.

PB explained that Elected Members had been sent 'Issues and Actions' papers in relation to the proposed changes which were not circulated to Community Councils. It was acknowledged that planning policy may have missed out by not doing this. PB also assured the forum that developers did not have undue influence in the process.

An Elected Member who was present confirmed the complexity of the process and how difficult it is to achieve the best outcome. It was acknowledged, however, that the team should be getting communication right.

This discussion highlighted the need to be honest and transparent about things. PB acknowledged we are happy to take this on board and will make sure that Community Councils are included in the circulation of the 'Issues and Actions' papers in the current process.

It was highlighted that the level of representations meant that some submissions might have been missed but that greater care would be made to ensure a similar situation does not arise in the current LDP process. The attendee further explained that when this issue was noticed, it was too late in the process to highlight it. Therefore, it was suggested that acknowledgment letters sent out to people who made bids should also be informed of what happens next in the process. This was supported by PB and use of email to do this was suggested.

A forum member asked if sites allocated in the current plan that had not been developed will automatically be carried over into the next plan. PB explained that generally they would unless the site is constrained meaning that it is undeliverable either due to ownership or viability.

It was further queried if it is possible for a current LDP allocation to be reduced. PB explained that generally reducing an existing site runs counter to the idea of certainty in the plan. However, where a reduction is sought, a new bid should be submitted for the reduced number of units or land area.

On the other side of this, another forum member asked whether bids can be made to protect particular sites from development. PB explained that if it is in response to a development bid, the opportunity to oppose this or make comment will come in at the MIR stage. However, if land is considered to be a community asset then it could be designated as a 'protected area' of which there are currently a number in the current Plan. PB highlighted that additional sites proposed on this basis would be welcomed.

Rural development was suggested in the presentation as a possible main issue, and a forum member agreed that this is a big issue. Concern was raised in relation to the sustainability of rural areas whereby some settlements which do not have any services are being allowed to expand under the current rural development policy.

It was asked at what stage the council would decide on the location of new houses. PB explained that this would be determined by the Strategic Development Plan (of which a proposed plan is currently out for consultation). However, it is not anticipated that there will be a significant change in allocations. The numbers are provided by the SDP; however the distribution will be dependant on what are considered to be the best sites. A forum member asked what the ratio is between development proposed within the Strategic Growth Areas and the rest of rural Aberdeenshire - known as local growth and diversification areas - however, this was unknown at this time to the officers present.

A forum member asked about the differences between the previous Structure Plan and the new proposed SDP and whether any changes would be clear. PB explained it would not necessarily be easy to tell the difference, however the housing numbers should be easily comparable by reference and comparison of the tables ("Schedule1") at the end of the Strategic Plan document. PB added that the MIR will highlight differences from the last LDP.

A discussion was had about misconceptions planners have about where people want to live in the countryside. It was suggested by a member that research should be done to back up the approach to policy making. However PB highlighted that the team has limited capacity to carry out such work and that we try to provide a range of opportunities to cater for the individual preferences of everyone. The Elected Member also highlighted their role as a point of contact for local people to express any issues with regards to planning and housing provision.

Affordable housing was also suggested as a main issue and whether 25% affordable housing was enough. A forum member asked where this affordable housing requirement came from. PB explained that the 25% is a benchmark was set by the Scottish Government, however needs differ from area to area. Some places within Aberdeenshire are naturally more affordable to live in and therefore the affordable housing requirement may be lower. However, it was also acknowledged that in a number of areas within Aberdeenshire we need considerably more than 25%.

A forum member also highlighted that there are a lack of housing options between the affordable tier and the 4/5 bedroom family homes. PB agreed that we need a greater mix of housing and developers have generally been building large homes over and over again. Concern was raised from one forum member who recently attended a planning meeting in relation to a local proposal and there did not appear to be consideration from the planners to provide a better mix of housing. The Elected Member also highlighted instances where affordable housing being provided as part of a larger development was not of a consistent street scale or design to the adjoining housing, emphasising the social issues that can arise if design is different.

PB stated that we need to give development management and councillors the tools to ensuring the details of such proposals are being assessed and policies are being adhered to properly. AD also pointed out that development management often do not

get the finer design details of such applications and this issue would be flagged up with area development management teams.

Finally, PB outlined the programme for the rest of the year and encouraged forum members to attend the consultation events that will be happening in November. A forum member asked if they should invite developers along to community council meetings, however PB stated that we would discourage this. It is hoped that developer 'exhibitions' will be organised to allow developers to come to display their proposals publicly in one place to avoid community councils being inundated by different developers. However, if individual community councils wish to organise their own events, we will provide support and look into making flyers that can be distributed.

It was mentioned that an email will be sent round community councils once this presentation has been published on the website.

PB thanks attendees for their time.