

Planning and Policy Meeting – Monday 15th August 2011

Agenda Item 5)

Proposal from Purbeck District Council for a Swanage Area Action Plan and development of a Neighbourhood Plan

Area Action Plan

Purbeck District Council has recently adopted a Local Development Scheme. This sets out the documents to be included in the Local Development Framework, which when completed will detail local planning policy and replace the existing Purbeck Local Plan. A chart setting out the various documents and the timescale for their production is attached to this briefing note.

A new feature of the Local Development Framework is a Swanage Area Action Plan. This has been introduced not only to address the issue of allocating sites for the 200 house settlement extension(s) included in the Core Strategy, but also to set out policies in respect of protected open spaces, employment land, the town centre and settlement boundaries. Consideration will also be given to schools, transport, elderly care, health services, seafront improvements, allotments and improved sports facilities.

The District Council has agreed that this plan should be undertaken jointly with Swanage Town Council. This will demand a share of officer time over the next two years, although the project will be led by the District Council's Policy Planning Manager with technical work being undertaken by members of his team.

The draft timescale proposes that work will commence immediately, with initial consultation being undertaken early in 2012. Further formal consultation on a pre-submission document is proposed for autumn 2012 prior to submission and public examination in early 2013. Adoption and publication would follow the inspector's report.

Neighbourhood Plan

Prior to the completion of this process the legislative framework will change once the Localism Bill reaches the statute book later this year (although it is likely that guidance won't be issued until spring 2012). At that point it is anticipated that the Swanage Area Action Plan will evolve into a Neighbourhood Plan.

Neighbourhood Plans are to be led by parish and town councils and are being promoted by central government as an example of community-led planning. They will be statutory documents and will be used in making decisions on planning applications in Swanage. This will provide the Town Council with an opportunity to take forward many of the issues it raised during the Core Strategy consultation, such as concerns about tidal flooding and coastal erosion, support for the local tourism industry and demand for high speed broadband provision.

Extensive consultation and community engagement is seen as key to the development of a Neighbourhood Plan. It should build on the work already undertaken for the Core Strategy and the Community Plan, so as to avoid a sense of repetition and 'consultation fatigue'. The Planning Officers' Society highlights the need to engage with different groups, such as youth clubs and disabled associations, by talking to them directly, rather than relying on traditional consultation methods. Use of social networking sites such as Face Book or Twitter might help to engage the young.

The process of adopting a Neighbourhood Plan is to be significantly different to an Area Action Plan. A draft of the plan would be submitted to Purbeck District Council as the planning authority to check it for compliance with the Core Strategy, Local Development Framework and national policy. Following that it would be subject to independent examination. The examination report can recommend either that the plan is put to a referendum, that amendments are made prior to a referendum, or that it proceed no further. If it goes forward to a referendum the outcome will be binding on all local authorities. Current information suggests that there will be no threshold to meet in respect of turnout for the outcome of the referendum to be valid.

In practice there will be many similarities between a Swanage Area Action Plan and a Neighbourhood Plan and the intention of officers in both authorities is to proceed in a manner that will enable a smooth transition from one to the other, as and when the legislation changes. Although a Neighbourhood Plan would be led by the Town Council, significant resources would be provided by the District Council's Planning Policy team who have both the technical knowledge of planning policy and extensive experience of running public consultation exercises.

There has to be realistic expectations of a Neighbourhood Plan. Central government has made it clear that this document must be consistent with the local development framework and national policy. The document cannot, therefore, propose a smaller number of houses than is contained in the Core Strategy, but it can shape how that target is delivered.

In order to ensure that it is robust and resistant to challenge by aggrieved landowners, developers, special interest groups or businesses, a significant evidence base must also be gathered to support the plan. For example, a new Housing Needs Survey could be undertaken with the assistance of the District Council to assess the demand for affordable housing in the parish.

Key partners such as Dorset County Council, the Chamber of Trade, the Hospitality Association, health and other service providers need to be actively engaged. The Town Partnership should also play an active role in the process, and it may be that a review of the Swanage Community Plan can be undertaken simultaneously. Partnership funds may be available for the employment of a consultant to assist in both this and the Neighbourhood Plan.

At present the cost implications for the Town Council are uncertain. Gathering the necessary evidence and commissioning appropriate reports can be costly, for example a Habitats Report could cost up to £10,000. In addition there is the possibility of the need for additional staff resources and/or the employment of a consultant, and the costs of holding a referendum. It may be that contributions towards such costs are forthcoming from both central government and the District Council, in addition to the Town Partnership funds referred to above. Given these uncertainties, it is not proposed that a blank cheque be written for this project at the current time.

Recommendation:

To endorse the proposal for joint working with Purbeck District Council to draw up a Swanage Area Action Plan, ensuring that work can be transferred to a Neighbourhood Plan at a later date.

To request that a further report be made to full Council at the earliest possible opportunity, once information is available regarding cost and resource implications.