

**Meeting:** COUNCIL

Portfolio Area: Environment

**Date:** 11 June 2003

## **THE FUTURE OF STEVENAGE – THE NEW TOWN LEGACY**

(Department of Environmental Services)

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### **1 PURPOSE**

- 1.1 To consider the views of the IDeA Peer Review in respect of the need to reinvent Stevenage's legacy as a New Town and debate what that legacy means in the context of finding a future role for Stevenage as a growth point within Hertfordshire.

### **2 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 A number of strands of thinking have recently coalesced into question marks over the future role of Stevenage in Hertfordshire and, more broadly, in the Eastern region. From those disparate strands it is appropriate to draw out the principal threads and initiate a debate on where Stevenage's future lies.

- 2.2 Over the last two years much thought within the Council has gone into defining a future role for Stevenage, a view confirmed by Executive last September in responses to the structure plan review and again in November in responses to the SERAS consultation and on the regional planning guidance. Other parties, outside the Council, have very different ideas about where the future of the town lies. The IDeA Peer Review made their own recommendations in respect of Stevenage's legacy as a New Town and advised that it needed to reinvent itself, divesting itself of its reliance on its new town past and values.

#### **The IDeA Peer Review**

- 2.3 The IDeA Peer Review report found that Stevenage is well known for being the first New Town in Britain, designated in 1946. It was one of nine proposed satellite new towns specifically needed to provide housing for post war Londoners. Initially the town was designed for a population of 60,000 within the boundary of 2,600 hectares. However, the current population (within that same area) is estimated at 80,000 and is proportionally younger than elsewhere in Hertfordshire.
- 2.4 The IDeA report *inter alia* goes on to identify a number of characteristics of the town:

“As in other new towns, Stevenage is characterised by its large ageing housing stock and it's outdated town centre infrastructure. There are over 33,000 homes in the borough. The council directly manages around 9,500 properties - a much higher percentage than other districts in Hertfordshire...

There are areas of socio-economic need and relative deprivation. The borough has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the county and the Eastern region. There is also a high percentage of lone parents. In terms of educational attainment 46% of students in Stevenage have qualifications at G.C.S.E grade A-C compared to 55% of students in Hertfordshire. Health is also an issue for the authority as the death rates for the under 75's are higher in Stevenage than the rest of Hertfordshire."

2.5 The review team found an incredibly strong sense of community identity and 'new town values' amongst the members, staff and managers. They felt that for Stevenage to move forward, the Council will need to build an agenda for success based on reinvention of its strong community and new town values.

2.6 Their report goes on:

"Understanding these 'new town values' is central to understanding both the challenges and, in some senses, the constraints of the town and its council. Stevenage has undoubtedly benefited from the 'pioneering spirit' that motivated the establishment of the new town. In Stevenage's case this spirit was reflected in a Council and a corporation, which sought to (and did) provide a better quality of life for, largely, a blue-collar workforce migrating from a war-ravaged London.

The town's legacy of a fairly homogenous local population, with extensive infrastructure, and a rather paternalistic culture of service provision, was clearly a strength in its first period, but may be a constraint to progress and success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The new town image, whilst still immensely valued locally, has been somewhat diminished in Britain as a whole, and, therefore, many new towns – Stevenage included – have not grown as rapidly as was predicted."

2.7 The Review Team acknowledged that the Council has a "deserved reputation for its involvement with the community and its delivery of a range of services beyond its statutory duty." However, they also felt very strongly that "there is much work to be done on shifting, if not reinventing, the new town mindset so that the authority can focus on a successful Stevenage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century at local, sub-regional and regional levels."

2.8 This is reflected in several of their recommendations to the Council:

- the need to develop, with its partners and local community, a coherent vision and strategy to secure long-term success for Stevenage. Success in this context involves, at the least, eliminating the gaps in social and economic outcomes between Stevenage and the rest of Hertfordshire
- in order to achieve this the Council needs to work increasingly in a sub-regional and regional context, and with relevant role players at that level
- significant progress needs to be secured on major initiatives (e.g. Stevenage West, town centre redevelopment) which are central to this future success

2.9 Against this background it is also appropriate to consider other factors pertinent to the future of Stevenage, which have arisen in various contexts over the last two years.

## The legacy of the New Towns

- 2.10 In 2002 the Borough Council gave evidence to the Urban Affairs Sub Committee of the House of Commons Select Committee on Transport, Local Government and the Regions in the context of their investigation into the problems and future role of the new towns. The Council's evidence and the work of the Interreg IIC funded new towns project highlighted both the positive and the negative elements of the New Town heritage:
- From the outset there was designed to be a close balance between homes and jobs, in line with modern sustainable development principles
  - The new towns are green, by comparison with traditional towns, as they are richly endowed with trees, urban parks and recreation/playing fields
  - Public facilities and services were generously provided, rigorously programmed and allocated between the town centres and the neighbourhood centres
  - A lively community life was created at an early stage thanks to the (10,000 dwellings) neighbourhood unit concept and to the fabric of voluntary community organisations, encouraged by the Development Corporations
  - An urban living environment that, whilst monotonous due to its uniformity, meets the expectations of most people
  - The abolition of the Development Corporations has left two-tier local government managing the New Towns, with consequent disjointed local administration and a lack of consensus
  - Serious decline in the physical fabric, in town centres, neighbourhood centres and especially in housing (at the time 8,500 homes below the Decent Homes Standard in Stevenage and a £60 Million repairs backlog)
  - Unusually large areas of grassland and significant numbers of pavilions, community centres and other public buildings to modernise and maintain without the resources to be able to do so
  - Social fragmentation (with the nuclear family unit for which the New Towns had been predominantly built being replaced by non-traditional family units) weakening community networks, increasing dependency on state welfare services
  - Mismatch between service expectation and resources. The New Towns provide services commensurate with a much larger population (100,000) than most of them have (Stevenage 80,000) without the council tax income, grant distribution and retained commercial rate base to fund those services
- 2.11 The Council summarised its evidence to the Select Committee by stating that the first generation of new towns were arguably the most successful examples of social engineering in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They demonstrated what could be achieved by robust national land use and planning policies, proactive economic development and a strongly community-based Council administration.

- 2.12 The view was advanced that the London ring new towns today represent the best option on which to concentrate residential and economic development in the South East and Eastern Regions. But in order that they can fulfil this role, they require urgent and decisive action. In particular Government must recognise that:
- new towns have the potential to be the major economic drivers in their region and are the appropriate location for expansion to meet future housing need; however
  - they have been systematically asset stripped over a twenty year period by English Partnerships and the former Commission for the New Towns in order to meet H.M. Treasury financial targets; and
  - as a direct consequence of dis-investment and lack of Government attention, they now face substantial and unique physical, social and environmental problems.
- 2.13 The Council's evidence made six recommendations to redress this situation, with urgent Government action. Government did not accept these arguments and none of them have been acted upon.

#### **The emerging sub-regional and regional context**

- 2.14 Since then the Council has had to make decisions about the future of Stevenage in the context of the emerging county structure plan review to 2016, the SERAS (regional airports study) consultation and work on the new regional planning guidance for the east of England.
- 2.15 The vision for Stevenage set out in the emerging structure plan review would see:
- Stevenage West abandoned
  - the Borough building only 180 new houses a year from now until at least 2011 (significantly lower than allowed for now, and the lowest figure assigned to any district in the county)
  - These houses would have to be built on brownfield, rather than greenfield, sites, of which Stevenage (as a New Town) does not have a large supply
  - Most of these houses would, therefore, be built in the town centre and on sites occupied by active commercial uses and community facilities
  - Affordable housing numbers would be likely to be few because of the low overall build-rate and the reliance on small, brownfield sites (against a need for 1,075 units)
  - Stevenage would lose employment land to meet the demand for new housing
- 2.16 Work on new regional planning guidance for the Eastern region (RPG14) is still at an early stage. However, the Government's 'Communities Plan' has identified the Thames Gateway (in Essex), the Milton Keynes area (which now extends to the whole of Bedfordshire and Luton) and the London-Stansted-Cambridge corridor (along the M11) as particular growth areas to take larger shares of population and housing growth.
- 2.17 Stevenage lies just to the east of the Milton Keynes growth areas in Bedfordshire and just to the west of the London-Stansted-Cambridge corridor. It has not been identified for growth: implicitly, the new County Council strategy holds sway at regional level, unless it is changed.

### **3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS**

- 3.1 The work of the Peer Review was invaluable for the Council in preparing for our CPA inspection in January 2004. However, there are some factual inaccuracies within the report, and some of the recommendations miss the point about Stevenage as a New Town. The Review invited the Council to 'move on' from its past. It acknowledges that the Council's pioneering 'can do' spirit was a positive benefit to the town. It also recognises that there is a strong sense of identity within the town and that local people appreciate the level of service that they get from the Council (services akin to those of a 100,000+ population London Borough, rather than an 80,000 population district in the Home Counties).

#### **The legacy in context**

- 3.2 There is much to be proud of: the planned neighbourhoods; the purpose-designed car-free pedestrianised town centre; the clear separation of residential and employment areas; the green and spacious nature of the town; the generous supply of open spaces; the well-planned highways, cycleways and pedestrian networks.
- 3.3 However, there is also a negative aspect to the heritage: an ageing building stock all built within a few years, leading to a massive repairs deficit; a tired town centre in need of regeneration; pockets of deprivation and real social need; inadequate resources to fund all aspects of the infrastructural inheritance; and an apparent sense of resentment and envy from neighbouring parts of Hertfordshire at the 'cuckoo in the nest' thrust on them in 1946.
- 3.4 It is impossible for Stevenage to ignore its heritage, as it is for any other town. Our past provides us with the building blocks for the future. Whether the legacy is good or bad, we have to 'play the hand' that history has dealt us.
- 3.5 Stevenage's legacy from the former Commission for the New Town was a poor one in many ways. It means that the Borough Council faces issues unique to the new towns without the resources necessary to tackle them. These were very clearly identified in the Council's evidence to the Select Committee, but the Government chose to ignore those issues and rejected any action to address these vital physical, social and environmental problems. Nonetheless, those issues will not go away and rejecting that legacy is not an option for the Borough Council. It will need to continue to lobby to get Government to address these problems through those special interest groups established by the English new towns. In the meantime, the positive 'can do' pioneering spirit of Stevenage will stand it in equally good stead in the future as it has in the past.
- 3.6 The Peer Review team see the 'new towns mindset' as a weakness and spoke of 'reinventing the new towns spirit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. How practical a proposition is this? And what would it mean for the town?

#### **Changing the mindset**

- 3.7 If it means extinguishing the 'can do' values that have served us well for over sixty years, this is unlikely to be welcomed by local people. If it means ignoring the legacy of a hefty maintenance deficit, disrepair and social exclusion together with the need for regeneration, then that is equally impossible.

- 3.8 If, however, it means finding a new role for Stevenage within Hertfordshire and the region: building on our 'pioneering' spirit; our ability to take on and successfully implement big ideas; and to continue providing new homes and new jobs for real people, then that vision is already well developed. Stevenage demonstrates what could be achieved by robust land use and planning policies, proactive economic development and a strongly community-based Council administration. Those values are as relevant today as they were in 1946.
- 3.9 But there are other mindsets that need changing too: principally those of the County Council and some of our neighbouring Hertfordshire local authorities. The Executive has already rejected the policies of the County Council's structure plan review that Stevenage should, effectively, stagnate, with little or no new investment. This stagnation strategy is supported by North Hertfordshire D.C. and East Hertfordshire D.C. Despite arguments put forward by this Council and other authorities, GO-East and English Partnerships (amongst others), the County Council remains implacably opposed to Stevenage West and proposes to restrict the town to minimal development levels.

### **A new vision for Stevenage: a regional city**

- 3.10 In a report to November 2002 Executive an alternative vision for Stevenage was set out: playing a strategic role by becoming a growth point, either free-standing or as an extension to one of the growth zones established in the 'Communities Plan'. Sustainable urban extensions – similar to Stevenage West - could accommodate valuable new homes, new jobs and new people in a balanced and well-planned manner.
- 3.11 An important element of that new housing is affordable housing - in large numbers. Housing waiting lists continue to lengthen across the south east, whilst the supply of affordable housing is not keeping pace (only 4 affordable dwellings have been built in Stevenage in the last year). As public and private sector employers find it increasingly difficult to recruit professional staff, there is a growing need for key worker housing.
- 3.12 With the recent changes in social housing funding, increasing reliance will be placed upon the town planning system to deliver affordable housing. But the County Council's preferred strategy of relying on small, brownfield sites will not deliver the amounts of affordable housing necessary to address current problems. Both the County Council and Government have been made aware of these issues, but the County Council will not change their stance.
- 3.13 The key factors in favouring growth at Stevenage can be summarised as follows:
- Stevenage is a new town, purpose-designed to accommodate development pressures in a sustainable manner and could be further expanded to provide for a large part of Hertfordshire's housing requirements
  - Stevenage has a proven track record of successfully supporting and accommodating growth. More growth can be accommodated through further urban extensions, a large part of which can come on stream very quickly at Stevenage West

- Stevenage is recognised as a key transport node, being on both the A1(M) and the East Coast Main Line, as well as the regional railway to Hertford and the A505 Luton to Cambridge road
  - Stevenage lies between the most obvious growth airports in the region (Stansted to the east, and Luton to the west). It can help to relieve some of the pressures that their expansion will generate in their immediate locality, if transport infrastructure is improved between the three points
  - There is a strong economy based on clusters of pharmaceutical research and development (stretching south to Welwyn Garden City and east to Harlow), and also in aerospace industries
  - Stevenage already has two of English Partnership's national priority development and regeneration schemes – in Stevenage West and the town centre. Close working already exists between the Borough Council and English Partnerships, and this can be further developed.
- 3.14 Stevenage expansion is a deliverable, practicable and realistic proposal and more sustainable – in line with Government guidance - than a series of small-scale incremental incursions into the Green Belt around some, or all, of Hertfordshire's 24 urban settlements (part of the County Council's preferred approach). Concentrating growth in one location – Stevenage - would relieve the inevitable development pressures elsewhere on the Hertfordshire Green Belt. Stevenage would grow to effectively become a new regional city in the East of England. The alternative to growth is stagnation, as is proposed in the structure plan (further progress upon which has been put into abeyance by the County Council following Government pressure).

#### **Addressing the Peer Review's concerns: reinventing the New Towns ideal**

- 3.15 As a regional city, Stevenage would be in a stronger position to tackle the gaps in social and economic outcomes between the town and the rest of Hertfordshire. The Borough Council already works closely with its partners and the local community to develop a coherent vision and strategy to secure the long-term success of the town, as evidenced by the Local Strategic Partnership. Unfortunately, however, some of those partners – such as the County Council – do not accept the vision shared by the other partners and are unyielding in their opposition to the growth of Stevenage. The Peer Review does not appear to recognise that the intransigence of some parties means that a consensual approach cannot always be achieved.
- 3.16 If, however, Stevenage is identified now by Government, by the region and even by the County Council as a growing future regional city - in a county that would rather push growth away - then it's outlook as a thriving, sustainable settlement in line with the original new towns vision, will be assured. This vision would be in line with a recognition that new towns have the potential to be the major economic drivers in the region and are the appropriate location for expansion to meet future housing need.
- 3.17 Arguably, this represents the reinvention of the new town ideal suggested by the IDEa Peer Review report.

## **4 IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 These are covered in the report.

## **5 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- That Members consider the legacy of Stevenage as a New Town and its future role in Hertfordshire and the region.
- That Members debate the Executive's vision that Stevenage continue to grow into a regional city by 2021 as an alternative to the County Council's vision set out in the emerging structure plan.

## **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

- IDeA Peer Review report
- Borough Council evidence to the Urban Affairs Sub Committee of the House of Commons Select Committee on Transport, Local Government and the Regions
- Interreg IIC NWMA Inclusive New Town Project report
- September 2002 and March 2003 Executive reports on the Structure Plan
- November 2002 Executive reports on the future role of Stevenage in the Eastern region, SERAS and emerging regional planning guidance

## **APPENDICES**

- None