

LEIGHTON LINSLADE: PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE OF THE TOWN

SECOND REPORT & PROJECT BRIEF: SEPTEMBER 2021

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1. Introduction

1.1 Leighton Linlade Town Council (LLTC) wishes to:

- Have a greater say over the future of the town than it has had in the recent past
- Address unfilled infrastructure capacity and quality gaps and to find a more effective way to plan their future delivery
- Work more collaboratively with CBC and with others to plan the future of the town, including its town centre as the focus for well-being of the community

1.2 To achieve these objectives it has commissioned a short report that will review the relevant planning issues and recommend how they are taken forward by the Town Council and others. Its decision depends on an analysis of those issues and of the benefits and costs of different approaches it could take to tackling them.

1.3 This second report follows on from a first report presented to the Town Council in June 2021. It identifies the key issues, it identifies the different ways they may be tackled, it identifies their relative benefits and costs and outlines a Project Brief for the recommended option.

2. The Key Issues

2.1 The previous report highlighted three key issues that were driving the Town Council to pursue this initiative:

- Infrastructure Delivery
- Town Centre
- Strategic Planning

Infrastructure Delivery

2.2 The September 2020 joint workshop of the Town Council and CBC reviewed the schedule of secured S106 Obligations. These obligations were agreed in 2015 and relate to the major planning permissions at Chamberlains Barn, Clipstone Park and Stearn Land. They each comprise a wide range of infrastructure projects, financial contributions and commuted sums covering highways, education, sports, recreation, green infrastructure, community facilities, transport, waste management, public realm, affordable housing, employment, cemetery land, allotment land and healthcare provision. They are to be implemented from site start through various housing quantum thresholds up to the occupation of the last of the 1,100 homes at Clipstone Park.

2.3 However, although much of those projects and investments follow the aspirations of the Town Council's earlier Big Plan initiatives, there remain concern that they will still be insufficient to meet the needs of the town, that some later projects will not be delivered and that there is inadequate co-ordination.

2.4 At that date, CBC had collected a total of £1.6m from two of the schemes of a total of £7.1m secured for transport, community facility, green infrastructure and waste management projects. In some cases, notably the provision of a new community building, there were still decisions to be made by CBC on which option to pursue. Many other projects have been delivered as part of the schemes, e.g. highways improvements; education and employment land transfer; and new open spaces and play areas.

2.5 One year on, it will be helpful for the Town Council and CBC to review an updated schedule of these projects, noting those that had been delivered, those that were underway, those that are scheduled for start and those that still need to be committed. Together with CBC it can review the successes and failures of the projects so far. And, ten years on from the last Big Plan and six years since the obligations were agreed, they can identify how well the remaining projects will fit with the future vision for the town.

2.6 As noted at the workshop it was noted that there are constraints on what may be negotiated as part of a S106 obligation and it is rare for them to be renegotiated (normally only if the developer considers the obligation is no longer viable and wishes to reduce the scale of, or rephrase the obligation; there is no opportunity to add requirements). In which case, if the review identifies deficiencies, it will not be possible to resolve them through the existing obligations.

2.7 There is a dynamic relationship between a local population and its demands on local infrastructure. The last couple of years, and wider trends of the last decade, have challenged conventional thinking and assumptions about how infrastructure capacity is used, and at what thresholds additional capacity may be needed. In past decades, these relationships have been easier to predict and to plan for with reasonable certainty. It may therefore not be surprising if the review in Leighton Linlade identifies, with hindsight, weaknesses in the provisions made in those three main obligations.

2.8 It is now often more helpful to establish a longer term vision of a settlement in terms of size and range of supporting infrastructure at that future time, and to compare that future with the present day to identify gaps. The delivery of infrastructure does not have a linear relationship with population growth. Rather there are population thresholds within a specific catchment area – the town – that trigger the need for capacity improvements, hence the S106 obligations each have a variety of phased infrastructure schemes or payments tied to the occupation of specific numbers of new homes. The gaps in provision needs to reflect a clear understanding of those thresholds.

2.9 Of course, this vision of the future needs to come to a view on the future size of the town and its inter-relationship with its bigger and smaller neighbours. New investment to fill gaps in infrastructure will require new S106 obligations from new development planned.

Town Centre

2.10 Like all town centres of this type and size, this one has faced a series of challenges in the last few years. Although it appears to have weathered the storms, especially of Covid, better than many in terms of footfall and vacancies, those challenges are many and varied. It is commonly held that Covid has accelerated pre-existing shifts in shopping trends – both convenience and comparable – by about a decade.

2.11 Without access to the data for this town centre, it is still possible to conclude that what was driving its success in years gone by is very likely to be different in the next decade, bringing into question not only the viability of the current scale and mix of its commercial floorspace but also the future reuse of the land on its fringes. At the same time, Government policy initiatives to loosen planning control of town centre uses – the 2020 changes to the Use Class Order and 2021 Permitted Development Rights – may begin to have unintended consequences.

2.12 It is difficult to see CBC's property-led 'South of High Street' initiative being able to go forward without a clear land use and commercial context for it to work within in terms of responding to market signals. Certainly, the assumptions made in 2012 about the scale and mix of new (primarily retail) development seem very dated now. It is expected that the imminent feasibility study commissioned by CBC last year will draw the same conclusions.

2.13 Some kind of town centre study is therefore necessary and timely. Its scope should extend to the edges of the town centre, including Bridge Meadows and Vimy Road and should gather a wide range of data to relate the town centre to the 'out of town' provision (existing and planned) as well as to Central MK/Bletchley and Dunstable/Luton. The discussion with CBC officers to inform the first report indicated that its interest is in its land ownership, with no plans to carry out any wider town centre study or strategy.

Strategic Planning

2.14 The Central Beds Local Plan 2035 was adopted in July 2021. It provides an up-to-date planning policy framework for decision making in the town and its environs, which ought to enable the plan-led system to operate for some time. It contains a number of policies relating to land in the town as well as a wide range of development management policies applying to different areas of the town.

2.15 However, CBC has had to commit to a partial review of the Local Plan commencing by the end of 2021 "to investigate opportunities for future growth that can capitalise on Government decisions around strategic infrastructure". CBC is "actively leading and driving forward a coordinated approach to enhanced growth within the central area of the Corridor and is leading on the identification of a high-level, joint, spatial strategy".

2.16 That work will likely relate closely to the Oxford – Cambridge Arc Spatial Framework as well as the review of Plan:MK (the Milton Keynes Local Plan), MKC's 2050 Vision and the first Bucks Local Plan 2040. Each of these will in turn be shaped by the Government's proposed changes to the planning system to be set out in the forthcoming Planning Bill.

With climate change gathering momentum as a national policy imperative, each will also have to demonstrate how this will be tackled in this sub-region.

2.17 It is observed that the new Local Plan had little to say about what is now the largest settlement in its area. In practice, much of the current and future town was planned the decade before and the new plan has not sought to do very much else to 2035 as the schemes to the east of the town are completed in the coming years.

2.18 Given the location, connectivity and size of the town it is inconceivable that it will not feature in future scenarios for growth in the Arc and Central Beds. Its close boundaries with Bucks to the south west and north west, and its proximity to MK just further north, are likely to place it on the radar of more than just the CBC plan review.

2.19 More generally, CBC has adopted a '2050 Vision' for its whole area, which sets out its ambitions for policy and project initiatives for the next 30 years. The initiative stops short of translating the vision into specific, localised 'placemaking' proposals, and it has no intention of doing so, but it does provide a valuable framework for places like Leighton Linlade to plot its future.

3. The Options for Tackling the Key Issues

3.1 There are five ways in which some or all of these key issues can be tackled at the Town Council level:

1. Infrastructure Strategy
2. Neighbourhood Plan
3. Town Plan
4. Town Centre Plan
5. South of High Street Neighbourhood Development Order

3.2 The essential features of each option are summarised below:

1. Infrastructure Strategy

- A review of existing and planned capacity across all local transport, social and green infrastructure
- An estimate of current gaps and future needs based on growth scenarios and a no change scenario
- An analysis of sources of funds for investing in infrastructure
- A strategy for delivering infrastructure

2. Neighbourhood Plan

- Evidence gathering and community/stakeholder opinion testing to shape a vision of the town in say 2050 and development/infrastructure scenarios on which that vision is based

- Translating preferred growth option into a set of planning policies to fit alongside the Local Plan Review and other plans/strategies
- Including the Infrastructure Strategy and Town Centre Plan capturing any site allocation-specific infrastructure proposals in policy requirements
- Taking the plan through examination and referendum to secure the full weight of the development plan in decision making
- Or stopping short of examination to allow policy proposals to find a more effective implementation route if held up by the Planning Bill and/or Local Plan Review timetable

3. Town Plan

- As Neighbourhood Plan (including stakeholder engagement) but without the examination and referendum
- May incorporate Town Centre Plan
- Encouraging CBC to adopt the Plan as a material consideration in planning and infrastructure decisions

4. Town Centre Plan

- A review of town centre data and analysis of future spatial (land use) and management (non-planning) options to inform a vision of its future, including the imminent CBC feasibility study
- A strategy for delivering change of planning and non-planning proposals
- Providing a policy framework for an NDO for South of High Street (if desired)
- Encouraging CBC to adopt the Plan as a material consideration in planning decisions

5. South of High Street Neighbourhood Development Order

- Bringing forward development proposals for stakeholder engagement informed by the Town Centre Plan
- Taking the plan through examination and referendum to de-risk the scheme by granting automatic planning consent and encouraging the relevant land interests to assemble land for development

3.3 As a control, a sixth option should also be objectively assessed, namely that of the Town Council deciding to do nothing but to rely on Central Beds Council to take the lead in addressing these issues through its own plans and projects. In practice this would mean Central Beds:

- continuing to secure S106 obligation financial contributions from qualifying development proposals submitted in the town in future
- bringing forward its partial review of the Local Plan, and then full review after that, and making proposals for the town as necessary, bearing in mind any higher level strategic policy from the Arc or other regional policy initiative (e.g. Bucks and MK plans)

- being persuaded to widen the scope of its 'South of the High Street' project to consider the future of the town centre in terms of placemaking and planning policy, as well as to consider the use of a Neighbourhood Development Order to implement specific development proposals
- taking forward its Central Beds Vision 2050 and determining the town's place in that vision

3.4 In each case, the Town Council would be a consultee on emerging proposals and would use those opportunities as they arise to make comments.

4. Their Relative Advantages & Disadvantages

4.1 The table below summarises the relative advantages and disadvantages identified for each option.

OPTION	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Infrastructure Strategy	A sharp focus on infrastructure issues	No formal status
	May identify plausible short to medium term wins where investment has been secured but no committed projects yet	Dependent on clear vision and growth plan to inform its analysis and proposals – difficult to be done in isolation
	Brings the TC and Central Beds together to review future needs	Either requires TC to have some external professional advice or to rely on CBC and its own experiences.
	Reasonably easy to resource given the focus and work already done with CBC	Not eligible for Locality funding
	Easy to incorporate it into the other options	
Neighbourhood Plan	Formal (regulated) framework that can accommodate all the other options even if not needed to be finished	Requires a (probably) two year TC commitment to leading the project with some challenging issues to address and likely difficult choices to make
	TC in charge of scope, process, content and timetable – can pause, change direction etc to fit circumstances	Requires the TC to have more external professional support for project management, document production etc – not all costs likely to be covered by grant programme
	Requires structured community and other stakeholder engagement	Requires tight alignment with and support of CBC for the NP to succeed (and CBC being willing to allow the TC to take the future in a different direction).
	Enables policy proposals to have full weight in decision making if 'made' and part of the 'development plan'. If CBC minded to prioritise other 'material	Future of NPs uncertain – Draft Planning Bill expected autumn 2021 – latest signals that NPs will be part of the future system but scope unclear

	considerations' over NP policies then it will be obliged to explain how and why.	
	Although policy confined to TC boundary, doesn't stop NP thinking and consultations extending beyond the boundary	Future of Locality programme uncertain after March 2022 – pending Spending Review in autumn – latest signals are that likely to be at least a one year extension to March 2023
	Access to Locality programme for grant and free technical support	Focused on planning matters only – can relate to non-planning issues but cannot include policy on such – requires careful expectation management
	Land interests tend to take NPs more seriously than other options given formal status	Challenge for larger towns like LL to effectively engage larger, more diverse communities
Town Plan	A quicker route to a vision and strategy than an NP with no regulations to adhere to	Not eligible for Locality funding
	Can accommodate the Infrastructure Strategy, Town Centre Plan and NDO	No formal status in planning decision making but may be 'material consideration' – but scale of disadvantage dependent on role of planning policy in managing positive change
	Probably a smaller resource requirement	Challenge for larger towns like LL to effectively engage larger, more diverse communities
	More easily able to accommodate non-planning proposals	
Town Centre Plan	Focus on a smaller part of the town to deliver a quicker project outcome – smaller number of players to engage with	Not eligible for Locality funding
	Can address infrastructure and NDO matters affecting the town centre	No formal status in planning decision making but may be 'material consideration' – but scale of disadvantage dependent on role of planning policy in managing positive change
	A shorter term priority for TC that need not wait for bigger picture to play out	
	Probably a smaller resource requirement	
	More easily able to accommodate non-planning proposals	
NDO	Focused on known TC and CBC priority	Still requires the TC area to be designated a neighbourhood area (as per NP) – but simple process

	Doesn't need bigger town centre to be resolved – can be a tactical solution	Unclear who the referendum vote would extend to – examiner may recommend the whole town – may therefore need to engage with whole town
	Should be eligible for Locality funding	Depends on shared vision of CBC, TC, town centre businesses and land interests if there's no spatial plan above (town or town centre)
	Delivers planning permission (outline + reserved matters as appropriate) for proposed scheme to derisk for land assembly etc – might tip the balance in favour of action	
	Requires structured community and other stakeholder engagement	
	TC in charge of scope, process, content and timetable – can pause, change direction etc to fit circumstances	
Central Beds Council	No requirements on TC to lead and resource	Depends on shared vision of CBC and the TC
	Reasonably healthy working relationship	TC will still need some idea of the bigger picture even if its comments are tactical
	TC focuses on commenting on CBC documents within existing resources	Depends on CBC project timetables
		No Locality financial support if any external advice required to help in making comments

5. The Preferred Option & Project Brief

5.1 The above analysis indicates that the Neighbourhood Plan option has the greatest difference between its range of advantages and disadvantages, though an informal Town Plan may have similar value. Perhaps the two most important advantages are the ability of a Neighbourhood Plan to accommodate all the other initiatives, so they can be properly co-ordinated and assessed, and for the Town Council to stop and change direction if it becomes clear that a better course is available, without having to return spent grant.

5.2 It is therefore recommended that it is the option the Town Council pursues and so that the Town Council can better understand how it would proceed, an outline Project Brief is set out below.

5.3 A key assumption is that the project will need to be delivered through external support rather than either rely on volunteers or significant internal officer time. This is not an uncommon approach for larger town councils to take given their existing commitments and resources and given the greater challenges of recruiting volunteers in urban areas.

However, it is stressed that the TC should not over-depend on the external support and should put in place a means of scrutinising progress and performance as it would on any project.

Aims & Objectives

- develop a 2050 vision for the town and its surroundings
- translate the vision into a set of spatial objectives and land use policies
- support those objectives and policies with a delivery plan of infrastructure and investment proposals
- fully engage the community and other stakeholders in developing the vision and making choices on how it is achieved
- ensure the vision fits with those of the wider sub-region and with national policy priorities

Project Governance

- led by the TC but with day-to-day responsibility handed to a Neighbourhood Plan Committee (NPC) of councillors
- TC and NPC to agree terms of reference to govern NPC operations
- NPC may co-opt non-councillors if desired
- TC to apply for grants and technical support and to appoint any external professional support
- TC to use existing TC/CBC liaison mechanisms to connect with CBC as necessary

Project Management

- If external professional support secured then delegate most project management tasks (project planning, Locality and contractor liaison, community/stakeholder engagement, sub-contractor management, meetings administration etc) reporting to chair/vice-chair
- Delegate to chair/vice chair all relevant project admin matters
- NPC monthly meetings with forward agendas of at least 6 months
- Likely formation of task-specific sub-groups for evidence gathering/analysis and policy idea generation and testing – either by geography (ward?) or (probably better, even in a big town like LL) by theme (e.g. housing, infrastructure, town centre, natural environment etc) – sub-groups will work with external support and can also co-opt interested/expert others to help – sub-group chairs responsible for reporting back to NPC
- NPC oversees sub-group work and makes policy and proposal recommendations to TC
- NPC or TC agrees a communications plan for mapping out community and stakeholder engagement activities through the project with the NPC monitoring its effectiveness

Project Inputs & Process

- TC will have to apply to CBC to designate the TC boundary as the 'neighbourhood area' then apply to Locality for grant (and subsequently technical support)
- TC will procure any external professional support to take most of the responsibility for delivering the project as steered by the NPC
- Once formed the NPC should start with a project inception meeting to inform members of the project plan etc facilitated by the external support
- NPC should carry out an initial community survey to gather opinions on key planning and related matters using external support to prepare and implement survey and analyse and reports its findings
- Process will continue with a policy idea scoping session (again facilitated by the external support) based on analysis of the bigger picture and results of the initial community survey
- NPC will set up and brief sub-groups to work with external support in gathering and analysing evidence as per agreed initial scope and to generate policy ideas
- The external support will convert ideas into a draft vision and content under the steer of the NPC for a second community engagement exercise to test the water
- NPC will review feedback and refine vision as necessary and will re-convene the sub-groups to work up the ideas with the external support into draft policy policies based on the feedback
- The external support will finalise policies and produce the Pre-Submission version of the Neighbourhood Plan for NPC approval for formal consultation
- NPC will review feedback from that consultation with external support and either proceed to submission, examination and referendum or decide to take a different course with the policy proposals

Project Duration

- With an October 2021 start the project is likely to take two years aiming for submission in July 2023 and referendum in December 2023

Project Costs

- There are three types of cost: external professional/technical support, external project management support and internal (client side) project governance
- External professional/technical support – it is estimated that this will cost approx. £60k (assuming access to free technical support via Locality – see below) to appoint a lead planner and any third party professional expertise (including community engagement activities)
- External project management support – it is estimated that the project will require 2-3 days/month on average to help manage NPC, the Locality-sourced technical support contractor(s) and any third party professional expertise (assuming this is delivered by the lead planner for efficiency rather than separately, although this would be a TC choice), so budget for approx. £25k-£35k over project duration

- Internal project governance – where TCs have delivered a project in this way they have deployed an existing project manager on a day/week average (although there are inevitable peaks and troughs) – the role is to regularly liaise with the lead planner on behalf of the TC and NPC and is less intensive if an external project manager is used
- In overall terms therefore the project is estimated to have an external cost of less than £100k spread over three financial years (2021/22 – 2023/34), although the TC may wish to add a contingency fee

Project Resourcing

- The project will qualify for a minimum grant of £17k and likely another £10k plus access to free technical support packages (note: the NDO will be funded separately by Locality if progressed – that grant is worth up to £50k but its cost has not been included above)
- The remaining sum – approx. £70k-£80k – will need to be funded by the TC over the next three financial years assuming an October 2021 start and completion in summer/autumn 2023

6. Summary

The first report rehearsed the history of the TC thinking about its future role in planning the future of the town, most notably using a neighbourhood plan as a contemporary version of its 'Big Plan' initiatives some years ago. An NP would be the most effective means of playing that role and will enable access to funding not otherwise available.

Although the TC appears keen to play a greater role – with CBC needing to play less of a role than it might otherwise have to – the fact that there have not been very significant spatial policy differences or major political divisions between the two ought to make the project a success. This would be a more difficult choice had there been major differences.

Of course, with that in mind, the TC may feel it can continue to depend on CBC for delivering the future its communities want. However, with CBC having to face many ways across its areas, with limited resources, this will continue to carry risks that it cannot meet these expectations. This report shows that for what may be a modest investment over the next three years, the TC should be able to step up for its communities and take a lead.