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Poole Borough Council

Review of Central Area Masterplan

Final report

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BACKGROUND

1. Poole Borough Council has ambitious proposals to exploit the development potential of underused land within its central area on both banks of the Backwater Channel and around the southern shores of Holes Bay. Within a spectacular and important natural environment the Poole Central Area includes a significant residential community and a wide range of economic activity – including engineering, boat building, financial services, leisure, retail and a cross channel ferry port. There is a range of architectural styles extending from the historic vernacular of the Old Town to the contemporary apartments, supermarkets and offices around Hunger Hill and the RNLI headquarters. The area contains significant barriers to movement as a consequence of the Backwater Channel; the main rail line and station; the important



Figure 1: Poole Twin Sails Bridge

- regional vehicular routes linking to the port area and serving the wider sub-region; and the 1960's development of the Dolphin Centre and adjoining bus station; and other large footprint buildings such as stand-alone retail units and the swimming pool.
2. There are significant development opportunities created by the demolition of a power station, underused manufacturing and boat repair yards and disused rail marshalling yards. These have the potential to transform the economy of the Central Area by the provision of new homes and employment, leisure, community and retail facilities, within a high-quality public realm that mitigates the impact of the barriers to movement, creates a welcoming environment for pedestrians and cyclists and exploits the major

opportunity to enable access to the water and the spectacular views and environments it offers. The Council estimates that their regeneration strategy has the potential to deliver:

- 1873 new homes with a floorspace of 167,452 sqm
- 36,263 sqm employment floorspace
- 34676 sqm retail, showroom, leisure and hotel floorspace

This represents a very significant challenge and opportunity on a scale usually found within a larger urban authority in the north or midlands and one which is of major regional significance. It would be foolish to underestimate the scale of resource, technical competence and sustained political leadership that unlocking this potential in extremely difficult economic circumstances will require. Nevertheless, delivering the ambitions for development and improved transportation, circulation and quality of public realm envisioned within the Poole Central Area Masterplan is a prize well worth competing for and one that will make a major contribution to the economic prospects of Poole and the wider sub-region.

3. The key project that unlocks much of this potential is the development of the unique, iconic Twin Sails Bridge, which provides a second vehicle/pedestrian crossing of the Backwater Channel; creates a 'twenty-first century' image for Poole and will be a catalyst for development and economic activity. The project, which is one of only two infrastructure projects in the South West of England to feature in the recently published *National Infrastructure Plan 2010*¹, is now on site at a cost in excess of £40m and is due to complete in early 2012. Creating this second bridge has been an ambition for the town for over 30 years and its construction represents a remarkable achievement that demonstrates both the ambition and the capability of the Council and its partners.
4. The Council's ambition for the central area is amply demonstrated by the extensive planning policy, urban design and development advice documentation produced over the last several years. This is designed to ensure that the area's development potential is realised in a way that achieves environmental and social, as well as economic benefits, that high standards of design, sustainability and quality of public realm are realised, that the natural environment is protected and that by its location, design, mix of uses and financial contribution to off-site requirements, each development contributes to a 'whole greater than the sum of its parts'. The opening of the Twin Sails Bridge in 2012, when the United Kingdom is anticipated to be coming out of recession and growing its economy, should provide exceptional competitive advantage for Poole and represents a significant opportunity for the Borough to position itself for growth. The challenge now is to ensure that the right spatial planning and delivery mechanisms are in place to enable the Council to gain maximum benefit from the position it has worked so hard to create.

¹ HM Treasury/Infrastructure UK, October 2010: www.hmtreasury.gov.uk/d/nationalinfrastructureplan251010.pdf

The project brief

5. CABE has been working with others, including English Heritage, to provide both place based advice enabling work in the South West and specific support for Poole Borough Council for some time and sees this task of reviewing the Masterplan for West Quay as a further step in these processes. The initial brief outlined a broad agenda for the work which included, *inter alia*, the following topics and issues:
- Exploring the key issues and questions for a refresh of the Central Area masterplan.
 - The extent of the refresh (big or small)?
 - Responding positively to the scale and grain of the town.
 - Ensuring the vitality and viability of the existing town (linkage and uses).
 - Working in house - what skills we have in house and a steer on what skills to buy in or develop?
 - The level of work involved for an in-house team (duration and timescale).
 - The level of community/public consultation - we want to do lots at various stages but have limited resources?
 - Level of Section 106 contributions?
 - Forming the project Brief (Prepare, Design, Implementation, Delivery).

This report builds on previous work involving CABE, English Heritage and the Council's transportation and urban design team in June 2010. This workshop focussed on the access roads to the Twin Sails Bridge and enabled the group to gain a collective understanding of the relationship of the access routes to their urban context and the specific constraints to creating successful place. The workshop made a number of draft recommendations for taking the work forward:

- Clarify project scope and definition
- Reframe the team's design brief
- Develop a multi-disciplinary approach
- Develop a clearer understanding of success and translate this understanding into action
- Be able to step away from previous work if required – especially if it is out of date
- Develop an immediate, proactive response
- More detailed consideration of the whole West Quay area required
- Build on existing local guidance and resource – with case studies and visits to exemplars elsewhere

Inevitably, given the limited extent of the commission, only a broad strategic approach can be taken to this project brief; nevertheless, it was substantially addressed in an extended discussion in Poole on October 1st 2010 with Warren Lever, Environment and Design Team Leader, and his colleagues from the Council – Aliis Kodis and Tom Southgate – and David Stuart, English Heritage Historic Areas Advisor (South West). This discussion, along with two visits/explorations of the central area (by bike and car) and desktop/internet research of relevant documentation, has informed the study.

ASSESSMENT

Headline conclusions

6. The headlines that emerge from this review of the Central Area Masterplan are:
- There is a strong and enduring vision and sufficient policy, guidance and advice within which development can proceed.
 - The urban design principles within the Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) – *Planning and Urban Design Guidance for the Central Area of Poole*² - and adopted in December 2004 are important and of continuing relevance. The SPG continues to provide a strong urban design framework to guide the development of individual sites, provision of infrastructure and the creation of a unique, high-quality place.
 - Technical standards have changed and there is a need for some up-dating.
 - In the current, exceptional economic and political circumstances there is a strong case to focus the effort on delivery – putting plans into action.
 - Central area place-making and shaping needs to be a corporate priority supported by members across the authority and a wide range of Council departments and service areas including those required to achieve delivery through capital programmes; those responsible for community engagement, promotion and business development; and those with responsibility for the operational maintenance and management of spaces and infrastructure once they have been developed.
7. There is a large body of plans, policies, guidance, advice and other material setting out the Council's ambitions, the area's potential, the design, sustainability and other standards that are to be achieved and the layout and uses of development for both the central area as a whole and the individual development sites within it. An audit of this material accompanied by a user's guide explaining the role of individual documents and the relationship between them would be a very helpful tool for both the community and potential developers and would be particularly useful if accessed via the Council's website – or possibly a dedicated 'mini-site' - as an easy to navigate guide to the vision, policies, urban design principles and technical advice available to inform partners, stakeholders and community members about the Council's strategy for the Central Area.
8. The principles of design, land use, building footprint and form, transport interventions and public realm ambitions set out in the documentation are soundly argued, well illustrated and provide a strong foundation for moving to a positive delivery phase. The Council are to be commended on the investment made in the early years of the last decade in visioning and planning the future of the West Quay and the wider Central Area in the context of the Twin Sails Bridge proposal. Advice from central government in the intervening period in relation to highway design, provision for pedestrians, the creation of distinctive places and the over-arching objective of achieving sustainable development and distinctive places has now 'caught up' with the vision and standards set out in the SPG and supporting documentation.

² Borough of Poole 2004

9. While the principles of design and development remain valid and relevant, this is not the case for the detailed technical requirements set out in the masterplan and supporting documentation. A re-assessment of standards of, for example, coastal flooding protection, parking, the quality of the pedestrian experience and the linking of pedestrian routes, emissions standards, sustainability requirements and other design parameters is essential to ensure the principles of the masterplan are implemented to current technical design standards. Much of this technical re-appraisal will be taking place as part of the process of completing the new local development framework core strategy and other development plan documents.

10. The Council has exceptional and extensive experience and has developed best practice in regeneration and development through the successful Twin Sails Bridge construction project. Overwhelmingly there is now a strong sense that Poole Borough Council should build on this experience and direct its efforts towards delivering the vision and potential described in its strong masterplanning documents and undertake further plans, policies, guidance and advice only where these are necessary to comply with legislative requirements or changing technical standards. The vision is strong and enduring; the Twin Sails Bridge is one of a number of powerful exemplars of what can be achieved; the principle drivers will be the need to strengthen and rebalance the economy and to engage local communities in the planning process; in the medium term resources – both revenue and capital – are going to be in short supply; determining priorities and achieving impact will be difficult challenges when resources are limited; and the current changes in national and regional agencies and the switch to local determination and governance will require the invention of new partnerships and mechanisms for delivery. All these factors point to this being the right moment to address how, over the next decade, the vision set out in the masterplan can be delivered on the ground.

Key issues

11. The scale of the refresh of the Central Area Masterplan revolves around three questions:
 - The extent to which the strategy and the technical assumptions underlying it need to be challenged and updated?
 - What can be done to enable momentum to be maintained in delivering the masterplan proposals in the light of the economic downturn?
 - How should Poole BC and its partners respond to the changing policy, organisational and funding environment following from the May 2010 general election and the establishment of the Coalition Government with a strong commitment to decentralisation, localism and democratic accountability?

The discussion that follows seeks to answer these questions and set out proposals for refreshing the masterplan and, perhaps more importantly, for continuing its delivery in changing and difficult times.

Strategic and technical assumptions

12. The conclusion of this review is, as stated above, that the principles of the masterplan – particularly in relation to urban design, circulation, development areas and parcels and land use proposals - remain sound and relevant. Consideration ought to be given, however, to the need to revise the technical assumptions and some design standards and developer requirements in the light of current standards if they are not dealt with in other policy or development plan documents, including:
- Sustainability standards in both domestic and non-domestic new build projects in the light of the revised Code for Sustainable Homes and the government’s target of reaching a zero-carbon standard for new dwellings by 2016 and for non-domestic buildings by 2019.
 - Using Building for Life assessments to ensure that new residential developments achieve high standards of design, functionality, quality of place and space and sustainability by requiring all new build schemes to achieve a ‘good’ or ‘very good’ standard.
 - Introducing the standards and principles in the Department for Transport’s Manual for Streets 1 and 2 to the design of all residential streets, commercial streets and roads and higher capacity highways; including the design of parking, electric vehicle re-charging points and cycle storage.
 - Renewable energy and micro-generation, including proposals for combined heat and power.
 - Coastal flooding prevention measures in the light of climate change predictions.
 - Emission at key junctions and traffic ‘pinch points’ and the design of junctions with a view to further reducing the barrier effect of major routes and dedicating more road-space to pedestrians, cyclists and public realm.
 - Run-off management – rainwater harvesting and sustainable drainage systems.
 - Habitat protection, promotion of bio-diversity and provision of local green infrastructure.
 - The 2007 Lyons Inquiry into local government introduced the idea of ‘place-shaping’ as a ‘shared idea for the future of local government’. The delivery of the Poole Central Area Masterplan lends itself to a cross-service and organisational partnership approach to the integration and linkage of streets, spaces, highways and green infrastructure to achieve a range of environmental, economic and social outcomes, including pedestrian and vehicular safety, air quality, bio-diversity, flood prevention and mitigation, education resources and health prevention and improvement strategies.
 - Action to combat the impact of climate change across service areas, including both Development and Transportation service areas.

Maintaining momentum

13. Poole Central Area has unique and substantial development potential and a clear vision of how this might be achieved on the ground; however, the weakness of a plan that offers up so many possibilities and, rightly, seeks to ensure that each development proposal compliments the others - so that the whole adds up to something greater than the sum of the parts - is that it becomes difficult to maintain momentum when there is a downturn in property values and public sector funding is in short supply. The

development industry and the public sector face a period of difficulty unprecedented in the post war era in the next five to ten years; as a result maintaining momentum in delivering the Central Area Action Plan becomes a challenge and a priority for the Borough Council. As developers make tough choices, only those locations that offer the best chance of success will be chosen. It is suggested that Poole BC might consider the following strategies to maintain momentum in the down turn:

- Ensure that completion of the Twin Sails Bridge is followed by delivery of the Central Area Masterplan being placed at the centre of the Council's corporate strategy as a key priority and that the whole community understands its importance to the economic future of Poole and the wider area.
- Make it a priority to prepare development and delivery briefs for the various development sites and areas demonstrating where the Council is prepared to support development with investment in infrastructure or assist with land acquisition and re-location.
- Use the up-coming new guidelines on Section 106 and the community infrastructure levy (CiL) to give clarity to developers on the financial demands that will be made on them and use the development brief to re-asses land and property values so that, for each site, the Council understands the issues around the viability of development and the areas where it might be prepared to negotiate to achieve a successful outcome.
- At a suitable point in the economic and political cycle and in the light of professional valuation and viability advice prioritise the order in which sites might come forward so that the development industry understands the Council's priorities, while not losing the important sense that each site contributes to the greater whole and ensuring that any priority order needs to be implemented in a flexible manner.
- Ensure that progress continues to be visible on the ground by using whatever funds that are available for a series of small scale projects that keep the larger project 'alive' in difficult times. These could be transport or public realm projects and should focus on investment that delivers quality of place and space and improves connectivity, both across the well-established barriers to movement and to make better pedestrian, cycling and visual links between the various sub-areas of the central area.
- Continue to meet with the developer community on a regular basis to demonstrate the Borough's continuing commitment to the strategy, gather intelligence on the state of the market and explore mechanisms for joint working.
- Continue to stress that the re-making of the Central Area through its redevelopment and regeneration is a central task that will impact on the whole community and demands to be a priority for a wide range of service areas within the Council, its partners and other stakeholders. It should be at the heart of the Council's corporate policy and requires 'across the board' inputs from a range of Council service areas and partners in the public, private and community sectors in both delivery and subsequent management phases, as described earlier.

Responding to the changing policy environment

14. Since coming into office the Coalition Government have announced the abolition of regional development agencies and government offices; the down-sizing and re-focusing of the Homes and Communities Agency and many central government departments; and substantial reductions in public expenditure over the next four years. At the same time the idea of local enterprise partnerships as the principle mechanism for economic development and re-balancing has been introduced and major cultural and procedural changes to the planning system have been signalled with a move to localism and ‘bottom-up’ neighbourhood-based planning and much reduced central guidance delivered through the mechanism of a National Planning Framework. Local government as a whole is being encouraged to look at pooling resources and planning across boundaries where this makes sense on the ground. The policy, organisation and partnership environment has changed dramatically. In particular it is clear that local authorities, who will be granted both a power of general competence and a duty to co-operate in the forthcoming *Decentralisation and Localism Bill*, will ‘stand-alone’, with much greater discretion for freedom of action and directing their own expenditure, than ever before. Similarly, in an environment of much reduced central policy and guidance, local planning authorities, planning departments and planning officers will be required to ‘stand on their own two feet’ and make their own decisions (and account for them) more than has previously been the case.
15. There are a number of potential moves that the Borough Council should carefully consider in responding to this new environment, including:
- Working more closely with adjoining authorities, especially Bournemouth Borough Council and Dorset County Council. Closer working might include – sharing key specialist skills; shared management; cross-boundary spatial and transport strategy planning and implementation; sharing back office and administrative services; but, more importantly would allow the complementary strengths of the adjoining authorities to mutually support each other and give individual initiatives, for example, the Poole Central Area Masterplan delivery, a stronger sub-regional context and importance.
 - Local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) are to be led by a partnership of local government and the private business sector. Their purpose is to:
 - shift power to local communities and businesses - by establishing dynamic local enterprise partnerships of local business and civic leaders, operating within an area that makes economic sense, which can provide the vision, knowledge and strategic leadership to set local priorities and empower communities to fulfil their potential.
 - increase confidence to invest - by creating the right conditions for growth through a consistent and efficient framework for investment, an effective planning framework and new incentives to make sure local communities benefit from development.

- focus investment - by tackling barriers to growth that the market will not address itself and supporting investment that will have a long term impact on growth.

The bid for the Local Enterprise Partnership for Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole was not successful



Figure 2: Proposed LEP for Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole

in the first round; but as the government is inviting further discussion with partnerships wishing to establish LEPs it may well be accepted in due course. The LEP Expression of Interest³ lists the Poole Regeneration schemes as a prime example of the area's economic development potential. The proposed LEP appears to offer an excellent opportunity to provide a strategic context to enable the Central Area Masterplan and its delivery to be presented as a main economic driver for the future of the sub-region and a good platform for bids supported by partners to, for example, the Regional Growth Fund, to enable sites to be prepared and infrastructure delivered.

- Implement the principles of localism and community engagement to energise the communities of the central area and the wider town to support and engage with achieving the objectives of the Central Area Masterplan; to demonstrate continuing community support for the strategy; and underpin future funding bids. In particular, it would be a positive step to use the Council's in-house community engagement specialists to mount a programme of engagement and consultation exercises to enable local communities at neighbourhood level to engage with and 'buy-in' to the proposals for their area, many of which have now been proposed for a considerable period of time. A re-affirmation of support and a discussion around community benefit to help shape future CiL and Section 106 arrangements would be very helpful to the delivery programme and fit well with the new localism approach.

³ Local Enterprise Partnership for Dorset, Bournemouth and Poole: Expression of Interest, September 2010.

Focusing on delivery

16. The downturn and cuts in public expenditure clearly provide an opportunity for plans to be re-visited and brought up to date. This report suggests that effort ought to be concentrated on addressing technical standards and requirements rather than revisiting principles and strategy. However, tough times for development and delivery; the priority being placed on economic recovery and the opportunities presented by the call for partnership working, joint planning and the proposed local enterprise partnership - and the fact that the Central Area Masterplan is a well thought-through, robust strategy - point to the opportunity and need for the local authority to focus on making the plan happen – delivery – as the over-riding priority. There is a case for the organisation to develop an in-house dedicated delivery team to take forward the suggestions in this report to support implementation, particularly at a time of market uncertainty, and to learn better ways of joint working so that, for example, road schemes benefit from the input of planners and urban designers as well as the technical design skills of transport specialists. In addition to essential planning, transport design and urban design skills there needs to be project and programme planning capacity and the ability to manage capital and project budgets – skills all evident in the delivery of the Twin Sails Bridge project. These core skills could be augmented with specialist skills in valuation, development economics, land acquisition and communications procured through a framework or panel agreement and delivered on a call-off arrangement. There is the opportunity to create such a delivery team by partnering with adjoining authorities and using it as a central mechanism in the capacity of the forthcoming local enterprise partnership.
17. A focus on in-house delivery capability would help re-dress the imbalance caused by the loss of support from the regional development agency and Homes and Community Agency and could be used to:
- Prepare bids for funding support.
 - Design and implement transport and public realm projects within the area.
 - Provide specialist advice on land acquisition and relocation.
 - Support developers with action on site assembly, relocation and infrastructure provision – possibly using joint-venture arrangements.
 - Plan an on-going programme of community engagement and information-sharing on the project as a whole.
 - Underpin a programme of neighbourhood plans, envisaged by Government's Localism Bill to re-engage neighbourhood communities, re-establish support and re-define community benefit and participation.
 - Support the development management process with informed information on land and property value and requirements for Section 106 contributions and CiL.