

REPORT TITLE: Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership Planning Concordat

Submitted by: Guy Benson

Portfolios: Planning & Assets
Economic Regeneration, Business and Town Centres

Wards affected: All

Purpose of Report

To inform Cabinet about the 'Planning Concordat' prepared by the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) which aims to ensure that planning authorities are playing their part in promoting the LEP's growth agenda, and to provide Cabinet with the opportunity to decide whether or not to ratify and participate in the Concordat.

Recommendations

- (a) To ratify and enter into the Planning Concordat**
- (b) That the portfolio holders for Planning and Assets and Economic Regeneration, Business and Town Centres be authorised to agree on behalf of the Council actions with respect to their portfolios which the Council will take to deliver its contribution to the Planning Concordat, and that such agreed actions be reported to the Planning Committee**
- (c) That Cabinet, and the Planning Committee, receives a further report after the first annual review of actions and outcomes envisaged by the Planning Concordat**

Reasons

To improve the effectiveness of the planning system and to demonstrate that it is designed and operated to promote and support appropriate development.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The background to this report is set out within a report that went to the Council's Economic Development and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on the 3rd September. This report is attached as Appendix A. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee commended to Cabinet that they ratify the Concordat. A report will be going before the Planning Committee at its meeting on the 7th October 2014 and any comments of that Committee on the Council's position with respect to the Planning Concordat will be reported to Cabinet by means of a Supplementary report

2.0 The content of the Planning Concordat

- 2.1 As indicated in the attached report the Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) Board at its meeting on the 11th July 2014 has agreed, following a review of its former Planning Charter (now renamed the Planning Concordat), to the following 8 proposals :-

1. All parties agree that the NPPF requirement for high-quality, sustainable forms of development should be an over-arching priority in respect of all future development proposals.
2. The LEP will seek to publish, as a matter of urgency, a Strategic Economic Plan for the area, in consultation with Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) and appropriate consultees, and subsequently to coordinate the Local Plan strategies of individual LPAs in accordance with its stated aims and policies.
3. The LEP will investigate the possibility of establishing a “call-off” contract with appropriate supplier(s) to provide consultancy assistance if / when required by LPAs and developers.
4. The LEP will establish and convene a bi-annual Working Party comprising planning officers, elected members, statutory consultees, planning agents, and representatives of local businesses at which issues of interest and concern can be raised, discussed and resolved in an open and collaborative environment.
5. All parties to encourage pre-application submissions and discussions, to include elected councillors in cases where there are likely to be community concerns. In pursuance of this, individual LPAs will publish a clear set of guidelines for potential developers wishing to engage in pre-application discussions.
6. LPAs to provide Town and Country Planning update training of an appropriate standard for planning officers and elected members on an annual basis, in addition to Introductory training for new councillors.
7. LPAs will monitor and regularly review levels of customer satisfaction with the services offered by Planning Departments, and review their own performance in terms of adding value to new development.
8. LPAs will ensure that the planning section of Council web-sites are as informative and customer-friendly as possible and that they are updated on a regular basis, with regard to both development management and policy issues.

2.2 The LEP envisage several stages to the effective implementation of the Concordat. The **first stage** is ratification. As a joint initiative between the participating bodies it will need to be ratified by all the respective partners. For the planning authorities it will require a report to be taken to their Cabinet or a relevant committee. For the Borough this is the report.

2.3 The **second stage** would be a set of agreed actions by the participating bodies to undertake those elements of the agreement that are not currently being provided. A period of time for these to be established will need to be set out and agreed within the Concordat. The LEP propose that this should be 6 months from formal ratification, to be agreed between the parties.

2.4 The various officer groups in the County that meet already on a regular basis are seen by the LEP as a useful source of experience to help with introducing any changes required. This would continue the process of evolving and sharing good practice that is already established.

2.5 The **third stage** would be some form of monitoring or reporting to confirm the extent to which the Concordat is being implemented. In the spirit of joint enterprise reporting by each party to an annual review of actions and outcomes would be the preferred way of securing this information. This should include it is suggested some aspects of customer satisfaction as well as hard data on the number of permissions granted, the scale of job creation and appropriate measures of economic success.

2.6 Much of this data it is suggested by the consultants will be collected already and it should be relatively straightforward to assemble the necessary information to illustrate the operation and effectiveness of the Concordat.

2.7 One additional element that might be considered would be to compile annually a series of case study examples provided by the participating bodies that highlight a positive and helpful approach to development proposals.

2.8 There is no statutory basis for the proposed arrangements for encouraging the delivery of sustainable economic regeneration across Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent. It is hoped by the LEP that all the authorities will see the value in agreeing to the measures proposed but they are free to choose not to if circumstances argue against their continued involvement. The annual review would be the opportunity for this.

3. The consequences for the Borough of participation in the Concordat.

3.1 The Council already provides some of the elements of the Concordat. For example it encourages pre-application submission and involves members in pre-application discussions on certain applications (through the Strategic Planning Consultative Group). That it charges for some of these is not seen as incompatible with that objective. It has a well-developed website offer in certain respects, although its pages will always require regular review. It has been pursuing as part of the Staffordshire One Place initiative the concept of inter authority trading of specialist services, as an alternative to the use of consultants and the LEP call-off contract proposal could perhaps add another useful option, resources permitting. Other elements referred to in the LEP's recommendations are perhaps not as well developed at the Borough Council as they might be – for example member training (where there has been introductory training rather than an in-depth annual programme) and the limited provision of guidelines for potential developers wishing to engage in pre-application discussions being examples. The Planning Concordat could provide a useful focus for their introduction and the forthcoming Planning Peer Review Action Plan will provide a vehicle to address the same.

3.2 Your officers see no fundamental objections to any of the 8 elements of the Concordat.

4. Financial and Resource implications

4.1 There would be resource implications for the Council associated with participating actively in the Planning Concordat. These would include officer time attending the required meetings, providing input and ideas, drawing up proposals, implementing them and then participating in the proposed annual reviews. By using the services of the LEP to organise meetings such as the suggested Bi-annual Working party at which issues of interest and concern can be raised, some of the administrative burden of such arrangements would not have to be borne by the Council and it could be a useful forum that does not exist at present.

4.2 Whilst the LEPs' consultants suggest that hard data may already be available on outcomes, in some cases additional information may need to be collected which could have resource implications but these should be able to be managed. There could be small direct costs – for example if customer satisfaction surveys are to be undertaken successfully they may require some form of modest financial incentive (no more than £100) to participants to achieve high return rates.

4.3 The Council is already preparing to respond to the recent Planning Peer Review and this will involve the preparation, approval and implementation of an Action Plan. However much of this activity would relatively easily feed into engagement into the Planning Concordat and should be compatible with it.

4.4 If the burden of participating in the Planning Concordat became unduly onerous then the option of withdrawing from it would exist.

5.0 Earlier Cabinet Committee Resolutions

- Cabinet 12th December 2012

6.0 Background Papers

- The Stoke and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership Planning Agreement : February 2014
- Stoke-on-Trent & Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership – Planning Concordat – Final Report 15 May 2014
- Report to Economic Development and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee 3rd September 2014