

SOUTHAMPTON: CITY OF OPPORTUNITY

NEW LOCAL PLAN

FIRST STAGE: ISSUES AND OPTIONS

A COMMUNITY RESPONSE

By Rebecca Kinge, Community Project Worker based in Southampton

This response to the First Stage: Issues and Options Local Plan has been informed by a range of conversations that we have been having as a community over recent years.

The project that I coordinate, Dangerous Ideas Southampton, held an informal evening of discussion with Transition Southampton on Tuesday 6th October 2015 to talk directly about the Local Plan. This was well attended by 35 people, despite very little publicity. The room was made up of people who are passionately involved in Southampton, active in their communities and in the city as a whole. At the event, we drew attention to the wording in the summary leaflet, and everyone had the opportunity to read the leaflet and the main report as they wished. When asked, only one person said they had submitted comments to a Local Plan document before. This makes me wonder how we can make sure that documents such as the Local Plan reflect the wishes of the community?

This report sets out some of the key themes that reflect the conversation that happened on the night of 6th October as well as the comments that members of the community have been making to me and as part of group discussions over the last few years. A little bit more about me and my background is included at the end of this report, to help create the context in which these comments are made.

The need for a unique vision

Our city needs a unique vision – one that is not led by developers but led by the community. The document in its current form reads as a developers' charter. Although it talks about Southampton's assets, is yet to be clear about how to overcome some of the challenges. Among other challenges, we still have significant pockets of multiple deprivation in the city, a lack of clear identity and pride, unacceptable poor air quality and an urgent need to respond to climate change.

At our event on 6 October, we asked the people in the room the question "What should Southampton be like?" Here are some of the answers that were captured in writing following group discussion. These are not just one off comments, these are issues that have been raised time and time again through our events and discussions.

- Real regeneration rather than "development"
- Welcoming to all communities – supportive and respectful
- More respected
- Even greener / protect, preserve, enhance / ecological
- More boldness, colourful
- Unite the villages
- Recognise that Southampton is not just the city centre
- A city that involves and engages
- A city that celebrates and builds on the arts that are here so more flourishes
- Pedestrianisation

- Radical buses between centres
- Our poor citizens prioritised in the Council plans
- Joined up thinking
- Accessibility to water – see it, go on it for fun, businesses based around it
- A place that talks about and focuses on residents not businesses
- More diverse in business
- A leader – new idea / ways of being

One of our strengths as a city is our difference to the wider Hampshire area, yet we look to people from beyond the city to build our future rather than foster the talent within. There is an emphasis on large shopping malls and ‘big name’ restaurants often with adjacent large car parks. These places attract wealthy visitors (often from elsewhere) including cruise passengers with disposable cash. Whilst these external shoppers do indeed bring expenditure into the city and help make it a regional hub, there is also an element of “spend and go” rather than creating a place where all people of Southampton wish to spend their time. They can be the antithesis of diversity and culture, so the message that is being sent to residents and visitors is that Southampton is a clone town where flagship stores such as John Lewis and Ikea dominate the community. It is not in the commercial interests of these large companies to encourage people to go beyond the shopping mall. The Local Plan needs to set a very clear framework to say, integrate your proposals into the city, or this development is not acceptable.

We need to strengthen the assets that we have already. We also asked people to say “What I love about Southampton”. Here were the comments from one gathering only:

* The people * The people are great * Community * Community organising * Creative people
* Friendly people * Passionate community * Festivals

* Music * Art Gallery * Art House * History * Old Town * Vaults * The Walls (more than York) * The free things * Harbour Lights * My shop * Local High Streets * Derby Road * Shirley High Street Shops
* Some of the pubs * 1 or 2 of the restaurants * K6 * Talking Heads * Dolphin * Red Lion

* The rivers, the Itchen, the Test * The green spaces * Parks * The Common * Pear tree common * Weston Shore * Riverside park * The graveyard * Allotment * The boardwalk * The new landscaped public places * The Uni campus * The nut trees * Street parties * Itchen Valley * St Michaels * Red sunsets * The waterfront * Hythe ferry and the bus from Hythe to Lepe

In addition we have been working on a collaborative map of the hidden gems of the city, which is also available to see and add to.

A new approach to economics and growth

The need for ‘economic growth to remain competitive’ argument is stated clearly in the document, but what does that actually mean? Since the last Local Plan was produced, we have learnt so much more about unsustainable growth practices and the consequences for environmental destruction through climate change and the impacts of poor air quality. It is accepted that business cannot continue in this format for any longer, otherwise we will not be able to keep within the 2 degrees of warming limit or meet air quality standards for the city. Business that will succeed will be low carbon and business that help society transition towards a low carbon future. There needs to be emphasis on the circular economy. This is a massive challenge but it has to start with documents like the Local Plan. Therefore, the document should start with climate change and sustainability, not deal with this as a bolt on green issue.

Connecting places

There needs to be more emphasis on how the city pulls together as one coherent place, rather than being treated as a series of separate sites for development or regeneration.

One of the critical issues for the city is the way spaces and places within the city are connected, and how we deal with the street scene generally. The dominance of the car and the roads that accommodate them, the lack of permeability created by large developments such as our city's numerous shopping centres (existing and defunct), has undermined our city streets.

The Plan should give significant emphasis on how places are connected by including this as a core theme. This goes beyond transport connections, it is about how different communities relate to each other.

In the past, planning decisions have moved the centre of gravity of the city away from places such as East Street, St Mary's and even the High Street, with the city turning its back on the communities that live in these areas. The East Street Shopping Centre site is vacant now that the developer has pulled out, having been left boarded up with no link though between East Street and St Mary's. Similarly, the Bargate has been left empty and inaccessible, which has had significant impact on local traders in the East Street area and is blight on the historic town. This shows we need to have a much clearer framework about regeneration priorities, rather than leaving these critical issues in the hands of developers.

As a port with an international identity, we need recognise the roles of diverse communities and all the vibrancy they bring, to be at the heart of economic and social future of our city.

The scale and geography of Southampton makes it an ideal place to walk and cycle, and these need to be encouraged as we move towards sustainability. In terms of cycle provision, a successful and green city makes provision for cycling and invests in a range of cycling infrastructure. However, cyclists often find themselves in an in between situation. Shared routes with pedestrians are valued by many, but do not work well for confident cyclists. Yet cyclists are indeed very vulnerable when required to share with lorries and cars. Cyclists and pedestrianised from the area need to be actively involved in the design of new routes and generally test the appropriateness of new and improved street design. If air quality and climate change is going to be taken seriously, cycling and walking will need to be prioritised over car use.

Pedestrianisation and restricting access by powered vehicles should be an important part of the city strategy.

A network of city villages

One of the themes that came through really strongly from the event we held on 6th October is that Southampton is seen by many members of the community as a city of villages. The plan is very much focused on City Centre development and recognises the role of Town and District Centres. But what is the role of Neighbourhood Centres in the city? Local shops, community centres, parks etc are hubs of the community and are essential for those people who are less able to easily visit the larger centres. It is these places that create a sense of identity. Places such as Bitterne Park Triangle or the parade of shops in St James Rd, Shirley are key examples of very important neighbourhood centres.

These small local centres are at risk of being eroded and lost. If we are serious about encouraging people to use sustainable forms of transport and being inclusive, then these places are absolutely

crucial. They need to be flexible, vibrant and respond to the needs of the local community. These hubs should be identified within the plan, and provision should be made to allow a range of community-focused activities.

Putting people at the heart of regeneration

The word 'regeneration' is often used to describe a building project, and in many planning documents this term is freely used based on the assumption that investment in buildings equate with regeneration. We need to be clearer that development can fail to lead to regenerated communities, indeed it can exacerbate problems. Bringing people to live in once derelict sites, or creating jobs is not regeneration if it creates problems elsewhere, is based on low-salary insecure jobs or pushes people out. Without a strong link to the established communities (is it in their interests?) or a clear sense of inclusivity, then this is not 'regeneration' but simply 'development'.

Parts of our city are not beautiful in architectural terms and, like other cities, we are stuck with a legacy of buildings and street design that has not stood the test of time. We also have some historic buildings that have been seriously neglected, which is a wasted opportunity given the cultural, social and aesthetic value that historic buildings can bring.

Many of these neglected buildings are boarded up now, often with unwelcoming spaces surrounding them. We need to be careful that we don't see the solution as being investment in shiny new buildings to detract us from those declining areas. Developers will talk in these terms, but it needs determined leadership from the Council not to listen and respond to the developers' views at the expense of those of the local community.

Instead, we should be looking at regeneration as happening from the community-up, otherwise it becomes a series of one-off capital projects that will lose their shine very quickly, will become unloved and even become the eyesores of the future. The critical question for new development is 'How much do people care about this place?' It is as much about the street scene and the positivity of the people that work there and visit it, as it is about the building itself. Recent decisions on important planning issues, such as the new arts centre, have divided our community rather than united us, and we need to do more to address this. The process of community involvement is critical to the success of the city. This needs to be addressed through the Local Plan.

The section on key sites in the document should also include areas which are not being identified for wholesale redevelopment (such as East Street or Queensway) but still have significant potential to improve over the next few years given the right conditions. The plan should also set a very clear framework for connecting different parts of the city.

There needs to be a much clearer approach to what people want from places and spaces, otherwise we are setting ourselves up for conflict within communities. There needs to be places for free activities, natural play, street play, skaters, buskers, markets, street art, street parties, festivals, car free zones and more. These are the initiatives that places such as Brighton and Bristol have been admirable in achieving and the cities are economically and socially healthier and happier as a result. Some very clear evidence is emerging through the work of Philip Turner of the University of Southampton, which should inform this plan and other decisions about how to achieve regeneration.

The city's previous emphasis on major development has been at the expense of small, locally-managed buildings. East Street is a perfect example of a street left behind as a result of the city's focus on major shopping centre development with in-built car parks. The High Street (Below Bar) has

some wonderful remaining historic buildings and the potential to create a strong sense of place here, but too many buildings are boarded up. The Plan needs to be very clear that priority should be given to enhancing existing streets. The Council itself has a role in promoting the vacant buildings that it manages and leading by example. As part of a small start-up cooperative, a group of us have leased vacant business premises and established Tiger Yard for pop up shop and community activities. The Council should allow and facilitate innovative uses of more of their own empty buildings and encourage others to do so through documents such as the Local Plan.

Where places are sad and neglected, the Council needs to be very clear that initiatives to bring life back into the city would be welcome. We have welcomed the Neighbourhood Plan processes that have started in the city. We have learnt through the Neighbourhood Plan process for the Below Bar / East Street area some important lessons about how to engage people and ways that the Council can support such activity. The key is not to see this as simply about business or building development, but at building a resilient community. There is a significant role for temporary activities on the street and this is perhaps something that needs to be built into the Local Plan. The design of local areas needs to allow for the community to access and use space in a range of interesting, innovative and also traditional ways. The phrase used by one participant in our workshop is the importance of “nurturing the little things”.

Enlivening local streets may well involve a series of small interventions such as introducing street art or activity onto the street to detract from this neglect. Our experience of Tiger Yard in East Street, and other initiatives such as Music in the City is that opening up mostly unused spaces for community activity is popular and helps give the impression of a more active and loved street. Empty space is a waste and landlords need to be encouraged or indeed forced to make sure they are not allowing their properties to bring down the area. Many landlords are not interested in local-based initiatives, many are owned by large property owners from elsewhere and having a few empty properties on their books is of no consequence to them. Our experience of liaising with the Council too has meant that initiatives that fit well with the Council’s wishes are not always understood by the implementers of the detail e.g. parking services, rates department or Capita property services. This could be addressed through strong leadership and clear support for community activity through documents such as the Local Plan.

The role of culture and creativity in our city’s future

We know that a focus on the arts and heritage in a city is good for a city and the people that live there. We have the right ingredients to develop as a city of culture from creative talent including those talents connected with the universities, our young people, established artists, the ethnically diverse population, places such as the Mayflower, City Art Gallery and Nuffield, and a strong grassroots arts and music scene. September and October 2015 has been an example of how vibrant the city can be in terms of cultural offer with a number of interesting and unique events and festivals around music, arts and including a whole festival dedicated to the spoken word. Much of this is happening outside the city’s cultural quarter showing the importance of integrating culture into the whole fabric of the city.

The importance of locally-owned business

We know that money spent on local business is retained in the city to a much greater degree than spending within the large corporates, who are often serial users of tax havens. The Plan needs to make a very clear message that local business is the future of Southampton. There are a number of non-planning initiatives that could help hugely e.g. business rate and VAT exemptions.

Neighbourhood Plans should be encouraged, along with community-orientated Business Improvement Districts and other initiatives to give the community and small businesses a strong say in the future, rather than being dominated by the large corporate voices.

There needs to be a recognition that every large commercial development in the city will impact on small business somewhere else in the locality. It is not true that visitors to large commercial development will choose to permeate the rest of the city unless there is a very clear planning framework in place to make this happen. For example, developers should be required to invest in encouraging people to visit to other parts of the city, through urban features and people-led projects that facilitate permeability and social / economic resilience in the city.

It is appreciated that the Council has little say about the planning framework and operation of the Port. However, the impact of Port development has significant impacts, including a link with deaths in the city due to poor air quality. The Plan should clearly set out ways to mitigate the impact and ensure that development benefits the whole of Southampton.

Providing jobs close to places where people live

Within a future world based on low carbon and the circular economy, small industrial sites located within communities are increasingly important. Spaces to accommodate new technological development are also critical. These sites need to incubate new businesses close to the places where people live and indeed within easy reach of the universities. The plan should be clear about how our transfer to a knowledge and high-tech world will be accommodated, whilst also supporting the development of traditional crafts and low impact ways of living. I refer to the potential loss of Pitt Road Industrial Estate, whenever I have visited this site it has been an active place of employment activity. We are moving to a situation where industry is located beyond Southampton, in business parks that the vast majority of people drive to.

As for business parks, I would like to see the Plan include specific provision for community-focused business activities. A specific problem that needs to be addressed is skills development in communities, and the need to make flexible business units feel integrated into the city and suitable places to visit at different times of day and night. The variety and flexibility of the industrial stock in the city is crucial, allowing businesses to change over time.

Mountpleasant Industrial estate is an example of a critical location for charities and social enterprises, with several located here that involve volunteers in their business models including upskilling vulnerable and disadvantaged groups e.g. SCRATCH and Jamie's Computers. Fairways House is a very important community hub in the city, hosting a large range of socially-minded organisations.

So Make It, a community 'makerspace' is based in an industrial estate in Freemantle. It needs to be in a place where the community can use machinery and share engineering skills. However, it also needs to be welcoming to visit after dark. Because of their changing needs, So Make It have moved to four different locations over the last three or four years. They will need to move again.

There is also the demand for leisure facilities such as soft play and roller discos etc, and industrial estates are providing affordable flexible space.

These estates need to integrate more with the areas around them, they need to be made safer to visit on foot or bike and at night and they need to retain flexibility to allow business to move frequently as they grow. They have to work towards a better sense of place.

Housing

Housing is of course crucially important, and the Council is under huge pressure to enable the building of more homes.

We need to make better use of the places that we have. A key problem is the quality of housing design which is generally very poor. Our city is full of housing from the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries which have a really good relationship with the house, green space for growing, permeable surfacing, natural light, places to play, hang washing and ways that occupiers can personalise their surroundings. We need to be much clearer about the importance of quality design and the link with the function of the buildings. Is the Cumbrian Way development shown in page 3 the best example of new housing?

The loss of publicly owned space and the need for growing space

There appears to be a current move also from public sector ownership of space to private sector control of public space. These issues are a direct threat to the vibrancy and diversity of the city, which in turn is limiting the city's ability to be attractive to the community it serves.

If we are to move towards sustainable food production and food security, we need to make provision for more growing in our cities. Many lessons can be learnt from the inspiring work of Incredible Edible and the way they have integrated growing projects into communities. We need to protect our existing growing space and be innovative in how we find more.

The need for a more ecological approach

Developers in both private and public sector seem to equate being green with a few trees dotted amongst impermeable hard standing, where any grass is provided it is closely mown, planting is spiky and green features are disconnected from each other. We need a more ecologically approach to 'being green'. The Local Plan sets out some good ideas in its biodiversity section, but this needs to be more integrated throughout the document in terms of what we mean by true sustainability. Every development needs to have biodiversity at its heart. The plans for Royal Pier site to date show developers struggle to incorporate ecological issues. Their priority is still large car parks, buildings with bolt-on green measures, hard surfacing and sterile green space. These issues can't be an afterthought, they need to be integrated from the start. The connections between places need to plan for nature to connect up as much as people.

The need to separate vibrancy with economic development

The text in the Local Plan document concerned with 'a vibrant city' is so intertwined with 'a strong economy' that it is losing sight of the fact that businesses don't create vibrancy, people are responsible for this. We've seen examples of waterfront developments in the city, which should have been vibrant, but have failed as consistently vibrant places. Businesses can indeed help create the conditions for vibrancy, but so does people-led culture such as giving opportunities for adults and children to play in the city and specific activities such as street events, busking, skateboarding. As we found with the East Street Arts Festival at the end of September 2015, providing the conditions to allow free activities to happen creates significant vibrancy. This Plan seems to associate vibrancy with bars and restaurants and the night time economy. We are surely reaching saturation point with new eating and drinking establishments, with independents loosing trade as a result.

The education of the city

Demand for school places in the city has grown, yet the places where they have been delivered do not reflect where people live. With the growth of 'super schools' children are travelling further to school (particularly at secondary level). This is unsustainable as we move to a lower carbon economy and is not good for social cohesion or indeed child development. The successful schools are being developed beyond the capacity of their sites. There is an urgent need for a city centre secondary school.

An issue that is raised time and time again is that of creating a place where university students and young people want to stay and develop their careers once they have finished their courses. Southampton is not being successful in this respect and the perception of the city is not good by many students. The issue of where students live is a tricky one. Many people from the community are unhappy with the large number of blocks of student housing, and feel this exacerbates community tensions. I'm not sure what the answer is in planning terms, but we do need to work harder to find ways to integrate students into the city and break down these barriers.

This concludes the points that I wish to make.

About me

This statement is submitted by me, Rebecca Kinge BA(Hons) DipTP. I am a Town Planner by background although have not practised for a few years. I previously worked in both the private sector planning consultancy (working for Terence O'Rourke, on major development projects) and in a local authority planning policy department, during which time I was a member of the RTPI. Since leaving town planning, I worked for a short time in Southampton City Council's Regeneration & Renewal department in 2003 and since then have many years of experience of working on community projects in Southampton.

For the last 18 months, I have been coordinating events for a grassroots community network called Dangerous Ideas Southampton. We meet regularly (about once per month) and explore different issues to do with fairness, sustainability and creativity and discuss the connections with ourselves and the city in which we live. Our events are well attended and there is lots of enthusiasms for the types of conversations that we have together.

Last December and now during October, November and December of this year, a group of us have been trialling the use of Council-owned properties for temporary pop-up activities on East Street. We call this Tiger Yard. As a result have had opportunities to understand more about the issues facing this the city centre, talking to many people from a wide range of backgrounds about the city.

I have also been working with the Eastgate Traders Association following on from a Neighbourhood Plan viability exercise that the Council organised. We closed East Street on 26 September and held a small but powerful street festival, which included discussion about the future of East Street and the area around. I have been working alongside Philip Turner too, a University of Southampton PhD researcher studying urban interventions in shopping streets. Philip is rigorously gathering evidence about the city and researching how parts of Southampton could become a more resilient place. One of the key lessons that we have learnt is how important perception is within a city. Sometimes the perception lags behind reality, but still can be very damaging to a place.

I am closely associated with Transition Southampton, being a member of their movement wishing to see communities become more sustainable. We have worked in partnership with each other and others in the city, including being part of June 2015's Climate Coalition. Our local MP for Southampton Test, Alan Whitehead, has been clear that he wishes to see Southampton lead the way as a low carbon city. Alan is a Labour MP, part of the same party that current has political control of Southampton City Council. I look forward to seeing some of the principles of a low carbon approach filter down into Council documents such as the Local Plan.

Thank you for reading these comments.

To contact me about any of the issues in this documents please email rebecca@solentrenewal.co.uk or telephone 07968 777261.

Rebecca Kinge

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