

Name of Exercise: Preparation of Master Plan and Detailed Designs for the Northern Development Area

Location: Newcastle upon Tyne

Participation Exercise under which Article? *Article 7*

Purpose of Participation Exercise:

To involve the public in guiding the design process of the Northern Development Area in Newcastle.

Background:

The focus of this exercise is the Northern Development Area (NDA), now renamed the Newcastle Great Park. It is an area of about 400ha of farmland, immediately north of Newcastle's urban area. The NDA includes land for 2,500 new houses and about 80ha for employment purposes, to provide for about 8,000 jobs in offices and high technology industries. About half the site area is reserved for open space and wildlife habitats.

The NDA was first proposed for development in 1991 as part of a larger scheme shown in the City Council's first draft Unitary Development Plan (UDP). The UDP is the 15-year land-use and transportation plan that each local authority must produce as a requirement of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. A second draft UDP was published in 1993. This showed a reduced NDA scheme, very similar to that now being progressed.

There were objections to the proposals, many on the grounds that the Council should not be encouraging development on new land. A public inquiry was held in 1994/95, as required by the Planning Act. The independent Inspector reported in late 1996 and supported the Northern Development Area, leading to adoption of the plan in January 1998.

The UDP gives only a very vague indication of what the NDA might look like in practice. For example, the Proposals Map within the UDP showed an outline only for the areas for housing, employment and open space. This paper looks at public involvement in the process of translating the outline plans in the UDP into more detailed schemes for individual components of the NDA. That process is still ongoing and development has not yet commenced.

The NDA scheme is to be built by the private sector with very little financial involvement from local or central government. The development is being progressed by a consortium of two nationally known housebuilders. Almost all houses will be for sale. Thus the role of the City Council is as regulator and enabler, but *not* as developer or funder.

The purpose of the consultation exercise since January 1998 has been to assist the Council and the developers in the following:

- deciding issues to be addressed in the design process;
- defining guiding principles for that process;
- beginning to put these principles into practice through more detailed site plans;
- setting up mechanisms for continuing consultation on the final very detailed design stages (not yet reached); and
- meeting legal requirements regarding public consultation on applications for planning permission under the Planning Act.

In the view of the Council, the process should not have been a continuation of the debate over the justification and need for the development as a whole. However, not all participants have accepted this, and the process has therefore not gone entirely as expected.

Who participated?

The primary targets for the consultation and participation exercises have been residents living around the proposed development area. Given that traffic and education issues have a wide impact, information had been provided at most stages to about 35,000 people living within 4km of the site. Stages covering more specific details have concentrated on about 4,000 residents living within 2km.

It was hoped that representative residents' and tenants' groups might engage in the process at an early stage, but this proved not to be the case to any great extent until very recently. Bulletins and consultation letters were circulated to a range of such organisations, as well as to regional or city-wide amenity groups and specialist agencies, such as the Countryside Commission and English Nature.

Stage(s) at which public participated in the process:

This case study looks only at the period January 1998 to the present. The first priority has been to ensure that all residents in the affected area have been kept up to date with the process and have been told where to find information. This has been through circulation of a NDA Bulletin (generally two sides of A4), distributed every three months. Each bulletin refers readers to fuller information at the Council offices and at the local public library (a very important resource in this whole exercise).

Since January 1998, the exercise has gone through a number of stages:

- identification of issues as inputs into proposed Planning Brief (Jan-Mar 98)
- circulation of Planning Brief and publicity for draft proposals (May-June 98)
- statutory consultation on an application for outline planning permission (Aug-Nov 98)
- consultation on draft Master Plan (Oct-Nov 98)
- *public inquiry called by central government to review planning application, so main consultation process stalled and statutory inquiry process took over – not covered in this paper (Feb-Sept 99)*
- statutory consultation on new planning application (Sep-Nov 99)

What information was made available?

At the start of each stage a NDA Bulletin or leaflet was circulated to 35,000 households and about 50 organisations. Further information available at each stage included:

- pre Planning Brief stage: discussion paper with draft list of issues to be covered – explained at 12 local public meetings;
- draft proposals stage: final Brief circulated and exhibition of developers' outline proposals staged – explained at 5 larger public meetings and series of topic groups (open space, housing, etc);
- outline planning application stage: forms, outline plan and extensive supporting information, including a lengthy Environmental Statement and a Traffic Impact Assessment, available;
- Master Plan stage: prior to Council coming to view on planning application, consultation on draft Master Plan;
- new planning application submitted (and inquiry cancelled): new and much more detailed supporting information, some of which turned into an exhibition – instead of public meetings, the exhibition was toured round five venues, with council and developer representatives in attendance.

At some stages, especially when the two planning applications became available, a lot of information suddenly appeared, and some people had difficulty in absorbing it. This was unavoidable in itself, as large scale environmental studies are required by law when a planning application of this scale is submitted. The complexities were explained, however, at meetings and exhibitions.

The Council generally makes background information available to the public but few members of the public have sought to gain access to such material. The Council had to be very careful about releasing information

as the public enquiry approached since the adversarial nature of the process meant that the council must be objective. More recently, the developers have been reluctant to release the draft legal agreement associated with the new planning application for commercial reasons. This has caused some frustration.

What was the outcome of the public participation exercise?

The Council hoped that the process of consultation and participation would become inclusive and interactive. In practice, the process has been overshadowed by widespread opposition to the development. Drawing the residents into more detailed discussions about, for example, landscape or housing design, has not happened.

The experiment with topic working groups in mid-1998 was suspended after low attendance and the possibility of using focus groups (formed from prospective house buyers) has not happened yet. However, staff know about such techniques for the future. At the very least, residents have been kept fully informed of the process through bulletins, public meetings and exhibitions.

Understanding of many issues is greater than in January 1998 due to the submission of detailed supporting material with the new planning application (September 1999). The exhibition created from those submissions proved very informative and prompted many detailed discussions when it toured around north Newcastle. Many hundreds of residents attended these. The latest planning application has prompted over 1,000 written responses from residents, showing a widespread knowledge of and interest in the scheme.

For many participants, their objective of stopping or reducing the scale of the scheme has not been achieved. However, the number and strength of objections to the scheme as a whole or to specific aspects has had an effect. A particular focus of concern was the possible increase in traffic levels caused by development. The new planning application has addressed these concerns and has seen a change in spending £2 million (US\$ 3.2 million) away from creating roads for cars to support for public transport and cycling.

Comments of participants in scheme

The Council has not sought direct feedback on the process so far but views on the scheme itself are quite clear. A review of the process will be undertaken when this initial (but rather lengthy) phase has finished. Such feedback will allow all parties to consider how best to organise the next stages of consultation and participation, once the principle of development is finally resolved.

City Council view on the participation exercise

The Council has put major resources into informing and consulting the public. There is now a very high level of awareness of the scheme, although not necessarily an acceptance of its benefits. Lessons have been learnt in taking forward consultation, in particular the non-constructive nature of many public meetings when feelings are running high. The Council is certainly not against public meetings, but did find the staffed exhibition approach during the most recent stage a much better learning process for all concerned.

The Council is disappointed that more interactive means of participation did not really get off the ground and looks forward to restarting these in 2000.

Contact:	Colin Percy Policy Manager
Address:	Planning and Transportation Division Newcastle City Council Civic Centre Newcastle Upon Tyne United Kingdom
Tel:	+44 (0) 191 211 5637
Fax:	+44 (0) 191 211 4998
E-mail:	colin.percy@newcastle.gov.uk
Website:	www.newcastle.gov.uk