

Overview of the approach to Rochford's three Area Action Plans

Local Authorities are encouraged to prepare local strategies and planning policies for key locations where investment and change might take place. National planning policy is clear that the most preferable locations for new retail and commercial developments are established town centres which tend to benefit from good quality public transport services and already benefit from a range of shops and services. These locations are therefore seen as sustainable. Rochford District Council took the decision some time ago to prepare Area Action Plans for its three key centres of Rayleigh, Rochford and Hockley.

The approach taken to all three of the District's AAPs has been the same – with strategies and policies for each of the three centres emerging from analysis and a number of stages of consultation.

Issues and Options documents were prepared and consultation carried out in relation to all three AAPs in 2009; in 2010 an additional stage of options work was undertaken in relation to Hockley, on account of the challenging issues raised by proposals for the potential redevelopment of employment land at Eldon Way.

Since this time, a new project team lead by Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners, including planners, urban designers, property advisers and transport consultants, has been appointed by Rochford District Council (RDC) to review the existing issues and options and prepare draft AAPs from submission. The work programme for all three AAPs requires the development of further options and strategies, and additional consultation.

To date the project team has undertaken a public exhibition in relation to its preferred options for the Hockley AAP and finalised the pre-submission version of this document, which RDC has now published for consultation. Preferred options for the Rochford and Rayleigh AAPs are currently being prepared and public exhibitions will be held in early 2013. Pre-submission AAPs for Rochford and Rayleigh are expected later in the same year.

The National Planning Policy Framework, when setting out its presumption in favour of sustainable development, requires that Local Planning Authorities undertake plan-making in a manner that positively seeks opportunities to meet the development needs of their area. In appointing an experienced team to undertake the production of AAPs for its three town centres, RDC has taken the opportunity to ensure that it is able to respond to the evidence collected as part of its Local Plan evidence base – such as that relating to future retail capacity, which was identified through in the 2008 Retail and Leisure Study. This will allow RDC to ensure that its Development Plan is robust and steers development towards appropriately sized and located sites.

Transport Approach

The approach taken to transport and movement issues in the preparation of draft AAPs for Hockley, Rayleigh and Rochford has been the same as specified in the single contract for the preparation of the three AAPs.

The consultant team tasked with preparing consultation drafts of these three AAPs has included a specialist transport consultant, who has worked closely with the urban designers, planners, property advisers and key stakeholders in the review of issues and opportunities, development of AAP options and drafting of policy statements.

Specific transport-related input for each of the three towns has included:

- Local site visits and steering group meetings
- District and County-level stakeholder consultation (discussions regarding transport and highways have been focused through Mark Lawrence at Essex County Council, the local highway authority)
- Baseline review of existing evidence base, consultation responses and policy context
- Refinement of early draft movement strategies in response to issues raised and the emerging preferred approaches, including concept sketches for potential highway and public realm improvements
- High level assessment of site proposals, involving the preparation of sketch options for access arrangements and broad trip generation exercises
- Input into the drafting of transport-related policy text for the final AAPs

Note that, as is usually the case with strategies of this nature and at this stage of policy development, the work undertaken for all three towns has not included any detailed traffic, parking or other surveys; nor has it included any detailed highway modelling work. However it will be a requirement that planning applications for any significant new development must include such surveys and modelling work and present these in detailed Transport Assessments and Travel Plans, in accordance with the Department for Transport's Guidance on Transport Assessment (March 2007).

Transport Assessments would need to identify the specific impacts of increased movement that come with increased development, and set out a range of mitigation measures (like junction improvements, parking strategies and smarter travel measures) that would be required, as a prerequisite of development, in order to mitigate these impacts. Travel Plans will be required as a way of encouraging any new residents and businesses to live and operate in a more sustainable way, reducing the number and length of car trips generated in the area, whilst promoting more sustainable modes of travel like public transport, walking and cycling.

Essex County Council, as the highway authority responsible for managing and maintaining the highway network and coordinating bus services in and around Hockley, Rayleigh and Rochford, has been fully consulted in the preparation of this AAP document. In its role as highway network manager, ECC will consider the issues, opportunities and improvement framework identified in this AAP and will take these forward as part of its strategic planning process. ECC will also be responsible for reviewing and approving Transport Assessments and Travel Plans submitted as part of any future planning applications for significant development in the AAP area.