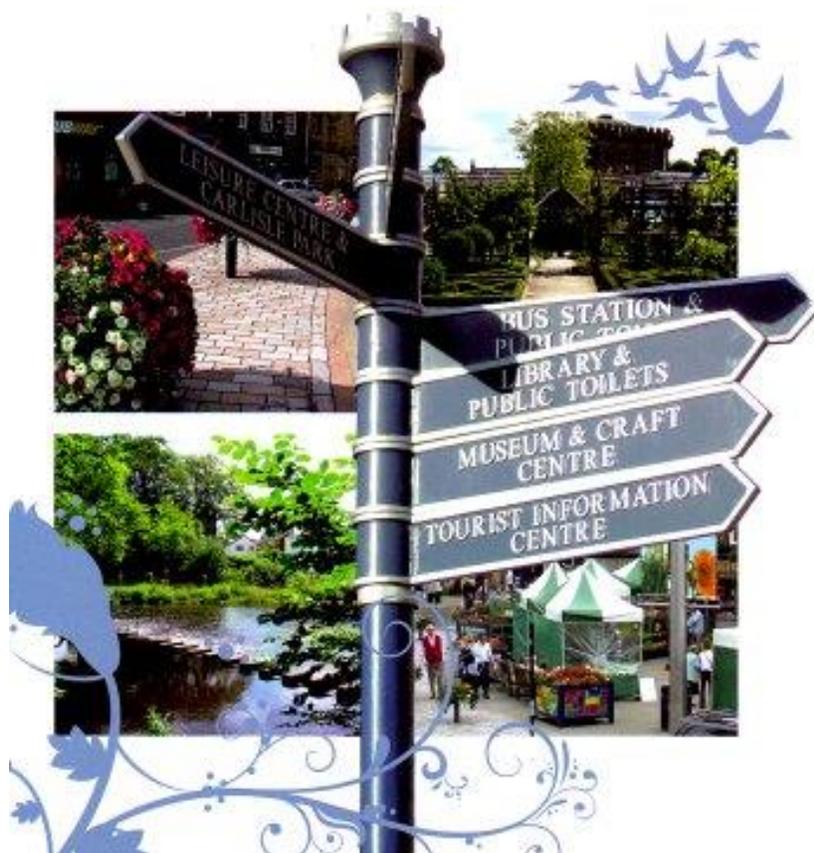


NORTHUMBERLAND

Northumberland County Council

Morpeth Neighbourhood Planning Front Runners Project Submission to the Department for Communities and Local Government from Northumberland County Council

8 November 2011



Application by Northumberland County Council on behalf of Morpeth Town
Council

1. Introduction

1.1 In response to the invitation to local planning authorities from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to submit bids for grant assistance to enter the Neighbourhood Planning Front Runners scheme, Morpeth Town Council approached Northumberland County Council seeking entry into the scheme to support them in their aspiration to prepare a neighbourhood development plan for the town and immediate surrounding area. Whilst this request was received very close to the deadline for bids, we were encouraged by the offer from DCLG to submit an expression of interest by the 5 November 2011 deadline and to follow this up with a more detailed proposal early the following week. We submitted our expression of interest before the deadline along with plans showing the Town Council's indicative plan area and the letter of intent from the Town Council seeking support for a bid.

1.2 The County Council has been successful in its previous applications for entry into the Front Runners programme and is actively supporting rural and market town communities in Allendale and Alnwick where work is progressing on the preparation of neighbourhood development plans in those areas. We have gained considerable experience in establishing appropriate governance arrangements for the delivery of neighbourhood planning projects through these Front Runners projects and have helped these communities plan and undertake engagement activities to begin the process of community-led planning. We have also submitted a bid for entry into the Front Runners scheme to support Cramlington Town Council in developing a neighbourhood plan for the south west sector of the town. The County Council is therefore well placed to assist Morpeth Town Council with technical support and guidance in meeting their aspirations to plan for sustainable growth to meet the needs of the town and support its role as a key service centre and the county town for Northumberland using the new neighbourhood planning process.

1.3 This final call for applications to become Front Runners and the interest expressed by Morpeth Town Council presents an excellent opportunity for the process

of neighbourhood planning to be tested across the whole of the administrative area of this important market town. The Town Council, whilst setting an initial plan area by reference to their administrative boundaries in order to meet the submission eligibility criteria, are also keen to work with neighbouring parish councils, with whom they have good working relationships, in order to define a detailed and appropriate plan area for the project. This provides a real opportunity to test the expectations in the draft neighbourhood planning regulations that appropriate plan areas can be defined locally and agreed by the local planning authority following consultation.

1.4 In submitting this bid we are encouraged by the fact that we have the support of an active, very capable and enthusiastic town council who have attained Quality Town Council status and, with the skills and resources available to them, could lead the project as the qualifying body to meet requirements set out in the Localism Bill. The Town Council supports sustainable growth to the town and is seeking support from the County Council as local planning authority to give shape and direction to this growth to meet strategic objectives established in earlier draft and approved planning policy documents. Finance for the project will generally be underwritten by the Town Council who may seek support from other partner organisations alongside the technical support offered by the County Council. The County Council is looking to gain some level of additional government financial support through this bid for a £20,000 grant which would primarily be directed towards our input in terms of technical support and community consultation. In addition, it would contribute towards meeting the County Council's obligations regarding arrangements and funding of an independent examination and referendum.

1.5 The parties to this bid see the new neighbourhood plan-making powers as providing an excellent opportunity to set in place a clear vision and statutory planning policy framework which has been developed by the community and their locally elected representatives to replace the existing and somewhat dated Castle Morpeth District Local Plan. This will help in taking forward anticipated sustainable growth in employment and housing development required to meet long established strategic

spatial planning objectives for Morpeth having regard to the role and function of the town.

2. Background Information

2.1 Morpeth is located in the south eastern part of the county of Northumberland within the Wansbeck parliamentary constituency. The town is located approximately 15 miles north of Newcastle upon Tyne. It is well connected by road and rail being situated on the route of the old A1 and having access to that trunk road to the north and south. Passenger rail services are provided from the town's railway station to the East Coast Mainline. The location of the town is shown on the plans at Appendix 1.

2.2 The town has grown gradually over the last few decades. The Castle Morpeth District Local Plan (February 2003) notes that between 1971 and 1991 housing development took place at a rate of approximately 70 units per year. Subsequent planning policies for later periods continued to plan for growth at or around that rate. However, more recently, housing development rates for the town have slowed significantly. The County Council's published five year housing land supply report for the period 2011 to 2016 provides information on delivery of housing for previous years. This notes delivery in 2009/10 for the former borough council area at 54 units and forecasts net delivery for 2010/11 at 37 units, both figures being substantially below the anticipated rate of house building apportioned through Regional Spatial Strategy at 140 units per year for the whole of the former borough area during that period. The reduced delivery rate for the former borough council area of Castle Morpeth is generally seen as a reflection of market conditions rather than the lack of sites or planning permissions available across that area. Nevertheless, when examined in greater detail it is clear that limited availability of planning permissions in some locations, particularly at Morpeth, may be a relevant factor. This may also now be contributing to the current pressure on land surrounding the town from housing developers.

2.3 The town has a population of approximately 13,476 from Office of National Statistics (ONS) mid-year estimates at 2009, based on the wards within the Town Council administrative area, and has approximately 6,300 dwellings. Employment in the

town is dominated by public sector employers having the County Council's main offices, two local mental health trust hospitals, a cottage hospital and schools serving a wide catchment. A range of manufacturing and service industry jobs are provided at the town's main employment area, Coopies Lane, located at the eastern edge of the town, and there is some scope and developer interest for seeking additional employment land to serve the town and surrounding areas. Major employment is also provided in the pharmaceutical industries at Piramel to the western side of the town.

2.4 The town has an ageing population structure evidenced through its population profile which has seen a steady decrease in the number of people between the ages of 0 to 15 with a decline of 1.8% between 2005 and 2007 recorded in the ONS mid-year population estimates for 2007. The same dataset also shows the Morpeth area having a relatively higher proportion of people at pensionable age compared to the rest of Northumberland and a lower proportion at working age compared to Northumberland. The neighbourhood plan can explore ways of seeking to address this imbalance and/ or deal with the spatial planning policy consequences of this population structure in a way that seeks locally derived solutions to any service and infrastructure issues that may arise.

2.5 Average house prices in the Morpeth area for house price sales recorded in Land Registry data at 2008 are shown at £223,761 which is significantly higher than both the average for the south east Northumberland area (£121,733) and the Northumberland County average at £179,852. This differential presents both opportunities and costs in terms of housing delivery to serve the needs of the town and surrounding areas.

2.6 Evidence from research undertaken for the County Council and published by Tyne & Wear Research and Information in 2008 based on CACI Paycheck data and ONS data shows that Morpeth residents have significantly higher average weekly household incomes than the County Council area as a whole and higher than the regional average. Although this evidence does not provide current information on earnings there is little to suggest that, relatively, this situation has changed significantly in recent years. Notwithstanding more recent market corrections in house prices across

the region and elsewhere, the price of new and second hand homes remains beyond the reach of many individuals and families who may expect to be able to look to buy a home in Morpeth.

2.7 However, the value in land associated with the sale prices for new housing that can be achieved within and on the edge of the town presents an opportunity, which may not exist to the same degree in other housing markets, to secure the delivery of or funding towards reasonable proportions of affordable housing from new development. The neighbourhood plan will look to explore in detail what may be an appropriate proportion of affordable housing to be delivered through development of market housing, how development viability is affected by the provision of subsidy to affordable housing and the type and tenure most appropriate for provision to serve the town.

2.8 There have been limited recent developments providing additional employment for the town with the exception of additional town centre employment arising from the redevelopment of the central area of Morpeth. Work continues in the town centre to create new employment opportunities and services for the town. However, there remains a demand for employment in the business use classes. The neighbourhood development plan can explore ways in which current or alternative employment land allocations may be brought forward to meet this demand.

3. Planning Context

3.1 Northumberland County Council is the local planning authority for Morpeth. The County Council was formed as a unitary authority following local government reorganisation in April 2009 when six former district councils and the former county council merged.

3.2 The County Council is in the process of preparing a Local Development Framework (LDF) to replace the former district and borough council statutory development plans. Work is well progressed on various evidence base studies and it is anticipated that an Issues and Options Core Strategy consultation document will be available by spring 2012. In the interim period the remaining saved policies in the

Castle Morpeth District Local Plan (February 2003) form the statutory development plan for the area alongside one saved Structure Plan policy concerning the extension of the Tyne & Wear Green Belt to the north of Morpeth and policies in the Regional Spatial Strategy. These latter policies will be removed on enactment of the Localism Bill.

3.3 Morpeth has been identified in successive planning policy documents as a main settlement where sustainable development should be concentrated along with several other main towns and regeneration towns in the county. Whilst the general expectation remains that the strategic policy for Morpeth will continue in a similar form to previous strategies, with the intended abolition of Regional Spatial Strategy, the age of current saved development plan policies and the timeframe within which the County Council is likely to produce more detailed policies to guide development across the county, along with the policy imperative expressed in the draft National Planning Policy Framework to deliver more housing through the plan-led system, it is clear that alternative and relatively faster approaches to creating lasting and relevant policy to guide development in the town needs to be explored.

3.4 Reflecting local ambition for growth in the town, land at St Georges Hospital to the north of the town was designated as one of six growth areas in the successful South East Northumberland Growth Point Programme of Development promoted by the previous government and supported by the County Council and the former Castle Morpeth Borough Council. The scale of development proposed in the Growth Point bid reflected the ambition for growth to the north of Morpeth expressed in the Castle Morpeth Submission Draft LDF Core Strategy. Progress on that document ended at local government reorganisation. The neighbourhood development plan would look to build on the work undertaken to support that strategy reflecting on more recent work undertaken to support the delivery of a major strategic link road connecting the A1 north of Morpeth with the A189 road and the rest of south east Northumberland. Funding bids at the 'best and final bid' stage are currently with the Department for Transport for the construction of that link road and a decision is expected by the end of this year. The County Council has committed to fund up to 30% of the cost of this new link road the total cost of which is in the order on £35m. This link road is proposed pursuant to

Policies T1 and MT1 of the Local Plan and is the subject of a current planning application. Its construction is of fundamental importance to delivering a strategy for growth for Morpeth. It will unlock the current access constraints to land in the north of Morpeth, principally the St Georges Hospital site, and to achieve additional strategic objectives of relieving congestion in the town centre and creating links to south east Northumberland to encourage development and regeneration in towns in that area, particularly Ashington and the former coastal coalfield villages.

3.5 The Local Plan includes saved policies which cover the development of up to 150 dwellings at the St Georges site. This allocation has not been implemented and remains the only outstanding housing allocation in the town. The County Council, and previously Castle Morpeth Borough Council, has been in discussion with the site owner, the Homes & Communities Agency (HCA), for some time seeking the implementation of that allocation. The HCA has committed to a masterplanning exercise for the area. That work will help to inform the Town Council in leading the preparation of a neighbourhood development plan which could confirm the planning status of the current allocation and look to extend allocations giving development plan policy status to further land to meet growth aspirations set out in the Growth Point programme of development and, if agreed locally, higher growth levels currently under discussion with the HCA and others as part of the work undertaken to support the County Council's best and final bid for funding towards the A1 to south east Northumberland Link Road.

3.6 The Local Plan also includes saved policies concerning the allocation of land for employment uses, mainly B1, B2 and B8 uses, but also an area of land for a single non-estate based 'special employment site'. All of these allocations are in the Fairmoor/ Northgate Hospital area towards the western end of the proposed A1 to south east Northumberland Link Road. Their delivery is, to a greater extent, likely to depend on that road being constructed. The neighbourhood development plan will be able to examine each of these sites in relation to the current position regarding the Link Road and more recent evidence commissioned by the County Council in support of preparation of the Core Strategy for Northumberland.

3.7 The current planning policy framework is a product of its time and, while useful in re-affirming the general strategy for Morpeth as a main settlement where development should be directed, it has not necessarily delivered housing growth in the numbers anticipated in the Local Plan, in the Submission Draft Castle Morpeth LDF Core Strategy or the Growth Point Programme of Development. The County Council support the Town Council in seeking to use this new approach to plan-making to develop a framework for delivery of housing and other development to serve the town.

3.8 The County Council has commissioned considerable work to create an evidence base on which to build the Core Strategy for Northumberland. This work and the Issues and Options reports currently under preparation will be made available to the Town Council to support preparation of a neighbourhood development plan for the town. This presents a significant opportunity in terms of cost efficiencies in plan preparation and offers the chance to ensure alignment with the emerging spatial strategy for the County.

3.9 From discussions with Morpeth Town Council it is clear that there is support for further development to meet the needs of the town and support for the process of shaping that development locally and in partnership with landowners and developers. The Town Council has submitted a letter of support, which is enclosed with this bid, confirming their willingness to lead and fund the preparation of a neighbourhood plan for the town. A draft plan area has been proposed which is defined by the administrative boundary of the Town Council area. However, this is indicative at present. The Town Council is committed to working with all adjoining parish councils to seek consensus on an appropriate plan area prior to submitting details of that area for publicity and approval by the County Council as local planning authority to meet the intentions of current draft neighbourhood planning regulations.

4. The Project

4.1 The Morpeth Neighbourhood Planning Front Runner project would see work commence early in the new year under current planning legislation on the preparation of an Area Action Plan (AAP) to create policies intended to deliver growth up to and above that anticipated in the South East Northumberland Growth Point Programme of

Development. Specifically, this would involve preparatory work on establishing a plan boundary area for the AAP which could be created following draft regulations on the implementation of neighbourhood planning currently out to consultation. This would involve discussion and agreement with all adjoining parishes and with the County Council. For the purposes of this submission the plan area is that shown at Appendix 2.

4.2 On enactment of the Localism Bill, and as regulations bring into force the provisions of the Bill during spring 2012 it is proposed that the Town Council would lead work on drafting a neighbourhood development plan for the agreed neighbourhood plan area.

4.3 The County Council will support the Town Council in setting up appropriate governance arrangements for plan-making activities and will advise on all statutory requirements and guidance directing the preparation of a neighbourhood development plan. We would propose to encourage the Town Council to follow current draft regulations and seek formal approval for the neighbourhood plan area. The County Council will also provide support in conducting community and stakeholder engagement activity associated with plan preparation and will advise on appropriate project management arrangements if necessary. The County Council will arrange the necessary independent examination and referendum in due course.

4.4 Where appropriate, plan preparation can draw from evidence recently collected by the County Council in developing its Core Strategy along with the evidence base associated with the Northumberland Local Investment Plan (LIP) which was recently agreed with the Homes and Communities Agency and specifically supports community led initiatives; the Northumberland Housing Strategy; the Northumberland Economic Strategy; and the Draft Sustainable Community Strategy. However, the plan itself and the evidence required to support proposals would be coordinated and prepared by the local community led by the Town Council. The County Council will assist in ensuring compliance with legislation and in particular can provide advice on meeting obligations concerning the assessment of environmental effects and Sustainability Appraisal, although the process of appraisal will be procured or undertaken by the Town Council.

4.5 Having regard to procedures proposed through the Localism Bill, the plan will be prepared using a locally led bottom-up approach. The project offers the opportunity to establish a structured and replicable locally developed approach to the preparation of a neighbourhood development plan in a growth area. It will also test the effectiveness of partnership working with a group of local authorities and landowners, and will seek to demonstrate the ability within local communities to lead the delivery of planned growth and to shape local areas to meet reasonable community expectations. It will also seek to demonstrate that local strategically important development can be supported and coordinated at this level of local government to fit with requirements on being in general conformity with higher level plans and strategies.

5. Project Deliverability

5.1 The Town Council is committed to the delivery of planned sustainable growth to meet the needs of Morpeth and the surrounding area. This project gives them the opportunity to directly lead and shape how, where and when that development takes place, what it looks like and how it fits with the rest of the town. It gives an opportunity to establish local priorities on the delivery of infrastructure associated with the creation of sustainable development in locations agreed by the community as being the most preferable. It gives an opportunity to bring together all associated service and infrastructure providers to plan the growth of the town in a coordinated and phased manner.

5.2 Funding for the majority of the plan-making exercise will be underwritten by the Town Council. The plan-making exercise will be led by the Town Council as qualifying body and all other stakeholders will be expected to sign up to this arrangement at the outset once an appropriate plan area has been agreed. If the bid for support from DCLG is not supported the County Council would continue to pursue opportunities for Morpeth Town Council to lead the preparation of a neighbourhood development plan for the town and the surrounding area subject to agreement with neighbouring parish councils and subject to resource constraints.

5.3 Work on preparing a draft plan can commence immediately on confirmation that this bid has been successful. Work on establishing the plan area and the Town Council's governance arrangements could begin before that time. It is anticipated that substantial progress will have been made in preparing the draft neighbourhood development plan within 12 months of project inception.

5.4 The County Council is committed to working in partnership with Morpeth Town Council to achieve a successful outcome and realise the creation of an appropriate and mutually agreed spatial planning policy framework to guide growth to serve the town for the future. It is anticipated that a neighbourhood plan would be prepared to cover a 15 year period.

5.5 Resources will be provided by the County Council to support the project as necessary. This will include a Principal Planner who will guide and support the Town Council through plan making requirements. Support will be provided from a Localities Development Officer to advise on and facilitate appropriate planned community engagement.

6. Project outputs

The following outputs are expected to be delivered through this project:

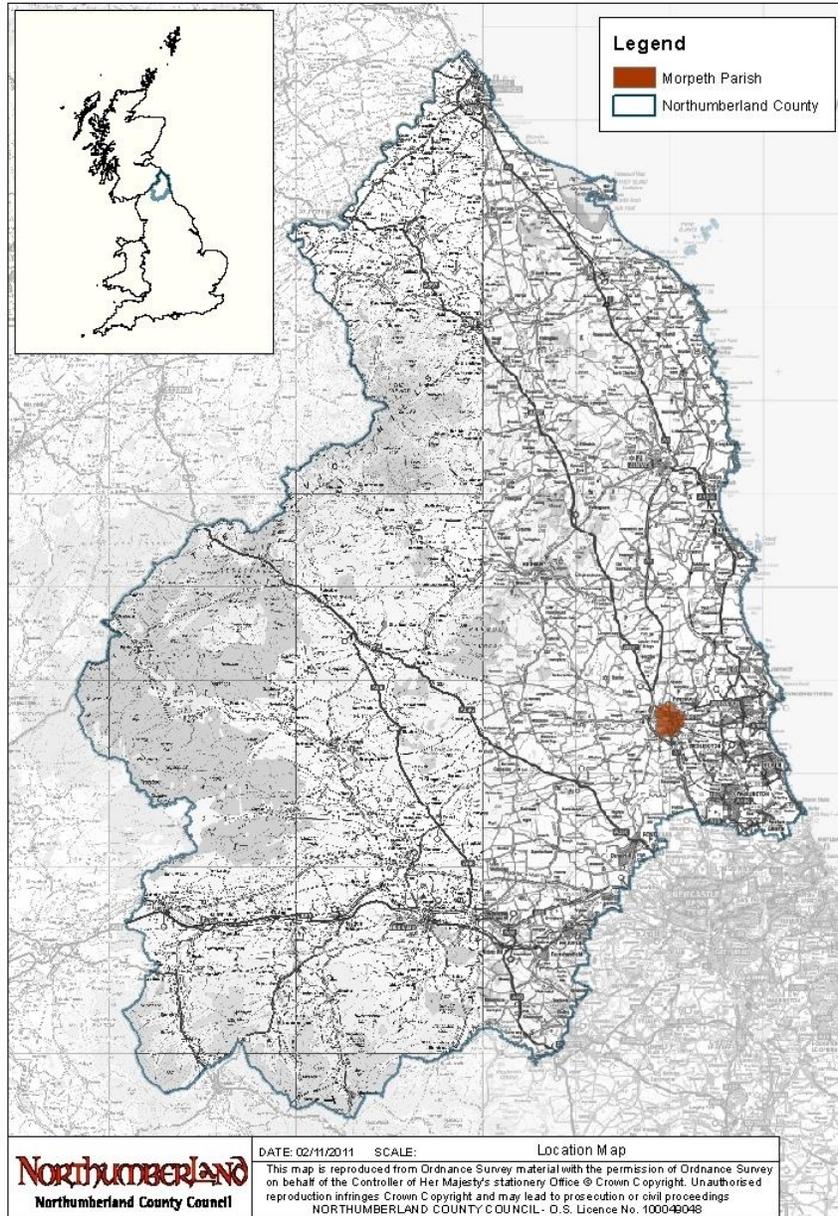
- Demonstration of success of a locally led community driven and partnership based process of plan making that meets community aspirations and helps to deliver development and all associated infrastructure to serve Morpeth and the surrounding area. Successful elements of the process could then be applied to other areas with similar characteristics and development expectations in Northumberland and elsewhere;
- Exploration of opportunities to build capacity within local communities to establish tried and tested tools to assist other communities in bringing forward plans in response to changes proposed in the Localism Bill;

- Preparation of a spatial plan that articulates the community's development needs which has been tested and supported and eventually owned by the community of Morpeth.

7. Contact Detail

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Appendix 1: Location Plans



Appendix 2: Proposed Morpeth Neighbourhood Development Plan Area

