

**Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan
Visioning Workshop – Tuesday 5 February 2013
Morpeth Town Hall**

The workshop was attended by around 35 residents – most of whom have been attending the various Neighbourhood Plan Topic Groups - and was facilitated by Colin Haylock (Cabe Built Environment Expert) and assisted by Ian Campbell (Neighbourhood Plan Coordinator) and Chris Anderson (Planning Aid England) and Planning Aid volunteers. The attendees could not be seen to be representative of the population of the plan area as a whole, but Planning Aid had been appointed to help achieve better engagement with younger demographic groups and the “hard to reach” more generally.

The purpose of the workshop was to consider the role and character of Morpeth and the other settlements in the Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan Area in order to develop a “Vision” for the Neighbourhood Plan Area.

There were five discussion groups with a mix of Topic Group interests and representation from across the plan area.

1. As part of the opening discussion attendees were invited to prepare a one sentence strap line for on how they would like to see Morpeth in 15/20 years time before going on to consider what worked well in the town – its assets – and what problems needed addressing.

This is a flavour of the “strap lines”:

....Rural Market Town catering for future community needs...

....A thriving local economy based on environment, townscape and history...

... A vibrant town which looks to the future but respects the past...

There was also a recognition that whilst there were strengths on which to build some changes were also important

.... Make the town more sustainable...

.... Retain its individual market town character whilst remaining inclusive for all community sectors...

....Sufficient economic growth to sustain existing schools and services

2. The group discussions on “the good the bad and the ugly” reached broadly similar conclusions. Morpeth is seen as an attractive historic market town, with a strong rural character and pleasant ambience. Its river and woodland setting, green spaces and corridors and heritage interests were key assets. It was also seen as a compact centre with good transport linkages. It also had good schools and a strong “retail offer”.

There were of course also many concerns expressed; most notably flood risk, a need for affordable housing, a lack of local jobs and traffic congestion. There was also concern about deteriorating services in outlying settlements, particularly public transport.

In visual terms the town’s telephone exchange attracted particular criticism; but there was also a more general concern about the quality of design of recent development and the impact of vacant shops and empty / vacant sites.

3. The planning context, and in particular the relationship between the Morpeth neighbourhood Plan and the County Council's Core Strategy, was outlined. Although the preparation of the Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan is community led it does not take place in a vacuum. It must be in broad conformity with national planning policy (set out in the National Planning Policy Framework) and the strategic planning framework of the local planning authority – as expressed in the Local Plan Core Strategy. This is currently being prepared and town and parish councils (and any other consultee / individual resident) can seek to inform and influence housing numbers and the Green belt boundary through further consultation exercises.

There was also a discussion on what might be important shapers for the future of the plan area; principally around the development of the Morpeth Northern bypass and how this might influence wider relationships with Ashington and the rest of South East Northumberland and, more locally, future development patterns within the town. Reference was made to the development potential around the former St. George's Hospital site. The setting of an inner Green Belt boundary would also influence future development patterns of the town and in adjoining settlements

4. The principal group discussion and feedback sessions considered the future role and character of Morpeth and its adjoining settlements and how the Neighbourhood Plan could help successfully shape the desired future.

Pegswood

- There was a view that Pegswood needs to become more sustainable and that more growth might make it more viable. This built on the idea that the new Morpeth Northern Bypass could be an important shaper of future growth patterns.
- It was also seen as a more affordable housing market and whilst it had a dormitory role this was as much for the rest of South East Northumberland as for Tyneside.
- To accommodate such growth it would need to be a "window" in the future Green Belt.
- There was a recognised need to strengthen the town / village centre with a stronger mix / choice of retail provision.
- There was also a need to develop a stronger sense of place and a desire that new development should be "masterplanned"

Hebron

- Seen as a very small settlement in a very large parish - a parish / settlement dichotomy
- The new bypass may reduce the volume of through traffic (particularly commercial traffic)
- There were a range of proposed developments and development opportunities located within the parish, including Cockle Park, Heighley Gate and the proposed residential development at Northgate Hospital. A new "arts centre" had opened at Fairmoor

Mitford

- Similarly a large parish with a number of settlements beside Mitford itself (Tranwell Village; Tranwell Woods)
- Seen to be redundant building conversion development opportunities – for business start-ups rather than residential.
- Also seen to have heritage tourism potential
- Keen to develop partnership relationship with Mitford Estates
- By contrast however there were limited local services – no public transport –and the village pub was seen as vulnerable

Hepscott

- The Parish Hall is the village hub but in other respects the settlement is unsustainable with limited services and limited public transport
- Considered that a limited local population remain
- The village has a range of heritage assets (some unknown!); there was also a need for a character assessment of the conservation area
- Hepscott Park was seen as an important prospective development immediately adjoining the plan area

Morpeth

- Morpeth has a compact town centre and a rural market town character with a strong sense of place and local identity. The river, woodlands and park were seen as strengths of the settlement.
- It is a nice scale and has a nice “feel” – it is this market town character that leads many “migrants to become settled in the town
- There was much discussion on the negative views of residents expressed in the local press – there was a perceived anxiety about the future and things becoming worse in the town – but this may reflect a local pride and the preparation of the Neighbourhood Plan provides local people with an opportunity to shape and influence its future
- It maintains a local service centre role (though some concern was expressed regarding the impact of reduced public transport services to the town)
- There was a wide range of sports and leisure clubs and attractions – but some differences of view on the quality of local facilities. There was a perceived need for more cultural attractions.
- There was seen to be a strong retail offer in the town - described by some as “defying gravity” (the impact of the economic recession). It was considered that the impact of the new multiples had a positive influence on local retailers with local investment taking place to make them more “competitive”. Equally some considered that the new retail offer was not serving all the community and there was a perception that it would be risky if the town were to rely on retail as the sole basis for its future
- There was a view that Morpeth was a historic market town made up of multiple local attractions – but no national attractions (unlike Alnwick, Berwick, Hexham?). Some considered that the range of local attractions generated a “critical mass” although conceding that this did not offset the lack of any attractions with a “wow” factor. Others saw Morpeth’s location as offering the potential as a gateway to Northumberland’s wider attractions. Some caution was expressed about the financial viability / sustainability of potential new attractions.
- There was limited time to consider Morpeth’s wider economy and employment – there was some recognition that with the loss of public sector jobs Morpeth needs some new economic / employment role
- There was similarly limited time to explore Morpeth’s wider relationship to the Tyneside conurbation though its importance was acknowledged (*the same also applied to the relationship to the rest of South East Northumberland*).
- Morpeth’s mainline station, and position within the national rail network was referred to as a strength that could be better exploited

5. Next Steps - It was not possible (nor was it the objective of the workshop) to reach any definitive conclusions on a "Vision" for Morpeth. This will evolve and be tested through further meetings of the Topic Groups and ultimately with the wider community through the Issue and Options public consultation. However it has started that process, and will help individual Topic Groups as they begin to consider draft plan objectives (which similarly will have to be tested through the Issues and Options consultation).

Further workshops on where to protect and where there may be potential for development, and how to achieve the quality of development that we aspire to, will be held on 4 March and 11 March respectively

IHC
08.02.2013