

NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

18 AUGUST 2003

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY AND NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK JOINT STRUCTURE PLAN REVIEW

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report advises members of recommendations of the Examination in Public (EIP) Panel Report on the Joint Structure Plan, First Alteration, and sets out responses to its recommendations.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 It is recommended that:

- i) responses to the recommendations of the Examination in Public Panel Report, set out in Appendix A, are approved;
- ii) the Chief Executive is authorised to agree the detailed wording of Policies to be included in the Proposed Modifications and to publish them.

3.0 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The main function of the Joint Structure Plan is to establish the general policies of strategic importance for the development and use of land and environmental protection in the County of Northumberland and so provide a framework to assist in delivering sustainable development. More detailed, site-specific policies are to be included in the National Park Local Development Framework (LDF), which will help to deliver the Vision of the Authority.
- 3.2 The Examination in Public (EiP) was held at Hepscoth Park and ran from 2 March 2004 to 5 March 2004 and was reconvened for one day on 6 April 2004. This was held to discuss particular issues arising from the proposals in the Deposit Plan where more information was required before the County Council and National Park Authority could proceed towards formal adoption of the Plan. The matters for discussion were selected by the County Council and National Park Authority in consultation with the EiP Panel and Government Office for the North East.
- 3.3 The Panel Report has now been received and generally it reflects well on the work undertaken in the preparation of the Structure Plan and the broad strategy adopted in the Structure Plan is endorsed. The Panel Report has been distributed to all Joint Structure Plan deposit points in libraries, District Councils, National Park Authority and to participants in the Examination in Public. A wide range of stakeholders including Parish Councils, consultants and interested organisations have been notified of the availability of the report.
- 3.4 The purpose of this report is for the National Park Authority to consider those recommendations of the Panel that are pertinent to the National Park. The

issues of particular concern to the Authority and on which evidence was presented to the Panel relate to housing and energy.

4. MAIN ISSUES RAISED IN THE PANEL REPORT

Overview

- 4.1 Current Government policy is to concentrate development on existing urban areas, and especially on previously developed land. This would direct the majority of development to South East Northumberland. Elsewhere in the County, market towns and other main settlements with existing key services should become the focus of development so as to assist rural regeneration. These settlements include the National Park's 'Gateway Towns' of Bellingham, Haltwhistle, Rothbury and Wooler. The Panel fully supports this approach and has recommended that this central strategy should be made more explicit in the Joint Structure Plan. Since the population of the National Park is relatively low it is likely that, its development needs will continue to be satisfied through the infilling or minor extension of suitable settlements. The National Park LDF will be expected to develop this strategic policy approach in more detail and set out how the Authority's vision of thriving communities and a sustainable local economy can be delivered within the framework of existing policy.

Housing

- 4.2 The Panel have acknowledged the very real problem of planning consents and completions running at levels well beyond planned allocations and that the rural Districts need to 'manage down' the rate of development. A realistic attitude has been taken to the short term (up to 2006) but beyond that the planning figures in Regional Planning Guidance (RPG1) for the County (of 810 dwellings pa) must be incorporated into LDF's. In respect of the relevant District allocations, the figure for Alnwick is unchanged at 75pa; the figure for Berwick is increased from 30pa to 60pa; compensated by a reduction in the figure for Tynedale from 130pa to 100pa.
- 4.3 It is recommended by the Panel that Policy H3 should be amplified, urging the four rural Districts, Alnwick, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Castle Morpeth and Tynedale, to adopt more robust policies towards affordable housing backed up by Housing Need Surveys.
- 4.4 The Panel concurred with the discussion at the EIP that housing completions in the Park should not contribute to the housing requirements of the three districts. However, the Panel did stress that this recommendation is made on the basis of the low building rate currently in the Park and the approach should be kept under review in case the rate of development within the Park should increase in the future.

Comment

It is clear that recent house building rates in the rural areas of Northumberland will need to be reduced significantly in order to comply with strategic planning guidance, contained in the Regional Planning Guidance, and the Panel's recommendations. This process is already in hand with the adoption of interim planning policies by the District Planning Authorities. The objective of not having a separate housing allocation figure (which would inevitably be very small indeed) imposed on the National Park has been achieved, at least for the

time being. The Park Authority has anticipated the recommendations about affordable housing by commissioning its own housing need surveys. It is not suggested that the Panel's recommendations are challenged. There will, however, need to be close co-operation with the District Planning Authorities in the preparation of the forthcoming LDF's to ensure consistency of approach, particularly over the criteria for identification of settlements where development is to be encouraged and policies towards affordable housing. This was recognised by Members at their recent policy conference.

Energy

- 4.5 Current Government energy policy seeks to create a positive and sustainable framework for energy. There has been a raft of national guidance for energy and in particular planning for renewable energy, including the Energy White Paper and draft Planning Policy Statement 22: Renewable Energy, and regional guidance, principally through the North East of England Regional Renewable Energy Study (RRES). In December 2003, the County Council and National Park Authority published and consulted on pre-Examination in Public Changes to Deposit Joint Structure Plan Policies M3 and M4 and text 4.6.7 to 4.6.13. This sought to establish a strategic planning framework for energy development and included policy for energy efficiency, renewable energy and in particular wind energy and policy for fossil fuel energy.
- 4.6 The Panel have no fundamental objections to the general principle and thrust of the Pre EIP Changes in terms of general conformity with national and regional guidance. The recommendations focus more on how the aims of the policies are expressed, the clarity and ease with which they will be interpreted and applied, and whether they strike the right balance between promotion of renewable energy projects and the safeguarding of other important environmental interests.
- 4.7 Pre EIP Changes Policy M4 set out the strategic locational framework for wind energy. The policy did not include Harwood Forest in the list of wind resource areas, as proposed in the RRES, because it was believed that development should not be encouraged so close to the Park boundary. Representations were also made to the Panel at the EIP about the sensitivities of the Kielder area to major development. The Panel has concluded that whilst policies M4 and M5 are generally consistent with national and regional policy they should be more positively worded and that there should be a single set of criteria for assessing renewable energy projects. They have recommended modifying the locational approach in Policy M4 to cover all areas of least constraint (including Harwood) identified in the RRES as there were no good reasons to depart from the conclusions of the strategy. Kielder, moreover, should be identified as a Strategic Renewables Resource Area as this area would be critical to the region's capability of meeting the prescribed targets for renewable energy generation.

Comment

Whilst it is disappointing that the Panel has not accepted the National Park Authority's views on Harwood Forest it has been recognised that all of the locations identified in the revised policy are areas of least constraint which will be subject to further testing and evaluation before any development could

proceed. It is, therefore, considered that recommendation 5.5 should be accepted.

Policy M5 has been replaced with a new and more positive policy on major renewable energy projects. However, this specifically states that such projects should not be supported and encouraged in international and national designated areas including the National Park and Hadrian's Wall World Heritage site and can only be justified in exceptional circumstances. The policy also sets out a comprehensive list of criteria for assessing all renewable energy projects outside of these areas. These criteria include landscape, visual amenity, cultural heritage and nature conservation interests with a supporting paragraph referring to the importance of the landscape setting of the National Park. In the circumstances of new Government planning guidance the policy would provide as strong a level of protection as could realistically be expected and so the Panel's recommendation should be accepted.

5. THE NEXT STEPS

- 5.1 In the light of the Panel Report and the objections received to the Deposit Plan, the County Council and National Park Authority must now produce a schedule of responses to the Panel report (Appendix A) together with Proposed Modifications to deposit draft policies. These will be open to a further round of representations and it is anticipated that this consultation period will run for six weeks beginning in the first week in October 2004. In the light of representations received, the County Council and National Park Authority can then decide to adopt the Plan or, to publish further Proposed Modifications.

6. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Northumberland County and National Park Joint Structure Plan Review, First Alteration, Deposit Plan, May 2003

Report to National Park Authority on Schedule of Representations made on the Deposit Plan and the Response of Northumberland County Council and Northumberland National Park Authority, October 2003

Pre-Examination in Public Proposed Changes to Energy Policy, December 2003

Northumberland County and National Park Joint Structure Plan Review, First Alteration, Report of the Examination in Public Panel, May 2004

7. CONTACT OFFICER

For further information contact Ian Campbell on 01670 534063.