

AYRSHIRE JOINT PLANNING STEERING GROUP
13 May 2010

Ayrshire Joint Planning Steering Group: Work Programme Assessment, Review and Future Directions

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. To assess the working of the Ayrshire Joint Planning Steering Group over the first year of operation against the Terms of Reference, to identify any improvements and bring forward items for a possible future work programme.

BACKGROUND

2. The Ayrshire Joint Planning Steering Group was established in April 2009 by East, North and South Ayrshire Councils through a Minute of Agreement to promote the concept of joint working on planning and related matters of mutual interest. Along with the powers and duties of a Support Team, the Minute of Agreement identified the Terms of Reference by which a shared service might deliver best value for councils in the implementation of the new planning system. The role of the Steering Group, therefore, is to identify key tasks, to confirm the work programme is broadly equitable between all three councils and sits well with SOAs and local development plan priorities.
3. It was clear at the Steering Group's inception that the new planning system was very much in its infancy and the role that a shared service might play would evolve through time as work pressures arose. At the start of the process therefore, rather than a discrete work programme, a series of key topics were identified based on the Terms of Reference. This report explores how the work of the Ayrshire Joint Planning Unit (AJPU) has evolved, the lessons learned, seeks to identify improvements to working practices and priority work streams for the future.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

4. The Minute of Agreement through the Terms of Reference identifies 13 key functions to be discharged by the Steering Group (see Appendix). In general they cover five specific areas of work: strategic direction, topic and specialist support to local development plans, data management and co-ordination, strategic action plans and supplementary guidance, strategic and specialist support for development management. The following sections identify how far these key areas have been successful in delivering a shared service.

Strategic Direction

5. The Ayrshire Joint Structure Plan and Transportation Committee was established in 1996 to prepare a joint structure plan for the three councils that identified a joint strategic direction in a statutory planning document. This function was tied directly to the, then, Planning Act. In practice, however, strategic planning has its roots in economic activity and any strategic plan needs to understand the driving forces in the economy before translation to a land use plan. This requires a different skills base than planning as practiced at the local level. Latterly that skills base was used, not only in the planning process, but to supplement a lack of strategic planning across other agencies in Ayrshire, most notably at Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire. At the time of the inception of the Steering Group, therefore, with a newly approved Joint Structure Plan, with new planning legislation no longer requiring a further statutory joint strategic plan, but with uncertainty surrounding the extent to which Ayrshire would proceed jointly with any strategic objectives, exactly how strategic direction, if any, would be articulated was not clear.
6. Since April 2009 there has been a substantive change to the delivery of Ayrshire's strategic direction. The national context is now set by the National Planning Framework (which in turn relies largely on the approved structure plan policies). Each council is preparing a local development plan, which although has the joint structure plan as a basis, is being prepared to different timescales in each council, and, in accordance with the new Planning Act, is focused on a more localised vision. An element of economic priority is currently being established through the Joint Ayrshire Economic Regeneration Group operating at a senior level between councils, but does not involve the skills developed in AJPU despite reference as lead in the National Planning Framework.
7. The upshot of these substantive changes is that a primary function of AJPU, to be proactive in identifying and preparing a joint strategic future for Ayrshire, and one which it had been staffed to achieve, has mostly gone and the ability previously available for presenting a positive Ayrshire case is consequently limited. The work over the last year in this area, therefore, has focused on intermittent reactive support for councils in responding to the National Planning Framework, other occasional national planning documents and future scanning. Whilst this change to an individual council vision is understood, scarce resources at all levels of government mean that an Ayrshire perspective is often required. This has become more difficult to articulate as councils move in different directions. The paradox is that all councils still seek to achieve the same spatial planning objectives, and that a pan-Ayrshire perspective outside the confines of local development planning is still required.

Topic and Specialist Support to Local Development Plans

8. Much of the work of AJPU has focused on this area of work. There are three strands. The first relates directly to the support given to councils in the preparation of technical aspects of the local development plan. This includes both involvement in providing data on specialist topics such as retailing, and to a lesser extent, housing (see Item 7), but also on the management of the process through, for example, providing an independent chair for public meetings for North Ayrshire Council or

sitting on the South Ayrshire Council Local Development Plan Project Board. With the current prioritisation of work in council planning sections concentrating on their primary statutory functions, work for AJPU in this specific area of direct support for local development plans has been more limited than anticipated.

9. Second, the local development plan is required to take account of a number of related Scottish Government plans and programmes. Most of these were apparent in 2009, and have continued to evolve over the last year with many coming into force during 2010. Councils had agreed in the interests of best value that AJPU should act for all three councils in the development of a diverse range of topics including onshore wind energy (see Item 6), sasines analysis, river basin management planning, green network development (see Item 5) and marine spatial planning. In practice this has led to new expertise in rural issues, LEADER and European funding support, where there is growing government interest, support and funding.
10. The function here is twofold; to provide an updated view on how national policies and programmes are emerging that might affect the preparation of the local development plan and to ensure that an Ayrshire view is taken account of in the development of important national spatial policy often not directly related to the local development plan. This latter function has been particularly successful in articulating a pan-Ayrshire perspective on topics such as the National Planning Framework, river basin management planning, green network development and marine spatial planning. Topic briefing papers are prepared and placed on the web site.
11. Third, there are a small number of subjects where AJPU provides specialist support for topics which are less likely to be required specifically for local development plans but where there could well be policy implications in future. Examples of this include the Government's proposals for enhanced radar facilities for air traffic control and its impact on onshore wind energy, the development of aviation policy in relation to Glasgow Prestwick Airport (AJPU provides the secretary of the Glasgow Prestwick Airport Consultative Committee); the development of Government's Forest and Woodland Strategy; the planning response to the Climate Change Act; and the development of a strategic waste facility (AJPU represent the three planning departments on the Ayrshire Joint Strategic Waste Management Project Board). All the work streams identified by paragraphs 8, 9, 10 and 11 are intermittent but regular.

Data Management and Co-ordination

12. At the inception of the Steering Group it was envisaged that an improved web based data management system could be developed for Ayrshire councils that centralised data storage and handling linked to an individual officers work station. This has not proved acceptable to councils, primarily as a result of how data has been required for input to the Main Issues Report of the local development plan, and the need to present individual council monitoring statements. Instead, the work of AJPU has focused firstly on providing a simple online statistical data and map-based information source on the revised web site. This falls short of the Terms of Reference in the Minute of Agreement.
13. In other areas AJPU continues to provide the annual audit of all Ayrshire housing sites, and as result of discussions at the December Steering Group has added financial

monitoring of housing data as well. A substantial level of work has gone in over the year to retail impact analysis. Partly as a result of a number of major superstore developments and the conclusion of a major shopping survey carried out for AJPU it has been possible to upgrade shopping data across Ayrshire. This continues a long history of understanding trends in shopping and the impact that has on existing town centres. This work will be taken forward in the coming year. As part of the national priority to develop a green network for Central Scotland an Integrated Habitat Network Mapping model is now underway through the Central Scotland Green Network Support Unit, which, for the first time will give an updated picture of habitat networks throughout Ayrshire and link directly into the LBAP process. Councils have also agreed that the sequence of biennial Ayrshire Monitoring Reports will continue, with the next scheduled publication in late 2010.

Strategic Action Plans and Supplementary Guidance

14. The approved joint structure plan contained a number of proposed action plans. In discussions with councils it is apparent that whilst some are no longer options, some are underway in a different guise, and others will be subsumed within the new local development plans there are a small number which continue to be relevant. These focus, firstly, on wind farm guidance where a report was prepared for councils and approved by the end of 2009. Pending further Government policy development, work on this topic is confined to technical support on planning applications and on the emerging issue of the impact of aircraft radar on location.
15. Secondly, South Ayrshire Council has commissioned AJPU to co-ordinate a study on the environs of Glasgow Prestwick Airport. Work is already underway and consists of two main strands; an access strategy and a land use strategy. The timeframe for completion is linked to the local development plan process. Thirdly, an action plan that was flagged in the approved structure plan focuses on the development of a Biosphere for Galloway and Southern Ayrshire where AJPU has provided the chair and secretariat for the project Steering Group. During 2010 this project will reach a critical stage if it is to move forward for formal approval by the Scottish Government and UNESCO.

Strategic and Specialist Support for Development Management

16. The approved joint structure plan remains in force for planning policy and development management. In this regard AJPU have commented on over 30 planning applications with a strategic context over the year from April 2009. This number will decrease once local development plans emerge, however, many currently require considerable assessment particularly those relating to retailing and onshore wind farm development. For these topics considerable expertise has been obtained within AJPU and this allows support to all councils up to planning appeal level without the necessity of that expertise being available in each council.

ANALYSIS OF EXISTING WORK PROGRAMME

17. The change from Ayrshire Joint Structure Plan and Transportation Committee to the Ayrshire Joint Planning Steering Group required a radical rethinking of how a shared

service might deliver best value for councils. At the time it was far from clear to what extent the new planning system would evolve at council level and how councils might wish to work together at a strategic planning and economic development level. Over the year this has become clearer, in part as a result of changes to the structure of planning function within councils. As a consequence there has been less engagement by AJPU in the statutory planning process and on setting a strategic direction and more dependence on non statutory advice and assistance across a broad range of ad hoc topics. In effect AJPU has moved from a pro-active to a mostly reactive role – but dependent on councils working together to define priorities and identify significant gaps.

18. Nevertheless, there are significant benefits to a shared planning service in the provision of specialist topic support and particularly the delivery of key initiatives as evidenced by work currently ongoing on the Glasgow Prestwick Airport study, the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere initiative and the potential offered by an Ayrshire Green Network as an integral part of the Central Scotland Green Network. These fill important gaps in councils' staff resources. Indeed it is in the area of sustainable development and climate change, where both the initiative and the mechanisms for delivery are outside the context of the local development plan that offers most scope for joint working of mutual benefit.

CONCLUSIONS

19. Since 1996 the Ayrshire councils' shared planning service has been held up to the rest of Scotland as a model of best value practice. An effective changeover to create the new joint service has been effectively applied, but early uncertainties surrounding how the new planning system would develop have only now allowed a more coherent look at the changes made. The conclusion to be drawn at this time is that whilst the Minute of Agreement and Terms of Reference remain robust, the detailed working arrangements at managerial level require a reconsideration to ensure a more integrated approach to prioritization of workloads. The loss of staff both within the AJPU team and at council level will also necessitate that councils increasingly pool their resources in spatial planning to offset these difficulties and to work together more actively to decide on priorities.
20. From the current work programme already identified there are a number of tasks underway that will require to be completed by the end of 2010. These are:
 - Progression of the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere proposals to a UNESCO submission;
 - Glasgow Prestwick Airport and Environs Study for inclusion as Supplementary Guidance in South Ayrshire Council's local development plan;
 - The requirement from the last Steering Group meeting to prepare a retail capacity exercise and report on the future of Ayrshire's town centres; and
 - Preparation of Monitor 2010.
21. In addition there are early decisions required on how councils would wish to take forward:

- The recommendations for Ayrshire contained in the Central Scotland Green Network Initiative and the offer of substantial funding to develop the opportunity;
 - The need for further work in relation to the “Prestwick Airport radar solution” and associated issues relating to onshore wind farms; and
 - Councils’ response to the development of Marine Spatial Planning and in particular the upcoming consultation on the establishment of Scottish Marine Regions.
22. Although councils have agreed to identify areas of work where staff and financial resources would be better served by the work being carried out by AJPU, the bulleted items above present a substantive work programme of themselves over the next six months, particularly when topic and specialist advice is added in.
23. In any consideration of a future programme of work for the shared service, therefore, the experience gathered through sitting at the interface between local and national spatial planning and other land use based initiatives, and seeking appropriate funding packages may offer a way forward rather than simply filling a range of ad hoc gaps in councils’ local planning resources. This would also present a pro-active image for Ayrshire working together to create new opportunities and grasping new agendas. It is for discussion at the Technical Management Team how that should happen.

RECOMMENDATION

24. The Steering Group is asked to consider the issues raised by this report and remit to the Technical Management Team for decisions to be taken on a priority work programme.

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APPENDIX

FIFTEEN

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Three Councils hereby agree that the following functions shall be discharged by the Support Team through the Steering Group:-

- (1) To support the Three Councils in the implementation of the Planning etc. (Scotland) Act 2006 to achieve best value, as deemed appropriate by the Steering Group.
- (2) To prepare and take a lead role as required in developing appropriate delivery mechanisms for Strategic Action Plans and other Initiatives as agreed by the Steering Group.
- (3) To monitor changes to the physical, economic, social and environmental characteristics in each of the Three Councils' areas.
- (4) To identify and advise the Three Councils on the impact of Scottish, UK Government, other national agencies' policies and proposals and European legislation on general planning and other related matters affecting the three council areas.
- (5) To co-ordinate data collection and statistical standards for planning purposes in a way that allows for a consistent approach across the Three Councils, including the preparation of appropriate forecasts and models.
- (6) To establish and maintain an e-planning spatial data management system, centrally located, web based, collated and updated regularly.
- (7) To develop and implement, in conjunction with the Three Councils, the Ayrshire Biodiversity Action Plan by establishing appropriate environmental data management systems and implementation, reporting and monitoring systems.
- (8) To prepare and publish monitoring reports as necessary on the progress towards achieving planning outcomes defined through the planning process.
- (9) To provide the Three Councils with access to expertise in specialist topics that could either not be justified at an individual council level or, in terms of best value, would be better provided jointly.
- (10) To prepare any Alteration to the Ayrshire Joint Structure Plan and/or Supplementary Planning Guidance on any topic defined by the Steering Group.
- (11) To take an overview of development management and local development plan preparation in the Three Councils' areas to advise on matters relating to the approved Ayrshire Joint Structure Plan.

- (12) To assist the Three Councils in the preparation of evidence for planning appeals and local plan inquiries that involve strategic issues and to provide specialist witnesses as appropriate.
- (13) To prepare any other reports or plans relating to planning policy as considered necessary.