Proposed March Neighbourhood Plan

"March Town Plan by March Town People"

Summary Analysis of Preliminary Survey Results

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1.0 Designation of a Neighbourhood Area

1.1 On the 3rd September 2013, March Town Council submitted an application to Fenland District Council to designate a Neighbourhood Area as the first step in progressing a Neighbourhood Plan for March. The proposed area included the whole administrative boundary of March Town Council.

1.2 Fenland District Council carried out a statutory consultation exercise on receiving the application, during which no adverse comments were received. Consequently, the Council's Planning Committee approved the application on the 11th December 2013.

1.3 On the 19th December 2013, the Council's Chief Planning Officer issued the necessary notice to March Town Council under Regulation 7 of the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 that the Council had designated a Neighbourhood Area under Section 61G of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended by Section 116 and Schedule 9 of the Localism Act 2011), enabling March Town Council to proceed with the preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan.

2.0 Town-Wide Survey

2.1 The Town Council recognised that in order to obtain a clear understanding of the scope and content of the proposed Neighbourhood Plan that it needed to carry out a comprehensive survey among residents and businesses in order to identify the key issues, challenges opportunities and priorities relating to the development and use of land and buildings.

2.2 Based on a detailed knowledge of concerns already raised by many residents and businesses, the Parish Council had a sound starting point, which led to the production of a survey questionnaire with 35 questions covering a range of issues such as housing priorities and needs, business and employment, town centre and shopping, traffic and transport, sport and leisure, open spaces and environment, plus an opportunity to raise issues not covered to help produce a Neighbourhood Plan.

2.3 The survey was produced in leaflet format and hand delivered to every household and business in the Plan area, which included 10,900 houses and businesses. The survey commenced on the 12 November 2013 and ran to the 16 December 2013. The event was promoted with press release in the Cambs Times and information was released on Facebook, including March Free Voice and Free Discussion. A number of collection boxes were provided across the town to encourage participation.

3.0 Survey Results

3.1 A total of 617 questionnaires were returned, which represents a 5.6% response rate. This compares favourably with the response rates of other Neighbourhood Plan surveys across the country, and is considered to be a satisfactory basis upon which to identify trends and patters that will help shape future exercises and tasks associated with the finalisation of the emerging Neighbourhood Plan.

3.2 For the purpose of enabling a full analysis, it was necessary to identify the percentage of respondents who did not complete a question or who completed the question incorrectly, thus rendering the question incomplete. These are identified as "nil response/spoiled data." In most cases these accounted for an insignificant proportion of respondents.

3.3 Additional comments can be cross-referenced to those who made them on the main excel database. This is what the numbering relates to.

4.0 Key Findings

Respondent profile

4.1 It is noteworthy that 63% of respondents provided a name and address, of which 93% provided a full postcode. Only 37% were anonymous.

4.2 The vast majority of responses (53%) came from people who had resided in the town for longer than 25 years, with a roughly even split between male and female respondents. It is noteworthy that 61% of respondents came from people of 51 years of age and above.

Housing Priorities

4.3 In terms of housing scale, it was clear that the majority attached a high priority to small scale development (36%), with larger scale development being attached the lowest priority (46% large development and 57% very large development). There was also opposition to isolated development (44%)

4.4 In terms of housing type, Family Homes (69%) and Starter Homes (70%) were most supported, with Flats and Executive homes most unpopular (38% and 56%). There was also recognition of the need for affordable housing (39%), but less for housing association type homes (22%). Retirement (39%) and Sheltered Housing (27%) was identified as a need.

4.5 In terms of additional comments made, patters emerged on the need for bungalow development and eco friendly homes.

4.6 In terms of personal need, 38% said they would be looking for alternative accommodation in March in the next 5 years. Questions 8, sections A, B C and D attracted a high nil response rate of 63%, which makes it more difficult to profile the need. The results show that open market accommodation for coupes in 2 bedroom houses is most popular. It is noteworthy that 91% of respondents felt that developments should have more amenity space.

Business & Employment

4.7 In terms of the location of new employment sites, there was support for town centre locations (59%) and dedicated sites on the outskirts of the town (48%). Development in residential areas was identified as low priority. In terms of the types of developments, small to medium sized retail space were the highest priority (48%) followed by office premises (41%). Large office premises, large retail units and large industrial units or warehouses were of lowest importance.

Town Centre & Shopping

4.8 In terms of shopping choice, there is a roughly even split between those who shop in the town centre (41%) and those who shop on the edge of centre (37%). There is 9% leakage to sites beyond the town. In terms of usage, a high priority (86%) was attached to retail, with a significant request for leisure (39%). Uses such as Food takeaways (77%) and charity shops (68%) were seen as the lowest priority.

4.9 A significant amount of additional comments have been made on this area. Consistent themes include the need for a better mix of retail with big brand names and better parking and accessibility. It is noteworthy that the majority of respondents (48%) felt that shops on the outskirts of March should be allowed to convert to housing to keep the town centre vibrant.

Traffic & Transport

4.10 In terms of travel patters, the survey showed that the majority of people used the town centre for daily food essentials (67%), pubs and restaurants (41%), active leisure (32%) and medical appointments (74%). It was noteworthy that the majority of people still use edge of centre locations for the weekly food shop (46%). 51% of people chose leisure locations in other towns, including Peterborough. In terms of the type of transport used, the private car dominates across all traffic generating activities. However, walking is popular for accessing daily food essentials (31%), pubs/leisure (24%) and medical facilities (27%).

4.11 The encouragement of the provision of public transport facilities such as new bus routes, more bus stops, more frequent services and links to other transport hubs is highly supported. 93% of respondents felt that public rights of way and access to the countryside should be encouraged.

4.12 Measures such as speed reduction at town centre entrances and within new developments, more off street parking, safer routes to schools and dedicated cycle routes attracted high levels of support.

4.13 In terms of the future growth of the town, with the exception of places of worship, community buildings and waste recycling, all identified areas of service demand were highlighted as significant in terms of their need for improvement and enhancement. In terms of other areas for facilities, a broad range have been identified, with some repetition on roads/footpaths/parking/improved leisure facilities.

Sport & Active Leisure

4.14 In terms of new development being used to develop leisure facilities in March, a new swimming pool (62%), and a host of outdoor related pursuits such as more cycle routes (55%), sports pitches (40%), parks and open space s (71%), countryside paths and tracks (65%) and riverside activities (44%) were identified as the highest priority. A skate park and golf course were rates as low priorities. In terms of other suggestions, a cinema and leisure park were recurring themes.

4.15 Respondents were roughly equally split as to where sport and leisure facilities should be located with 48% suggesting on the edge of town with parking provision and 45% favouring locations closer to the town centre accessible on foot or by public transport.

4.16 The most popular location for a new secondary school based on the ranking of choices was on land to the west of March. Although this did not attract the most first choice rankings, its first and second choice rankings combined brought it out on top, with land to the north of March coming second. In terms of facilities for younger children, the town centre was the most popular location for child care/day nursery and sites within existing housing was most popular for pre-school. Primary schools were seen as best located on edge of town sites. It is noteworthy that there were between 55% and 61% nil responses to this question.

Open Spaces & Environment

4.17 The survey revealed that as many as 75% of respondents felt that there were existing publicly accessible open spaces that were valued for leisure and recreation. A wide variety of locations were provided with the most popular being West End Park, Town Centre Park, Estover and Gaul Wood. In terms of land valued for visual amenity, 52% felt there were sites of such importance, although 34% felt there was not. Sites specified as important visually fell into the same general categories described earlier.

4.18 In terms of renewable energy, solar electricity, solar hot water, ground/air source heat pumps, and to a lesser degree, biomass/anaerobic digestion were the renewable sources that people felt should be a high priority in the plan. Domestic and large-scale wind power was seen as a low priority.

4.19 As part of new developments, the protection and creation of wildlife habitat, the creation of new wildlife areas and maintenance of biodiversity were seen as high priorities. The creation of more open space and the opportunity to walk, run and cycle off road were the highest (72%).

4.20 97% of respondents indicated that they had not been affected by flooding. 2% indicated that they had been affected and that this was equally due to a failure to control surface water run off and a failure of drains/sewers/pumps. In terms of actual damage caused, no data was collected. However, 195 of respondents felt that there were sites in and around March that were at risk of flooding. Numerous sites were identified but Creek Road and Gaul Road were most commonly referred to.

Location of Future Development

4.21 With the main focus on housing, it was noteworthy that the majority of support was for sites that related well to the existing built up area of the town. The strongest support was for sites J (area north of Knights End Road), K (site of former Kingswood Park and surroundings), L (area between Gaul Road and Burrowmoor Road), and G (area south of Upwell Road). It is noteworthy that these sites fall within the growth areas identified in Fenland District Council’s Core Strategy for March. Areas H (area east of Wimblingdon Road) and I (area between Knights End Road and Wimblingdon Road) also received significant support, which would see the town rounded off to the south up to the bypass. It is noteworthy that all sites to the west of the bypass, (M, N, O, P, Q), received very little support, along with sites to the north of the town (R, and A). Sites to the east received limited support, with the exception of sites D, E and F, which attracted more support.

Other Comments

4.22 The last section of the questionnaire invited further comments that may be used to improve the Plan. A total of 371 additional comments were received. These include a broad cross section of feedback, much of which has previously been raised in the questionnaire. It is also worth highlighting that some feedback is not relevant to the development and use of land, but which may influence the practices of other organisations active within the town.

4.23 This feedback will be the subject of more detailed analysis, but for the purposes of this report, the main recurring issues raised can be categorized as follows:

Traffic & Transport

- *There is a need for a bypass to the town (east and west)*
- *There is a need for a new road crossing over the river*
- *The Gaul Road Junction must be improved*
- *The train station and rail service must be improved*

Town Centre

- *The town centre must be tidied up*
- *The range and choice of shops must be improved*
- *Traffic congestion must be tackled*
- *Parking should be free*
- *There is a need for an indoor market*
- *The character of the town must be preserved*

Leisure & Youth

- *More facilities must be provided for youths*
- *There is an urgent need for a new leisure centre*

Housing & Services

- *There is no capacity or need for 4,200 houses*
- *Empty homes should be tackled as a priority*
- *Housing must deliver required infrastructure*