What Good Plans Look Like: Central Lincolnshire

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Introduction

The legal framework and processes within which local plan development takes place have been regularly changed since the new system was introduced in 2004. This year saw the publication of the Housing White Paper (HWP), which contains more proposals for reform. Since the NPPF was published, the average time taken to go from formal Publication to Adoption of a plan has actually increased by approximately 9 months. Many authorities will cite the changing policy landscape and the uncertainty that creates as reasons for slowing down their plan making. On the ground, challenges come in the face of opposition to overall housing numbers and specific site selection, amongst other things.

A question we are often asked is "can you tell us what 'good' looks like?" There is a reluctance to label any plan as 'good' both from the Inspectorate, and from local authorities themselves. So what can we do? This set of small case studies takes recently adopted local plans and asks four simple questions. These questions take some of the key elements of the HWP about ensuring plans deliver and can respond to challenges:

    1) How does the plan make best use of land?

2) Does the plan demonstrate a clear narrative in first identifying and then tackling the issues?
3) How does the plan promote a diversity of suppliers and developers?
4) How does the plan contribute to the delivery of strategic objectives?

We also look at a set of metrics to assess some of the other issues that can trouble us as a sector. These look at the length of the plan, how much housing is it delivering (and what percentage of the OAN is that?), how many objectives does it have and what was the level of representations received? These provide some context and, when looked at over a number of plans, patterns may start to emerge. Time will tell.

The case studies look at the adopted plan, the Inspectors' Report, and parts of the evidence base to provide some learning. Each one starts with some simple metrics.

For each question you will see a brief summary of what the plan does with any useful principles covered at the end.

Central Lincolnshire Local Plan

Central Lincolnshire is the joint planning authority for the 3 local authorities of Lincoln City, North Kesteven and West Lindsey. Governance arrangements also include Lincolnshire County Council. The Local Plan Team was established in May 2010. In December 2013 the then Core Strategy for the joint planning unit was recommended for withdrawal by the Inspector owing to a lack of sufficient allocated sites to demonstrate a 5 year land supply. The Local Plan Team 'regrouped', procured additional professional resources from Peterborough City Council Policy Planning Team and pressed ahead to deliver a Local Plan extremely quickly. From commencement of this work in early 2014, (utilizing evidence from the Core Strategy where still appropriate, but still needing to procure additional evidence as needed) to final submission to the Planning Inspectorate in June 2016, took just over 2 years.

Metrics

Length – 129 pages plus 11 pages of appendices
Number of objectives – 15
Number of homes – 36,960 (at 1,540 per annum) representing 100% of identified need.
Representations on submitted plan – 1,034 – (Source: Proposed Submission Consultation: Report on Key Issues Raised – June 2016)
Time from Publication to Adoption – 374 days

Following the withdrawal of the previous local plan in December 2013, work on this local plan started with consultation on the Integrated Impact Assessment (incorporating the legal requirements of SA, SEA and EIA) Scoping Report in July 2014

Time from first formal consultation ('Preliminary Draft Local Plan') to Publication – 1 year 4 months.
  (Sources: Central Lincolnshire Local Development Scheme – Adopted June 2015 and Central Lincolnshire Local Plan Web Page)

Useful links:

Central Lincolnshire Adopted Local Plan
https://www.n-kesteven.gov.uk/central-lincolnshire/local-plan/

Inspectors' Report
https://www.n-kesteven.gov.uk/central-lincolnshire/local-plan-examination/

Central Lincolnshire Settlement Hierarchy and Growth Distribution Study – April 2016
https://www.n-kesteven.gov.uk/_resources/assets/attachment/full/0/17755.pdf

1) How does the plan make the best use of land?

The plan covers 3 local authority areas resulting in around 400 settlements to consider. These vary greatly in scale from the city of Lincoln to small villages and hamlets. In order to make some sense of the scale of the task, the committee produced a "Settlement Hierarchy and Growth Distribution" study. This study applies a 2-stage approach to determining the scale and distribution of housing across the plan area, reflected in two overarching policies in the plan.

The study identifies 7 tiers in the hierarchy. It then splits these up into the two policies. The first policy covers tiers 1-4 (Lincoln, Main Towns, Market Towns, and Large Villages (over 750 dwellings)). The second policy covers tiers 5-7 (Medium Villages (250-749 dwellings), Small Villages (50-249 dwellings), Hamlets (15-50 dwellings) & Countryside). This approach recognizes that in smaller settlements there tend to be many interdependencies. At this scale, different services are often provided in different settlements, serving a group, rather than expecting each settlement to provide a full range of services.

All settlements in tiers 1-4 have sites allocated in the local plan. Settlements in tiers 5-7 do not. In tiers 5 and 6, a growth 'baseline' has been set at 10%. This level can be raised to 15% if certain criteria are met. What this means is no small settlement will be swamped by too much new development. With an average population density amongst the lowest in England, this is quite an important factor to consider. At the same time growth should be significant enough to maintain existing services. Crucially the percentage figures are not a development cap but they set a level of growth beyond which additional development needs to demonstrate an appropriate level of local support.

This policy approach really gets under the skin of the existing settlement pattern and shows a good understanding of how the rural areas can contribute to overall growth levels without affecting their character.

Where whole settlements are subject to flood risk or are covered by the Lincolnshire Wolds AONB, they have been highlighted as areas where the known significant strategic constraint places a degree of uncertainty on the level of growth that can take place. In such areas the plan does allow for sites to come forward where the impact of the development is able to demonstrate that the constraint can be overcome.

In such a large area with so many settlements, such an approach is an excellent starting point, and should avoid protracted discussions about choosing one settlement over another, or expecting disproportionate levels of growth in one settlement. It reflects the interdependencies of smaller settlements and should deliver sustainable patterns of growth.

The Inspectors concluded "[However], the availability of services in a particular village can vary over time and the overall size of a village is a reasonable way of deciding its position in the hierarchy. It also has the advantage of being a relatively straightforward and constant measure to count on a consistent basis. Furthermore, in very broad terms, larger settlements will generally tend to provide more services than smaller ones."

Interestingly, the plan does not define the boundaries of the settlements. This is a very flexible approach but perhaps failed to provide certainty when discussing 'appropriate locations' where the policy allows for development over and above allocated sites. The Inspectors sought to overcome this by requiring the plan to define 'appropriate locations' as well as what constitutes an 'exceptional circumstance'. In their report they state: "*The fundamental difficulty here, in the absence of settlement or development boundaries, is to develop policies that strike an appropriate balance between flexibility and certainty. They must also be clearly expressed in order to meet the Framework's requirement that policies should provide a clear indication of how a decision maker should react to a development proposal.*"

They do go on to offer support in broad terms for the approach, as it allows development to occur as set out in the hierarchy, without being overly restrictive, particularly where there is local support for additional growth. This is at the heart of the policy approach. With so many settlements, and a number of representations in support of the need to allow the rural economy to grow where sustainable, a 'line on a map' approach was not considered the best solution for the area.

This 'hybrid' of defining suitable locations without drawing settlement boundaries perhaps offers the most sustainable approach. Existing settlement boundaries may have been drawn some time ago and may unreasonably limit potential development opportunities. The idea of defining locations without boundaries further focuses on what makes a location sustainable. It isn't a line on a map, it is factors such as access to facilities, the local economy, landscape and service provision.

The amount of flexibility in the policy points to the importance of close monitoring. The Inspectors referred to this point, specifically. The committee will have to keep the levels of growth under scrutiny, to ensure development is continuing in the right locations and at the right levels.

Regarding employment land, the plan accounts for existing permissions as well as new allocations including mixed use elements of the Sustainable Urban Extensions (SUEs). The plan allocates 7 Strategic Employment Sites. All of them have existing permissions or fall within an LDO. There are also 21 Existing Employment Areas where only B1, B2 or B8 uses are supported. This combination of strategic sites and existing areas means the plan is potentially providing for a higher level of employment land than is needed. Should all the land be developed out, there would be a need to provide more housing sites to ensure the balance between housing and employment. The plan covers this by identifying broad reserve locations for growth. Higher annual delivery will trigger the release of such sites, post-2026. This allows for larger allocated sites to be prioritized. A criteria based approach to considering other employment opportunities will ensure the potential for economic development in rural areas will not be overlooked.

We think that for a plan to make the best use of land it has to:

Have a clear settlement hierarchy – Where there is a particularly high number of settlements, consider separating out how sites will be identified. The same methodology for identifying land for SUEs and rural sites in smaller settlements is unlikely to work well.

Consider a flexible approach to settlement boundaries – It is possible not to identify boundaries at all, but you will have to clarify what makes a site 'appropriate' or what exceptions will apply

Consider a 'baseline' percentage of new development in more rural areas – This should ensure that no one settlement is swamped with development, whilst allowing all settlements to maintain existing facilities and services. Factor in annual monitoring here to make sure growth is occurring as envisaged but also create the room in policy for settlements that want additional growth.

Set out the methodology for identifying where settlements sit in the hierarchy – Do not include this in the plan to make sure it doesn't become over long, rather write a topic paper so that the rationale is set out clearly.

Identify broad locations for reserve sites – Also clarify when these would be triggered. Pursue the adopted strategy first, but keep monitoring progress to ensure delivery

2) Does the plan demonstrate a clear narrative in first identifying and then tackling the issues?

Describing such a large area in a succinct way could prove challenging. However, the plan paints a spatial portrait which is high level yet informative. It sets out the largely rural nature of the area, which houses over half the population. It points to some pockets of significant deprivation. It draws on the importance of several environmental features, such as the 'Lincoln Edge' as well as challenges such as climate change and water levels owing to the low-lying nature of large parts of the area. It also mentions the importance of the MoD, which is a large land owner in the plan area, the new university in Lincoln, and the visitor economy. It does all this on around two pages.
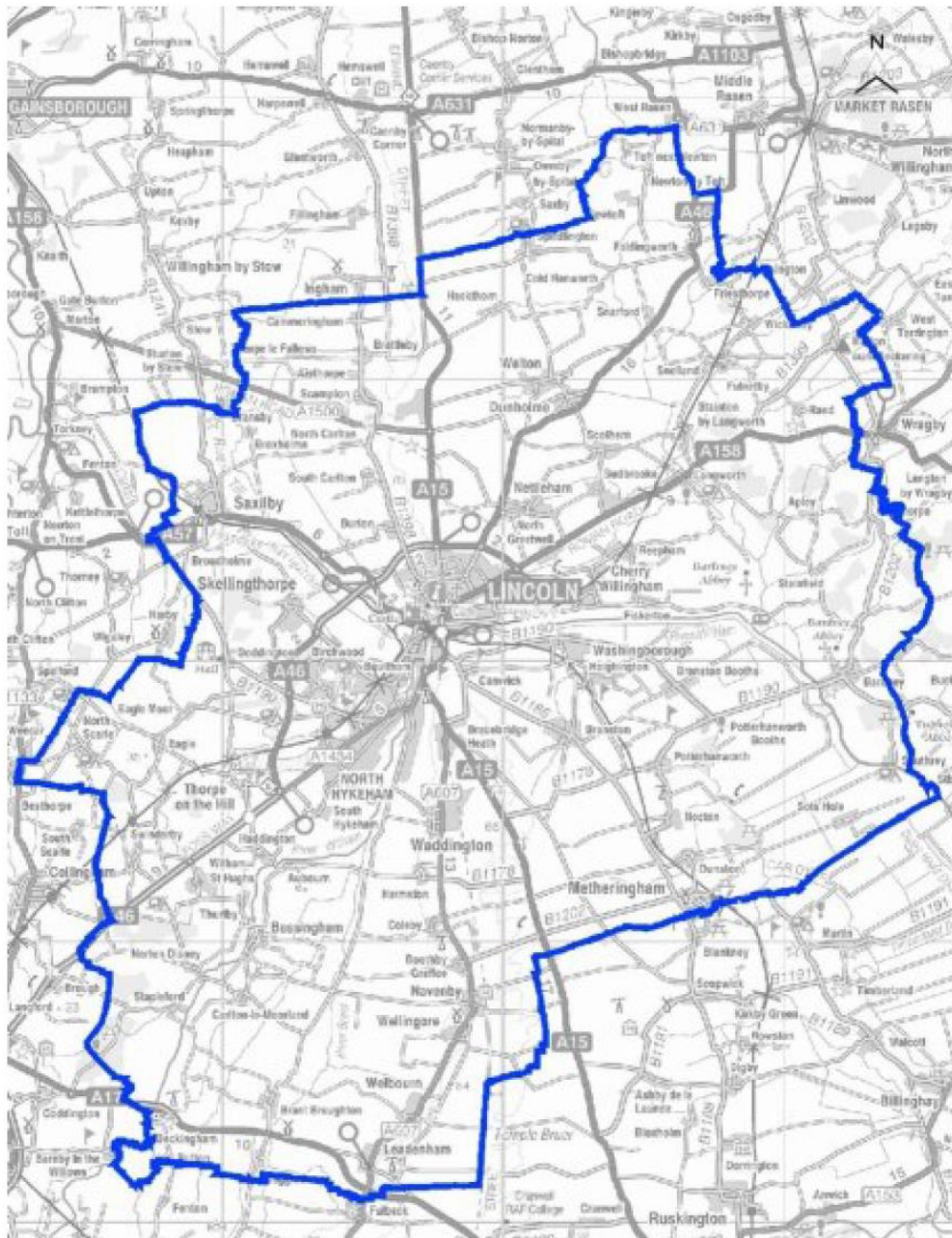
This portrait moves into the key challenges, described in a single paragraph:

"Central Lincolnshire faces a range of challenges, notably the need to improve social and economic conditions, including health, housing, jobs and the range and quality of facilities whilst at the same time ensuring that the environment is improved and that growth does not erode the area's environmental and heritage assets or exacerbate pressure on natural resources."

The vision describes a growth-led strategy to tackling deprivation and infrastructure deficits. The majority (88%) of housing growth will be focused on the Lincoln Strategy Area, as well as the other 2 main settlements of Gainsborough and Sleaford.

The 15 objectives are short and simple. They cover housing, the economy, social equality, infrastructure, the built and natural environment, and climate change. Given the natural geography of the area it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority (9) of the objectives, whilst focusing on sustainable growth included clear environmental sustainability and climate change content.

Map of the Lincoln Strategy Area

This section closes with a list of the main documents that have helped inform the plan. Although not an exhaustive list, it shows how partners and stakeholders have been drawn into the process and how the plan has not been written in isolation.

This demonstrates a flexible approach to dealing with constraints and possible mitigation. It also shows the benefit of working with other agencies, and an understanding of the wider context, rather than focusing solely on each site in isolation.

The policies in the plan reflect these objectives. Although a large part of the plan is taken up with housing and employment text, it also sets out policies covering health, MoD land, the universities and higher learning, and the environment.

Some of these policies were modified following the examination to provide additional clarity and emphasis. Perhaps the most important point to make here is to recognize the inter-relationship between the built environment, the vision and objectives and the policies in the plan.

In considering the use of MoD land, for example, the policy did not initially differentiate between the location of the MoD sites, nor whether they were still in use. This could have led to large scale development in places far removed from the places identified for growth in the strategy and would have been contrary to the overall strategy and other policies in the plan

In dealing with health inequality, the committee has asked for Health Impact Assessments alongside applications over 25 dwellings or 0.5 hectares. Given the importance placed on addressing such inequalities, some policy text provides extra emphasis and certainty that the HIA will be provided, and subsequently, the developments will help address the issue and meet the objective. Central Lincolnshire have also published additional advice on the website post-examination.

In supporting the expansion of the university and higher education, the plan had not included reference to a campus site to the north of Lincoln which the university had stated as being crucial to its ongoing teaching, education and research. Whilst the Inspectors recommended including reference to supporting development of educational facilities on the campus they did not feel that there was any compelling evidence to support the proposal put forward by the University for enabling development on the site to justify departure from the settlement hierarchy policies or the Neighbourhood Plan for the area.

We think that for a plan to create a clear narrative and identify issues it has to:

Provide a clear and concise spatial portrait – Even with a plan covering 3 authorities it should be possible to describe the important elements of the place in a couple of sides

Recognize the impact of policies on the ground – Ensure policies are written which can apply to all related uses/sites/issues that it covers. A 'one-size' policy may bring about unintended consequences, such as development on a brownfield site, but in a location which doesn't fit well with the strategy. There may need to be a series of policies covering the same issue. Good quality maps and diagrams can help make clear policy intentions.

Make sure that essential 'asks' are embedded in policy – This provides extra weight to the ask. If a HIA is going to be required, make it part of the policy.

3) How does the plan promote a diversity of suppliers and developers?

Through the sheer scale of the plan, there is a range of allocated sites in varying locations, from SUEs and brownfield sites to smaller rural sites. Most of the development will occur in the Lincoln Strategy Area, but there is still scope for developments across the whole area, In particular, the 'benchmark' approach to smaller settlements should encourage local housebuilding in all of the settlements across the plan area. This is a very positive policy which opens up opportunities for small developments.

The plan also recognizes the need for elderly accommodation and sets out how affordable housing levels can vary across the area.

Although most of the larger employment allocations contain existing permissions, the large number of existing employment areas will offer plenty of new opportunities for development.

We think that for a plan to promote a diversity of suppliers and developers it should:

Clearly set out the site selection process and the role each settlement can be expected to play – this gives early indication to local builders what the market could deliver in the plan period

Set out how individual buildings in rural areas will be considered – Provide clear criteria and set out the process so that individuals are clear on whether the building they are considering is or could be made suitable

Include a policy on seeking training and employment opportunities from developments – This will increase local job growth as well as potentially increasing small and medium housebuilders in the future

4) How does the plan contribute to the delivery of strategic objectives?

As a joint plan covering 3 local authorities, produced in collaboration with Lincolnshire County Council, the plan sets the policy context for a strategic area. The housing market area aligns closely enough to the joint plan area. All the housing can be accommodated in the plan area. There were discussions between Central Lincolnshire and neighbouring authorities, and any issues have been resolved.

Outside of the site-specific policies for housing and employment, most of the other policies are written in quite high level language. This is not surprising, as the policies are covering a strategic area. The alternative would most likely have produced an over long and repetitive plan. Instead, what the reader sees is a plan which is detailed where required, and more broad brush where it can be. A good example of this is in the section on the visitor economy. There is one 'generic policy' on development that delivers facilities to improve the visitor economy. There is then a specific policy on the strategically important Lincolnshire Showground.

These more generic policies point to the settlement hierarchy rather than specific places. This approach offers flexibility whilst still retaining clarity, as the hierarchy is so well defined.

We think that for the plan to contribute to strategic objectives the council should:

Clarify the governance arrangements at the earliest possible opportunity – Knowing precisely who is involved and what the purpose of the plan is, will be crucial to its success. Build on existing relationships but also use the opportunity to consider new ways of working.

Separate out the generic issues affecting the whole area from site or location – Site specific policies provide appropriate and proportionate policy response to sites of strategic importance, generic policies cover the rest of the plan area in a similarly proportionate way

Thoughts and reflections from Central Lincolnshire

The Three Central Lincolnshire district authorities and Lincolnshire County Council, with procured support from Peterborough City Council came together to produce a Local Plan in a very short space of time . There are a number of factors which meant that each authority was able to enter into the partnership and achieve this outcome.

Firstly from the outset, all partners were clear about the importance of the Local Plan, it was understood to be a fundamentally important document in setting the framework for growth. As such it was 'owned' from the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive, through each organisation and enjoyed clear prioritisation.

This prioritisation was coupled with a recognition of the need for appropriate resourcing. A Local Plans Team was set up with Officers from each of the constituent authorities, and from a wider field than 'just' Planning Policy and additional professional resources were procured in the form of technical expertise from Peterborough City Council.

Clear prioritisation by the Leader, Chief Executive and senior Councillors and Officers also meant that the Local Plan's development was never in danger of being marginalized or siloed by any of the partners.

Secondly this understanding of the importance of the plan, was based on a shared understanding of the fundamental importance of growth. All authorities understood and accepted the need for it, and more importantly sustainable growth was understood as the key to a prosperous and flourishing future for Central Lincolnshire. The Local Plan was seen as the key document to sustainably meeting housing need, delivering employment and infrastructure.

Thirdly there was a clear commitment to partnership and collaboration. All partners knew Local Plan production was a significant and resource intensive process, and working jointly was required for this as much as strategic reasons. Good project planning with clear governance structures were put in place. Formally this commitment is seen in the creation of the Central Lincolnshire Joint Planning Committee supported by joint governance and delivery structures, which included a Service Level Agreement with Peterborough.

Good project planning and governance provided the framework for partners to work together to set out and agree priorities and outcomes, report findings, monitor progress and debate and agree the way forward.

Finally success was down to attitude. Working over such a large geographical area and across four authorities meant there were challenges and issues along the way and inevitably differences of opinion to resolve. Each partner

approached the partnership with openness and transparency and with an ultimate and mutually shared goal of an adopted Central Lincolnshire Local Plan.

Ian Fytche Chief Executive 6/10/2017