



SMARTER GROWTH IN STROUD

REPORT OF A VISIONING WORKSHOP

July 2013

Summary

There was consensus on the need to escape from the pressure for sporadic release of sites and to think long term, beyond the horizon of the emerging Stroud District Local Plan. Any long term strategy should prioritize local community cohesion, working towards walkable neighbourhoods, in the context of a coherent vision which spans local authority boundaries.

There was discussion about the changing character of the population, employment and lifestyles in the I.T. era. A controversial proposal for a major urban extension to the north of Stonehouse based on a new all-direction station at the meeting of the Bristol and the London lines stimulated some challenging debate.

General agreement emerged that the canal corridor, from Cainscross to Brimscombe offered great potential for reinforcing existing communities, and that improvement to walking/cycling routes (such as the Stroud-Nailsworth cycle path) were a key requirement in delivering a healthier more sustainable future for the Stroud area.

Background

The future growth and development of the Stroud area has raised major controversies, with concerns over the loss of valued green space, and the need to make the most of the area's special heritage, including its town centres and canal. A small group of planners have proposed the area looks beyond 2031 – the timescale for the current local plan – and convened a half day meeting in Stroud's Old Town Hall on June 25th to debate the issues with representatives of different stakeholders. This report sets out some conclusions where there was consensus, and identifies issues where further work needs to be commissioned. It will be circulated to all those who were invited to stimulate discussion over how to resolve conflicts between development pressures (and private profits), and the wider and longer-term public interest.

The Workshop was led by Leonora Rozee, Nicholas Falk, Max Comfort and Hugh Barton (the Stroud Futures group) and attended by:

1. Peter Eddis Bates, Don't Strangle Stroud
2. John Bloxham, Rodborough Parish Council
3. Cllr David Drew, District and Parish Councillor, and Labour Parliamentary Prospective Candidate
4. Paul Fong, Hunter Page Planning



5. Alan Ford, Stroud Waterfront Vision
6. Dianne Glautier, University of Gloucestershire
7. Camilla Page, Stroud Preservation Trust
8. Daniel James, Stroud Waterfront Vision
9. Martin Large, Stroud Common Wealth
10. Richard Lloyd, Gloucestershire CPRE
11. Tom Lowe, Eastington Parish Council
12. Cllr John Marjoram, Deputy Mayor Stroud
13. Tim Mars, Stroud Civic Society
14. Cllr Simon Pickering
15. Mervyn Dobson, Pegasus Planning
16. Charlie Watson, Gloucestershire CPRE
17. Barry Wyatt, Stroud DC Head of Planning (observer)

Report of the workshop

Prior to the event invitees were provided with a paper setting out some thoughts about “A Framework for Smarter Growth” for the Stroud area which included an example of how a new urban extension to the north of Stonehouse based on a new station where the two main railway lines meet could provide an exemplar development accommodating major growth over the next 50 years. Following an introduction by Leonora Rozee setting out the national context provided by the Localism Act 2011 under which citizens are enabled and encouraged to take increased responsibility for planning the future of their areas, presentations by Max Comfort on local issues and Nicholas Falk on Smarter Growth based on the “Framework” paper set the scene for the workshop. Hugh Barton then introduced the following propositions:

1. Stroud District should develop a **long term spatial strategy** (to 2050 and beyond) to help shape ongoing policy and plan reviews in a consistent way.
2. Stroud area should be planned so as to progressively **improve rail, bus, bike and walking options for people and business** - for health, social inclusion, economic and climate reasons.
3. Specific major developments should be planned as **beacons of high quality walkable design** for a growing and ageing population, and 'future proofed' for energy, food and water security and resilience to climate change. In addition settlements should be planned so as to **diversify housing provision** and increase the chance of becoming more autonomous for local services.

1. Is a longer term spatial strategy needed?

There was agreement that changing demographic patterns as well as work and lifestyles make it essential to look beyond 2030. Infrastructure and urban form takes decades to change. People are living longer, and require more flexible kinds of space. Funding for infrastructure is hard to secure, and housing has become unaffordable for those not on the



housing ladder. Stroud also needs to look beyond its boundaries, as people are moving further to work. For example Gloucester has one of the highest rates of new housing, but people are moving there to access jobs in North Bristol, and contributing to road congestion in the process.

The present planning process does not allow much time for considering alternative scenarios. Parochial concerns tend to outweigh consideration of the 'bigger picture', and there is no longer a regional or county strategic plan. It therefore makes sense now the local plan strategy is approaching finalisation to think about the longer term options and issues, what might be called a vision for Stroud 2050. This may include revisiting earlier strategies and plans to make the most of what makes the area exceptional, such as the valleys and hills, mix of people, and local industry. It is vital to recognise constraints such as flood plains, and the danger of losing areas of character or local employment as a result of development pressures.

A spatial strategy is essentially about what kinds of land use should go where, and how they interrelate. Inevitably there are conflicting views, for example with regard to the need to expand the smaller settlements. But without an agreed plan, development tends to sprawl wherever it is profitable.

Issues

- a. A spatial strategy should consider current and future patterns of work (for example two thirds of Stroud jobs are concentrated in the valleys). Most people work for smaller firms who might grow if they could attract the right staff or find the right space. We must avoid losing workspace that does not depend on driving to work
- b. Climate change as rising resource costs may require a rethink of the relation between town and country, for example through producing more food locally, and controlling travel costs through making better use of public transport.

2. Can places be developed in ways that support healthier movement?

There was agreement we should make the most of transport links. New development in the wrong places can increase the time spent commuting and sitting in cars. The brownfield sites along the canal should create a sustainable 'chain' of development along the valleys, as they parallel the main transport corridors. In the past many people lived close to their work, but with higher levels of skills people are moving around more. This creates tensions, for example between those in the creative industries who want to live within easy reach of cities like Bristol, or their supply chains, and those who work more locally..

While views on the potential use of the railway vary, with some thinking its only use at present is for long distance journeys, everyone can agree on the importance of making cycling and walking as easy and safe as possible. There is also agreement on the importance of as many people as possible living where they can naturally walk to shops and services, particularly as the population ages. Similarly there is agreement that more and more people will want to work part of the time at least from home.



Healthier movement argues for increasing the numbers living close to town centres and stations, and restricting the tendency for development to be concentrated in isolated villages in rural areas (where is often most profitable). It also means addressing obstacles, such as crossing main roads, and making much more of cycle ways, such as the route along the old railway line between Nailsworth and Stroud.

Issues

- a. IT clearly has transformed the way we work, with more scope for 'live work' units, but we still need face to face interaction. Future generations may experience equally profound changes, and there are clear differences between the needs of creative people, and those in more routine forms of work. Appropriate sites need to be identified for the forms of work with most growth potential.
- b. The potential for a new station North of Stonehouse, funded by associated mixed development, is worth evaluating, especially as much of the land is in public ownership, and new housing could help pay for a transport upgrade, and take advantage of the scope for more frequent services.
- c. We should learn from the examples of towns in the South West linking new development to the provision of better rail links, such as in Tavistock, as well as Continental models for smarter growth, such as in the Netherlands, where more use is made of 'rail hopper' services

3. How could beacon developments achieve a better balance?

New developments could provide for changing lifestyles, for example with 'granny flats' or space for two families to share, and Stroud is a great place for innovation in the way housing is provided. There was consensus on intensifying development along the A419 so long as the design principles could be agreed. Though many areas look quite dense, in fact there is often scope for intensification, and so the first priority is making best use of space in easy walking distance of existing centres. It is easy to identify the opportunities at places such as Brimscombe, Cheapside in Stroud, and possible along the canal between Stroud and Ryford.

There are also major opportunities to use development at Sharpness Port to improve transport links, and the same applies at Cam and Dursley. The situation North of Stonehouse in some ways is more complex, as it represents such a large area in relation to the size of the town. But as much is in public ownership, there is real potential to manage the development process for the public benefit, and to provide the County Council with much needed revenue.

The challenge in all these cases is securing developments that achieve both sufficient quality to overcome local concerns, and that also provide a balance or mix of housing, so they do not simply encourage long-distance commuting. Examples such as on the edge of Cirencester do show that if there are clear policies, for example covering provision of affordable homes and housing mix or densities, better results can be achieved. Eastington is so far the only Parish Council to make use of the power to develop a Neighbourhood Plan,



which will include using Community Land Trusts to ensure new housing, is affordable, but others may follow.

Issues

- a. There would be value in looking into some form of 'quality charter' to guide new development in sensitive areas, with development briefs to secure higher standards without losing viability
- b. Revisiting the 'string of pearls' along the Canals could be a good place to start in view of the need to raise further funds to link the restored canal with the rest of the system.
- c. Before proposals for a new urban extension at Stonehouse could be considered further, there would need to be discussions with the County Council, and some work on likely costs and values.

Conclusion and next steps

Following the meeting, reports in Stroud Life and the Stroud News and Journal referred to the group as a 'Think Tank', and several of those present at the workshop said afterwards they welcomed the chance of discussing the 'bigger picture'. So often development opportunities are wasted because what is profitable in the short-term takes priority over longer-term considerations. Yet there is the knowledge and capacity in the Stroud area to achieve better options, and some of the town and parish councils are starting to take the initiative in commissioning 'frameworks'.

As a small and voluntary group with knowledge of what has worked elsewhere, we intend to enter into further discussions with the relevant councils. New applications will be coming in for the Cheapside site next to Stroud Station, which could offer a test of the principles proposed in our report *Stroud Futures: a framework for smarter growth* (available at www.urbed.com/news/stroud-futures-workshop-25-june-2013). The site at Brimscombe is owned by Stroud District Council, which should provide an advantage. Much of the land North of Stonehouse is owned by the County Council. Planning is therefore in a position to play a particularly positive role.

We were told at the workshop about places in other parts of the South West and in parts of Europe where local initiatives are enabling people to achieve a much better quality of life. The Stroud area has already achieved notable innovations, and demand for housing is strong. Hence we hope that the local authorities will take up the challenge to play a leading role in securing 'smarter growth' that does not cost the earth, that is fair to all, and that will be truly sustainable.

Dr Nicholas Falk and Leonora Rozee

17 July 2013

