

5.0: Community Engagement & Consultation

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5.1 Background

The Sleaford Masterplan Scoping Study highlighted the need to ensure strong community buy-in to any masterplan that was adopted for Sleaford. Accordingly the primary purpose of the community component in the Sleaford Masterplan Scoping Study was to highlight what currently existed within the town by way of community organisations and community based activity. This was set alongside the current knowledge base, systems and policy framework within NKDC that impact on community consultation, engagement and empowerment. This analysis was used to suggest ways in which the communities that live, work and use Sleaford could be enabled to be strongly involved in the actual masterplanning process in a mutually palatable way.

The analysis also highlighted the potential to establish a local regeneration partnership that could champion the development and implementation of an agreed masterplan for the town.

Other local consultation exercises have also been undertaken. In particular a distinctiveness survey was carried out by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) early in 2010 and their findings were used to help shape a specific masterplanning approach for Sleaford.

The brief for the Sleaford Masterplan recognised the long term nature of the masterplanning process and the need to discuss and debate at an early stage any major or contentious proposals that might emerge. In a clear statement it also asserted that:

'Effective community engagement in the masterplan preparation should not be a 'one-off' event but something that encourages a long term involvement by local groups or individuals to shape the future of the town and assist in the delivery of initiatives.'

There was a clear expectation that an effective community engagement strategy and plan would be prepared and agreed at an early stage and this would be imaginative and effective in securing the sustained involvement from the community over time.

Between the completion of the Sleaford Masterplan Scoping Study and the commencement of the actual masterplan project two important interactive workshops were held, led by GENECON. The first was a 'Members Briefing' event to ensure that Councillors from Town, District and County authorities were aware of the outcomes from the scoping study and the potential for a successful masterplanning project. The second was an initial meeting with similar content of the Sleaford Regeneration Group (SRG). This is essentially a Steering Group consisting of roughly equal numbers of representatives from the public, private and voluntary and community sectors established to oversee the masterplan process. It acts as a sounding board for the process, is a main point of contact for the consultant team and reports directly to the North Kesteven Local Strategic Partnership (LSP).

5.2 Consultation Strategy & Approach to Engagement

To meet the requirements of the brief a detailed community engagement plan was prepared and agreed at a very early stage in the process. (Appendix 5) The content of the plan was based on previous successful masterplanning assignments undertaken by the team and the activity was led by their community development and engagement specialist. A four stage community engagement plan was proposed but with a degree of flexibility to accommodate local circumstances and any changing requirements. The four stages were:

1. Direct contact with key community groups and organisations;
2. An interim workshop to test early ideas and build consensus views;
3. A full, open interactive exhibition of the draft masterplan;
4. Feedback to local people on the completed masterplan.

The four stages described above were supported and complimented by two additional actions:

5. Preparation of an agreed communications plan that promoted and raised general awareness of the Sleaford Masterplan project and kept local people informed of progress;
6. Support in the formative stages for the SRG.

To facilitate the first stage above, a local voluntary and community sector umbrella body, Voluntary Centre Services North Kesteven (VCS NK) joined the consultant team. They were able to provide a comprehensive list of key local groups, community organisations and contact details. This ensured that a wide cross section of communities of interest and in particular the seldom heard/harder to reach groups were identified. The list of target groups was agreed with the client. It was also likely that VCS NK could provide ongoing support for SRG beyond the consultancy assignment.

The purpose of identifying key local groups and organisations was to establish a schedule of interactive workshops to be held at the place where the individual groups meet and as part of their own programme of events, thus integrating masterplanning into their regular activity. The workshops were based largely on providing a brief outline of the masterplanning process, current perceptions and a pictorial review of key issues in Sleaford to prompt discussion, debate and interest in how the town might change, grow and develop over time.

Additionally a strong relationship was established with the Communications Team at NKDC and an agreed communications plan prepared that would promote and raise awareness more generally of the Sleaford Masterplan process. NKDC took the lead in delivering the plan that was designed to provide interesting and timely information leading up to the full open public exhibition of the draft masterplan.

Additionally NKDC created a dedicated 'masterplan' area on their own web site that enabled updates, blogs and tweets to be posted from time to time.

Early contact and work with the SRG had suggested that this group was capable of playing a mature and significant role in the masterplanning process. Accordingly a monthly programme of meetings was arranged as a direct interface between the group and the consultant team. This enabled regular updates on progress to be made and also through brief workshop sessions to test ideas and build consensus views as the masterplan developed.

The importance of the three secondary schools to the town was identified through the Scoping Study, not only in terms of their physical location but also as recognised outstanding education establishments. With the Sleaford Masterplan creating an important 25 year vision for the town it was felt appropriate to involve young people specifically in the consultation and engagement process.

5.3 Working with the Community & Stakeholder Groups

Some 20 local community groups were identified with whom to run initial masterplanning interactive workshops. (Appendix 5) These included groups representing young people, older people, young parents and carers, faith based groups, businesses, people with mental health issues and learning disabilities, rural parish clusters and local sports groups.

The workshops were based on a PowerPoint presentation that explained masterplanning and highlighted Sleaford against the specific themes that have emerged from earlier consultations. These themes included the town's history and heritage, the townscape and streetscape, retail and leisure offers, waterside developments, housing needs and growth, transport links, cars, traffic and parking, empty buildings and also highlighting facets that bring national pride to the town.

The workshops were intended to 'warm up' local people and prepare them to engage fully in the open public exhibition of the draft masterplan and enable them to view, comment on and influence the final plan. It was also an opportunity to gather instant responses and collect information to feed back to the design team.

Specifically workshops were run with the local Chamber of Commerce and Sleaford Town Council to ensure that local representatives from both the private and public sectors were fully informed and engaged with the masterplan process.

A short life special project was set up and run with a small group of students from Kesteven and Sleaford High School with Carre's Grammar School. This aimed to capture the current views and future aspirations through the eyes of young people that would inform the masterplan for the town. It involved 11 students aged from 14 to 18 taking digital pictures of Sleaford, capturing images from elsewhere and preparing a short PowerPoint presentation. The presentation was delivered by the students to the SRG and was followed by

round table discussions with the current SRG members. The enthusiasm from the young team was so great and their impact so strong that they were invited to lead the planned workshop with the local Youth Council.

The original community engagement plan included for an interim community workshop to test emerging ideas and build a consensus view. As the SRG is broadly representative and was working so successfully it was decided that they would perform this role and accordingly this activity was planned into the relevant meeting agendas and run as a series of workshops.

Overall the interactive workshops were run with 20 local groups covering a total of over 350 people. At the same time almost 400 handouts were taken by participants to use in disseminating information to others about the Sleaford Masterplan.



▲ Sleaford Regeneration Group Workshop

5.4 Summary of Feedback from Workshops & Impact on Masterplan

Generally the feedback from the initial 'warm up' workshops was very positive and produced real interest in the process with many sensible suggestions and comments. Also many groups expressed approval for the more intimate opportunities created by this form of approach and engagement strategy. Over 20 workshops provided opportunities for local debate and discussion often with individuals demonstrating a strong interest in the future of Sleaford and a keenness to support actions that would bring change for the better. While there was not always a consensus view there are a number of local people with a good body of knowledge who may wish to be involved in the delivery phase as the masterplan moves forward.

The key comments recorded from the group workshops and fed back into the masterplan design process are at Appendix 5. However a number of 'strong' issues emerged as being the most frequently cited and often the topic of serious debate. These are shown below:

Process comments:

- This is a real process of change and it is important to ensure there is strong local buy-in to the masterplan;
- Will NKDC join up and learn from all these studies that are happening in the town?
- This (Sleaford Regeneration) Group could be a good thing;

Specific issues:

- The waterways in the town centre are attractive but need to be kept clean. Also they could be much more imaginatively lit at night to make them safer and more attractive;
- Closing the level crossing is a poor idea. It will add to journey time, is a concern to the emergency services and will create an unnecessary 'Berlin Wall' type barrier between the south and the town centre and will not reduce congestion;
- The proposed new link road will cut through 'The Rec' (green space) and we will lose trees. Will these be replaced?
- The Hub could be much more of a community centre and place where people meet and socialise;
- The market place should be a real focal point for the town. The market is dwindling with only a few stalls. Traders now have to bring their own stalls

and rents are high. It is important that we re-invigorate the market and market place, including doing something about the poor state of the Corn Exchange building;

Employment and work:

- We need to encourage more and better quality jobs into Sleaford and be more enterprising to get people to start new businesses;
- We need to be very clear that we seek to provide jobs and employment at appropriate levels and of a quality for young people to keep them here or attract them back to Sleaford;
- Is there some way that we could encourage young people to set up in business?

Retail offer:

- The new Tesco will kill the town centre. NKDC have sold out to big business so we need to 'control' what they (Tesco) are able to do;
- How do we get shoppers to come into town from the new Tesco site?
- We need a local music shop for instruments, bits and music;
- Young people need more town centre shops that have what we want to buy – Top Shop, Primark, River Island, HMV, New Look;
- We need free town centre parking, it is too expensive now, it drives me away to other places;

Leisure facilities:

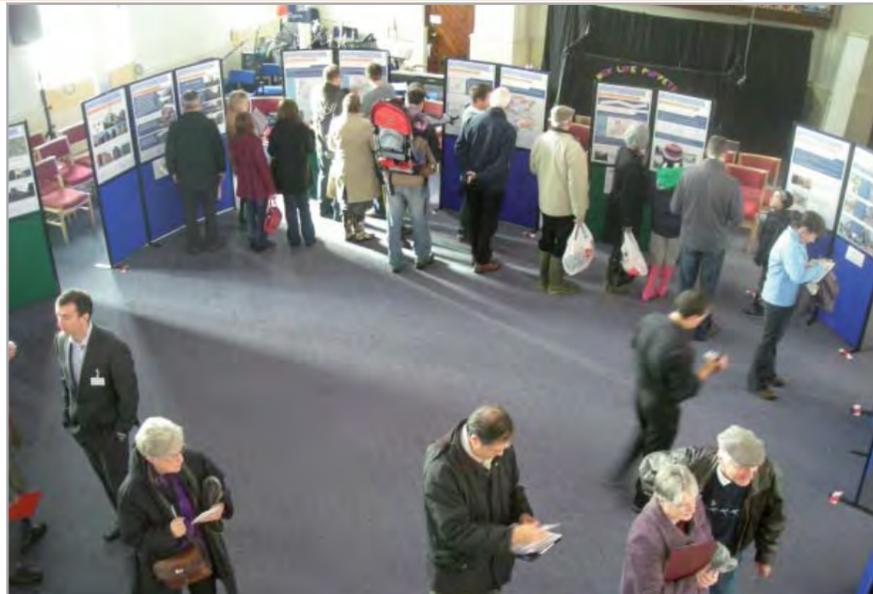
- We need a good local venue for live music where we could play for local events; There is no concert hall in Sleaford;
- Sleaford lacks a range of leisure facilities, for example a cinema or bowling alley;

Housing:

- We need better infrastructure now before we build more housing;

Two groups were keen to feedback specific listings of their composite comments. They were NK Seniors and the Youth Council. Their responses are presented in full at Appendix 5.

5.5 Public Exhibition Arrangements and Feedback



▲ Public Exhibition November 2010

A full open public exhibition was staged at The Source, Southgate, Sleaford on 26th and 27th November 2010. The exhibition was widely advertised and promoted locally and was open to visitors from 10.00am to 8.00pm on the Friday and 10.00am to 4.00pm on the Saturday. In total just under 400 people visited the exhibition over the two days and 192 completed response questionnaires were collected and analysed. These are represented at Appendix 5. Additionally a local young entrepreneur provided 'vox pop' opportunities for all attending the exhibition to record digitally their feelings about what they had seen and experienced through the masterplan display should they wish. This DVD is useful in providing extra depth and colour to the written comments contained in the questionnaires. A specific workshop session was run with the SRG to review and take comments on the draft masterplan proposals. The consultation period remained open for six weeks (up to the 7th January 2011) and the exhibition display boards were available on the NKDC website for that period. Additional comments and observations were received during this time.

It was noted by consultants that many visitors spent at least 45 minutes at the exhibition and some considerably longer. It was evident that having the team of specialist consultants in attendance was valuable in being able to provide visitors with specific answers and background to particular aspects of the masterplan. Additionally the strong support and information provided by officers present from the local authorities helped those attending understand some of the background and history that was now an integral part of the masterplan. This included in particular local planning decisions, highways matters and previous regeneration initiatives.

Analysis of the questionnaire responses indicate a very high degree of agreement with the key issues identified for the town. Some 85% concur that 'coping with growth' is a major concern; 89% agree that there is a 'poor town centre experience' and over 90% see 'traffic congestion' as a major issue. The exhibition set out to show the vision for the future of Sleaford. Only 10% disagreed with the proposed vision described for the town. There was equally strong support for the proposed 'Big Ideas' suggested for the town that include the transformation of Money's Yard, a pedestrian focus for Southgate, a ring of perimeter car parks and better use of the riverside environment.

An indication of how well visitors to the exhibition took time to understand the proposals before commenting is demonstrated by the high degree of conformity on responses across a number of different questions. For example recognition of the importance of 'connectivity' for pedestrians moving into and through the town, the advantages of restricting vehicle access in the town centre coupled with improved public transport facilities and how the 'Big Projects' such as Money's Yard, Market Place regeneration and delivery of the Southern Southgate regeneration scheme can be catalysts for the overall vision.

The responses to the questionnaire and from the extended consultation period as a whole have shown little in the way of outright disagreement with any matters contained in the masterplan. However two areas where positive responses have achieved agreement scores at a little over 50% relate to where potential new housing growth should be focused and potential future school sites. However with those ambivalent on both matters scoring about 34% there is little to cause concern. It may suggest that these two areas would benefit from more detailed and specific consultation in the future when project plans are being developed.

In terms of the freeform responses captured through the written and online consultations, most replicate and repeat what has already been recorded via the initial 'warm up' workshops. This suggests that overall the engagement and consultation process has been successful in capturing views from a wide cross section of local citizens and interest groups. Additionally, by observation, a significant number of those who experienced the initial workshops also attended the exhibition indicating that the overall process and publicity has been successful in capturing local interest and securing active involvement. The opportunity now is for partners and the SRG in particular to capitalise on this interest and ensure that momentum is maintained into the masterplan delivery phase.

All comments received through the consultation period have been considered as part of the development of the final masterplan.

5.6 The Future

Based on the masterplan teams previous experience, there are two key outcomes from the masterplan consultation process in particular that are significant for the future of the masterplan as it is adopted and moves into the delivery phase. The first is that a significant number of local people have expressed a keen interest in seeing Sleaford develop its full potential and many show an interest in having some practical involvement in that process. This suggests that local buy-in to the concept has been stronger in Sleaford than in other similar market towns and that there could be a useful body of people willing to actively support project delivery in some way. Accordingly the consultant team ensured that the local authorities were able to devise and deliver effective feedback on the masterplan process and the final adopted plan.

The second is that the relatively young Sleaford Regeneration Group (SRG) has developed into a strong masterplan partner. We have noted in particular:

- it has a strong, inclusive and respected chair, well supported by NKDC and LCC council officers.
- there is a good understanding of the masterplanning process and of the role and requirements of the group at this stage, which has led to a high quality of discussion and exchange of ideas/thoughts.
- the group is purposeful and task orientated and has worked well to support the masterplan team.
- the partnership contains a good cross-section of local interests and has to date avoided being compromised by bureaucratic or political baggage.
- it is receptive to new ideas and generally engaged by the tasks it has been asked to perform.

Accordingly NKDC called for a discussion paper from the consultants to consider the potential for the SRG to continue as an active body taking masterplanning forward. Additionally a visit was arranged for the chair of the SRG and client side representative to visit Calder Valley in West Yorkshire, which has an established regeneration partnership that is successfully implementing the recommendations of a masterplan for their area. This enabled information to be obtained on how the partnership development process had worked and project delivery had been enabled to create change on the ground.

At the final SRG meeting with the consultant team the content of the paper outlining options for the group was discussed and overall there was a strong consensus that the Sleaford Regeneration Group should continue. It was felt that there was now a comprehensive body of knowledge within the existing group coupled with a strong commitment to drive the agreed masterplan forward. However it was noted that the real interest of the group in continuing was in facilitating action and project delivery and not simply in becoming a 'talking shop'.

A further point for consideration is the impact of the government's Localism Bill on the delivery of the masterplan, building on the momentum this consultation and engagement process has achieved. For example the masterplan could form the basis for a neighbourhood plan for Sleaford or equally Sleaford could be broken up into smaller neighbourhoods with the masterplan providing the overarching strategy to support more detailed neighbourhood plans.

In tandem with the masterplan consultation process, the Central Lincolnshire Joint Planning Committee are working towards the preparation of a joint Local Development Framework. Consultation took place on the Issues and Options for the Core Strategy Development Plan Document towards the end of 2010. There will be further consultations later in 2011 and in 2012 working towards establishing an overall level of growth to be accommodated in the Sleaford Area, and the formal allocation of sites. The proposals set out within the masterplan are intended to guide this process and a collaborative approach has been undertaken to date.

5.7 Summary

The Sleaford Masterplan project and process has benefited fully from the inclusion of planned engagement and consultation activity with local people over time. The approach has ensured that a wide cross section of local people and interests has been enabled to understand the masterplanning process and contribute to the formulation of a draft plan for the town. Gathering key priority issues through the 'warm up' workshops has enabled the design team to understand better local views and opinions and respond wherever possible with options and solutions to the priorities identified.

It has also created a setting in which local buy-in to the process has been enhanced through a more personalised and intimate approach. In turn this approach and a well crafted communications strategy ensured that a good number of local people attended the public exhibition and many spent a considerable amount of time discussing the draft masterplan and contributing their own thoughts and ideas. It also created a forum where citizen to citizen exchanges highlighted the need for compromise and consensus building where there were differences of opinion.

The involvement of a significant number of young people has highlighted how this important section of the local community can be encouraged to contribute fully to the process and provide real insights through the eyes of the 'citizens of the future'.

The work of the Sleaford Regeneration Group has been remarkable in how well a new group of local people has gelled in a short space of time, taken to its tasks and contributed fully to the development of the masterplan. It is encouraging to know that there is a strong will for this group to continue and perhaps grow to drive the process forward into the delivery phase.