

Summerhouse Village

Masterplan: developing a sustainable neighbourhood for Yeovil town centre

Executive Summary

Context

The study has been commissioned by South Somerset District Council under the aegis of the Yeovil Vision Board incorporating key partners including Somerset County Council to examine the viability of developing an urban village to eco-town standards on land primarily owned by the District Council and currently used for car parking for the town centre. The report sets out a masterplan and outline design codes to be used in negotiations with potential development partners, and proposes a way forward through a public private partnership company.

The work has taken forward policies set out in the South Somerset Draft Core Strategy, with the idea that new housing could be

used to test out principles that could later be applied in a planned urban extension that would be large enough to count as an 'eco-town'. The Council appointed a multi-disciplinary team of consultants led by URBED (Urban and Economic Development) with Matrix Partnership as masterplanners and urban designers, and supported by Addison & Associates as transport planners and King Sturge, now Jones Lang LeSalle on viability and implementation.

The work involved a series of studies over a nine month period, with a series of interim reports and progress reviews. The Study is one of a number commissioned as part of the Yeovil Eco Town Project being pursued by South Somerset DC with Somerset CC and a number of partners.

Methodology

The work has included:

- Examining and defining the best site for implementing the concept, which has focussed on an area of just over three hectares of developable land, including the Stars Lane, Box Factory and other car parks, and taking in the derelict ski slope owned by the Town Council, and the Vauxhall Dealership owned by Rowcliffes.
- Reviewing and summarising previous studies, starting with work by Roger Evans (now REAL Studio) and including both studies for the District Plan and also guidance on eco-towns developed by the Town and Country Planning Association and others.
- Drawing inspiration from work on urban villages undertaken by the Urban Villages Forum and a series of recent housing developments that could serve as exemplars, and producing a Thinkpiece setting out the main conclusions.
- Taking guidance from both Councillors responsible for Yeovil South, and also the board of Yeovil Vision and the Local Strategic Partnership on objectives and priorities.
- Producing and summarising a series of technical reports on key aspects – design, transport, viability, which have been reviewed with relevant officers.
- Discussing the main options and priorities for the masterplan in a visioning event with the major stakeholders.
- Developing the preferred option, and

securing feedback from the Eco-town Officers Steering Group.

- Working up the preferred option, taking account as far as possible of comments and queries.
- Producing and designing up a draft final report and viability assessment.
- Holding presentations to explain the conclusions and recommendations.

Conclusions

The main conclusions from the work are:

1) Housing-led regeneration of a key major town centre development site is feasible The site will support a development of around 150 new homes, mainly in the form of town houses, along with ground floor uses such as shops and a health centre, and possibly some offices. This should help transform the image of the town centre, and achieve the aims of the Yeovil Vision. An important new idea is a proposal for a 60 bed hotel on the ski slope site, which will form part of a wider plan to upgrade the Country Park and connect it better with the town.

2) A medium density urban village will meet most of the objectives The original idea was to develop a place that had some of the appeals of living in a city, along with the benefits of living in the country. The preferred masterplan involves a net density of some 70 homes to the hectare, creating what is best described as a 'sustainable urban neighbourhood'. It will apply the

basic principles of an 'urban village' as exemplified by Poundbury, for example, but in a form that is appropriate for an edge of town centre site next to an attractive Country Park. Such a scheme will broaden choice within the town, help to rebalance the population by attracting those on higher incomes, and will boost the image of the town, thus helping Yeovil to move up a league.

3) However not all the original aims can be achieved without subsidy The scheme has to cover not only the costs and risks of development, but also the provision of replacement town centre parking. It has also to respond to the market as it is, and the requirements as far as resident parking is concerned reflecting the failures of past radical parking policies in Yeovil and other town centres. It should however be able to achieve many of the objectives set for eco-towns, specifically under half the trips being by car (if the recommendations in the transport section are implemented), keeping energy consumption down (particularly if the proposal for a Combined Heat and Power network is implemented), and creating substantial green space (through direct links with the Country Park). The easiest way of covering the costs is to ensure that the affordable housing element is not social housing (for which grants are no longer available) but other forms of rented housing, such as key workers, that could cover the costs of building new homes to higher than usual standards. In addition some of the transport costs are not specific to the site but to the town, and so should not count

against the scheme. As well as carefully matching development and the provision of new parking, great care will be needed in securing the best energy and utilities options. An edge of town centre site lends itself to applying Combined Heat and Power, which could form one of the most innovative aspects of the scheme, and might apply principles such as biogas from Anaerobic Digestion that would be particularly appropriate to Somerset.

4) Careful phasing is key to viability While detailed planning could start as soon as resources allow, the only development that is viable before new town centre parking is provided is on the Addlewell Lane site. Though this would only yield around ten homes, its attractive position on the edge could be used to test out new concepts, such as cohousing, working with a group of potential residents who want to live in somewhere that is a little different, and that they can help design – an example that would put localism into practice. A precursor to development on the parts of the site covered by town centre parking is the implementation of a clear parking management strategy that is explicitly linked to not only supporting the viability of the town centre but to moving towards a more sustainable approach to transport. An agreement with a master developer or the setting up a joint venture, backed by Council assets, would enable the start of work on the heart of the urban village. This would complement what has been developed by Zero C on the old Glove Factory site. Alternatively a start could be made on the Rowcliffe site, thus

bringing in the Country Park and the derelict ski-slope, which requires a new link across the Dodham Brook. The final phases could take in the other car dealerships, but only if the GateWay Yeovil Community Church want to move to a new building. It might also take in the other land owned by the District Council, which includes some empty shop units at the bottom of the High Street.

5) Several new partnerships will be required Doing something on the scale and quality that are required cannot be achieved through the usual process of site disposal, and standard planning application, particularly given the foreseeable financial climate. Instead, development will depend on creating new forms of partnership, with three distinct aims.

a) The first is to develop the urban village, that is to secure builders for elements that conform to the masterplan, and that will provide the right social balance. This will change over time, as the site becomes more attractive, and so the development will need to be carefully stepped. A public private partnership company joint venture with a private developer offers the most benefits, and this might be set up with a wider remit so it could tackle other regeneration projects in Yeovil or South Somerset.

b) The second partnership will be concerned with the transport aspects, as the changes envisaged in behaviour require actions that go far beyond the site to the town as a whole. For this to deliver the necessary transport solutions will require a partnership including not only the local

authorities but the transport operators, key businesses, the hospital and college, and it should preferably be independently chaired. This body could promote improvements to public transport, the setting up of a car club and car sharing scheme as well as a programme to support behavioural change. This body would consider the whole of Yeovil including the site and the proposed new extensions. Rather like the Somerset Waste Partnership there are strong arguments for creating a delivery vehicle to reduce car use within the wider central area of Yeovil, and not just the urban village site.

c) The third partnership involves energy, and might take several forms. One would be to create a Multi Utilities Service Company, in partnership with one or more of the existing utilities. Interest has already been expressed by several companies that specialise in this field. This could be the prototype for the much larger urban extension. The other, which is more novel, but for which there are good precedents, would be to establish a community based trust or community enterprise with a mission of applying eco principles on as large a scale as proves viable. This might take in experts at Yeovil College, and 'green' businesses keen to serve the markets that are opening up in both energy and food.

Key Principles

The development of Summerhouse Village is based on a number of principles aimed at making the scheme viable:

1. Develop a mixed use mixed income

development that appeals to a range of markets, including people already living in Yeovil in unsatisfactory accommodation.

2. Create a balanced community over time in terms of ages and incomes, starting with young families and following on with senior living and larger individual eco homes, with some accommodation for rent, and also home workers through larger than usual homes.

3. Provide a better than usual level of infrastructure in terms of energy, waste and water.

4. Replicate models that have worked elsewhere including involvement of community enterprises.

The basic design principles, which are shown in the masterplan and supporting design codes, are:

1. The 'village' should provide the benefits of city-living, but within a countryside setting, with an abundance of greenery as well as green vistas.

2. The streets will provide strong links between the town centre, countryside and surrounding attractions.

3. Houses should be oriented as far as possible to exploit views of the countryside and the potential to design to 'passive house' standards and maximise solar gain.

4. Development should proceed in tandem with the sensitive enhancement of the Country Park e.g. a hotel and gardens.

5. The site can be developed in small phased parcels with a number of house types; to encourage a mixed community and enable a number of builders to be involved.

6. Pedestrians are to be prioritised throughout the scheme, with shared surfaces, and parking at the edges.

7. Inappropriate town centre uses such as car showrooms will be relocated where possible as part of development proposals.

8. Roads/streets and links will have active frontages to provide natural surveillance to the area.

9. A variety of architectural styles will be encouraged, in accordance with the final design code requirements such as densities, parking, and materials.

Viability

Once the scheme had been refined in the light of consultations, and a final masterplan and accommodation schedule prepared, a further viability assessment was undertaken by Jones Lang LaSalle. This led to five main conclusions:

- While the scheme should fund replacing the existing spaces it will not be able to pay for meeting the future requirements that have been projected.

- The development of a mixed use residential scheme on the Council owned car parks appears viable, and should attract developer interest. However the return to the Council

depends on accepting that the surrounding area already includes sufficient affordable housing.

- The attractiveness of the scheme would be enhanced by taking in the derelict ski slope and land owned by the Town Council, but this requires access over land owned by Rowcliffe and used as a Vauxhall showroom.

- The redevelopment depends on further assessment of the proposal for a 60 bed hotel and various access arrangements, and also the feasibility of building new homes in the valley bottom, which would require a flood risk assessment.

- Some form of public private partnership will therefore be required, which can also access potential grants and low cost sources of finance.

The Next Steps

Following approval of the report and its submission to both the Council and the Yeovil Vision Board, the report can provide the basis for a series of coordinated actions:

- Setting up a development group to take the ideas forward that includes relevant officers and councillors, and that can negotiate with potential partners, secure relevant grants and establish a delivery plan.

- Identifying, acquiring and financing the development of replacement long stay car parking to serve the town centre and

implementing a new car parking management strategy in the town.

- Undertaking further feasibility work on the ski slope site, including the market for different kinds of hotel or leisure attraction, the costs and viability of different access options and a flood risk assessment on proposals affecting the Dodham Brook.
- The provision of an energy centre as part of a local CHP scheme.
- Consulting on the draft masterplan, and character guidance.
- Establishing the Quality Transport Partnership, and undertaking the transport assessment and travel plan process for the site.

Summerhouse Village Masterplan



