

Western Corridor & Blackwater Valley Sub-regional Strategy

Appendix 3

Housing Distribution – The Preferred Option

Introduction:

This note and the accompanying diagram explains the preferred housing distribution. They provide general principles of distribution, rather than specific allocations to individual local authorities or settlements.

The fact that our distribution identifies particular settlements for varying degrees of expansion should not be taken to mean that other settlements would see no growth. All would expect to receive some development. Where a settlement is identified for expansion, it will not automatically be the case that the expansion would or could all take place within the administrative area of the local authority concerned. In some cases, tightly-drawn boundaries may make it necessary to look for extensions of the urban area outside the administrative boundary. This would be a matter to be resolved between the authorities concerned, possibly through the production of a Joint Local Development Framework (as is now proposed for some parts of the Milton Keynes & South Midlands Growth Area).

The size of the shaded circles on the diagram is in broad proportion to the population of the principal urban areas (those of over 10,000 population) as at 2001. They are not intended to indicate the scale of future development although, other things being equal, opportunities for intensification within the urban areas may be expected to increase with settlement size.

Strategic Development Areas

The Regional Assembly's brief asks us to consider the feasibility of a Strategic Development Area (an area to accommodate upwards of 20,000 houses over the life of the Plan) somewhere within the sub-region. This could have benefits for the area in attracting additional funding. Given that much of the area is already relatively densely developed and multi-centred, our view is that a single new area of development on this scale is unlikely to be appropriate. If the idea has any relevance to this sub-region, it might be in terms of the multi-centred approach used in the Milton Keynes & South Midlands sub-region. There, a number of urban areas were identified for expansion and linked by improved transport. Together, these comprise what is now known as the Milton Keynes & South Midlands Growth Area (analogous to, but on a somewhat larger scale than, the SDA which we have been asked to consider for the Western Corridor & Blackwater Valley). So, for example, growth at Reading, Basingstoke and Bracknell, linked by enhancements to the transport corridors between them, might together be regarded as an SDA. This principle of treating a number of settlements as an area of growth, where additional funding might be levered in, could be applied to other broad areas in the Sub Region, such as the Blackwater Valley and its near neighbours, although the scale of development in individual settlements would be much less.

Housing and the economy

The preferred option considers housing growth only. One consideration in evaluating development options must be the consequences of economic growth being significantly slower than forecast. Would it result in a commitment to an unsustainably high level of housing growth? This might be the case with a free-standing SDA, which might be delayed in reaching a viable size if economic growth

were slower than anticipated. However, the preferred option is considered to be sufficiently flexible to be adjustable in line with the pace of economic growth.

The preferred option assumes that employment growth will be concentrated sustainably in existing urban centres, that there will be no employment land releases on a strategic scale and that no local allocations for employment growth will be made in the South-East Plan. Further work is under way to look in more detail at the supply of and demand for employment land and premises, both at a sub-regional level and in specific parts of the sub-region. Further attention is also being given to the labour supply and demand balance within different parts of the sub-region.

Transport:

The completion of the programme of work set out in the Thames Valley Multi-modal Study (some of the principal elements of which are identified on the diagram) is taken as a given. For any growth beyond 2016, and for any rate of growth in excess of current RPG rates, either before or after 2016, enhancements of TVMMS measures and additional new measures would be required. However, substantial further work will be needed to identify the nature of those works.

The Preferred Option

Combining various elements of the other options considered in our initial evaluation, our preferred option, an example of a hybrid option, is one which:

- Establishes an urban focus throughout the sub-region, under which priority will be given to the efficient and effective use and re-use of land within existing built-up areas, whilst not compromising quality of life considerations;
- Focuses the majority of additional greenfield development on the periphery of those urban areas which have been identified (in the Regional Transport Strategy and the Thames Valley Multi-Modal Study) as key transport hubs in the sub-region, particularly where this could make possible step changes in the quality of public transport services; but
- Where those urban areas (hubs) are tightly enclosed by higher order environmental or planning policy constraints (such as AONB, SSSI, SPA etc.) or other constraints such as the Green Belt, the level of new peripheral development is scaled back (or in some cases reduced to minimal levels) so as to avoid any conflict with existing policies;

Under this option, the Blackwater Valley is identified as an area which may have potential for bringing forward areas of development. However, a recent study into the implications of future growth scenarios in the area that was commissioned by the Blackwater Valley Network clearly indicated that “securing investment in high quality public transport provision on a large scale” was necessary for the successful implementation of a high growth strategy. This was primarily established on the basis of the Blackwater Valley’s complex travel patterns. Proposals for a rapid transit system were investigated and revealed that more development than could realistically be accommodated in the area, taking into account environmental designations, would be needed to make such a system viable. The Blackwater Valley is also the main area of search for possible releases of MoD land but making such releases sustainable in transport terms will present challenges because of their dispersed nature and small scale