

## **Urban Development Corporation Quinquennial Review –**

### **Communities and Local Government Consultation**

#### **Formal Response from Northampton Borough Council**

##### **with particular reference to the**

##### **West Northamptonshire Development Corporation (WNDC)**

Northampton Borough Council's (NBC) response to the review of WNDC has been helpfully informed by a recent review of WNDC by its Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This Scrutiny Review was carefully considered by Cabinet on the 8<sup>th</sup> July 2009 and that Report and Minute is attached as part of our formal response.

In setting the context for this response we feel that it is important that CLG understand that the context of local government and Northampton Borough Council in particular is very different now to the period which saw the creation of WNDC (2004) and the handing of planning powers to WNDC (2006).

The Joint Strategic Planning Committee has been established with the full and thorough involvement of all partners. A revised LDS is being delivered, with the emergent Joint Core Strategy currently out to consultation.

Northampton Borough Council has strengthened its capacity to deliver on planning and regeneration and this has been recognised by the ending of Government engagement in planning at the start of 2009. The Council now has much enhanced capacity and ability to lead on planning matters for the Borough and is recognised as a key and committed partner.

At County level, the creation of the Public Service Board supported by all partners has created an environment in which local government and partners work much more closely on the key issues for the County. Within this, a strong focus on Northampton and its future growth is recognised as a necessity and there is a common commitment to an effective delivery vehicle to make this happen.

The current arrangements for WNDC no longer fit the context of Northampton or West Northants and need fundamental change to make WNDC a much more focussed and efficient agency.

WNDC should be concentrating very tightly on the delivery of the major developments and investments, including major infrastructure in particular, that will enable the delivery of a better Northampton and West Northamptonshire through growth in the future.

WNDC should not be spending its time and energies on matters which are outside this scope, which are properly the responsibility of local authorities or which would be better delivered by more appropriately equipped agencies.

The Council has a positive vision of WNDC as a tightly focussed agency, which has local backing to deliver, married with support from the HCA and CLG and the RDA (EMDA). We believe that the journey towards that agency must be started now and deliver within 18 months from now. If all that comes of this review is marginal change within the context of a statutory (UDC) approach, then progress on the things that WNDC are geared up to deliver will continue to be slower than can be achieved.

In moving to a non-statutory agency, with local legitimacy and national backing, the local partners will be building on much improved local working relationships between Councils and between WNDC and Councils. If commitment is not shown, by making WNDC considerably more effective within a short period, it will over time become harder to make progress and retain commitment from partners. Northampton needs arrangements which are locally focussed and legitimate, which engage partners across West Northants and deliver for the whole area, and which will enable innovation and growth.

The Council desires this important consultation to improve the ability of all partners to deliver the future Northampton (inside and outside this Council's boundaries). It is our assertion that this can be achieved by addressing the achievement of the following goals:

- (a) a redefined and refocused role for WNDC as the Local Delivery Vehicle (LDV) and of its relationship with the Borough, District and County Councils, given its function to secure the regeneration of the area;
- (b) the ending of WNDC's role as a Development Control Authority for the purposes of Part III of the Act;
- (c) creating a narrower focus for WNDC on delivering investment and Regeneration working closely with all partners;
- (d) changing the boundaries of WNDC's operational area and its functions within those boundaries so that for its revised purpose (rather than for planning purposes) WNDC is responsible across West Northamptonshire;
- (e) introducing democratic accountability to WNDC; for example by allowing Northampton Borough Council Councillors, as Board Members, to be able to sit on WNDC's Northampton Planning Committee, and ensuring that nominations of councillors to the Board of WNDC are appointed by their own Council;
- (f) implementing a managed and speedy transfer of WNDC's planning powers back to Northampton Borough and the other planning authorities through the cancellation of the relevant Statutory Instrument;
- (g) ensuring that WNDC maintains a clear focus on Infrastructure funding and delivery;
- (h) enabling the development at local level, backed by CLG, HCA and EMDA, of mechanisms and processes for joint delivery of major projects, between the partner local authorities, including the sustainable urban extensions required to deliver growth.

These key issues are addressed separately below:-

- (a) **A redefined and refocused role for WNDC as the Local Delivery Vehicle (LDV) and of its relationship with the Borough, District and County Councils, given its function to secure the regeneration of the area.**
  - The future role of WNDC should be redefined and refocused to deliver investment and regeneration, with a strong focus on delivering the new Northampton for the wider benefit of Northamptonshire.

- This core purpose of WNDC should not be confused by amalgamating WNDC into any wider organisation covering wider objectives or geographic area, an approach which in our judgement would be more inefficient and would slow rather than accelerate delivery through the need to reconcile different areas of focus.
  - Investment priorities and delivery plans should be clearly aligned to the Joint Core Strategy and Development Plan Documents within the emerging Local Development Framework for West Northamptonshire.
  - Investment priorities and delivery plans should secure a balance between short term immediate delivery and medium/long term investment to secure future infrastructure to sustain delivery of new jobs, new homes and new facilities.
  - This review should kick start the transformation as soon as possible of WNDC from its current statutory basis to a non-statutory partnership driven by shared objectives and backed by HCA and CLG and regional agencies or their successor bodies.
  - We believe that such a transformation should be possible within 18 months. If Northampton is not to be left behind by the pace of change and regeneration, then it is absolutely critical to make these changes with as much speed as possible.
- (b) The ending of WNDC's role as a Development Control Authority for the purposes of Part III of the Act.**
- To maximise focus on investment and delivery WNDC should, as soon as possible, and preferably within 18 months, be relieved of its role as a Development Control authority.
  - Development Control powers should be returned to Local Planning Authorities, through a managed process with a clear transitional plan agreed by all partners and supported by CLG.
- (c) Creating a narrower focus for WNDC on delivering investment and regeneration working closely with partners.**
- The future role of WNDC should be redefined and refocused to deliver investment and regeneration, with a strong focus on delivering the new Northampton for the wider benefit of Northamptonshire.
  - Investment priorities should be clearly aligned to the Joint Core Strategy and Development Plan Documents within the Local Development Framework.
  - Investment priorities should secure a balance between short term immediate delivery and medium/long term investment to secure future infrastructure to sustain delivery of new jobs, new homes and new facilities.
  - This review should kick start the transformation of WNDC from its current statutory basis to a non-statutory partnership driven by shared objectives and backed by HCA and CLG and regional agencies or their successor bodies.

- If Northampton is not to be left behind by the pace of change and regeneration, then the necessary changes need to be in place within 18 months.
- (d) **Changing the boundaries of WNDC's operational area and its functions within those boundaries so that for its revised purpose (rather than for planning purposes) WNDC is responsible across West Northamptonshire.**
- With the exception of planning powers, which should be returned to the local planning authorities, the boundary for WNDC should be extended to cover the whole of West Northamptonshire.
- (e) **Introducing democratic accountability to WNDC, for example by allowing Northampton Borough Council Councillors, as Board Members, are able to sit on WNDC's Northampton Planning Committee, and ensuring that nominations of councillors to the Board of WNDC are appointed by their own Council.**

**There are two key points:-**

- WNDC has suffered from a lack of local legitimacy. This has been in part due to the disconnection between local democratic bodies and WNDC. It is therefore proposed that nominations should be made direct to WNDC by the local authorities, whilst also accepting the value of independent voices on the WNDC Board.
  - The current proportionality on the Board should be retained in the future. The proscription of local members from sitting on the Planning Committee for their own area should be **immediately lifted** ahead of such powers being transferred back to the local planning authorities.
- (f) **Implementing a managed and speedy transfer of WNDC's planning powers back to Northampton Borough and the other planning authorities through the cancellation of the relevant Statutory Instrument.**
- It is a major distraction to WNDC to be dealing with minor planning matters, particularly within Northampton Town Centre. Planning powers should be returned on a phased basis, starting with the Town Centre, then moving to other minor and small major applications, then strategic (large major) applications over an 18-month period in total.
- (g) **Ensuring that WNDC maintains a clear focus on Infrastructure funding and delivery.**
- Through this process of change, WNDC can focus on its prime task – that of delivery, supported by the local authorities, CLG, HCA and EMDA. It is particularly important to Northampton that WNDC has a prime focus on delivering the new Northampton, but we recognise for practical reasons that the whole of West Northants needs to be included. It is therefore important that WNDC delivers not just for Northampton but also for Towcester, Daventry, Brackley and other settlements and areas.
  - The delivery of infrastructure is a pre-requisite of being able to deliver growth in West Northants and Northampton. We need a focussed, slim and effective local

delivery vehicle which is overloaded with roles that should be performed by the local authorities working within the overall partnership.

**(h) Enabling the development at local level, backed by CLG, HCA and EMDA, of mechanisms and processes for joint delivery of major projects, between the partner local authorities, including the sustainable urban extensions required to deliver growth.**

- It is by delivering a better focussed WNDC with local legitimacy and accountability that stronger progress can be delivered on the ground. This can also be enhanced by more effective partnership working.
- The creation of the Public Service Board, under which sits a Regeneration and Growth Board, provides oversight of delivery across the County.
- Through the West Northamptonshire Joint Strategic Planning Committee a common and shared vision for West Northamptonshire is being developed in the Local Development Framework. The emerging Joint Core Strategy is currently out to consultation.
- Through the Single Conversation in West Northamptonshire this will be related to what needs to be delivered and how this will be achieved.
- WNDC needs to spearhead the delivery of major projects. Their role needs to be underpinned and actively supported by effective working mechanisms agreed by partners.

