

Briefing Note

Spatial Planning and Infrastructure Partnership (SPIP)

1. Role and working arrangements

The SPIP board comprises the leader of the county council and the leaders of each of the five district councils. The board meets quarterly. The board is supported by an executive of officers, being the directors responsible for planning and housing in each of the districts, and for infrastructure at the county council.

Other board attendees include representatives from the PCT, the Homes and Communities Agency, the Environment Agency and Highways Agency.

From September 2012 the chairman of OxLEP, Adrian Shooter, became a member of the SPIP board.

The main objectives of the SPIP are to:

- drive economic growth,
- deliver new housing, including affordable homes,
- achieve regeneration and tackle deprivation,
- prioritise strategic infrastructure needs

In practice the SPIP board achieves the four objectives by:

- coordinating work across the county on spatial planning, economic development, housing, transport, and general infrastructure issues
- seeking agreement from each partner authority on prioritisation of infrastructure projects
- ensuring that deliverability and that value for money criteria are taken into account in the prioritisation of infrastructure projects
- informing the thinking of OXLEP and providing a link between the OxLEP priorities and those of the councils
- commissioning workstreams such as the Strategic Housing Management Assessment and the Oxford green belt review having regard for the duty to co-operate between all statutory bodies

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The main work undertaken by the SPIP over recent months has been the development of the Local Investment Plan (the LIP). The LIP was first produced in 2009 however it has only been over recent months that officers have completed the work of analysing all the data that has allowed the board members to consider the relative merits of each of the key infrastructure projects for the county.

This was a challenging task for officers and for board members. The funding available for infrastructure needed to support development is now a fraction of what it was in the past.

The amount of section 106 funding that can be claimed from housing and other development is usually well short of what is needed to cover the cost of transport works, schools, community needs and other essential infrastructure.

Where large Greenfield schemes are planned, such as in Bicester and Didcot, major new infrastructure is needed and we are many millions of pounds short of what's needed to deliver sustainable growth in these areas.

At the last SPIP meeting on 20 September, the board debated the relative merits of the top priority infrastructure projects. We considered the projects against the following criteria:

1. Value for money based on cost of project against number of homes/ jobs delivered
2. Scale of project, i.e. how many homes and/ or jobs were being delivered
3. Whether the project was critical, i.e., could the planned growth proceed without this work

Based on these criteria the board ranked the top 10 projects.

However, there is much more work to be done. Officers are now having to cost up and put timetables to all of the development work required to enable these projects to proceed. The outcomes of this work may well change the priorities as deliverability will become probably the top criteria.

This is because we are expecting government to allocate infrastructure funding to Oxfordshire through the LEP. There are two likely routes for this. The first is by way of loans such as the Growing Places fund. The second is likely to be grant allocations via a new local transport board which the LEP is likely to lead on.

The SPIP recognises the great importance of working closely with the OxLEP and we have agreed a protocol with the LEP on our respective roles and how we inform each others work. The SPIP board had proposed to the LEP that it delegate the function of prioritising and leading on infrastructure delivery to SPIP. However, the LEP chairman has advised that he wishes to retain this responsibility within the LEP as it is the LEPs role to canvass business views on their priorities for infrastructure, which may not correspond with those of the local authorities.

The SPIP board recognises the importance of working closely with the LEP in the coming months to seek to align priorities and therefore the direction of funding for infrastructure.

Other day to day SPIP activities include overseeing Oxfordshire-wide studies such as the Strategic Housing Market Assessment and the proposed review of the Oxford Green belt. The National Planning Policy Framework places a new duty to co-operate on all statutory partners and we are holding a seminar on 29 October to explore how this will work in practice.

We also liaise with the Homes and Communities Agency to steer the HCA affordable housing and other government funded programmes that the HCA lead on. At the present time housing associations are finding it difficult to commit all of their grant funding in Oxfordshire due to the sluggishness of the housing market which means not enough homes are being built to deliver the affordable targets. This is a concern for districts as it leads to greater pressure on housing waiting lists and potentially, more families in temporary accommodation. Our officers are working closely with the HCA to try to get funding for affordable housing released across the county.

In conclusion I am pleased with the progress we've made in SPIP. Board members have tackled some difficult issues and we are pleased with the way all districts and the county council are working together to deliver improved outcomes for Oxfordshire.

Councillor Ann Ducker