

Report to Neighbourhoods and Community Services Select Committee

Date of meeting: 15 March 2016

Subject: Local Plan Update

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Committee Secretary: A Hendry



Recommendations/Decisions Required:

To note the progress on the Local Plan

Reasons for Report:

Under the terms of reference, the Neighbourhoods & Communities Select Committee has requested a regular review and update on the Local Plan.

1) Local Plan Timetable

The Local Development Scheme agreed by Cabinet on 11 June 2015 has the timetable for consultation on the draft plan scheduled for July 2016 to September 2016. However, this timescale is now looking very challenging given that the timetable for the Green Belt Review Stage 2 has slipped and that strategic transport work remains outstanding. The current position reached on both of these key pieces of work is explained below.

The Government has made clear their expectation that all local planning authorities should have a post NPPF local plan in place and have set out their commitments to take action to get plans in place and ensure there are up to date policies. This includes intervening where no local plan has been produced by early 2017 to arrange for the plan to be written, in consultation with local people, to accelerate production of a local plan. The Government are currently consulting until 15 April 2016 on the criteria to inform their decision on whether to intervene to deliver this commitment. This is included within the technical consultation on implementation of planning changes arising from measures outlined in the Housing and Planning Bill that is currently being debated in Parliament.

EFDC were visited on 1 February 2016 by an official from DCLG when it became apparent that we are one of the authorities on the Government's list for potential action. One of the penalties proposed for not having produced a plan, (it is not clear yet how this will be interpreted), is the loss of New Homes Bonus. It is clear that the Council needs to make good progress this year and to have consulted on our Draft Plan Preferred Approach prior to the Government's yet to be determined 2017 cut-off date.

2) Member Workshops

The purpose of these workshops, that includes Town and Parish Council representation, is to inform Members of emerging key issues that the draft Local Plan will need to cover and to ensure that Member views and concerns are aired at this formative stage in order that they might be taken account of in the policy drafting.

Recent workshops have covered design on 28 January 2016 and evolving work on stage 2 work of the Green Belt study on 25 February 2016. Both were well attended and Members provided valuable information and opinions on the matters presented. In respect of the Green Belt workshop, Members were afforded a short period (until 10th March), to send further comments on the parcel boundaries and to feed in local knowledge and views about the areas now being looked at in more detail.

It is intended that future workshops to inform the Draft Plan (Preferred Approach) will consider climate change, energy and flood risk; development management policies; settlement policy and preferred sites. A programme is being worked up for these sessions and once finalised Members will be advised of dates and arrangements accordingly.

3) Key Local Plan Evidence

Work continues on finalising the evidence base reports which will be used to inform the policies included in the Draft Plan (Preferred Approach) that the Council consults on later this year.

Green Belt Review

Government guidance and emerging Inspectors' reports make clear the need to undertake a comprehensive Green Belt Review of the entire District before the release of any Green Belt land is considered. It is important to remember that the outcome of the Green Belt Review is only one, albeit an extremely important, piece of the evidence base that will inform the Council's future plan-making decisions.

Following completion of the Stage 1 work reported to Cabinet in September 2015, work on the Green Belt Review Stage 2 is being undertaken for the Council by external consultants LUC. It is understood that the consultants' fieldwork and analysis has now largely been completed giving a finer grain assessment of the broad locations identified in the Stage 1 work. In particular, this will provide detailed evidence and information concerning the contribution different parcels of land make to the Green Belt purposes identified in the NPPF. This in turn will assist the Council in deciding:

- The areas where the Green Belt policy designation should remain;
- Any historic anomalies in the existing boundaries or locations where development has taken place, which may therefore suggest minor amendments to the Green Belt boundaries are required;
- Areas that may be least harmful in Green Belt terms if released from the Green Belt.

It therefore follows that, simply because a parcel, or part of the parcel, is being appraised as part of the more detailed work, this does not necessarily mean that it should / will be allocated for development in the emerging Local Plan, or that the Council would look favourably on a planning application.

As noted above, the consultants recently ran a workshop to ensure that Member views are appropriately taken account of in this work. Once the Stage 2 study has been completed, (now likely to be around mid-April), together with the other evidence the findings will be used to inform the Draft Plan (Preferred Approach).

Settlement Capacity Work

Fregonese Associates have made good progress on the settlement capacity study of the District's 10 largest settlements - namely Epping, Theydon Bois, Buckhurst Hill, Chigwell, Loughton/Debden, Waltham Abbey, North Weald Bassett, Chipping Ongar, Lower Nazeing and Roydon. This will provide the District with the information to determine the potential for additional capacity within existing settlements over and above that identified in the SLAA, and so minimise the potential need to utilise Green Belt land for any future growth. Like Stage 2 of the Green Belt Review, the results of this work will be used to inform, and be published alongside, the consultation Draft Plan Preferred Approach.

Transport

To help inform the best way to meet the objectively assessed housing need for the Strategic Housing Market Area identified in the work reported to Cabinet in October 2015, further transport modelling work is being undertaken by Essex County Council. This will look at the implications for the transport network of growth and how it can be distributed across the Housing Market Area. The outputs will then be considered by the districts and jointly by the four SHMA authorities at the Cooperation for Sustainable Development Board. This work is being progressed using support from ATLAS and facilitated by AECOM to undertake a sustainability appraisal on the impact of strategic growth options in the four authorities to meet the overall housing and employment figures for the SHMA area. Officers have met Natural England and the Conservators of Epping Forest to consider the impact on air quality in particular for Epping Forest itself.

Delays have been encountered in the strategic transport assessment using the VISUM model which has still not been signed off by Highways England. This is of concern because it could lead to a delay in completing the work to test the strategic options for growth in the SHMA area. A joint letter from the leaders of the four authorities to local MPs and relevant ministers was sent on 22 February 2016 seeking a dedicated resource at senior level within Highways England to assist with the work so that Local Plans are not further delayed.

Officers have also been involved in transport work being undertaken by the London Borough of Enfield and continue to keep a watching brief on wider transport work being undertaken as part of Enfield's Northern Gateway Access Package (NGAP).

Other evidence base studies

Essex County Council is undertaking a Historic Environment Characterisation study of the District with a final report due this Spring. Town and parish councils are also to be asked for expressions of interest in participating in work leading to the establishment of a Green Infrastructure Framework for the District. The intention is that this work will produce a Corporate District-wide strategy and can be used to help inform policies in the emerging Local Plan as well as potentially support neighbourhood planning initiatives. A short report and presentation explaining more about this work will be given at the next Local Councils' Liaison on 29 March 2016.

4. Duty to Cooperate

Officers and Members continue to meet regularly with appropriate authorities, principally through the Cooperation for Sustainable Development Officer group and Member Board, to consider a wide range of cross boundary issues. In addition to the post SHMA work, the Board has considered other strategic issues including employment, Green Belt Review work. The Lea Valley Food Taskforce continues to develop a programme for the future of the glasshouse industry - one of the District's historic and still important sectors (along with Enfield and Broxbourne).

5. Neighbourhood Plans

Moreton, Bobbingworth and the Lavers have finalised their draft Plan and submitted it to the Council. The plan has now been published and is currently being examined.

Eight other Parish and Town Councils have applied to designate neighbourhood planning areas for their areas (Chigwell, Epping, Buckhurst Hill, Theydon Bois, Loughton, North Weald Bassett, Epping Upland and Waltham Abbey). Many of these are now at early stages in scoping out and drafting their plans.

There are proposals in the Housing and Planning Bill to streamline and simplify neighbourhood planning so that there is automatic designation of whole parishes, statutory time limits on local planning authority decisions and powers for the Secretary of State to intervene to send a plan to referendum if there are delays or disagreements.