

## **Report to the Local Development Framework Cabinet Committee**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Report reference:** **LDF-006-2010/11**  
**Date of meeting:** **28 June 2010**

**Portfolio:** Leader

**Subject:** Local Development Framework Engagement Strategy

**Responsible Officer:** Kate Hallé (01992 564481).

**Democratic Services Officer:** Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

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### **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**That the principles and methods set out in the Local Development Framework (LDF) engagement strategy be approved as an approach for consulting the community in the forthcoming preparation of spatial development plans.**

### **Executive Summary:**

This report sets out an approach to engaging with key stakeholders, interested parties and the community in the early stages of the forthcoming Local Development Framework (LDF). The Council is committed to providing the local community with opportunities to shape the place in which they live and has developed an approach to engagement designed to make this achievable.

The recent change in Government has created some uncertainty about the future direction of the planning system – it is yet to be confirmed whether local planning authorities will be required to continue with spatial planning in the LDF format. As such the approach set out below is designed to be flexible; setting out a series of principles for future engagement. The report focuses on engagement at the evidence base stage as it is considered that this element of the planning process will remain, however the system may be altered.

Any devolution of decision making and increased public participation in policy making and planning can have an impact on officer time and resources. The aim is to produce an engagement strategy that is:

- (a) focused using both tested and innovative methods;
- (b) provides an adopted structure/format for officers and the community to work with; and
- (c) is cost effective.

### **Reasons for Proposed Decision:**

To provide a formalised and adaptable strategy for engaging with key local stakeholders and the general public in the production of spatial plans (currently the LDF).

### **Other Options for Action:**

To not approve a Local Development Framework Engagement Strategy. However,

stakeholder and public engagement is a statutory requirement in the production of the LDF and the Core Strategy may be found unsound if there is no robust evidence of this.

## **Report:**

### Communicating positively with the community

1. Positive and effective communication is essential in order to engage successfully on spatial planning, particularly with the general public where consultation fatigue and previous negative consultation experiences can act as a barrier.

2. The Council has previously produced a draft Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) to set out its approach to consulting with the community on the LDF and planning applications. This engagement strategy will feed into the development of the SCI which, subject to new changes in the planning system, will be adopted at a later date.

3. The Council has a corporate consultation strategy which is compatible with the approaches set out within this engagement strategy and will be cross-referenced when consultation tasks are developed in more detail.

4. It is suggested that the following methods are considered in order to communicate a strong, positive message that will encourage people to become involved with planning for the future of their community:

(a) *LDF branding* - develop a simple and recognisable 'brand' for the LDF. This can include logos, straplines, and a design theme to emphasise linkages between LDF components and attract attention from the general public;

(b) *Principles of engagement* - develop a set of principles of engagement for the LDF to ensure that a consistent approach that allows the Council to meet and exceed its statutory consultation requirements;

(c) *Alternative consultation methods* - Consider alternative consultation methods as well as more traditional methods such as writing letters and making documents available in local libraries. More innovative methods such as poster campaigns, social media, the use of a dedicated website or a family fun day have the potential to attract a significant level of interest and engage with a wider section of the community; and

(d) *Partnership working* - Work closely with other Directorates within Epping Forest District Council. There may be opportunities to link in with other consultation activities and the feedback received.

### Principles of engagement

5. A series of principles of engagement have been developed to ensure a consistent approach that allows the Council to meet and exceed its statutory consultation requirements. This approach also helps to tailor engagement activities to ensure that the Council gets as much useful consultation feedback as possible within the resources available. Unfortunately consulting directly with everyone in the district is unmanageable in terms of budgets and officer time. These principles are:

(i) the level of community involvement should be appropriate to the role of the plan or study in question;

(ii) Engagement should form part of a continuous programme, not be a one-off event;

- (iii) public involvement should be transparent and accessible;
- (iv) consultation methods used should be appropriate to the communities concerned;
- (v) use information gathered through other consultations where possible – e.g. the Local Strategic Partnership has just undertaken consultation for a revised Sustainable Community Strategy, which can form part of the LDF evidence base;
- (vi) produce accessible report summaries of consultation results at the end of each DPD stage;
- (vii) all communication throughout the LDF consultation should be directed through generic telephone and email contacts rather than named team members, e.g. *Contact the planning team on 01992 564517, email us on LDFconsult@eppingforest.gov.uk*;
- (viii) consultation questionnaires need to be very carefully developed if they are to engage with the desired audience and provide meaningful feedback that can be analysed within the Council's resources and LDF timescales. There should be a mostly quantitative, theme-based approach to questionnaire design. Questionnaire design should be engaging, accessible and user-friendly; and
- (ix) consideration should be given to the use of prize incentives where undertaking wide public consultation through questionnaires – e.g. may be appropriate for Core Strategy Issues and Options (complete our questionnaire, enter into prize draw). Chelmsford Borough Council found this approach helpful with their CS Issues and Options.

#### Preparation and evidence gathering (stage one)

6. Engaging with the community in the preparation and evidence gathering stage is the first element of consultation in the production of an LDF Core Strategy. In the event that the planning system is altered it is anticipated that the Council's spatial planning policies will still require a robust evidence base which will include community engagement as part of the new Government's localism agenda.

7. There is currently a statutory requirement to engage with the community in the production of a Core Strategy Development Plan Document (DPD). PPS12 states that the evidence base should be comprised of:

- *participation* – evidence of the views of the local community and others who have a stake in the future of the area; and
- *research/fact-finding* – evidence that the choices made by the plan are backed up by the background facts.

8. The guidance also states that the need to engage with the community is proportionate to the job being undertaken by the DPD and that early and effective involvement of key stakeholders and the community should ensure that there are fewer objections or issues arising at a later stage.

#### Consultees

9. Government planning guidance identifies four main types of consultee groups for DPD production (see Appendix 1 for a draft list). The Forward Planning department already maintains an up-to-date database of relevant consultees and this will be used to form the

groups set out below:

(a) *Statutory consultees* – There is a statutory requirement for the Council to consult with all bodies in this group. Consultees in this group include adjoining local authorities, English Heritage, Thames Water;

(b) *General consultees* – The Council has statutory discretion over which general consultees it consults, although as the Core Strategy is such a significant part of the LDF it is suggested that they are all involved. They include local voluntary bodies, religious groups, residents' associations, local businesses and action groups;

(c) *Other interested parties* – The Council has statutory discretion over which other interested parties it consults with. This group is mostly comprised of regional/national bodies including CABI, National Trust, Friends of the Earth, etc;

(d) *General public* – The Council has a statutory requirement to demonstrate that the 'views of the community' have formed part of the DPD evidence base.

#### Consultation methods

10. There are a variety of consultation methods proposed for each consultee group at the preparation and evidence gathering stage. These are set out in more detail in Appendix 2.

#### Formal letter: Core Strategy content

11. Sets out the subject of the Core Strategy and invites representations on what the statutory consultees consider it should contain. The letter should suggest some key themes on which the Council is inviting comment in order to make feedback more manageable (Relevant group: Statutory consultees, general consultees, other interested parties).

#### Formal letter: Evidence base

12. Each time the Council consults on an evidence base report or study a letter should be sent to each of the statutory consultees. The letter should consider suggesting key themes on which the Council is inviting comment in order to make feedback more manageable (Relevant group: Statutory consultees, general consultees, other interested parties).

#### Stakeholder meetings

13. It is important to undertake meaningful dialogue with key stakeholders in order to identify issues for the Core Strategy to address and to start thinking about what options may be appropriate. A programme of meetings should be developed with appropriate statutory consultees such as neighbouring planning authorities. The meetings should use a pro-forma to ensure that discussion remains focused and that there is useful output for informing the next stage of the Core Strategy (Relevant group: Statutory consultees, general consultees).

#### Organisation Issues questionnaire

14. It is important to offer the organisations within the general consultee group the opportunity to provide the Council with their views on the vision and issues for the Core Strategy. This can be achieved through a thematically designed questionnaire, to accompany the formal letter. It is important to offer this group two methods of commenting as some organisations will be quite formal and expect to be treated as such, whilst others will be less so and will require a more accessible and less time-consuming approach (Relevant group: General consultees).

### LDF summary leaflet

15. The LDF summary leaflet will introduce the LDF and explain in plain-English the key milestones and documents that are involved. This leaflet could be the start of a new identity for the LDF, helping to create a more positive relationship between the Council and the local community. The leaflet will include headline information from this LDF engagement strategy so the community can see in advance when it will be able to participate and how. It may be possible to also distribute this information through existing formats, e.g. The Forester newsletter. It should be noted that the content of this leaflet will be subject to any changes to the present planning system made by the new Government (Relevant group: General consultees, other interested parties, general public).

### Stakeholder Issues Workshop

16. All General Consultees (plus adjoining LPAs) should be invited to attend a Stakeholder Issues workshop. The purpose of the workshop will be to identify the key issues for the Core Strategy to address and get feedback on the development of a vision for the plan. Registration prior to the workshop will be mandatory for health and safety management and to enquire whether particular access arrangements are required (Relevant group: General consultees).

### Hard-to-Reach groups

17. Engagement with these groups should be covered through the invitation to the Issues Workshop, potential stakeholder meetings and LDF summary leaflet. However, they should be contacted early in the engagement process to understand any specific requirements they may have.

18. Guidance from CLG identifies 'hard-to-reach groups' as bodies which represent the interests of the following within the local authority's area:

- Different ethnic or national groups;
- Different religious groups;
- Disabled people; and
- People carrying on business.

(Relevant group: General consultees).

### LDF web pages

19. The LDF webpage on the Council website should set out all the information contained within the LDF leaflet including links to evidence base reports, indicative timescales, link to Facebook page and information of future engagement opportunities (Relevant group: Statutory consultees, general consultees, other interested parties, general public).

### Facebook

20. It is proposed that the LDF team set up Facebook page for the LDF. The Core Strategy / LDF branding launch can be first news item. The page will provide access to the LDF summary leaflet, news on consultations and links to the Council's LDF pages. It is recommended that the facility for the general public to comment directly on the 'wall' is disabled as it will be difficult to monitor abusive comments and it would be more constructive to direct people to the appropriate consultation channels. This method should be particularly successful for engaging with younger people (Relevant group: General consultees, other

interested parties, general public).

#### Further early public engagement?

21. Ideally consultation with the general public would be carried out at this early stage in order to gain a thematic overview of key issues for Epping Forest over the plan period and a vision for the future.

22. If the Council decides further information on the views of the community is required then a good approach would be to add a Vision and Issues questionnaire to the LDF/planning process summary leaflet. Any questionnaire produced at this stage should be clear and concise, use plain language and rely on quantitative data where possible whilst allowing a carefully controlled opportunity for more general comment.

23. Once there is more information available about the direction of the planning system under the new Government the Council will need to consider whether this is something it wishes to do or whether the results of the SCS Community Engagement plus feedback from Statutory/General consultees on evidence base studies are sound enough to produce a robust evidence base on which to develop a spatial plan.

24. It should be noted that front-loading with the community is considered good practice. This means involving people from the start of the plan process. The Council needs to demonstrate that it has had an open dialogue with the community from the first stage of the plan, rather than the first thing people see being a series of development options at a later stage.

#### Evidence base studies

25. It is considered that involving the general public in consulting on technical evidence base studies can be counter-productive; in some cases resulting in confusion and consultation fatigue.

26. It is suggested that the approach to engagement on evidence base studies is not to contact the general public directly, rather to create awareness of and provide access to reports via the LDF webpage. This could include a few thematic questions set out on the website to encourage the general public to respond in a manageable way if they chose to do so.

27. It is suggested that local community groups (identified in Appendix 1) are sent a plain-English letter and summary guide explaining the study and what the Council is seeking their views on. Statutory consultees (identified in Appendix 1) will receive a formal consultation letter.

#### **Resource Implications:**

An estimate for the costs of public engagement throughout the preparation of the LDF was presented to Cabinet in December 2007. It will be appropriate to reconsider this budget and the amounts that have been attributed to various functions once the proposals of the Coalition government become clear.

#### **Legal and Governance Implications:**

No relevant implications

### **Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

No relevant implications

### **Consultation Undertaken:**

None.

### **Background Papers:**

Planning Policy Statement 12: Local Spatial Planning (June 2008)  
Town and Country Planning (Local Development) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2008  
Communities and Local Government – Plan Making Manual  
EFDC Consultation Strategy – A Guide to Consultation 2006/2007

### **Impact Assessments:**

#### Risk Management

Risk to the LDF not being found “sound” by the Inspector at the public examination due to insufficient consideration of the views of the local community.

#### Equality and Diversity:

Preparation of the Local Development Framework as a whole will be subject to an on-going Equality Impact Assessment, as part of the Sustainability Appraisal. The finalised Engagement Strategy will identify issues relating to equality and diversity in spatial planning. It will then set out methods for ensuring that these issues are considered throughout any consultation undertaken e.g. the provision of materials in a format suitable for blind or visually impaired people.

*Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications?* No

*Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken?* No

*What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?*  
None.

*How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?*  
None.