

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Local Development Framework Cabinet Committee **Date:** 13 July 2010

Place: Council Chamber, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping **Time:** 7.05 - 9.00 pm

Members Present: R Bassett (Chairman), B Rolfe, Mrs M Sartin, Ms S Stavrou and Mrs L Wagland

Other Councillors: Mrs A Grigg, Mrs C Pond, D Stallan and J M Whitehouse

Apologies: Mrs D Collins

Officers Present: K Polyzoides (Assistant Director (Policy & Conservation)), K Wright (Senior Planning Officer), K Hallé (Senior Planning & Consultation Officer) and G J Woodhall (Democratic Services Officer)

15. ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE-CHAIRMAN

In the absence of the Chairman, nominations were invited from the Cabinet Committee for the appointment of a Chairman for the duration of the meeting.

RESOLVED:

(1) That Councillor R Bassett be appointed Chairman for the duration of the meeting.

16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct.

17. MINUTES

Although the minutes of the previous meeting had been published as part of a Supplementary Agenda for the Cabinet Meeting scheduled for 19 July 2010, Members of the Cabinet Committee had not had enough time to consider them and they were deferred until the next meeting for agreement.

RESOLVED:

(1) That the minutes of the last meeting held on 17 June 2010 be deferred until the next meeting for agreement.

18. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Cabinet Committee noted its Terms of Reference as agreed by the Council on 17 February 2009 (minute 113(a) refers).

19. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

It was noted that there was no other urgent business for consideration by the Cabinet Committee.

20. PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE PLANNING SYSTEM

The Assistant Director (Policy & Conservation) presented a verbal update on changes to the current planning system proposed by the new coalition Government.

The Assistant Director advised the Cabinet Committee that a letter had been received from the Minister for Decentralisation revoking the Direction to prepare a separate Gypsy & Traveller Development Plan Document. A report would be considered by both the Cabinet and Council before the end of the month, and would recommend the cessation of further work on the Development Plan Document as well as notification to all land owners and interested groups.

The Assistant Director further advised the Cabinet Committee of a letter from the Chief Planner at the Department of Communities & Local Government announcing the revocation of all Regional Strategies with immediate effect, although the requirement to produce a Local Development Framework still remained. A further letter from the Minister for Housing had set out some of the principles that the Coalition Government wished to see incorporated within the plan-making process. A statement of how the Council would secure real local and community engagement had also been requested.

The Assistant Director also informed the Cabinet Committee that Regional Development Agencies would be replaced with Local Enterprise Partnerships, which would be business orientated. There was the possibility of four such agencies for Essex, with the District most likely in the M11/West Essex Partnership.

The Cabinet Committee welcomed the revocation of the Gypsy & Traveller Development Plan Document Direction, and supported the reports being considered at the Cabinet and Council meetings in July. Local residents had waited more than two years for the Direction to be rescinded and it was felt that the news would be welcomed throughout the District.

RESOLVED:

(1) That the verbal update on the proposed changes to the planning system by the Assistant Director (Policy & Conservation) be noted.

21. TOWN CENTRES STUDY

The Senior Planning Officer introduced a report upon the Town Centres Study for the District, which had provided the first comprehensive assessment of retail and leisure provision across the District's main centres, as well as an assessment of future retail and leisure need in terms of both quantity of floor space and the quality of provision. This assessment of future need would help to guide decision making on policies in the Core Strategy for each of the District's main centres.

The Cabinet Committee was reminded that Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 4 – Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth – required local planning authorities to prepare an evidence base to plan for town centres in the future. Roger Tym & Partners had been appointed to undertake the study in March 2009. The study

provided information on the six main centres defined by the current Local Plan and an assessment of the current policy to retain a percentage of retail frontage within them. The Consultants undertook a household telephone survey, a visitor survey across the six centres, as well as a stakeholder consultation with Town Councils and Town Centre Partnerships.

The Cabinet Committee was informed of the key findings from the Study. Some parts of the District had excellent public transport links to London, whilst there was also a number of higher order centres located a short distance outside the District. The six centres within the District were all of a lower order and provided services that reflected their size. The national trend was for people to spend more in larger centres, as well as a rise in alternative forms of shopping such as the internet. The future development of the six centres was examined in terms of comparison retailing (clothing, furniture, electricals) and convenience retailing (food, drink, newspapers), as well as leisure uses (bars, cafes, cinemas), over five, ten and twenty-one year periods. In all cases, the study recommended a growth in retail capacity over the periods, using an increased market share scenario to increase the retail spending of residents within the District. The aim was to change shopping patterns through the development of new retail floorspace within the District.

The Senior Planning Officer stated that the study had concluded there were high levels of expenditure leakage from the District for both comparison and convenience goods. There was scope to improve the convenience retail on offer within the District, which would also increase choice and competition. There was also scope to accommodate national brand stores to satisfy local needs and provide a balance between independent traders and larger operators. Requirements for floorspace indicated there was still demand for space in the District's larger centres. There was still potential to improve the local commercial leisure provision and to encourage a small art house cinema within the District to provide an alternative to the nearby multiplex centres. Finally, the retail frontages policy was generally thought to be performing well as there were no major gaps currently, although it might be necessary to separate primary and secondary frontage in the future.

The Cabinet Committee welcomed the report and described it as both useful and important. It would form a sound Evidence Base study and would be invaluable when developing an overall Retail Strategy for the District. It was acknowledged that the desire for more national stores within the District would have an adverse impact upon the independent retailers within the District, and this would need careful management as part of any District Retail Strategy. Further information was requested upon the proportion of spending by commuters outside of the District, and some reservations were expressed about the proposed increase in cafés and bars to further improve commercial leisure provision. The possibility of a small cinema located within the District was enthusiastically received. There were further opportunities for development within Epping and Loughton other than those mentioned within the Study, and a covering note was requested to correct some minor errors when the Study was made publicly available.

The Cabinet Committee were advised of the Town Plan being developed by Waltham Abbey Town Council, with participation from the public. The retail units within the town were very small in comparison to other centres, which presented its own particular difficulties, and younger residents had identified a lack of affordable leisure facilities.

In response to queries from the Cabinet Committee, it was stated that the study did not specially include commuter spending. Currently, only 32% of available spending was retained within the District; commuter spending was assumed to form part of the

68% of available spending that leaked out of the District. The study was only concerned with the six main centres within the District and how they could be developed to increase the proportion of resident's retained spending. If it was felt that there were too many bars and cafes within the District then the leisure provision aspects of the strategy could be developed with a different emphasis, although a further study would be required for the provision of a small cinema within the District. It was confirmed that the Study would be made publicly available in due course.

The Assistant Director (Policy & Conservation) added that a natural synergy would be developed between the Study and the work being performed by the Town Centre Officers. The District was in a very unique position for retailing, and a wider approach would be required to attract people into the District to the existing centres. The Government's new Localism agenda would lead to more public input on the future of the current centres within the District.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the content of the Town Centres Study be noted;
- (2) That the Town Centre Study be made publicly available, with a covering note to correct any minor errors within; and
- (2) That the Town Centres Study be added to the Evidence Base to support the preparation of the Local Development Framework, although it had been based upon and influenced by policies and targets which might not be applicable in the future and might necessitate a review of the Study in due course.

Reasons for Decision:

The Local Development Framework had to be based on robust and up-to-date evidence, and a number of technical studies had been commissioned to provide this evidence. The Town Centres Study had provided information about retail and leisure uses in the District's six main centres as identified in the existing Local Plan, which would be used to formulate policies in the emerging Local Development Framework.

Other Options Considered and Rejected:

To not include the Study as part of the Evidence Base.

22. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Senior Planning & Consultation Officer introduced a report regarding an Engagement Strategy for the Local Development Framework, which outlined 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 was committed to providing the local community with opportunities to shape the place in which they lived and had developed an approach to engagement designed to make this achievable.

The Senior Planning & Consultation Officer advised that positive and effective communication was essential to engage with the public successfully on spatial planning. The proposed Engagement Strategy would assist in the development of the Statement of Community Involvement and was designed to be compatible with the current Corporate Consultation Strategy. A number of methods had been proposed for consideration: development of a LDF brand to attract attention from the public; development of a set of principles of engagement to ensure that a consistent

approach would be adopted and the Council would meet its statutory requirements; alternative consultation methods such as the use of social media and dedicated websites to engage with a wider section of the community; and partnership working with other Directorates to link in with other consultation activities.

The Senior Planning & Consultation Officer added that engaging with the public in the preparation and evidence gathering stage was the first phase of consultation in producing a Core Strategy. Government guidance had identified four main groups of consultees - statutory consultees, general consultees, other interested parties and the general public – and the Strategy had suggested a variety of methods for each group at this stage. The recent change in Government had created some uncertainty about the future direction of the planning system; therefore the proposed Engagement Strategy was designed to be flexible and focused on engagement at the Evidence Base stage. The aim had been to produce an Engagement Strategy that used both tested and innovative methods; provided an adopted format for Officers and the community to work with; and was cost effective.

The Assistant Director (Policy & Conservation) added that no timetable for the consultation periods had been implemented due to the changes in Planning Policies recently announced by the new Government. The Council would need to consult upon the Evidence Base and then the Issues & Options document to ascertain the Key Options for the District. It was confirmed that an allocation from the LDF budget had been made for the various consultations. The Evidence Base approach was still the preferred method for generating the LDF and this contained a statutory requirement to consult.

The Portfolio Holder for Legal & Estates expressed a number of concerns with the report:

- (i) the strategy appeared to utilise a top-down approach rather than a bottom-up approach;
- (ii) there should be a single named contact, not a generic email or telephone number;
- (iii) the Council should look to hold a number of public debates; and
- (iv) the hard-to reach groups should also include those people who feel they can't make a difference.

The Portfolio Holder wanted a more energetic approach with a named 'Champion' for people to identify with, as the consultations needed a wider base of responders than those people who normally replied, such as was the case for the Gypsy & Traveller Development Plan Document consultation. A cost effective approach should also be adopted for all consultations undertaken.

The Cabinet Committee made further suggestions on how the Strategy could be improved:

- (i) involve the residents groups that were formed for the Gypsy & Traveller Development Plan Document consultation;
- (ii) involve the Youth Council and hold debates or workshops in the local schools to engage the young people within the District;
- (iii) hold roadshows and question time events in different areas of the District;

- (iv) perform impact analysis on the suggestions forthcoming from the consultation early in the process;
- (v) allow the public to post comments on the proposed LDF Facebook site;
- (vi) consider the use of Twitter as well;
- (vii) ask specific questions during the consultation to get specific answers rather than generic questions; and
- (vii) the Strategy should be a Communications Strategy, rather than a Planning Strategy, with advice taken from the Council's Public Relations section.

The Assistant Director and Senior Planning & Consultation Officer thanked the Cabinet Committee for their comments. It was highlighted that the use of Twitter had been considered but it was not felt to be as useful as Facebook, whilst allowing comments to be posted on the LDF Facebook site was not considered feasible given the implications it would have on Officer time. It was felt that generic email and telephone contacts were important to allow for some Officer anonymity, and it was reiterated that the Council's Public Relations section had been – and would continue to be – involved in the evolution of the Engagement Strategy. The Assistant Director proposed that the Strategy should be further reviewed before being submitted to the Cabinet Committee again for approval.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the principles and methods set out in the LDF Engagement Strategy be further reviewed following the comments of the Cabinet Committee;
- (2) That the Council's Public Relations section continue to be consulted over the principles and methods within the LDF Engagement Strategy; and
- (3) That the LDF Engagement Strategy be submitted to a future meeting of the Cabinet Committee for approval.

Reasons for Decision:

To further review the proposed Engagement Strategy and incorporate some of the ideas proposed by the Cabinet Committee prior to its final approval.

Other Options Considered and Rejected:

To cease production of a Local Development Framework Engagement Strategy. However, stakeholder and public engagement was a statutory requirement in the production of the LDF and the Core Strategy might be found unsound if there was no robust evidence of this.

To approve the Engagement Strategy as presented, however it would not then incorporate all of the lessons learned from the Gypsy & Traveller consultation, amongst others, or the comments made by the Cabinet Committee.

CHAIRMAN

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