

# **Report to the Local Plan Cabinet Committee**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Report reference:** **LPC-008-2012/13**  
**Date of meeting:** **18 February 2013**

**Portfolio:** **Planning and Economic Development**

**Subject:** **Consultation responses to the draft Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) and Draft Communications Strategy.**

**Responsible Officer:** **Kassandra Polyzoides (01992 564119).**

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

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## **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

- (1) To note the responses made to the SCI consultation;
- (2) To approve the proposed modifications to the draft SCI, to go to full Council, which are partly (i) as a response to the consultations, and (ii) to update the document, on the understanding that the approved final version represents the minimum actions the Council will take to encourage community involvement in the Local Plan process;
- (3) To approve the actions proposed for inclusion in the draft communications strategy; and
- (4) To note further items to be explored for their inclusion in the Council's Local Plan Communications Strategy.

## **Executive Summary:**

The Council undertook a consultation on its draft Statement of Community Involvement in the summer/ autumn of 2012. The results of the consultation give rise to a number of valuable potential improvements to practice outlined in this report. The report recommends a number of changes to the text of the Statement of Community Involvement to make it clearer and more up to date. In addition there are a range of actions proposed for inclusion in the draft communications strategy to strengthen the transparency of communication on the Local Plan. It is intended that the Local Plan communications strategy provides more detail as to how the Council will engage with all its stakeholders and provides a detailed methodology. The report outlines further items to be reviewed for their inclusion in the communications strategy. The Statement of Community Involvement, if agreed by the Local Plan Cabinet Committee, will go to the Council for formal adoption.

## **Reasons for Proposed Decision:**

The Council is required to have an up to date Statement of Community Involvement which has been consulted upon. This report takes the document forward with recommended changes prior to adoption of the Statement.

## **Other Options for Action:**

The Council does not adopt the statement, undertakes only the minimum required by legislation, and is not transparent about the way it intends to engage with the public on the Local Plan and in determining planning applications for development. This option is not recommended.

## **Report:**

### Background

1. A key objective of the planning system is to strengthen community and stakeholder involvement in the preparation of local plans and the development control (management) process. In this context, the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (section 18) introduced the requirement for all authorities to produce a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) which would establish their vision and strategy for effective community participation. The Statement of Community Involvement represents the minimum action that the Council will take in engaging with its communities on planning matters, specifically the Local Plan and Development Control Planning applications.

2. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) emphasises the importance of involvement. Para 155 (Local Plans section) states "*Early and meaningful engagement and collaboration with neighbourhoods, local organisations and businesses is essential. A wide section of the community should be proactively engaged, so that Local Plans, as far as possible, reflect a collective vision and a set of agreed priorities for sustainable development of the area .....*". Para 188 (Decision-taking section) states "*Early engagement has significant potential to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning application system for all parties.*"

3. This Council's draft SCI was approved for public consultation at the Local Plan Cabinet Committee meeting on 2 July 2012. Consultation on the SCI ran simultaneously with the Issues and Options consultation on the Local Plan from 30 July to 15 October 2012.

### Consultation Responses

4. A total of 50 responses were received. Three of those received online were not addressed at all to the Statement of Community Involvement whilst two of those received online were purely objections with no detail. This leaves 45 making some comment that is relevant to the Statement of Community Involvement or the approach to communications on planning matters. Many respondents made comments both on the Statement of Community Involvement and on the substance of the Community Choices document. The full schedule of substantive comments is attached at Appendix 1 together with proposed actions. The proposed actions are replicated below and where applicable included in the Proposed Statement of Community Involvement.

5. The distribution of responses by settlement and organisation is set out in Table 1 below. Three of the responses were from District Councillors, whilst the Epping Upland and High Ongar responses are from the Parish Councils.

<b>Table 1</b>	
<b>Settlement or Body</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>
<b>Responses with comments</b>	
Epping	9
Chigwell	8
Chipping Ongar	5
North Weald	4
Theydon Bois	4
Loughton	3
Buckhurst Hill	1
Epping Upland	1
Hastingwood	1
High Ongar	1
Nazeing	1
Roydon	1
Thornwood Common	1
Waltham Abbey	1
Harlow	1
Chelmsford City	1
Essex Police	1
Friends of Epping Forest	1
<b>Responses purely objecting</b>	
Sawbridgeworth	1
Romford	1
<b>Total representations made on SCI</b>	<b>47</b>

6. Of the total of 45 responses making substantive comment, 19 were clearly supportive of the SCI and some of these included suggestions for improvement. A breakdown of the responses to the closed questions (those requiring a 'yes' or 'no' answer) is set out in Table 2 below. This shows that the positive responses to the closed questions far outweighed the negative.

<b>Table 2</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No response</b>	<b>% positive</b>	<b>% negative</b>
Q1. Is the document clear?	23	12	10	51.1	26.7
Q3. Do you understand how to contact the planning team?	34	3	8	75.6	6.7
Q6. Do you understand the process of agreeing planning policy documents as described in the document?	26	9	10	57.8	20
Q8. Do you understand how you can get involved in the planning policy process?	28	7	10	62.2	15.6
Q11. Do you understand the process of commenting on planning application consultations?	30	5	10	66.67	11.1

#### The Statement of Community Involvement

7. The substantive comments made in responses are reproduced in a schedule of

individual comments against individual questions at Appendix 1. Those relating directly to the contents of the Statement of Community Involvement at Appendix 2 can be categorised as follows:

- Layout, clarity and navigation of the Statement of Community Involvement document itself.
- Lack of clarity surrounding the process of how representations are taken into account in policy making.
- Lack of clarity about the stage in the policy making process reached.
- Lack of clarity about the process of acknowledging receipt of representations on the Local Plan.
- Lack of clarity about how residents in neighbouring authorities are notified of planning matters.
- Concern regarding the accessibility and design of the web based consultation system and web filing of supporting documentation.
- The role of Parish Councils in the planning process.
- Confusion arising from including material on both the Local Plan and Planning Applications in one document and how this information is expressed.
- Clarity about which neighbours are consulted on planning applications.
- Clarity about the availability of the weekly list of planning applications.
- Suggestions as to making it more straightforward for residents to comment on planning applications.
- Some specific comments on particular paragraphs in the SCI.

8. These matters are addressed where possible in the accompanying update to the Statement of Community Involvement at Appendix 2 as recommended changes.

#### Measures for the Communications Strategy

9. There were a significant number of pertinent comments relating to the communication with the public about planning matters. Some of the measures suggested are already used by the service or included in the draft Statement of Community Involvement that was consulted upon, but were clearly missed for some reason, by the particular respondents. However, to reinforce the results of the consultation on Community Choices they are listed below and included in the actions recommended.

10. The measures recommended for inclusion in the Council's communication strategy, are as follows:

- (i) continue to undertake pre consultation period publicity so as to advise communities of forthcoming consultation;
- (ii) produce summaries of consultation documents including very clear messages about the timescales for the proposed developments/ the plan period, and other headline basic messages for example; the status of the plan at this stage, what will happen next;
- (iii) ensure clarity of consultation documents as far as is possible by using plain English or Crystal mark verification as a minimum on summaries;
- (iv) ensure the layout of documents is as clear as possible, easy to navigate and well signposted;
- (v) ensure that diagrams are as easy to understand as possible and clearly explained;

- (vi) redesign the website pages to allow for easy access to documents and supporting evidence;
- (vii) ensure any future consultation allowing on line responses is easy to understand, use and navigate;
- (viii) clearly publicise the use of voicemail when it is to be used during consultation periods;
- (ix) ensure that venues and channels of communication include people with disabilities;
- (x) ensure that neighbours of proposed development within Epping Forest District who live in other authority areas and are likely to be directly affected, are as aware of proposals as the residents in Epping Forest District;
- (xi) double check that leading questions are not being used in consultation questionnaire design;
- (xii) ensure forms are clear that views are being sought;
- (xiii) seek to use some intensive area based consultations – e.g. workshops/ door to door publicity/ community presentations - for directly affected communities at the preferred strategy stage of the plan where sites will be proposed for allocation;
- (xiv) explain the role of ward and parish councillors in planning consultations; and
- (xv) ensure that all staff are briefed and trained in effective communication skills for undertaking public events in consultation and understand both the purpose of the event and their role.

11. The following matters should be explored for feasibility before a decision reached on their introduction:

- (a) whether producing letters for individual delivery to each household would be as effective in terms of cost and communication as the leaflets used in planning policy consultations;
- (b) production of a regular planning newsletter and or use of the Forester;
- (c) ways that both ward and parish councillors can be asked to assist in dissemination of information on planning policy; and
- (d) the introduction of planning representatives to communicate planning matters to residents.

### Conclusions

12. The responses on the Statement of Community Involvement have given rise to a lot of very valuable feedback for the service which can readily feed into action in forthcoming consultations. The proposals for changes to the Statement of Community Involvement go some way to addressing these. The Statement of Community Involvement represents the minimum action that the Council will take in engaging with its communities on Local Plan matters.

13. The additional matters for inclusion in the Councils communications strategy, if followed, would improve on the recent experience regarding planning policy consultation. There are nonetheless, always controversial matters within planning consultations and the overall aim can only be to ensure that messages are clearly and consistently communicated, and processes fair and transparent.

14. The final set of recommendations for exploration should be resolved over the coming four months to enable their inclusion, where considered feasible, in the next major planning policy consultation, namely the Preferred Options consultation.

#### **Resource Implications:**

The measures outlined in the Statement of Community Involvement represent a commitment that must be resourced – therefore if resources are not considered to be available to undertake all actions included in the draft Statement of Community Involvement it should be altered before adopted.

The recommended improvements to service will add some time to production of documents but this would be offset by the benefits of improvements in their accessibility.

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

The adoption of a Statement of Community Involvement fulfils a requirement. It should be kept up to date and it must, once adopted, be adhered to. This matter of compliance with the Statement is subject to examination by the Planning Inspectorate and can result, if found wanting, in a judgement of an unsound plan at examination.

There are no recommendations on any changes to matters of governance contained in this report.

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

Nothing to report.

#### **Consultation Undertaken:**

Council Members and stakeholders between July and October 2012 - Community Choices consultation.

#### **Background Papers:**

Statement of Community Involvement report – Local Plan Cabinet Committee 2 July 2012.  
Statement of Community Involvement Questionnaire report – Local Plan Cabinet Committee 2 July 2012.

Local Development Framework Draft Communications Strategy report – Local Development Framework Cabinet Committee 4 October 2010.

#### **Impact Assessments:**

##### **Risk Management**

The authority must be clearly signed up to the final Statement of Community Involvement and adhere to it in order to produce a sound plan.

Equality and Diversity

*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?*

N/A.

*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?*

N/A.