

Report of the Cabinet

Date: 23 April 2013

Portfolio Holder: Councillor R Bassett
(Planning)

STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Recommending:

That the attached Statement of Community Involvement, including the revised Local Plan Communications Strategy, be approved on the understanding it represents the minimum level of actions the Council will take to encourage community involvement in the Local Plan process

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. We have been advised by the Local Plan Cabinet Committee that a total of 50 responses were received. We understand that three of those received online did not address at all the Statement of Community Involvement whilst two of those received online were purely objections with no detail. This left 45 making some comment that is relevant to the Statement of Community Involvement or the approach to communications on planning matters. We have been informed that many respondents made comments both on the Statement of Community Involvement and on the substance of the Community

Choices document. The Local Plan Cabinet Committee has considered all of the representations received.

5. We have been informed by the Cabinet Committee that of the total of 45 responses making substantive comment, 19 were clearly supportive of the SCI and some of these included suggestions for improvement.

The Statement of Community Involvement

6. We have been advised that comments relating directly to the contents of the Statement of Community Involvement 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.

7. The Cabinet Committee has addressed these matters where possible in the attached Statement recommended for approval.

Measures for the Communications Strategy

8. The Cabinet Committee has stated that 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.

9. The Cabinet Committee recommended that the following be included in the Council's communication strategy:

- (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.

10. The Cabinet Committee also recommended that the following matters should be explored for feasibility before a decision is 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

11. 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 attached Statement of Community Involvement goes 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.

12. The additional matters for inclusion in the Councils communications strategy, if followed, will 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.

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

14. 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.

15. We agree with the conclusions and recommendations of the Cabinet Committee and recommend as set out at the commencement of this report.