

Report to the LDF Cabinet Committee

Report reference: **LDF-023-2010/11**

Date of meeting: **28 March 2011**



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Leader

Subject: Local Development Framework Issues and Options Consultation Strategy

Responsible Officer: Kate Hallé (01992 564481).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

(1) That the principles and methods set out in the LDF Core Planning Strategy Issues and Options Consultation Strategy be approved as an approach for consulting the community in the forthcoming preparation of spatial development plans.

Executive Summary:

This strategy sets out an approach to engaging with key stakeholders, interested parties and the community at the Issues and Options stage of the Core Planning Strategy. The Council is committed to providing local communities with opportunities to shape the places in which they live and has developed an approach to engagement designed to make this achievable.

The coalition government has made it one its priorities to make sure that local people have more say in the decisions that affect where they live. The government has abolished regional housing targets and it is now the responsibility of the Council to work with local communities to determine options for future development.

The strategy has taken into account lessons learned from the successful 'Community Visioning' exercise carried out from November 2010 to January 2011. The next stage builds upon this with a 'Community Choices' exercise that seeks the views of the local community on the planning issues facing the district are and the most appropriate policy options for addressing them.

The results of the Issues and Options consultation will be used to produce the Core Planning Strategy Preferred Options document in Spring 2012. The consultation and methods will be expanded upon to form the Council's LDF Statement of Community Involvement (SCI).

It should be noted that the increased requirements to engage with local people will have an impact on officer time and resources. The aim is to produce a communication strategy that:

- a) is 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 strategy for engaging with key local stakeholders and the general public in the production of the LDF Core Planning Strategy.

Other Options for Action:

To not approve the Issues and Options Consultation Strategy. However, stakeholder and public engagement is a statutory requirement in the production of the LDF, and the Core Planning Strategy may be found unsound if there is no robust evidence of this.

Report:

Overview

1. Engaging with the community in the preparation and evidence gathering stage is the second element of consultation in the production of an LDF Core Planning Strategy. It follows the successful community visioning exercise which took place between November 2010 and January 2011. The results of that exercise and the views of the local community have been used as part of the evidence base on which the Issues and Options are being developed.

2. 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:

(a) Key stakeholders should engage in timely and effective discussions with local planning authorities on the deliverability of options for core strategies;

(b) There is no point in proceeding with options for the core strategy which cannot be delivered as a result of failure to obtain the agreement of key delivery agencies; and

(c) Local authorities are strongly encouraged to seek out major landowners and developers and engage them fully in the generation and consideration of options.

3. The Council's spatial planning policies are required to be formulated with regard to the views of the community as part of the Government's localism agenda. The Issues and Options consultation will seek to build upon the Community Visioning exercise to gain a more in-depth understanding of community and stakeholder views on the best options for addressing planning issues in the District over the next 20 years.

Community Visioning - Lessons Learned

4. Despite the success of the Community Visioning exercise there are a number of lessons that can be learned from the process. The LDF team will seek to build upon these and improve its engagement for the Issues and Options consultation.

5. Parish Councils should be significantly more involved from the outset of the community engagement process. This will take place as follows:

(a) informing them of our approach and timescales once they are approved;

(b) starting an early dialogue when formalising the detailed elements of the engagement such as workshops and exhibitions;

(c) seeking their assistance with engaging with the local community where appropriate;

(d) providing more time between committee members approving the content of the consultation materials and print deadlines.

- (e) ensure that workshops are better attended by providing the local community with more time to register whilst improving publicity by working more closely with Parish Councils;
 - (f) provide more resource effective workshop areas following the cancellation of all rural area workshops due to low attendance;
 - (g) make better use of local media and reduce reliance on press releases by placing a full page advert in local papers; and
 - (h) work more closely with local schools to seek the views of younger people - the youth forum reported that this would be the best way to achieve this.
6. The photography competition received very little interest and as such it is recommended that this method is not used again at this stage.

Issues and Options Engagement Approach

7. Whilst the Issues and Options document is being prepared the LDF team is seeking approval of the approach to engaging with the community. This has been formulated in accordance with the LDF 'principles of engagement' approved by the LDF Committee in October 2010.

Consultees

8. Government planning guidance identifies four main types of consultee groups for DPD production. The LDF team 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** – The Council must consult with all bodies in this group. Consultees 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 Planning 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 CABE, National Trust, Friends of the Earth, etc.
- (d) **General public** – The Council is required to consult with the local community at the Issues and Options stage.

Consultation methods

9. There are a variety of consultation methods proposed for each consultee group at the preparation and evidence gathering stage. This engagement strategy divides them into two groups:
- (i) Community choices (general public); and
 - (ii) Statutory/general consultees (Statutory, general and interested parties).
10. Budget information for each method can be found in Appendix 1 where appropriate.

Community Choices

Core Planning Strategy Leaflet and 'Community Choices' Questionnaire

11. It is important that local communities have as clear an understanding as possible of what the LDF Core Planning Strategy (CPS) Issues and Options consultation is and how they can have their say. Production of a CPS Issues and Options 'Community Choices' leaflet in plain English can clearly explain this information to the wider community. The information in the leaflet will also be available on the LDF website and at exhibitions.

12. The content of the leaflet will differ from the community visioning leaflet distributed in November 2010. It will need to be very carefully developed in order to ensure the right balance is struck between providing the local community with enough detail about the Issues and Options and not distributing a long, confusing and resource-intensive document.

13. Potential approaches for achieving this are:

- (a) explain options for spatial development and seek views; and/or
- (b) simplify major themes of document and seek views on options.

14. This may take the form of a short 8 page leaflet or a slightly more comprehensive 'Executive Summary' version of the full Issues and Option report that would be approximately 20 pages but allow for more information. The print cost may be the determining factor between these two approaches.

15. The leaflet also needs to provide information about community workshops and exhibitions and other opportunities for people to have their say such as online and through social media.

16. It is recommended that, in order to inform and give the opportunity to comment to as many people as possible, the leaflet and questionnaire are sent to each household in the District – approximately 55,000.

Community Workshops

17. A series of community workshops will be held at different locations within the district to discuss the thematic and spatial development choices facing the District. The workshops will be publicised through the leaflet, website and other channels. All residents are welcome to attend, however they will be required to register as places will be limited to approximately 50-60 per event.

18. Community workshops will be held during the evening (7-9pm) in order to ensure that residents are more likely to be able to attend. Following difficulty attracting participants to attend the three rural area workshops during the community visioning exercise it is recommended that these areas are amalgamated into one 'rural' area and the workshop publicised accordingly.

19. The suggested workshop areas are as follows:

- Waltham Abbey/Nazeing;
- Epping / Theydon Bois;
- Loughton / Chigwell / Buckhurst Hill; and
- Rural communities (Roydon/Sheering/Ongar/Stapleford Abbots).

Community Choices Postcards

20. It's recommended that following a positive response the 'busy' hard-to-reach commuter segment of residents are again targeted through the distribution of postcards at underground and rail stations in the district during the morning rush hour.

21. Considerable thought will be required with regards to the content of the postcards. At present it is considered likely that they will only seek views on spatial development options. The design may need to be altered to accommodate the content required – e.g. fold in half to create the postcard.

Website

22. The Council website provides space for information on the LDF. Officers are proposing to continue with the updated design and 'planning our future' branding. The proposed structure will remain as follows:

- (a) **Home page** - LDF/CPS overview text taken from CPS leaflet;
- (b) **Get involved** - Information on 'Community Choices' exercise including upcoming workshops / exhibitions / choices questionnaire and opportunity to join the mailing list;
- (c) **Download** - Electronic versions of any relevant materials – e.g. full Issues and Options report, leaflets, exhibitions;
- (d) **Evidence base** – Plain English list of all evidence base studies plus previous consultation results with links to view the documents where appropriate;
- (e) **Timescales** - Indicative timescales for the CPS and LDF; and
- (f) **Contact us** - Generic links for tel / email / address for LDF team.

23. The website address will continue to be advertised on printed materials and contact details where appropriate - www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/planningourfuture.

Publicity Exhibitions

24. Information about the Community Choices exercise and how people can have their say will be on display at several locations within the District. It is likely that three exhibition panels will be used per display and they will be accompanied by copies of the questionnaire and a questionnaire post-box where people can submit their views.

25. It is proposed that the six exhibition venues from the Community Visioning exercise are used in order to provide consistency and awareness throughout the District. The basic format of the exhibition will be:

- Community choices – overview of CPS Issues and Options;
- Thematic and spatial development options; and
- How to have your say.

Social Media

26. It is proposed that the LDF team continue to work closely with the PR team to use the existing EFDC Facebook and Twitter accounts as another method of providing information on the Community Choices exercise.

27. A new Community Choices tab will be created for the Facebook page and the link for this advertised on all communications materials. The page will allow people to leave their comments and point them towards more information and the questionnaire on the Planning Our Future website.

28. Facebook can now be used more frequently and effectively than during the Community Visioning exercise as the LDF team has access to the site. This will allow the LDF team to share photos and initial feedback from community workshops after they happen, hopefully generating more interest and discussion.

29. It is recommended that Twitter is used to inform local residents about the Community Choices when launched and also to provide reminders of community workshops and the location of the exhibition.

LDF Email Newsletter

30. Over 750 people stated that they wished to be kept informed of progress with the Core Planning Strategy and future consultations as a result of the Community Visioning exercise. Of these approximately 500 also included an email address and have been added to the LDF database to be kept informed of news items relating to the Issues and Options consultation.

31. The email newsletter is an excellent way of keeping people informed as it requires minimal resources to produce and can also provide feedback on how many people chose to view the website / get involved as a direct result of receiving it.

32. The distribution of the email will be managed through the Council's existing MailChimp software account and the content will be simple for people to read and understand. Links through to the Planning Our Future website and Facebook and Twitter pages will also be included.

Local Media Launch

33. In order to increase awareness within the community and encourage local people to get involved it is suggested that a series of co-ordinated activities take place to 'launch' the Community Choices exercise. These could include the following:

- (a) interview with local press two weeks prior to the launch in order to communicate the importance of the engagement process and the Council's commitment to understanding local views;
- (b) place a full page advertisement in the press during the launch week;
- (c) issue an EFDC press release through the Public Relations department;
- (d) ensure all online materials such as the Planning Our Future website, Facebook and Twitter pages are displaying the correct information and are set up to receive comments where necessary;
- (e) issue an LDF email newsletter to people on the Core Planning Strategy database;
- (f) ensure that all leaflets/questionnaires are sent out within two weeks of the launch in order to maintain momentum and give people time to register to attend workshops and return questionnaires; and

(g) work with Public Relations to provide a briefing pack for Councillors and the LDF team - the pack will include all the consultation materials to be distributed, information about the process and a brief FAQ to deal with the questions which are most likely to be asked.

Statutory/General Consultees

Formal Letter and Document

34. A formal letter will set out the subject of the Core Planning Strategy Issues and Options consultation along with a copy of the full document and questionnaire (Relevant group: Statutory consultees, general consultees, other interested parties).

Stakeholder Meetings

35. It is important to undertake meaningful dialogue with key stakeholders in order to discuss the Issues and Options. A programme of meetings will 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 Planning Strategy (Relevant group: Statutory consultees, general consultees).

Leaflet and Choices Questionnaire

36. It is important to ensure that the organisations within the general consultee group are well informed about the Issues and Options consultation and have the opportunity to submit their views. This can be achieved through the use of the same Community choices leaflet and questionnaire that is to be distributed to the general public.

37. It is important to offer this group two methods of commenting as some organisations will be quite formal and expect to receive the full document, whilst others will be less so and will require a more accessible and less time-consuming approach (Relevant group: General consultees).

Stakeholder Options Workshops

38. All General Consultees (plus adjoining LPAs) should be invited to attend a Stakeholder Options workshop. It is likely that there will be two workshops, one for technical stakeholders such as developers and other local authority departments and another for community groups in the area.

39. The purpose of the workshops will be (a) to identify the key issues for the Core Planning Strategy to address and (b) 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 Focus Groups

40. It is important to identify any hard-to-reach groups prior to the consultation period through discussions between the LDF team and the Performance Improvement Officer - Equality and Diversity. Guidance from CLG identifies 'hard-to-reach groups' as bodies which represent the interests of the following within the local authority's area:

(a) Different ethnic or national groups;

- (b) Different religious groups;
- (c) Disabled people; and
- (d) People carrying on business.

41. The Community Choices postcard scheme will be used to engage with commuters, who have also been identified as a hard-to-reach group (Relevant group: General consultees).

Timescales

42. At this stage, it is anticipated that the engagement period will run for 12 weeks from Monday 5 September to Friday 25 November.

43. This is a relatively long period of engagement, however it is considered that there are several benefits of the proposed timescale:

- (a) the Issues and Options consultation is more complex than the previous Community Visioning exercise and as such people will require more time to respond;
- (b) local people will have more time to hear about the Community Choices exercise and participate through community workshops;
- (c) there are more detailed requirements to consult with statutory and general consultee groups and as such more meetings and workshops are likely to be required than previously; and
- (d) as August can be a quiet time with people away on holiday it is important to make sure that there is time either side of this month.

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. The Community Visioning exercise carried out between November 2010 and January 2011 was within the agreed budget.

A draft budget for the Community Choices consultation exercise is set out in Appendix 1.

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 non compliance with statutory consultation requirements and 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.

This will include partnership working between the LDF team and the Performance Improvement Officer - 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?
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.