

ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE held at the COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN on 11 MARCH 2008 at 7.30 pm

Present: - Councillor S Barker – Chairman
Councillors K R Artus, C Cant, R Chamberlain, A Dean, C Down, E Godwin, S Howell, R Sherer and A M Wattebot.

Officers in attendance: - J Mitchell (Interim Chief Executive) M Cox (Committee Officer) R Harborough (Head of Planning and Housing Strategy) and S Clarke (Housing and Planning Policy Manager).

E43 PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Prior to the meeting statements were made by Peter Johnson and Petrina Lees. A copy of their statements and officers replies are attached to these Minutes.

E44 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors S Anjum, J F Cheetham, C M Dean, E Gower and H J Mason.

Councillor S Barker and A Dean declared a personal interest as members of EERA.

Councillor E J Godwin declared a personal interest as member of Birchanger Parish Council.

E45 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 22 January 2008 were agreed and signed by the Chairman subject to clarification of the figures reported on the 5th line of the second paragraph of Minute E34.

E46 MATTERS ARISING

(i) Minute E34 – Lead Officers Report

In answer to a question from Councillor A Dean, the Interim Chief Executive explained the basis behind the recent statutory timetable for preparing the Core Strategy. The date of 31 March 2008, to submit the Strategy had been approved by the Council and agreed by Go East. In September 2007 this had seemed a realistic timetable given that only 1000 responses had been received to the last consultation. However, due to the number of representations received it had been necessary to negotiate a new timetable.

This might have financial implications for the Council but it was a necessary course of action to ensure that all representations were taken into account and any new information was properly considered.

The Interim Chief Executive confirmed that a meeting of the LDF Task Group would be convened as soon as officers were in a position to put forward relevant information. He then replied to comments that had been made concerning Go East and ECC's concerns about the Core Strategy document. He said that constructive discussions were continuing with these bodies concerning work that was still to be done.

The Chairman reported that the district had achieved a recycling collection rate of 59.8% for January. This was 10% higher than any other district in the county.

(ii) Minute E40 – Review of Fees and Charges

The Chairman reported that the Council would be adopting a new policy as from 31 March to set a fine of £50 for overstay at car parks and £70 for illegal parking on yellow lines, in order to differentiate between these two offences.

It was understood that the orders for the new car parking charges had been drawn up and would be advertised shortly. Councillor A Dean asked to be advised of the likely implementation date.

(iii) Minute E42 – Revenue Budget 2008/09

Councillor A Dean asked for clarification of a report that a significant sum had been removed from the street cleansing budget. Members of the Waste Management Working Group said that this was not the case, although the budget would be more limited. It was hoped that the service could be enhanced by promoting partnership working with parish councils and the community.

E47 RURAL EXCELLENCE FINAL REPORT

The Housing and Planning Policy Manager reported that Uttlesford had been selected to take part in the Rural Excellence Programme for Strategic Housing and Affordable Rural Housing. This involved working with the Regional Development Agency, Government Office and town and parish councils to solve the most important housing issues for the locality. Five mentors had been selected and had held a number of workshops to discuss good practice and four objectives had been agreed. The final report had now been published and the mentors had put forward a number of recommendations.

The Chairman said that this programme would be likely to bring forward many issues, particularly in relation to housing. She said that the Council should

look at how housing issues could be given more prominence and questioned whether there was currently an appropriate forum within the Council to consider these matters.

Councillor Chamberlain welcomed the recommendations as a basis for further work. He was concerned at the suggestion that there should be only one partner for affordable housing schemes. He also thought that these schemes should predominantly provide homes for rent rather than shared ownership.

Councillor Wattebot said that Thaxted Parish Council was in the process of preparing its parish plan and was unsure as to the status of the completed plan. She was advised that recent plans had been submitted to the Development Control Committee and adopted as approved guidance.

Councillor A Dean was concerned that the Council was not taking a strong enough lead in developing its housing strategy and that a greater knowledge of housing need in the district was required.

RESOLVED that the recommendations were noted and officers research and provide proposals for recommendations b, d and f to the next meeting.

E48 REGIONAL SPACIAL STRATEGY SINGLE ISSUE REVIEW: PLANNING FOR GYPSY AND TRAVELLOR ACCOMMODATION IN THE EAST OF ENGLAND

The Regional Assembly had been working with planning authorities to identify the number of pitches required to meet the needs of gypsies and travellers. The current distribution was concentrated in particular parts of the region. The proposed distribution of the additional pitches followed a similar pattern but all districts were required to provide an additional 15 pitches to broaden the available choice. The exact location of the pitches would be determined by the relevant local authority.

In answer to a question, Members were informed of the current provision in the District, which on the whole was small scale and quite dispersed. Councillor A Dean said that there had been considerable discussion at the EERA meeting but felt that a balanced proposal had been achieved. Members agreed with this view and felt that 15 additional pitches could be easily absorbed in the district.

RESOLVED that the draft policy be supported.

E49 LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK CORE STRATEGY - UPDATE

The Committee received a report that set out the position of the Core Strategy following the close of the consultation period. The report set out a number of

factors which meant that it was now unlikely that officers would be able to recommend the submission Core Strategy to Members until early 2009 and it would not be finally adopted until early 2010.

The Interim Chief Executive said that a number of authorities had faced similar difficulties and 90% of them had slipped from the programme.

The Head of Planning and Housing Strategy answered points that had been raised earlier in the meeting and said that the LDF was intended to be strategy led. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment and the Strategic Housing Availability Assessment would also inform the decision. It would also need to consider whether a development site was achievable in terms of infrastructure and if there was development interest.

The Chairman said that the scoping opinion for Boxted Wood, Stebbing was on the agenda for the next meeting of the Development Control Committee and asked what this involved. She was advised that planning regulations allowed the developer to ask about the scope of an Environment Statement to be submitted to support a future application. The Interim Chief Executive confirmed that if the application was submitted before the Core Strategy was approved it would be considered in accordance with current plans.

Councillor Cant said that housing targets were not being achieved mainly due to the slow rate of building at Woodlands Park, Great Dunmow and asked if anything could be done to address this. She was advised that the assessments mentioned earlier would give a view on future supply and it might be necessary to put in place measures to improve.

Councillor A Dean could not understand why the target had slipped by 12 months when the additional sites had been known about previously. He asked why representations about these sites did not appear on the Limehouse system as this would allow the public to see the whole picture. The Chairman replied that the promoters of some of the alternative locations to those in the four options had carried out their own consultation exercises outside the Council's consultation period. This had resulted in further representations to the Council. It would take time to assess all the proposals, and in the meantime officers were moving toward analysing the representations received.

Councillor A Dean said that a lot of lessons had been learnt in the last six months and he hoped that the Council would do things differently during the next stage of the process. He hoped that there would be an opportunity for public participation in working up a scheme and he was willing to convene a scrutiny review if necessary.

In answer to a question from Councillor Cant it was confirmed that it was still not known when the Government decision on the bids for eco towns would be announced. Any proposal would be subject to a planning application and rigorous examination. It was unclear whether the homes would be instead of

or in addition to the houses already allocated for the district. Councillor A Dean asked why there had been a Council press release about eco towns when the Council had not yet formed a policy on this issue. The Chairman said that press release reflected the Administration's view, confirming that current policy did not support an eco town in the District.

E50 NATS CONSULTATION

The Chairman agreed to the consideration of this item on the grounds of urgency as the matter needed to be discussed before the next meeting of the Committee.

Councillor Chamberlain said that the recent meeting of the North Area Panel had discussed the recent NATS consultation on the proposed changes to flight paths from Stansted Airport. Members had been concerned that communities might not be aware of this consultation and the potential implications for their area and had asked that officers assess the proposal in detail and make information available to relevant parties. Officers said they did not have sufficient resources to carry out a comprehensive analysis and the consultation had gone directly to the Parish Councils. The District Council was likely to consider its response to the consultation at the next meeting of Full Council. The Chairman understood that ECC had raised objection to aspects of the proposals and would circulate a copy of the response to Members of the Committee.

The meeting ended at 9.05 pm.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

i) Mr Peter Johnson

Uttlesford District Council – Environment Committee Meeting
11th March 2008

Statement from Mr. Peter Johnson
Elsenham Parish Council Member on the Joint Parish Councils Steering Group

I have read, with interest, the Principal Planning Officer's report to members regarding the position of the Core Strategy and noted the progress made, to date, with the entry of responses to the public consultation into the Limehouse system.

The Joint Parish Councils Steering Group has been monitoring the Limehouse system, as regards the entry of representations, particularly those from residents in Henham and Elsenham. In doing this, a number of concerns have arisen regarding both the criteria used to determine how and where the representations are placed within the Limehouse system, and with the system itself.

As regards the entry of representations, it has become clear from the monitoring, and when comparing certain original representations made, with that which has been entered into Limehouse, that there can be definite disparities between the two. The reasons for many of these disparities occurring can be summarised as either:

- 1) Errors and mistakes have occurred when entering the data, which is understandable, given the large amount of information to be processed, and the need to transfer much of that data into Limehouse, by hand. I am certain that the staff undertaking this work are both conscientious and thorough in dealing with this huge amount of information, nevertheless, accuracy is going to be vital in reaching a correct judgement on the outcome of the consultation process.
- 2) Instances where respondents have not been absolutely clear and specific in stating their views and whether they support, oppose, or are making observations to the consultation and its preferred options, we recognise, can present problems. However, the vast majority of these respondents are not planning experts and in these situations, a judgement has to be made by Uttlesford staff, on behalf of the respondent as to where in the Limehouse system a particular entry should be assigned.

- 3) For representations made, usually by letter, or as an e-mail message, decisions have been taken to précis and summarise the respondent's submission, and in doing so, this has in some cases altered the nature and meaning of the submission made.
- 4) Instances where part of a representation refers to an objection (or support) for more than one Option, for example, an objection to Option 4 and also Option 3. It has been the case that only a single entry – the objection to Option 4, for example, has been entered into the Limehouse system. No entry of the objection to Option 3 has been entered. In other cases, the multiple objections have been grouped together under a single catch-all paragraph, for example, Paragraph 5.11.

The Joint Parish Councils' Monitoring Team has been in regular correspondence with the members of the Policy Team to question and challenge these types of discrepancies, and other issues, which it feels needs to be drawn to the attention of the Council. There is also concern that, although the Policy Team has in most instances made corrections where discrepancies have occurred, there are a few on which agreement has not been possible.

Lastly, I would also like to make a general observation on the Limehouse system itself, which is understood to be an off-the-shelf, proprietary software system. Like many off-the-shelf software applications, there will be limitations in its flexibility, particularly when faced with a large, complex, public consultation exercise such as the Local Development Framework Core Strategy. It is likely, therefore, that there will be constraints as to how data may be entered and processed, and also, that much of the content, format and presentation of reports from Limehouse will be pre-set by the system, and unable to be changed and tailored to meet the specific demands of the user. Therefore, whenever any of us rely upon these types of data handling and management systems, we must always be aware that they are imperfect by their nature and that the information on the representation to the consultation produced from the Limehouse system may not always properly or correctly reflect the information entered into it.

My statement notwithstanding, I would, nevertheless, like to receive from the Council, answers to three questions, these being:-

- Q1 **“What guidelines were drawn up and given to members of the Policy Team to provide them with assistance and clear guidance to allow them to decide, when and how, a particular representation or comment should to be summarised, as opposed to it being entered verbatim?”**
- Q2 **“What criteria are used by members of the Policy Team to determine where in the Limehouse system, a particular representation or comment should be placed?”**
- Q3. **Where part of a representation refers to an objection, or support, for more than one Option, what cross-checks can be put in place to ensure that all of a respondent’s points are accurately logged?**

Officers replied that the Limehouse system was open and transparent and for the first time members of the public had an opportunity to track their representations. It was inevitable that some mistakes would be made but these could be corrected. There was a degree of judgement involved in allocating the category of objection but there was a convention within the team as to where it should be attached. There were cross checks to ensure accuracy of data input and all the information was open and available for scrutiny. Due to the number of comments received the representations were now being attached in full as a PDF file. The resources within the team were now being switched to analysing the representations received.

ii) Petrina Lees

Petrina Lees said that she didn’t consider this issue to be a political matter. She asked where the Council was going with the proposals, particularly in the light of the recent concerns voiced by Essex County Council and Go East.

She said that there was not enough robust evidence in the options and particularly in the case for a single settlement. There was a lack of information as to why some proposals had been rejected and she questioned why the option of dispersement had not been considered.

She questioned the sense of urgency with the consultation and why it had to take place over Christmas when a recommended Core Strategy was not expected until 2009. She asked the Council to accept that the preferred option was not the right one and asked members to look at this again and to accompany the decision with robust credible evidence. She hoped that the development options would be strategy rather than developer led. She asked

whether the Council would be looking at other development opportunities in the district.

The Chairman said that the Council had gone out to consultation and would be listening to all the replies. They would come back with a proposed way forward but councillors had to rely on officers' professional advice.