

**LOCAL PLAN LEADERSHIP GROUP held at COUNCIL CHAMBER -
COUNCIL OFFICES, LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on
WEDNESDAY, 26 JULY 2023 at 7.00 pm**

Present: Councillor G Bagnall (Chair)
Councillors C Criscione, J Evans, R Freeman, R Gooding,
J Loughlin, R Pavitt, N Reeve and M Tayler

Officers in attendance: D Hermitage (Director of Planning), A Maxted (Interim Planning
Policy Manager) and C Shanley-Grozavu (Democratic Services
Officer)

Public
Speakers: A Dodsley and V Thompson

1 PUBLIC SPEAKERS

Mr Vincent Thompson and Mr Andy Dodsley addressed the meeting.

Copies of their statements have been appended to the minutes.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence or declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved as a correct record.

The Chair welcomed the new members to the Local Plan Leadership Group (LPLG). He highlighted that this was the first meeting of the Municipal year and explained that there had been a delay for a meeting to be convened due to May's Local Election and the subsequent requirement for Cabinet to approve the new membership.

In response to comments made by the Public Speakers, the Chair explained that there were plans for further workshops during the summer which would consider commercially sensitive data. The Director of Planning highlighted that the Local Government Association, who had advised the Council on the governance arrangements for the Local Plan, had said that there would be a number of occasions when the LPLG would have to meet in private.

Mr Dodsley clarified that his concerns were around the lack of published evidence, rather than the group meeting in private.

Councillor Criscione made a statement regarding his own personal interests, a copy of which has been attached to the minutes.

LOCAL PLAN UPDATE

The Interim Interim Planning Policy Manager provided an update on the progress of the Local Plan.

It was confirmed that the public consultation for the Regulation 18 Local Plan would be held in Autumn 2023. Following this, officers would consider the comments and make any necessary changes to the documentation before the public consultation for the Regulation 19 Local Plan commenced in Summer 2024. The actual plan submission was not scheduled until the end of 2024, and all comments received in the latter consultation would be presented to the Planning Inspectorate.

In response to questions from members, officers clarified the following:

- The Secretary of State had set a deadline of 30th June 2025 for Councils to submit their Local Plans under the current system. Whilst officers did not yet know if the new proposals may or may not be beneficial to Uttlesford, they were reluctant to delay the Plan further as this would result in more years of further speculative development.
- The preferred sites and spatial strategy would be finalised and shared with LPLG members in the next six weeks, and they would have an opportunity to discuss this at one of the two upcoming workshops. Officers proposed not to make this information public until it was complete, as there were risks to releasing information fragmentally.
- The methodology for the Site Selection process had previously been presented to, and agreed by, the LPLG in a public meeting in November 2022.
- The current Housing targets was based on 2014 census data and would continue to be unless the 2021 data was published before the start of the consultations.
- Whilst officers outlined the benefits to having an over-supply on the housing allocation, there was a greater need to ensure that the plan had the right policies to address the district's needs and for protection from speculative or inappropriate development.
- There was a mix of technical studies and supporting evidence which would be published alongside the consultation to assist with the understanding of what had informed the process. These studies were also used to test the viability of the draft plan in order to demonstrate sound evidence and that the policies were deliverable as a whole.
- The Regulation 18 document would look as much like a full draft plan as possible. There was a shared belief that the more information people were able to access, the more they were able to comment on the full proposals.
- Once the Regulation 19 Local Plan was published, the Council could only suggest minor modifications, subject to agreement through the governance process.
- The Supplementary Planning Documents would sit alongside the Local Plan as an additional tool for the Planning Committee to assess applications with. They would be refreshed to support the new Local Plan, but cannot themselves create new policy.

- Due to length of time without an up-to-date Local Plan, many Council policies did not currently support national standards, such as room sizes. When adopted, the new Local Plan would set out these updates and include the most recent standards
- Officers would work with infrastructure providers on the required infrastructure for the allocated sites. It was noted that any proposed development in existing settlements would more likely benefit the whole settlement in addressing the infrastructure deficit caused by speculative development.
- The Green Belt was national policy, but Local Authorities had the ability to adjust the boundaries if necessary. Officers were not recommending that this was done in Uttlesford.
- The Countryside Protection Zone (CPZ) was developed by Local Authority under the old local plan. It was up to the council to decide if they wish to maintain it. The Chair stated it was LPLG's request to retain the current CPZ.
- Whilst it is also important to consider the longer-term direction of the district, the main focus was on the emerging Local Plan and how it addresses the current profile of the district.

Members raised concerns about the possible lack of transparency by holding meetings in private and not releasing evidence until the publication of Regulation 18. Officers explained that they were trying to find a balance in progressing a plan quickly, but also factoring in the Council's interests and aspirations, along with a need to address the infrastructure deficit.

Moreover, the Local Plan team were working towards a consultation where everything would be made public so that stakeholders would have at least six weeks to consider all the information and make a meaningful contribution towards the process with their comments.

The Local Plan Leadership Group requested to see drafts of the policies and evidence, even if they were not ready for publication, in order to start to identify any gaps.

The update was noted.

5 **UTTLESFORD DESIGN CODE**

The Director of Planning presented an update on the draft Uttlesford Design Code.

Members commended the draft code and gave thanks to the outgoing Principal Urban Designer for their work on the project.

During discussion, it was noted that the Code would sit amongst the Council's other SPDs and be supported by the National Design Code. Furthermore, it set a minimum standard for all new development and offered an additional level of protection against poor design, such as the examples outlined within the document.

Members requested that Essex Highways engage with the Council on the Code to achieve the connectivity and safety required on district's transport network.

The Chair requested that any further questions or comments be forwarded to the Local Plan Team.

The report was noted.

Meeting ended 21:11

PUBLIC SPEAKERS

Mr Vincent Thompson

“Good evening. It is good to see LPLG back in action again after a long break. The priority is, of course, to ensure that this time, at the third attempt, the draft Local Plan is successful. Hence the need to ensure that the evidence base is robust.

My congratulations to our new Director of Planning for rebuilding the planning team so rapidly. We wish them well over the next few busy months prior to the issue of the draft Plan.

Landscape & Heritage are of course fundamental to the Uttlesford District. The shortcomings of the papers published to date have been highlighted, notably by Cllr Haynes. My own concerns, as expressed to the LPLG meeting of 28 October 2021 and reiterated in a formal letter from our lawyers, Richard Buxton to the Chief Executive dated 8 December 2021, was that the granularity of both meant that they failed in the basic objective of ‘informing the Plan’. Hopefully, our refreshed Planning Department will address these shortcomings and make revised documents available.

I welcome the addition to the Planning Team of a Conservation Officer and look forward to the arrival of an Ecologist as too the report covering compulsory Biodiversity Net Gain due in the Autumn.

Hopefully, this will address one element of the evidence base which I think is lacking. I refer to Nature Recovery Strategies, an area of increasing importance both at the national level with The Environmental Improvement Plan (highlighted in my email to the Planning Director of 3 February 2023), and at the local level with the formation of the Essex Local Nature Partnership.

This requires an understanding of the geology, topography, and ecology north into Cambridgeshire and down to Epping Forest. Members will be aware that the Essex Forest ran from Epping to Thaxted. Though severely damaged by the grubbing of Hainault Forest in the mid nineteenth century and the building of an airfield on Easton Park in World War II, the fundamentals remain with Hatfield Forest and Easton Park providing the key links.

Our Eco report on Easton Park published in March 2022 proposed a Nature Recovery Network from Thaxted to Hatfield Forest via the Chelmer Valley and Tilty and incorporating a restored Easton Park. This could be extended down to Epping, possibly with support from the City of London, owners of Epping Forest. So, once the Ecologist is on board, might I suggest that Nature Recovery Strategy should be a priority lest troublesome parties, such as myself, highlight the lack post Reg 18.”

Mr Andy Dodsley

“In a Dunmow Broadcast article last week, Councillor Evans was quoted as saying that the Local Plan Leadership Group was in place to scrutinise and inform the suite of evidence necessary to inform the local plan making process.

With only one previous LPLG meeting this year, I was looking forward to tonight’s meeting to see some of the outputs from the work that we are assured has been going on over the last year.

Imagine my disappointment when I saw from the agenda that all we are going to get tonight is a verbal update on Local Plan progress.

In the same Dunmow Broadcast article, Councillor Evans stated that the LPLG “meets to consider a wide range of technical studies and evidence, and then makes informed recommendations to the council’s cabinet”.

Where are the wide range of technical studies and evidence? Where are the heritage and landscape assessments? The transport studies? The site assessments? The sustainability appraisals?

Not one study or piece of evidence has been put before this group in the last 12 months. The council is now fast approaching the same scenario we saw last June when key evidence base documents had not been seen by LPLG just 7 days before the Regulation 18 recommendations were due to go to cabinet.

You are probably fed up with me banging on about this – many of you will have heard me talk about this before. I make no apologies for this - The Regulation 18 publication date of 27th of October is now around 12 weeks and a probable maximum of 3 LPLG meetings away and time is running out.

As a resident, I am feeling totally uninformed as to the development and content of the evidence base and I am struggling to see how this group can be any more informed than I am based on what evidence you have seen and I am left wondering how you will be able to make any “informed recommendations” to cabinet when the time comes.

I am therefore looking for some reassurance that this group will be providing the levels of scrutiny that councillor Evans talks about over the Local Plan. That the key evidence base documents and studies will all be “considered” and discussed by the LPLG prior to the publication of the Regulation 18 draft plan and that members of the public will finally see some transparency in what to date has been a totally opaque process.”

STATEMENT FROM CLLR CRISCIONE

Chairman, I appreciate that this is not a decision-making body, but nevertheless I want to make a personal statement regarding my own interests, which have been the cause of some discussion in agreeing the membership of this body.

Whilst I am proud in my day job to work in the built environment and to champion growth as the greatest way to better communities across the land, this in no way includes work within Uttlesford. I have no pecuniary interest in the promotion of any site, nor shall I for the duration of my tenure in this place.

I am both morally and legally disallowed from working on ANY projects in Uttlesford in my day job, something that is heavily regulated by the PRCA, the regulatory body to which my employer (and thus myself as a consultant) is fully subscribed.

Of course, I need not justify myself, having made all the necessary declarations. However, insodoing I want to make it abundantly clear that all which is driving me as a Councillor, and member of this committee, is to deliver a local plan for the benefit of the communities that elect us. Nothing else.

Such a declaration I feel is important to ensure this group is without any suggestion of prejudice.

I hope I have, in my time as a councillor, showed that I champion integrity and accountability above all else. This is no exception.

- Cllr Criscione
LPLG, 26th July 2023