

Committee:	Cabinet	Date:
Title:	Report from Scrutiny Committee regarding AECOM engagement	Tuesday, 26 November 2019
Portfolio Holder:	Leader of the Council, Lead for Planning and the Local Plan	
Report Author:	Richard Auty, Assistant Director - Corporate Services rauty@uttlesford.gov.uk	Key decision: N

Summary

1. At its meeting on 15 July 2019, Cabinet referred a matter to Scrutiny relating to the engagement of AECOM to review the Local Plan Sustainability Appraisal.
2. The matter was discussed at Scrutiny Committee on 24 September 2019 agreed that a note prepared by the Chair of Scrutiny Cllr Neil Gregory be referred back to Cabinet.

Recommendations

3. Cabinet considers the note from Cllr Gregory.

Financial Implications

4. None

Background Papers

5. The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author of the report.

None

Impact

- 6.

Communication/Consultation	None
Community Safety	None
Equalities	None
Health and Safety	None

Human Rights/Legal Implications	None
Sustainability	The report is in connection to the Sustainability Appraisal
Ward-specific impacts	None
Workforce/Workplace	None

Situation

7. At the Cabinet meeting of 15 July 2019, the Chair of Scrutiny Cllr Neil Gregory raised the concerns of a resident who had contacted him regarding the engagement of AECOM to review the Sustainability Appraisal.

8. Cabinet made the following resolution:

To refer AECOM's commission to carry out the Sustainability Appraisal update to the Scrutiny Committee, in light of a comment received by a member of the public.

9. The minute for the item is as follows:

The Chair presented the report on the Council's updated Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), a document explaining to the community how and when they could be involved in the planning policy process, and the steps that would be taken to encourage this involvement. The council's updated SCI had been sent out for consultation in early 2019 and considered by the Planning Policy Working Group (PPWG) on 19 March 2019. The group had recommended that Cabinet adopt the document subject to amendments outlined in the report.

Councillor Gregory raised the concerns of a resident who had accused the council of a 'lack of truthfulness' regarding the commissioning of AECOM to review the Sustainability Appraisal. He said there was a discrepancy between the appointment of AECOM to carry out the appraisal on 29 August and a payment to the company on 4 July. Furthermore, during the audio recording of the PPWG meeting on November 2018 it was stated that AECOM had begun work in June. This comment had not been corrected. He said a lack of transparency was at the heart of these concerns.

The Chair said there had been concerns at the Local Plan inspection in relation to the legality of the consultation, particularly with regards to the 'focused changes'. He said the issue of legal process would be left with the Inspector and the Administration would await the Inspector's feedback. In terms of the commissioning of the Sustainability Appraisal, he said AECOM had begun work in late June 2018, although Members were not made aware of this until October. He asked Cabinet whether this was an appropriate subject for Scrutiny to look at.

10. Following the Cabinet meeting, Cllr Gregory engaged in correspondence with relevant officers on the matter. Cllr Gregory and the Vice-Chair of Scrutiny Cllr Garry LeCount also attended a meeting with officers to discuss it.
11. Cllr Gregory reported back to Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 24 September 2019 with a paper summarising the situation and a timeline of events. Scrutiny Committee noted that there had been a failure to fully inform Members and the public of the potential challenges to the Sustainability Appraisal and proposed remedial action. This was due to an unintentional oversight and measures were now in place that should ensure there is no repetition.
12. Scrutiny Committee resolved to refer the paper to Cabinet.
13. The minute for the item is as follows:

The Chair opened the discussion by stating the next three items, while being dealt with individually, were of a similar theme and there was a perception in some quarters that the Council had not always acted as openly and truthfully as might be wished and whether there were issues of trust that might need to be resolved.

He gave a summary of the report. Cabinet had referred a matter to the Scrutiny Committee relating to the engagement of AECOM to review the Local Plan Sustainability Appraisal. The Chair had proposed a note to Cabinet following correspondence and a meeting which took place over the summer. This note summarised that there had been a failure to fully inform Members and the public of the potential challenges to the Sustainability Appraisal and proposed remedial action. This was due to an unintentional oversight by an officer. Measures were now in place that should preclude a repetition.

14. Attached to this report are the paper prepared by Cllr Gregory and the timeline prepared by officers, which Cabinet is invited to discuss.