

Planning Portfolio Lead Member Update Report

Full Council, 18th May 2021

Local Plan

The Council has just completed the initial consultation on its Local Plan, this is on track with the timetable agreed in the Local Development Scheme in October 2020. This consultation has been split into 9 different themes, with each theme opening with a discussion in public, in the Community Stakeholder Forum. Uttlesford has also had two specific consultation meetings with Town and Parish Councils to explain and respond to questions on the themes. These discussions were intended to spark a wider conversation and ideas and encourage people to submit representations to the consultation. These meetings were broadcast live and uploaded to the Council's YouTube channel. At the time of writing Uttlesford has not yet completed the processing of representations received, however we estimate that we have received just over 600 representations.

Alongside the Local Plan consultation, a call for sites was held, calling for the submission of sites for the Council to consider for the Local Plan. For the first time in Uttlesford this included a call for 'green sites' to be submitted. At the time of writing, it is estimated that we received between 200 and 300 sites. We will be aiming to publish this list in June / July, and then hold a consultation on the technical aspects of the site assessments.

This consultation programme is innovative, being run differently from the way consultations on local plans are normally run and is designed to secure very early engagement before a single decision on the plan is made. Rather than the Council writing a draft plan and asking for others' views on the draft plan, the public's views are being sought before a single word of draft consultation policies have been written. The open, discursive nature of the consultation is also intended to encourage engagement from those that do not normally get involved in the planning system. Comments received will then be used to help draft the first version of the Council's Local Plan.

The preparatory evidential work and community engagement is being undertaken at a pace conforming to the programme set for it.

In the autumn 2020, the government consulted on changes to the standard housing methodology for calculating housing need. Had these changes been made the Council's housing need would be over 1,200 homes per year. The Council along with others, made representations to the government objecting to this change, these objections were successful and the changes to the calculation of housing need did not impact Uttlesford. The calculation of housing need for Uttlesford results in a need of 706 homes per year. The Council will be taking this figure into account when developing its Local Plan.

A detailed programme of work to December 2021 was agreed on the Local Plan at Local Plan Leadership Group on 29 April. This sets out an ambitious timetable of work to ensure the timetable set out in the Local Development Scheme is met. This includes LPLG making recommendations to Cabinet over the summer on the objectives, housing numbers and preliminary outline strategy for the Local Plan.

Development Management

The Development Management function continues to deliver business as usual, with no reduction in planning applications submitted through the year. Indeed, recently submitted applications have been on the increase. The development industry is clearly preparing to build itself outside of the current downturn of the economy due to the pandemic and no doubt taking into account the lack of a recent Local Plan and absence of a five year land supply. There has also been an upturn in the numbers of householder applications for changes for homeworking and in response to the buoyant housing market brought about by the Stamp Duty Holiday.

The pandemic has brought the challenges of virtual Planning Committees, and Uttlesford has been one of the leaders in the County in delivery of virtual Planning Committee meetings from very early on in the pandemic in May 2020. The challenge is now the return to physical Committees following the Government's decision not to extend the period of emergency powers.

Officers continue to deal with the full range of planning applications and pre-application discussions ranging from rear extensions to proposals for major new housing developments. We continue to encourage developers to enter into Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs), which of course generate fees payable to the Council, so that we can engage local communities in planning proposals before formal applications are submitted. By doing this, we are already finding that developers are hearing what members and local community representatives think about the initial proposals advanced and in many cases, the developers are amending their applications to take on board these initial comments. As part of this early engagement, developers are also encouraged to take their proposals to the Essex Quality Design Panel for an external peer review of their proposals – again with the view to address potential issues, particularly in relation to design, before their planning application is submitted. This approach is becoming the default approach and should bear dividends as better framed planning applications emerge on this. One example of this was the successful reporting and approval of the two sites north of Woodside Way, Great Dunmow, where the early and continued engagement of the community and reliance on high quality design resulted in a scheme positively embraced by the community and the Planning Committee.

Progress has been made with the reporting to Scrutiny Committee, due to be submitted on 26 May, of the Task and Finish Group Study on Section 106s. This will finally inform the Council's improved approach to Section 106s, including community involvement, consistency of approach and maximising the effective delivery of infrastructure through emerging development.