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LOCAL PLAN LEADERSHIP GROUP held on ZOOM on WEDNESDAY, 9 FEBRUARY 2022 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillor G Bagnall (Chair)
Councillors M Caton, R Freeman, M Lemon, B Light, J Lodge,
S Merifield, R Pavitt, N Reeve, M Sutton and M Tayler

Officers in attendance: T Coleman (Interim Director of Planning), C Edwards (Democratic Services Officer), J Hill (Local Plan and New Communities Senior Planning Policy Officer) and S Miles (Local Plan and New Communities Manager).

Also present: R Wise and A Heinrich (National Farming Union, NFU)

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no apologies for absence or declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2021 were approved.

Councillor Light requested that the statistics due from the last meeting regarding Chesterford Retail Park (CRP) were provided. The Local Plan and New Communities Manager apologised and said he would circulate the details.

3 **AGRICULTURAL ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION IN THE LOCAL PLAN**

Rob Wise, NFU East Anglia Environment Advisor and Alastair Heinrich, NFU Graduate Trainee presented their report on the current legislation affecting agriculture and how farming businesses were changing.

In response to questions from Councillor Pavitt, Mr Wise said that there was some disconnect between the Agricultural and Environment acts. He said the development of Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) and the nature recovery component of the Environment act were on different timescales and the local development of the nature recovery package had been devolved to County Council level, but they did not necessarily have the expertise.

He said that there was an opportunity to protect chalk streams through legislation in terms of buffering and what is allowed to go into the streams. He said the main issue was the flow of water and its availability, agriculture was a major user, but most came from domestic use and the growth of developments put a strain on the water supply.

He said that this could be addressed by extraction licences to limit how much water is taken out of chalk streams and in the longer term a plan to build two major reservoirs to feed into the water ways.

Councillor Pavitt said he remained concerned that there was not an appropriate solution for the East of England as reservoirs were dependant on rain fall and this quantity of rainwater could cause a problem to the alkaline nature of the streams.

In response to a question from Councillor Merifield, Mr Heinrich said the land would continue to trap and store carbon whilst the solar panels were in place and as long as there was an adequate removal plan it could be returned to agricultural use once they had been removed.

Councillor Light said that farmers and growers could support the community by using their expertise to encourage Country Farm Parks, Urban Parks, and the use of small spaces to grow food.

She said that the district should consider the utilisation of agricultural space to feed into the building industry using local materials for developments, for example wood, sheep's wool and hemp to reduce the carbon footprint.

She said the Local Plan would benefit from Agri research at the Chesterford Retail Park.

Mr Wise said that he would be pleased to link Local Authorities with local farmers to create stronger relationships and to share expertise. He said it was important to incorporate into building codes requirements for net zero targets in construction standards, in order to encourage this sort of utilisation of the land for different purposes. He said the Local Authority needed to take steps to enable Agri research.

Councillor Tayler said this highlighted the tensions of land use, for food, energy and other uses, which took land away from the production of food and could have a negative impact for residents and tourism. He asked how the Local Plan could help farmers to make the right choices of land use for themselves and for residents.

Mr Wise said that farmers were moving away from artificial pesticides due to productivity, environmental and net zero reasons. He said there was always a balance when changing the use of land, and it needed to be a local discussion to get the right balance.

It was agreed that the presentation would be circulated to Members.

The Chair thanked Mr Wise and Mr Heinrich for their presentation and said it would be interesting to see how farmers and residents could help each other.

RETAIL CAPACITY STUDY

The Local Plan and New Communities Manager presented the report.

He said that this was another piece of evidence to inform the emerging Local Plan. The study examined the latest retail trends and incorporated a series of health-checks across the district, which included a household telephone survey. The survey enabled a detailed assessment of current shopping patterns, and an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each centre.

He said the report identified some issues particularly in Saffron Walden where there had been a move away from town centre destinations to out of centre destinations.

He said that there was limited capacity for new convenience shopping and said that the Council might wish to consider an additional food store in Great Dunmow to meet this identified need. He said that applicants would still be required to provide justification for the impact of any proposals on existing centres in line with both local and national guidance.

He said the Study found very limited capacity for new comparison shopping policy and finally made a series of recommendations.

In response to a question from Councillor Lodge, the Local Plan and New Communities Manager said that the fire station, laundry site and Emson Close/Rose and Crown Walk sites would be looked at to see if they could address the issues identified in the report and noted that it would be difficult to achieve but potentially very important.

There was discussion about a particular site in Dunmow that had been considered in the past for use as a convenience store. It was agreed that this would be passed onto the Local Plan and New Communities Manager outside of the meeting. He said that if a site could be identified then it should be in the regulation 18 report or something to state what progress had been made.

In response to a question from Councillor Reeve, the Local Plan and New Communities Manager said that that he was beginning to bring evidence together from the various reports and drafting policies for the Local Plan that would be brought before members in April.

The Chair said that if the NFU had standard templates for policies, for instance regarding the decommissioning of solar farms, could these be used rather than writing policies from scratch.

Councillor Caton asked if there would be another study after the development strategy had been finalised. He was concerned that there was no mention in the retail study of Stansted which lacked both convenience and comparison shopping. He said that if there was going to be an increase in development in that part of the district the strategy would need to be reviewed again to avoid the increase in car journeys to other areas including Bishops Stortford.

The Local Plan and New Communities Manager agreed and said that the implications of the planned developments in terms of jobs, retail etc, would need to be reviewed.

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INFRASTRUCTURE DELIVERY PLAN - BASELINE REPORT

The Local Plan and New Communities Manager presented the report, he said that it looked at the existing infrastructure in and around the district.

He said the main issues in the report were on page 249 and highlighted the following: -

- The rural nature of the district led to more private car journeys and the Local Plan needed to identify alternatives where possible.
- Neighbouring plans, growth corridors and plans from other Infrastructure providers should be considered in and around the district.
- There was significant pressure on education especially at a Primary level.
- The lack of alternative open spaces put pressure on Hatfield Forest.
- There was a need to provide for net biodiversity gain.
- GP practices were at capacity.
- The need to assist water providers to plan for their developments in a water stressed area.
- Increase in electricity use – especially in terms of electric cars.

He said the next Infrastructure Delivery Plan (IDP) would look at the need for, and timing of new infrastructure provision and funding strategies as the Local Plan developed.

In response to a question from the Chair, the Interim Director of Planning said that the growth of GP practices and schools would be dependent on the policies put in place. She said that in other areas GP practices were forming larger combined practices and super surgeries. She said that there would need to be an understanding of what GP surgeries needed in this district.

Councillor Tayler said the situation with GP surgeries was complicated. He said that they grew slowly but if there was a larger number of new residents there would be a need for new practices. He said there was also a shortage of doctors, nurses, and GPs.

Councillor Tayler said that the comments made in the report about the need for cycling infrastructure within the district, did not consider the rural nature of the roads which were narrow, and cars drove fast making it dangerous to cycle. He said there was not an easy answer.

Councillor Lodge said there was an error on the base inventory which still listed the Friends School sports hall and swimming pool which no longer existed and needed to be brought up to date.

He said there was already spatial strategy work going on within the Council and the Local Plan team needed to be involved.

Members were concerned that there was no planned increase to capacity of secondary schools within the report and Essex County Council's 10 year plan.

The Interim Director of Planning said that until a Local Plan was in place there would not be provision made in these plans.

Councillor Caton said that he thought there needed to be some reality checking he raised the following points: -

- The report said that Thaxted and Stansted libraries were closing but due to the public response this had been put off for at least 5 years.
- Addenbrookes Hospital was mentioned but not Princess Alexander or Broomfields.
- Stansted Surgeries now included the Stortford Fields development in Bishops Stortford. The health care provisions were not necessarily within one district.

Councillor Freeman said the Local Plan needed to be flexible, and he did not think this document provided a suitable infrastructure strategy.

The Local Plan and New Communities Manager asked for Members to pass on factual errors within the report.

The Interim Director of Planning said that new development could not put right past problems and developers could only be asked to contribute to current relevant issues.

She said that the lack of a Local Plan meant that the Council was not included in any forward programmes for water, education etc and there was a substantial backlog of issues. She said the IDP looked at all infrastructure and once sites were identified it would consider the impact and infrastructure required. This would establish what developers would pay for and what would come forward through Strategic Industrial Locations (SIL). The remaining infrastructure projects would need to be paid for in other ways through applying for government funding.

She said that although the Local Plan set out the allocation of suitable sites for development, the applicant would still need to demonstrate it could be delivered without adverse impact to the infrastructure of the area.

She said the IDP needed to identify everything and determine what was expected from developers, enabling them to know exactly what had to be paid for when buying from the land promoter.

The Chair said that there was a legacy of not having a Local Plan. He said there needed to be session to discuss this further as the Local Plan developed.

The Local Plan and New Communities Manager said the IDP was a baseline picture of the existing situation, once sites were confirmed it would be clearer what was expected in terms of infrastructure.

SHOPFRONT DESIGN GUIDE REPORT

The Local Plan and New Communities Manager presented the report. He asked for Member's endorsement of the guide as a material consideration to support planning decisions.

He said the report was part of a series of documents on design guidance to improve the design of new developments in the district. The guide would apply to developments relating to the design of, and alteration to, existing shop fronts and commercial signage in the district.

In response to comments from Councillor Freeman, the Local Plan and New Communities Manager said that there would be opportunities to change the document and a consultation process would take place before it was adopted. The particular timing of the report was to support Saffron Walden Town Council's neighbourhood plan.

The Chair said that as the design guide supported Saffron Walden's neighbourhood plan and could be reviewed and updated before it was finally adopted, he suggested that Members supported this proposal.

The Members agreed unanimously.

The meeting ended at 9.07 pm