

**Councillor John Evans, Portfolio Holder for Planning, Stansted Airport, Infrastructure Strategy and the Local Plan**

**Report to Council: 11 October 2022**

**Local Plan**

As Members will no doubt be aware, the Council was due to consult on its Regulation 18 'Preferred Options' document in November 2022. Last month, we announced that the production of this document is delayed. The publication and consultation was aborted as it had become apparent to senior officers that, despite strenuous efforts by the Local Plans team, the intended document could not be completed to an acceptable standard within target timescales.

It is therefore proposed to schedule a post-local election Reg.18 consultation, in early summer 2023. A proposed revised local plan timetable (known as the LDS) is being presented to a joint session of the Local Plan Leadership Group and Scrutiny Committee on 10 October.

It is proposed to use the time between now and June 2023 to produce a more focused, accessible and effective form of consultation document, address perceived shortcomings in some of the current content, and further develop and integrate the evidence required to support the plan. This 'Draft Plan' should make consultation more effective, and in various ways progress the Council further towards what is the most crucial step in the process; the Regulation 19 submission of a completed and sound 'final' plan for examination. It is not expected that the Reg19 would be delayed much beyond an additional three months, as by producing a more robust Reg18 document, we can compress the time needed to produce the Reg19 stage of the plan.

Between now and June, the overall spatial strategy will be further developed and clarified; strategic site choices will be more clearly distinguished and their rationale explained; the site selection process (a key criticism of emerging proposals to date) will be re-run to more rigorous standards, potentially resulting in different and more robustly justified, proposed site allocations; proposed development management policies will be refined; and questions to consultees drafted.

Unfortunately, the Local Plan team has suffered from high staff turnover in the past two years, with three of seven planners in the team leaving the council within the last four weeks – including the team's Manager.

In response, we have reviewed job roles, job descriptions, notice periods, and are in the process of re-profiling the Planning Service structure. We have brought in highly experienced interim planners to maintain impetus, and will be recruiting to the vacant roles on a permanent basis in the next few weeks.

A refreshed and detailed project plan to support the Reg18 work is currently being developed and will be reported to the LPLG and Scrutiny Committee.

## **Development Management**

The development management team continues to work on its performance transformation programme in response to the authority being designated by the SoS in February of this year. Members will recall, the designation was due unsatisfactory performance in the quality of its decision making on major applications – in essence, we could not successfully defend enough of our major planning decisions made between 2018-2020. In July, DLUHC wrote to the council advising that its performance was still below the threshold required. This came as no surprise, as period from which the government' performance statistics were taken goes back to the two years to March 2021. Thus, applicants for major applications have the option to submit any major planning application to the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) for determination. So far we have seen four such applications, compared to some 30 whereby the applicant has chosen to submit their application instead to UDC. This is testament to the early positive results of our transformation programme. Our pre-application advice service has generated some £180k so far this year.

At the request of DLUHC officials in July, we have sent them details of our performance action plan. This highlights details of the improvements made and those in train, such as the Community Involvement Protocol which sets out how UDC will involve elected Members, parish and town councils in the pre-application stages of schemes; the Exacom project – a database of all UDC S106 agreements which will be available online from December for anyone wanting to view legal agreements.

The period has been particularly busy regarding appeals, including public inquiries. One significant case considered at inquiry, Warish Hall, Takelely was dismissed by the Inspector, this was development in three parts and the Inspector placed significant weight upon the harm upon heritage assets, particularly around the area around Smiths Green. Last month, the Council successfully ran two public inquiries simultaneously at London Road (Griffin Park, Saffron Walden) and at Little Canfield (Highwood Quarry, Little Easton), we await the results of these two appeals.

Similarly, in enforcement, as of last month we have a regulations-compliant, searchable online enforcement register.

## **Building Control**

Finally, our building control team has 80% of the market share of building control contracts in the district. This is exceptionally high for a council building control function that operates in a competitive market. The service is also contracted to carry out all dangerous structures work for Harlow Council, as well as within our district.