

Councillor John Evans

Portfolio Holder for Planning

Full Council report – 10 October 2023

Local Plan

Since my last report in July we have drafted a full suite of local plan policies and policy chapters, developed provisional housing and employment site allocations, held meetings with a range of stakeholders (including neighbouring councils, Essex County Council, the NHS and Education providers) and held a local plan workshop with Parish Council colleagues.

The Local Plan Leadership Group has had two public meetings on 26 July and 4 October 2023. The purpose of the latter meeting to make recommendations to Cabinet. The group also held workshops in August and September to consider specific policy positions and provisional site allocations and has reviewed all of the draft local plan chapters by exchange of papers, in some cases requiring working over weekends by officers and colleagues.

We have now published a draft 'Regulation 18' Local Plan which will be reviewed by Cabinet and Full Council. If there is agreement from Full Council we will consult publicly on the draft throughout November and into December, all in general accordance with the timings given at meetings of the LPLG and Local Plan Scrutiny in the spring of this year.

The draft seeks to plan for housing in the most sustainable way we can, that minimizes the need for travel and maximizes opportunities for walking, cycling and using public transport. Thus, new homes are proposed to be near to jobs, shops and services and facilities. The draft seeks to support our existing centres (retailers/ businesses/ employers), but also seeks to ensure that any new infrastructure (schools/ health care/ leisure facilities/ open space) benefit as many people as possible, including our existing communities rather than solely new residents.

The decision made by Full Council will be a decision on whether or not to publish the draft for consultation; not necessarily to support each and every aspect making up the constituent parts of the plan. The Regulation 18 stage is still a relatively early stage within the plan-making process and can be amended following responses to the consultation.

During the recent LPLG workshops officers explained that some 6,000 homes had been consented in the current plan period, some on appeal, some via s62a and some by the council. Whilst this amounts to 6,000 fewer homes that we now need to plan for, it again demonstrates that development does not stop coming when there is no local plan in place. We just get more in locations that we do not support and that are not particularly sustainable. We saw that recently with the Secretary of State's decision to grant permission for up to 1,200 homes at Little Easton, made against the council's wishes.

I am therefore pleased that we now have a carefully prepared draft plan that we can seek residents' views on and then go on to revise and improve next year – as we will.

Allied to the above, we have just finished a six week public consultation on the Uttlesford Design Code. The code is intended to sit below the current 2005 Local Plan and will steer developers towards high quality design outcomes in the district once adopted. It is intended to be updated and republished to support the new local plan in 2025-26.

Development Management & Enforcement

In August, the Director of Planning and I prepared papers on the performance of the Planning Service at the request of DLUHC Officials. On 1 August, we met with DLUHC Officials to discuss progress. Officers have held further meetings with DLUHC Officials in September to discuss performance statistics and local plan progress.

Performance across Development Management remains strong and in all areas it met government performance requirements for the quarter. The Council is currently 'designated' for its performance in terms of 'quality of major planning decisions'. It is this measure that we perform less well on, and the recent appeal decision at Little Easton served to place us very close to not meeting the government's threshold of losing less than 10% of major planning appeals. The Planning Service is monitoring this statistic closely and reports it to Planning Committee on a monthly basis. Of course, the council is more likely to lose appeals without an up-to-date local plan in place.

Now that the council has its own Conservation Officer, we have started work on the designation of new Conservation Areas (CAs), the first in many years. A proposed Conservation Area for Smith's Green, Takeley is currently going through consultation, and a Saturday drop-in session in Takeley on 9 September was very well attended. This marks the beginning of a rolling programme of CA work with progress now being made on a CA for Stebbing Green. A review of policy regarding listed building consent in the context of energy efficiency and retro-fitting will also be undertaken.

Consultations as to aircraft flights commissioned by MAG and by DLUHC as to permitted development rights have been responded to.

In Planning Enforcement the team has been focussing resources on unauthorised off-airport parking. Officers have served Stop Notices at a site known as Squirrels in Broxted and at a site known as The Nook in Burton End. At time of writing the occupiers of these sites have not complied and officers are preparing further action which may lead to prosecution. Officers also recently served a notice on a site known as the Warehouse, Pledgdon Green. The operator of that site appears to have complied with the notice and parked vehicles were removed.

Building Control

Our Building Control Team continues to maintain a market share of approximately 80% of all building control contracts in the district. It has also won a contract from a conservatory company reviewing plans for the company nationwide. This contract is predicted to generate some £100,000 in income this year. The team are to be congratulated on this.

Building Control Officers, nationally, must complete compulsory registration and pass a competence exam to operate. The new regime commences in April 2024. This comes from the Dame Hackitt Review and new legislation (Building Safety Act 2023) governing building safety. Our BCOs are registering and are being supported in order to do so.

The team further remains on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year in respect of urgent and dangerous structure callouts (e.g. bridge strikes, building collapses etc).

Personnel

This year, Quarter 2 has been a particularly busy time in the Planning Service, and the nature of the work has placed even higher demands on our officers and those elected Members who are involved with the planning function.

I am pleased to report that staff turnover within the Planning Service remains low. We are to be joined by a new Urban Design Officer this month (October).