

Full Council, 8 October 2024

Councillor John Evans: Portfolio Holder for Planning Report

Local Plan

Since my last report to council, the Regulation 19 (Publication Version) of the Local Plan has been published for consultation. The consultation was originally scheduled to run until 3rd October however, this was extended to the 14th October to ensure that residents and interested parties had a full six weeks to review the detailed data that supports our transport evidence.

The Local Plan evidence is voluminous and includes numerous suggested possible future interventions and mitigations which were made by various consultants covering technical aspects. All of this information was reviewed by officers, and much of it made available for our Local Plan Panel (LPP) to review. The evidence base is of course separate from the Local Plan document itself and not everything discussed in the evidence base documents has necessarily been included and proposed within the Plan. Some of this evidence for example, includes a range of recommendations made by our external transport consultants, one of which, for example, was a suggestion to deck over Swan Meadow Car Park in Saffron Walden. It might be recalled that this recommendation has not been followed through in the Plan.

In August and September, the Local Plans Team, supported by a number of Members, (including myself) held a number of engagement events. Two Local Plan briefings were held for Parish and Town Councils. They were very well attended. Four exhibitions were held for residents and other interested parties. These were held in Saffron Walden, Ugley, Great Dunmow and Takeley. Approximately 350 persons attended across the four public evenings.

The Team has been liaising with both the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) and the, recently renamed, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to discuss the submission of the plan and matters of process. The council has signed a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with PINS regarding the Local Plan process going forward. This agreement sets out the steps both parties will take to help deliver an efficient examination and reporting process as it is anticipated through next year. The SLA does not create a formal relationship between the council and PINS concerning the content of the Local Plan; it is an agreement to make best endeavours to work in partnership for the purposes of conducting an efficient examination.

A meeting of the LPP is scheduled for November. The LPP will review by way of general update the headline matters raised during the Regulation 19 consultation.

In September, and in liaison with relevant Cabinet Members, the team responded to the government's consultation on planning reforms. A number of the proposed changes to the National Planning Framework have the potential to have significant impacts on the future of the district and we have sought to ensure that our views will be properly represented and heard.

Development Management

Performance of Development Management & Enforcement remains consistent. The council's key performance indicators (as submitted to and included also by MHCLG in their statistical reports) so far this year are:

Speed of Major Applications: 87.36%

Speed of Non-major Applications 82.38%

Quality of Major Applications 4.23%

Quality of Non-major Applications 1.67%

All performance indicators compare favourably with other planning authorities and meet the required government thresholds. Our quality of decisions for major applications (the measure for which the council is designated) is currently meeting the government threshold (i.e below 10%). The council has three major appeals pending. The Planning Service continues to liaise with the government's Planning Advisory Service (PAS) and reports performance statistics to Planning Committee on a monthly basis.

In terms of Member training, this quarter our Planning Committee attended a training session on bio-diversity, provided by Essex Place Services, and a session on planning appeals provided by the Planning Management Team. They were very worthwhile and I was pleased to attend both. Continuing Professional Education for team members continues to be a matter of priority.

The Planning Service has recently appointed two new career grade planners, one appointment being in partnership with MHCLG as part of their 'Pathways to Planning' programme. Great strides, I am pleased to report, have been made in terms of resourcing the planning portfolio throughout 2024. The proportion of agency staff has been reduced to just 3.5 FTE in Development Management and 1 FTE in the Local Plans Team. As much as our agency staff are appreciated and valued and have certainly helped plug gaps in our services, the continuing reduction in the need to engage agency staff is having a positive impact on continuity of service for our users and reduces pressure on our budgets.

While on the subject of budgets, within Development Management our small Strategic Applications Team has generated approaching £74,000 of fee income. We also anticipate agreeing a number of PPAs which are expected to bring in fees in excess of £127,000.

In terms of Planning Enforcement, we are soon to roll out within the Enforcement service the performance tracking and case management tools which were recently developed to good effect for our Development Management teams. I previously reported that Uttlesford is one of the first councils to have made use of analytics software having been developed for this purpose with our software provider *Idox*. In the past four months the team has served 5 Enforcement Notices, 1 Stop Notice, 1 Temporary Stop Notice and 7 Planning Contravention Notices.

Building Control

All of our Building Control Officers are now Registered Building Inspectors under the Building Safety Act.

The team was bolstered this month by the appointment of two Trainee Building Control Officers. Our trainees will be undertaking their professional training and qualifications on day-release and are being funded largely through fee income and Apprenticeship Levy funding. The recruitment of trainees forms part of our plans to build resilience within the portfolio and importantly for the purposes of succession-planning.