

Ashford Borough Council: Local Plan & Planning Policy Task Group

Notes of a Virtual Meeting of the Local Plan & Planning Policy Task Group held on Microsoft Teams on **2nd December 2021**.

Present:

Cllr. Bartlett (Chairman)

Cllrs. N. Bell, Blanford, Harman, B. Heyes, Ledger, Spain, Wright.

Apologies:

Cllrs. Mrs Bell, Michael, Sparks.

Development Partnership Manager.

Also Present:

Cllrs. Burgess, Ovenden, C. Suddards, Walder

In attendance:

Strategy and Policy Development Manager; Spatial Planning Manager; Deputy Team Leader – Plan Making and Infrastructure; Member Services Officer; Member Services and Ombudsman Complaints Officer.

1 Notes of the last meeting

- 1.1 The Notes of the meeting of the Task Group held on 21st October 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

2 Carbon Neutral Action Plan

- 2.1 The Strategy and Policy Development Manager introduced this item and gave a presentation which covered:

- Overall aim
- 8 priorities
- Consultation
- Questionnaire – questions, results and action needed
- Social media
- Face to face
- Key messages
- Next steps.

- 2.2 The Chairman opened up the item for discussion and the following questions/comments were raised:

- Members thanked the Strategy and Policy Development Manager for the presentation and the work undertaken so far. One Member said that officers had recently provided an exceptional presentation in Tenterden, although there had been noticeable levels of anger in the audience. The Strategy and Policy Development Manager responded that she understood the general feeling of frustration amongst residents that the Council were not achieving what was wanted or expected, and it was important to make clear what it was possible for the Council to achieve and what was outside of the Council's control.
- A Member said she was pleased to see that a carbon reduction strategy would be investigated, and that this must drive the final Action Plan. With regard to the priorities, she pointed out that some of the priorities were in direct conflict with others and gave as an example decreased use of fossil fuels vs biodiversity and encouragement of wildlife.
- Another Member said that clear leadership and support from the Council was essential, as well as the provision of more information.
- A Member said that the cost of sustainable new buildings was very close to the cost of traditional buildings and he considered that further investigation was needed. He also believed that the Council should employ a Climate or Sustainability Manager to give specific focus, although this was an area of collective responsibility for all officers and Members. The Chairman pointed out that the appointment of such a post would have to be fed into the budget setting process as additional resources would be needed for the new post. He agreed that the Council should make clear what work was already being done and how residents could participate and make their own contributions.
- Several Members commented that the footpaths, cyclepaths and walkways in the Borough were not sufficiently joined up. It would be necessary to develop a policy to govern how residents were expected to change their behavior and how the Council was going to drive forward that change. One Member said that every village was car dependent and it would be essential for bus companies to participate in the drive for change and provide appropriate services throughout the Borough. Another Member said he was aware that an 'on-demand' scheme had been set up by another authority, and this was working very successfully to maximize use of buses. The Chairman noted that KCC had just submitted a bid to Government for a new bus strategy.
- The Chairman concluded the item by saying that the above comments would be presented to the Climate Task Group and Cabinet in due course. He asked Members to email the Strategy and Policy Development Manager if they had any further points to make before the topic was considered by the decision-making groups.

Resolved

That the report be received and noted.

3 Progressing a Greener Planning Agenda

3.1 The Spatial Planning Manager introduced this item. He highlighted the importance of the plan-led approach and confirmed that the eventual target would be to introduce policies to tackle the issue of climate change through a future Local Plan Review. He said that this report offered short-to-medium term solutions, but there was a risk of pushback from the market. The Council previously adopted a similar approach when it introduced Space Standards and Fibre Optics to Premises, but he wanted Members to be aware of the risks. He said that the planning system and the NPPF were lagging behind at present and needed to catch up to help deliver current aspirations.

3.2 The Deputy Team Leader – Plan Making and Infrastructure gave a presentation which covered:

- Focus on carbon emission reduction
- Existing framework
- What are we producing?
- Fabric First approach
- Interim Guidance – proposed content
- Risks
- Progressing the Guidance.

3.3 The Chairman opened up the item for discussion and the following questions/comments were raised:

- A Member noted that residents were generally supportive of the planning enforcement service and suggested that targeted action using current enforcement powers to protect the environment might be a successful option. The Chairman said that it was important to balance Officer resources between developing new policies and enforcing current policies. He noted that the Budget Scrutiny Task Group would be considering the Planning service and would make a recommendation if they considered that one area required further resources.
- In response to a question, the Deputy Team Leader – Plan Making and Infrastructure explained that carbon sequestration was a term to describe storing carbon through trees and soil. The Chairman asked for further information on this to be provided to a future meeting.
- The Chairman sought advice from the Principal Solicitor regarding the direction of the discussion. The Principal Solicitor advised Members not to engage in detailed discussion on any specific applications, and reminded Members that the Task Group should focus on the development of policy rather than individual locations and areas. It was important for Members to retain an open mind on any future applications to the Planning Committee.

The issues to be considered when determining any future individual applications would not be clear until the application had been lodged and details were known.

- The Spatial Planning Manager added that there was a current policy in the Local Plan in relation to solar farm development and any applications for such developments would be subject to the usual criteria. He clarified the difference between the former CS10 policy and the current Fabric First approach.
- Several Members cited instances of mature trees being removed from development sites in the Borough and they considered that retaining mature trees should be a key enforcement message. The Chairman suggested that Members advise Officers of any instances where tree cutting was taking place in their ward. Another Member suggested that there should be provision on the internet for any resident to request a Tree Preservation Order, including on trees outside their own property. The Chairman noted that this was a complicated area, especially where trees were causing damage to nearby buildings.
- In relation to the high risks, a Member suggested that a sustainability scoring system could be introduced where each development was assessed against a number of criteria to produce a simple score. Other Members agreed that this was a useful suggestion and that it could discourage unsustainable development. The Spatial Planning Manager said he would explore whether any other authorities were adopting a similar approach. The Deputy Team Leader – Plan Making and Infrastructure added that there was a recommendation in the report for the requirement of energy and sustainability statements, and that requiring these was low risk in terms of likely challenge and could help towards achieving more sustainable developments.
- A Member commented that new purchasers were likely to be willing to spend a little extra on the purchase of a new home if it was built in such a way as to avoid excessive fuel bills. She also pointed out the environmental drawback of relying on electric cars to achieve targets.
- The Chairman concluded the item by noting that Officers would report back to the Task Group on this item in March 2022 and would also provide additional detail on sequestration at that meeting.

Resolved

The Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group agrees:

- a. That draft guidance be provided for discussion at the March Task Group**

- b. That 'Interim Guidance' should be produced and published by May/June 2022;
- c. That the broad contents of the future 'Interim Guidance', will cover the topic areas prescribed in this Paper;
- d. That the 'Interim Guidance' will become a material consideration in planning terms and applied to planning decisions once published.

4 Infrastructure Funding Statement – 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021

- 4.1 The Deputy Team Leader – Plan Making and Infrastructure introduced this item. She explained that since the publication of the Task Group report, there were two further updates for the Group. Highways England had confirmed that, due to personnel changes, it was not possible to provide information relating to 278 agreements in the Ashford area for this reported year. This was not a mandatory requirement, and Officers would work with Highways England to provide the information in the IFS for next year. In addition, several minor mandatory requirements could not be reported due to the previous methods of storing information. The new system was well underway in the Planning service and a recent update had advised that the new system was likely to go live in summer 2022, at which time it would be possible to report on these additional mandatory requirements.
- 4.2 The S106's signed this year and the funds secured were substantially less than last year, along with the funds received. This could be partly explained by the Stodmarsh issue and also the general effects of the pandemic on development. Although the amount of funds secured was down from previous years, it was still a substantial figure. However, although transfers to KCC and NHS were automatic, it was necessary to rely on submissions from other organisations and internal services for requests to spend. Officers were currently considering how to develop a more joined-up approach regarding funds received and spent.
- 4.3 A Member cited a current example relating to S106 and asked what lessons had been learned to make conditions more thorough in future. The Principal Solicitor said he would be happy to meet off line with the Member for a fuller discussion.
- 4.4 There was a question relating to whether there could be potential financial losses. The Deputy Team Leader – Plan Making and Infrastructure explained that it was not possible at present to report on data which went back in time 10 years prior to the reported financial year, as this would have to be reviewed and produced manually which would present a resource challenge. However, the new system would run historic reports electronically so it would be possible to report on historic data more fully in future.
- 4.5 The Chairman requested that a copy of the 278 agreement be distributed to Task Group Members when it was ready. He also noted that a play area had been identified for the town centre and he considered that this was an excellent proposal which would assist with town centre footfall.

- 4.6 It was noted that there were a number of recommendations relating to S106 arising from different workstreams, such as the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the audit of the S106 process, the report to the Task Group and the IFS itself. The Spatial Planning Manager explained that Officers would seek to respond to all the outcomes from the various groups and streamline processes going forward to provide a clearer narrative about how funds would be spent.

Resolved

That the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group:

- **Notes the content of the appended IFS;**
- **Notes the next steps identified to enable the requirements of the legislation to be complied with in full in future infrastructure funding statements;**
- **Agrees delegated authority to the Chair of the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Development and the Head of Planning and Development, to make or approve changes to the Infrastructure Funding Statement (for the avoidance of doubt including additions, amendments and deletions) as he/she sees fit.**
- **Agrees that the approved/amended IFS is published on the Council's website.**

5 Tracker

- 5.1 The Chairman noted that during the meeting a future item on the broader infrastructure agenda had been requested.

Resolved

That the report Tracker be received and noted.

6 Date of next meeting

- 6.1 25th February 2022 at 10am on Microsoft Teams.

Councillor Bartlett
Chairman – Local Plan & Planning Policy Task Group

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