

Forward Plan reference number: Not applicable

Report title: Statement of Community Involvement – update	
Report to: Councillor Lee Scott, Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Planning a Growing Economy	
Report author: Richard Greaves - Chief Planning Officer (County Planning and Major Development)	
Date: 19/12/2023	For: Decision
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Everyone's Essex

- 1.1 An effective planning service helps us to achieve the aim in Everyone's Essex of achieving a high-quality environment. This report seeks approval to update its [Statement of Community Involvement](#) (SCI), part of the Minerals and Waste Development Framework following a minor review. This will lead to a more modern engagement system with people as part of the planning service further promoting the use of online consultation, helping speed up the Development Plan-making process.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To approve minor changes to the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) removing the need to deposit paper copies of policy planning documents, during consultation periods, in libraries and district/city/borough council offices.

3. Summary of issue

- 3.1 The Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) is a statutory document (under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004), which sets out Essex County Council's commitments to the level of community involvement in the County Council's preparation of Local Plan Documents and planning applications.
- 3.2 Planning authorities must review their Statements of Community Involvement every five years from the adoption date. It is important that Statements of Community Involvement are kept up-to-date to ensure effective community involvement at all stages of the planning process. The last Review was carried out in 2022 that resulted primarily in changes that focused on better access to on-line information/consultation, especially following the COVID 19 pandemic.
- 3.3 The proposed change to the SCI, the purpose of this report, is to remove the need to deposit paper copies of emerging local plan documents around Essex at public locations, such as libraries and partner council offices. This change

would help speed up the plan-making process by removing costly and timely printing and delivery processes that currently slow down the ability for the ECC as Minerals and Waste Planning Authority to prepare an iteration of a plan for consultation purposes. For example, the lead-in times for printing and library delivery are between 4-6 weeks which leads to delay in giving members of the public access to consultation material.

- 3.4 Consultation is directed on-line via the Council's consultation portal, making sure the process to receive and thereafter fully consider responses is much more effective and efficient – leading to better outcomes. Nonetheless, paper copy versions of plans would continue to be made available at County Hall, in accordance with the [Regulation 35 of The Town and Country Planning \(Local Planning\) \(England\) Regulations 2012](#).
- 3.5 The Equality Impact Assessment has considered that age and disability are the groups that would be affected by the change however it is considered that there would be 'low' level of disadvantage to this group. This is based on the judgement that people accessing libraries would be able to view documents online using the free internet available at all Essex libraries, with assistance if necessary. Documents would not be removed from libraries – just be available to view in a different format/platform. Older members of the Essex community and people with a disability could face issues using a computer to view online documents. Essex libraries provide a free internet service which librarians could help to access and navigate.
- 3.6 We will continue to provide paper copies of the Plan at County Hall in Chelmsford on request and via appointment. Further, paper copies would continue to be available on request, for a small fee, as stated in the current SCI. Contact with our district/city/borough partners has confirmed that the majority no longer accept display copies of documents. So the current SCI is out of date in this respect.
- 3.7 The engagement processes detailed within the SCI help the County Planning team to deliver the following strategic priorities in the Council's Organisation Strategy:
 - Help to secure sustainable development and protect the environment
 - Develop the capability, performance and engagement of our people
 - Re-imagine how residents' needs can be met in a digital world
- 3.8 The Council is required to have a Statement of Community Involvement by law and it forms part of the Minerals and Waste Development framework.
- 3.9 The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires planning authorities to produce a Statement of Community Involvement.
- 3.10 There is no requirement for local planning authorities to consult when reviewing and updating their SCI. In line with government guidance we will publish documents forming part of the review evidence base on our website as they are completed.

4. Options

- 4.1 To amend and approve the Statement of Community Involvement document.
- 4.2 Do not amend the document in which case there will be continued delay in the plan-making process and reduce the desire to view and respond to documents on-line in the digital world.

5. Issues for consideration

5.1 Financial implications

- 5.1.1 The minor amendments to the SCI will result in minor financial savings removing paper copy printing and delivery costs.

5.2 Legal implications

- 5.2.1 The Council is required to adopt a Statement of Community Involvement under section 18 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. The SCI is a Local Development Document when adopted but it is not required to be approved by the Secretary of State.

6. Equality and Diversity implications

- 6.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:
 - (a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful
 - (b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
 - (c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.
- 6.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).
- 6.3 The equality impact assessment indicates that the proposals in this report could have a low-level adverse impact on two groups; age and disability. Older members of the Essex community and people with a disability could face issues using a computer to view online documents. However, Essex libraries provide a free internet service which librarians could help to access and navigate. We will continue to provide paper copies of the Plan at County Hall in Chelmsford on request and via appointment.

6.4 It is unknown if further action is required until a public consultation is carried out and the public provide feedback on this format change. Should the proposed amendment be made to the SCI we would implement this new process into our next public consultation on the Minerals Local Plan Review, scheduled for February 2024. The Minerals Local Plan goes through various stages of public consultation with responses to each analysed for engagement and equalities issues. The analysis findings for each consultation stage are then highlighted within the Authority Monitoring Report which is published every December.

7. List of appendices

7.1 Appendix 1 – Table of proposed amendments

8. List of Background papers

None

<p>I approve the above recommendations set out above for the reasons set out in the report.</p> <p>Councillor Lee Scott Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Planning a Growing Economy</p>	<p>Date</p> <p>19/12/23</p>
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In consultation with:

Role	Date
<p>Tom Walker Executive Director, Economy, Investment & Public Health</p>	<p>15/12/23</p>
<p>Executive Director, Corporate Services (S151 Officer)</p>	<p>14/12/23</p>
<p>Director, Legal and Assurance (Monitoring Officer)</p> <p>Paul Turner</p>	<p>13/12/23</p>

APPENDIX 1

Section updated	Text amended/removed	Reason for amendment
<p>Page 5</p> <p>How can the community can get involved?</p> <p>Paragraph 5</p>	<p>Visit your local library or district/borough/city council to view policy documents online or County Hall (via appointment) to view a paper copy during consultation periods. You can also visit County Hall to view an online copy of a planning application (via appointment).</p>	<p>Amend the existing paragraph with the text opposite to inform people that online documents are replacing paper copies in libraries and local council offices.</p>
<p>Page 8</p> <p>Engagement & consultation methods</p> <p>'Inspection copies in specified locations'</p> <p>Paragraph 1</p>	<p>Policy documents can be viewed online at Essex libraries and district/borough/city council offices for the duration of the consultation/engagement. Paper copies of documents can be made available at County Hall via appointment during normal office hours.</p>	<p>Amend the existing paragraph with the text opposite to inform people that online documents are replacing paper copies in libraries and local council offices.</p>