



Greater Cambridge Planning Agents' Forum

Notes of the meeting

**Thursday 11th October 2018,
Guildhall, Cambridge**

Attendees:

Cllr Tumi Hawkins - Lead Cabinet Member for Planning (SCDC) (TH)
Stephen Kelly – Joint Director for Planning & Economic Development (SK)
Sharon Brown – Assistant Director: Delivery (SB)
Paul Frainer – Assistant Director: Strategy & Economy (PF)
Caroline Hunt – Planning Policy Manager (CH)
Eileen Paterson – Planning Delivery Manager
Emma Linney – Corporate Business Processing Manager (EL)
Jane Green – Built & Natural Environment Manager
Judith Perry – Sohnius & Perry Ltd
Simon Ward – SWAD
Nicky Parsons – Pegasus Group
Meghan Bonner – KWA Architects
Richard Maung – Deloitte
John Dadge – Barker Storey Matthews
Rob Hopwood – Bidwells
Guy Kaddish – Bidwells
Kimberley Brown – Carter Jonas
Michael Vanoli – Annand & Mustoe Chartered Architects
Edward James - Savills
Tim Bond – Bond Chartered Architects
Adam Davies – Strutt & Parker
Anthony Nix – Pleasance Hookham & Nix

1. Apologies:

Cllr Kevin Blencowe – Exec Cllr Planning & Transport (CCC)
Liz Jackson – Head of Implementation
Sara Saunders – Strategy & Economy Manager
Robert Shrimplin – Shrimplin Brown Planning & Development
Richard O'Connor
Michael Bullivant – M Bullivant Associates
Garth Hanlon – Savills
Charmain Hawkins – Brighter Planning Consultancy

2. Actions from the last Forum meeting – 20th March 2018.

SB apologised for not circulating the finalised minutes but summarised the key actions.

- **The resource available to address drainage matters, the subsequent delays in application processing and inconsistency in advice.**

Meetings have taken place with management within the Streets & Open Spaces team. There is a recognised resourcing issue that is part of an ongoing conversation. All are alive to this and are working on a resolution.

Other actions are covered in items later in the agenda of this meeting.

3. Shared Service update and introduction to the new management team (SK)

SK presented the new management structure chart illustrating the new managers now in post. Phase 1 of the Shared Service project is now concluded.

SK indicated that the service is still running two separate software solutions for SCDC and City areas but that investment of £200,000 is underway to upgrade and unify the system over the next 12 months. Other enhancements will include improved functionality/self-service for agents and a more agile Land Charges service. As well as the ICT project, the “shared planning service programme” included other work streams to improve existing products or services. Specific discussion focused upon:

- Tracking applications and the availability of online material: - Officers are conscious of the feedback from agents, particularly on turnaround times and speed of uploading consultee comments and other documents. We are currently reviewing and starting to align workflows and processes, and this will include improving how the Public Access portal keeps agents/applicants informed as an application progresses. Some improvements will arise on implementation of on the ICT upgrade programme.
- The recent change in the administration at SCDC had not changed the commitment of both Councils to deliver a high quality shared service.
- Resourcing needs. The ongoing challenge of recruitment and retention of skilled and experienced staff was part of the work programme for the Shared Service project. The service was exploiting the opportunity provided by the move to see how improved resilience could be secured in this area.
- Liz Jackson has been appointed as the project manager for this shared implementation and will be actively seeking feedback from agents shortly on ideas and opportunities that our users would like to see delivered.

ACTION: Officers to circulate high level 10 thread Project Timeline.

Questions:

Judith Perry enquired whether Planning officers under the new service would be allocated cases based on their location, with City officers working on City applications. This arrangement is working well within Building Control according to Ms Perry, where the assigning of an officer speeds up the process and places less of a strain on working relationships.

SK outlined the earlier business cases proposals to create 3 new development management areas based upon a defined geography, and “allocated” staff who would accordingly develop an understanding of and familiarity with an area.

In response to a question about Planning Committees, SK clarified that the move to an area-based working did not require a change to the current committee structures. SK indicated an aspiration that in terms of improving the working relationship between agent and officer; some of the system improvements proposed should release capacity in officer time by reducing some of the administrative functions; therefore making them more accessible (SK)

John Dudge asked whether officers would be required to split their time between the two Authorities.

SK indicated that the new ‘Council Anywhere’ programme provided greater flexibility for staff as to their place of work. How officers allocated their time to offices was an area of ongoing discussion. The ‘Council Anywhere’ and ICT projects did however offer opportunities to explore more flexible delivery solutions that might benefit officers and applicants/users. Rob Hopwood raised the additional issue of consultation responses not being added to the South Cambs website in a timely fashion leading to misunderstanding at parish council meetings.

Instead of going direct to the case officer in the first instance, would representations to a central inbox not speed up the publishing process?

SK indicated that the new GDPR places liability on the organisation. There is a problem with using officer inboxes for this purpose particularly during periods of absence, but each document received has to be reviewed and redacted which causes the delay. There is no self-publishing option through the Public Access system but options are being discussed. There could also be the facility to send the customer a text alert whenever a new upload is available to view. Officers will be seeking to explore options for improvement through the new ICT solution but GDPR compliance will continue to be a key factor however. Work is also being done to improve turnaround times for uploading documents at South Cambs. Greater volumes of applications make this task more time-intensive than it is in Cambridge.

Nicky Parsons enquired as to the status of comments from statutory consultees in the context of GDPR. Would these be part of the same workflow or could they be uploaded directly onto the system?

Nicky Parsons also suggested asking statutory consultees to copy agents into their responses could quicken the process. All agreed this should be something for Forum members to explore and officers would report back on this to the next meeting.

ACTION: Officers to respond to Nick Parsons' query on options for improved feedback.

4. Local Plan updates and issues arising/timescales for preparation of further policy guidance and advice. (CH)

- The Inspectors' reports have been published declaring both Local Plans to be sound subject to modifications. This is good news as it provides clarity. The South Cambs Local Plan was adopted 27th September and will be available to view via the website. <https://www.scambs.gov.uk/planning/local-plan-and-neighbourhood-planning/emerging-local-plans-and-guidance/emerging-local-plan/>

The Cambridge City Local Plan will be considered for adoption at Full Council 18th October.

Both Plans look to development between 2011 and 2031 with 14,000 homes being provided in the City and 19,500 in South Cambs. It is expected 22,000 jobs will be created in each of the two Authorities.

There will be limited additional development in the Green Belt. The Inspectors confirmed it is appropriate to look to providing housing at the next stage in the development sequence which is new settlements, and endorsed the proposed new settlements north of Waterbeach and at Bourn Airfield. The Inspectors concluded that issues raised in representations are capable of being dealt with through the planning application process and proposed SPDs. The Inspectors confirmed the approach to calculating five year housing land supply as through a joint housing trajectory and using the Liverpool method and a 20% buffer, and this is written into the Local Plans.

- The proposal for housing development on Land North of Cherry Hinton at Cambridge East was confirmed. A joint SPD has been prepared in parallel with the Local Plan process and will be adopted with the Local Plans.
- The delivery of infrastructure to align with development is key and both Councils are working with the Combined Authority to support growth.
- The overall housing requirement has been endorsed by the Inspectors although they included a new policy in both Local Plans committing to an early review of the Local Plans, in particular to consider housing need and progress in delivering the development strategy. The approach to Gypsy & Traveller provision, in particular those who do not

meet the government's latest definition for planning purposes, has also been highlighted for review.

- Given the commitment to produce a joint Greater Cambridge Local Plan officers are already looking ahead. The Issues & Options consultation will be in 2019 with proposed submission consultation in autumn 2021 followed by submission for examination in 2022. Officers will draw on experience and will soon be beginning the dialogue with Members and agents to establish the right approach to achieve objectives.
- The Area Action Plan for the Cambridge Northern Fringe will relate to the area around the Water Treatment Works and Cambridge Science Park, having regard to the catalyst of the new Cambridge North Station. This is clearly a significant opportunity area and will bring forward the regeneration of the last major brownfield site in the area. There is a parallel process of ongoing work relating to the bid to Central Government for infrastructure funding to free up the Water Treatment Works site for development. The AAP would be dependent on the relocation taking place, which is part of a separate process.

Kimberley Brown queried whether there would be a 'call for sites' exercise taking place for the Joint Local Plan. The work is at a very early stage, so the decision has not yet been made, but it has previously been standard practice according to CH.

With the delay in the Non-Statutory Spatial Plan, Guy Kaddish enquired as to the likely impact on the Local Development Scheme (*which sets out the timetable for the Greater Cambridge Local Plan and AAPs*).

A report is expected from the Combined Authority in the autumn according to SK. The process of defining the NSSP is ongoing but the Mayor is keen to progress the programme. The Mayor's Transport Strategy will also be highly influential.

5. Local List update (EL)

This relates to revised validation requirements following adoption of the new Local Plans. Officers hope to consult on draft proposals between November and January. All feedback will be reviewed and a re-consultation period will follow if necessary. The aim is to achieve greater clarity and to standardise validation processes across the service.

The statistics on invalid applications are as follows with majority relating to the fee or incorrect plans:

Cambridge City invalid applications year to date: 35%

South Cambs invalid applications year to date 39%

Nicky Parsons stressed that more information regarding invalid applications would be useful; whether these related more often to agents supplying printed copies for examples. The majority of applications come through the Portal according to SK and although printed copies of applications are being gradually phased out some groups including parishes still find them helpful. Officers agree there is a need to drill down to understand the reasons behind the statistics and to work with agents/applicants to reduce them in number. Feedback forms would be useful in learning more about the agents' experience. Other Local Authorities such as Milton Keynes are exploring the use of Artificial Intelligence in the validation of applications (SK).

Agents would be happy to learn from their mistakes according to Nicky Parsons.

ACTION: Further data/analysis on invalid applications to be provided in time for the next Agents' Forum meeting.

6. Design Review Panels (PF)

There are currently 3 design review panels in operation:

- The City Council's Design & Conservation Panel
- The Design Enabling Panel (SCDC)
- The Quality Panel (administered by the County Council)

An independent review of panels is being considered with Jane Green, Built & Natural Environment Manager.

Feedback from agents on their experiences of these panels would be really helpful. With the broadening of the agenda for Planning we need to ensure the review process is a positive one.

The Cambridge Panel is very different from the South Cambs Panel according to Rob Hopwood; the Enabling Panel being more open and flexible. There were both positives and negatives for both however and agents would look forward to the findings of the review.

Judith Perry stressed the importance of sustainability as part of the design review process and that in her view the Planning Authority has a moral and ethical responsibility to broaden attitudes when clients refuse to make improvements to building performance.

SK acknowledged the important and potentially unresolved public debate on sustainable technology/low carbon solutions and heritage/conservation and design. As the Central Conservation Area turns 50 years old this year this debate will no doubt surface. In the meantime, officers try to arbitrate the different viewpoints daily. TH emphasised the need to take a common sense approach with this.

7. Questions/issues raised by Forum members.

- *How the City/District Councils and the County Council can work more effectively/efficiently with regards to dealing with Highways matters. Properly assessing Highways proposals understandably takes time, but better communication (for example, liaising directly with the applicant rather than everything having to go through the planning case officer with the consequent delay this entails) and more efficient processes (for example, considering potential mitigation in tandem with assessing impact rather than dealing with them sequentially) would help speed up this process.*

There are a number of threads to this issue according to SB, the prompt uploading/reconciling of responses including those from the Highways Authority, making sure case officers are aware of the conversations taking place with Highways and Transport officers so there's a collective understanding of a discussion and making the most of the pre-app process in order to scope out issues at an early stage.

How to mitigate impact is a huge issue that cannot be resolved without joint discussions with our County colleagues but the frustrations felt by Forum members are understood.

SK added that resource issues at the County Council were also a contributing factor.

- *The newly introduced Housing Delivery Test will be based on data provided by the government each November. Does the Council have any existing data, or propose to capture data on housing delivery, in order to monitor this Test themselves and will they make it public?*

Housing data is already provided annually through the Annual Monitoring Report. It is hoped according to CH that the Government's methodology will be clear and transparent. She commented that the Housing Delivery Test relates to the number of completed homes whereas housing supply data is the result of looking ahead.

ACTION: Officers will aim to provide clarity on the Housing Delivery Test as soon as possible.

- *Delays in securing pre-app meeting dates at the City Council.*

A high turn-over of case officers has led to a backlog in pre-app work according to SB. The management team have considered various options including the closure of the service and appointing temporary staff to tackle this backlog. The types of pre-app enquiries are also being examined. There is also a shortage of Senior Planners within the team who provide additional resilience.

(Anthony Nix described his differing experiences with three pre-app schemes recently and asked what message agents should communicate to their clients.)

SB stressed this was a top-priority project to see how processes can be streamlined and a more tailored approach to pre-apps applied. Managers are also examining best practice elsewhere.

All are aware of the need to make significant improvement while also remaining aware of the cost of the service to the Council at a time when all services are facing cost recovery demands.

Tim Bond asked if the Planning Authority was meeting its statutory obligations in terms of targets. SK confirmed it was, although pre-app is not a statutory service. (Some Local Authorities have discontinued their pre-app service altogether in fact.) Recruitment continues to be a priority according to SK.

- *Resourcing issues & how these are being addressed. Validation timescales/delays. It's currently taking circa 3 weeks for any type of application to be made valid; again this is having a knock on effect to development. This should not be hindered by the same resourcing issues as recruiting qualified and experienced planners.*

Post meeting note – Current performance:

Applications valid within 5 days year to date - Cambridge City: 94%

Applications valid within 5 days year to date - South Cambs: 71%

- *An update on the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)*

Last year it was decided to withdraw the review in order to take stock in light of the changes at national level. Once there is clarity on the 'revisions' to CIL, officers will expect to re-engage with Members on the respective merits of CIL vs S106 to form a view on the approach to follow in order to secure the infrastructure required to underpin development/growth. (CH).

8. General Questions and Answers.

- Judith Perry raised the issue of officers' technical competence and that an application could be refused on the grounds of noise or overshadowing even when the officer admits to having limited technical expertise.

Although the management team cannot comment on specific cases, the impact of noise in a residential area is a material consideration according to SK.

SB stressed that although the frustrations are understood, agents maintaining regular communication with officers was key to ensuring that important issues are raised at an early stage.

9. Suggested topics for future Forum meetings.

- Local Plan update.
- Progress made on the independent reviews of the Design Panels.
- Improvements to the pre-app service and validation statistics.

Nicky Parsons added that officer feedback on agents would also be valuable when exploring areas in need of improvement.

10. Date of next meeting – March 2019 (date TBC) – venue SCDC.