

East Herts Council report

Executive

Date of Meeting: 24 November 2020

Report by: Place Making and Growth Officer (Gilston Area)

Report title: Publication of the Gilston Area Community Engagement Strategy

Ward(s) affected: Gilston, Eastwick, Hunsdon and High Wych

Summary

- This report seeks agreement for the Gilston Area Community Engagement Strategy to be a material consideration in planning matters associated with the development of the Gilston Area, and for it to be published alongside the other planning guidance documents that support implementation of the District Plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXECUTIVE:

- a. That the Gilston Area Community Engagement Strategy is approved as a material consideration in the production of planning policy/guidance documents and the processing of planning applications associated with the Gilston Area.**
- b. That the Gilston Area Community Engagement Strategy is published alongside the other planning guidance documents that support implementation of the District Plan.**

1.0 Proposal(s)

1.1 The Gilston Area Community Engagement Strategy (GACES) has

been produced to support the implementation of Policy GA1 (The Gilston Area) of the District Plan which requires its production to assist in managing the effects of development on local residents, and enable them to participate in how the emerging new community at Gilston comes forward.

- 1.2 It is recommended that the strategy is approved for publication in order for it to be considered as a material consideration in the production of planning policy/guidance documents and the processing of planning applications associated with the development of the Gilston Area.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 As well as working with other local authorities and statutory bodies, the Council is committed through its Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) to ensuring that engagement with the local community is undertaken at every stage of the planning process.
- 2.2 As the Gilston Area will be subject to significant growth and change over the coming decades, the District Plan identifies the need for the production of a Community Engagement Strategy that is specific to the Gilston Area. Policy GA1 of the District Plan states;

“A community engagement strategy will be prepared, working with the two local parishes, which will include consideration of managing the effects on local residents, and opportunities for them to participate in the emerging new community. Engagement with the local communities and other relevant stakeholders shall take place through the planning application process and through the development of village Masterplans.”

- 2.3 The Harlow and Gilston Garden Town partner authorities recognise the value of community engagement and have collectively agreed to engage as “proactively as possible” with local stakeholders and the community across the garden town.

- 2.4 The GACES will help to ensure that growth comes forward in a positive way that will benefit both existing and emerging communities, and that development is managed appropriately to minimise disruption to the lives of local people.
- 2.5 The draft GACES has been produced by the Council, in collaboration with representatives from the local parishes and following consultation with the Gilston Area Steering Group. A copy of the draft strategy is attached as Appendix A.
- 2.6 It should be noted that the Council has reviewed and updated its Statement of Community Involvement in light of Covid-19, to ensure that plan-making and public consultation can continue in an effective way. The published addendum which sets out the changes is also relevant to the GACES. The intention is to ensure the addendum is linked to the strategy when it is published. A link to the Statement of Community Involvement including the addendum is provided in Section 7 below.

3.0 Reasons

- 3.1 The planning system can be complex and the GACES aims to address uncertainty by setting out how the various parties involved in the growth of the Gilston Area will undertake engagement, collaboration and co-operation with the community at various stages of the planning process.
- 3.2 Endorsing the GACES as a material consideration will help to ensure a consistent approach to how engagement, collaboration and co-operation with the community is undertaken and that in turn the values, needs and wants of local people are being reflected in what is planned and constructed around them.
- 3.3 The build out of the Gilston Area development is projected to take place over the next 20-25 years. Over this period the existing communities will change and a new community will

emerge. This means that the guidance will need to be updated and adapted as necessary over time to ensure it continues to be relevant and inclusive to all those affected by the development.

4.0 Options

- 4.1 The Council could decide not to approve the strategy as a material consideration when producing policy/guidance and determining planning applications associated with the Gilston Area. The GACES would be used as a guidance tool for officers looking to advise applicants and other stakeholders on how engagement should be undertaken.
- 4.2 This is not the preferred option as it could undermine the value and status of the strategy. This would compromise the LPA's ability to insist that the guidance is followed and ultimately undermine the quality and consistency of engagement undertaken with the community.

5.0 Risks

- 5.1 Should Members decide not to agree the recommendations in this report there is a risk that the value and status of the GACES would be lessened with the consequences being as set out in para 4.2 above. Furthermore it may erode public trust and confidence in the Council's commitment to meaningfully engage the community as promised in the Council's Statement of Community Involvement and in the District Plan.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

- 6.1 Representatives from the local Parish Council's and the Hunsdon, Eastwick and Gilston Neighbourhood Plan Group were invited to comment on the GACES at various stages of its drafting. The production of the strategy was welcomed and respondents were keen for it to establish a two way collaborative process that seeks to ensure the views of the

community are considered as the development of Gilston progresses. Many of the comments provided have directly informed the final draft version of the strategy attached, however there were some views expressed that officers considered should not be included. These have been summarised below together with the basis for excluding them;

(1) Financing – the community should be adequately financed by developers/the council to enable it to be properly resourced, advised and represented when responding to consultations. The strategy should therefore make specific reference to community resourcing and where it will come from.

The Strategy acknowledges in paragraph 8.5 that the Council and developers should seek to support the community representatives and that at times this may be through the provision of additional support.

The Council will continue to explore options with the applicants and wider HGGT partners in terms of how this can be financed/funded and it may be possible to provide more clarity/detail in future iterations of this document as the development progresses.

(2) The role of the Gilston Area Steering Group as an “oversight” group – Given its track record, the Steering Group cannot be relied on for the purpose identified in the strategy and as such its role should be limited to appointing (with the two directly affected Parishes) a Community Engagement Panel that would fulfil this role instead.

The Gilston Area Steering Group is the only established group where members represent all the key stakeholders involved in the development of the Gilston Area and where minutes of the meetings are made publically available. It's important that any decisions taken around engagement are undertaken in a transparent way and involve all key stakeholders.

The GACES is clear that sometimes it may be appropriate to devolve engagement on specific planning matters to appointed community panels, for example when producing Village Masterplans, with the Steering Group acting to help advise (given the local knowledge of its members and contacts) on how these could most effectively be established.

Members of the Steering Group continue to review how the group functions to ensure that it fulfils all of its roles effectively.

(3) The strategy should be clear that the community shall be involved in s106 discussions.

Section 106 agreements are private agreements made between local authorities and developers and are required to make a development acceptable which would otherwise be unacceptable in planning terms. The process of negotiating agreements is often complex and governed tightly by legislation.

For these reasons communities are not invited to be party to s106 negotiations, however the Council does acknowledge there may be certain commitments in the s106 agreement that would require and benefit from community input, for example matters associated with community stewardship.

The strategy makes provision for engagement on planning applications, particularly in regards to working through application issues that may be sensitive or significant from the community's perspective, this could include s106 matters.

- 6.2 The document was also presented to the Gilston Area Steering Group in September 2020 and shared subsequently to enable members to provide any comments they might have. Both landowners (Places for People and City and Provincial Properties) responded and their comments have been duly taken into consideration in the final version of the strategy.

Community Safety

No

Data Protection

No

Equalities

The Council's Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) was subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment, and the Gilston Area Community Engagement Strategy builds on the Council's commitment to engagement with the local community as set out in the SCI.

Environmental Sustainability

No

Financial

There are no financial implications arising from the report, any activities will be met from existing budgets.

Health and Safety

No

Human Resources

No

Human Rights

No

Legal

It is a requirement of District Plan Policy GA1 that a Community Engagement Strategy for the Gilston Area is prepared.

Specific Wards

Hunsdon, Eastwick, Gilston and High Wych

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

7.1 East Herts District Plan October 2018 – With particular

reference to Policy GA1 Gilston Area (Chapter 11); see <https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/districtplan>

7.2 East Herts District Council Statement of Community involvement; see <https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/planning-building/planning-policy/statement-community-involvement-sci>

7.3 **Appendix A:** Gilston Area Community Engagement Strategy.

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