

## East Herts Council Report

### Overview and Scrutiny Committee

**Date of meeting:** Tuesday 7 November 2023

**Report by:** Councillor Vicky Glover-Ward, Executive Member for Planning and Growth

**Report title:** Listening Council: Community Forum and Development Management Forum

**Ward(s) affected:** All

### Summary

- This report provides members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the opportunity to consider and provide observations on the proposal to set up Community Forums for Strategic Sites across the district and the proposal to establish a Development Management Forum. The outline for Community Forums is set out in **Appendix A** and the outline for the Development Management Forum is set out in **Appendix B**.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- (A) **To consider the proposal for setting up Community Forums for Strategic Sites as outlined in Appendix A and provide any observations to the Executive Member for Planning and Growth; and**
- (B) **To consider the proposal for establishing Development Management Forum as outlined in Appendix B and provide any observations to the Executive Member for Planning and Growth.**

## **1.0 Proposal(s)**

1.1 This report sets out the following proposals:

- 1) To establish Community Forums for large strategic sites being developed across the district in order to provide an opportunity for developer/s, residents, community groups, elected members and council officers to engage with each other, raise issues of interest or concern for existing and new communities with a view to enhancing the quality of community life and communication; and
- 2) To establish a Development Management Forum for planning applications which meet certain criteria. Generally, these would be complex/sensitive major planning applications for development of 50 or more homes. If the criteria are met then a Development Management Forum can be held early on in the planning application process in order for residents to share planning concerns with Members, Officers and Applicants in an open and transparent way.

## **2.0 Background**

2.1 The Council wants people and communities to actively engage in the planning process and have an influence over the future development of their areas. We also know that people want to be involved in the decisions that shape the places they live, work and play.

2.2 Effective community engagement can lead to better plans, better decisions and more satisfactory outcomes, and it can help to avoid delays in the planning process too; however most importantly, it also improves confidence in the fairness of the planning system. Engagement needs to be meaningful

and to occur from the earliest stages in the planning process to enable community views to be reflected in development plans and individual development proposals.

### **3.0 Reason(s)**

- 3.1 There are already opportunities built into the planning system to ensure people can get involved and have their say, including when local planning authorities are preparing their development plans and also during the development management processes when decisions are being made about proposed developments.
- 3.2 Local councils are required by the government to produce a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). The role of the SCI is to outline standards for community involvement in the planning process and to identify ways to achieve these standards. The Council's current SCI was adopted on the 23 October 2019 and is available to view online: <https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/planning-building/planning-policy/statement-community-involvement-sci>.
- 3.3 The SCI 2019 describes how the public, businesses and interest groups within East Herts can get involved in the creation of local planning policy and the planning application process. This is essential to help improve understanding and openness of the planning process.
- 3.4 The Council wishes to involve all sectors of the community in the planning process and is committed to always meeting or exceeding the minimum legal requirements for consultation set out in the Planning Regulations.
- 3.5 A key area where community engagement ensures that stakeholder voices are incorporated into the planning process is through the Council's masterplanning process. The Council

has a policy in its District Plan (Policy DES1) which requires that all 'significant' applications undertake a masterplanning process<sup>1</sup>. The policy sets out that the masterplan will be collaboratively prepared involving the Council, site promoters, landowners, town and parish councils and other relevant stakeholders. The masterplan will be further informed by public participation. Further information on the Council's masterplanning approach is available to view online:

<https://www.eastherts.gov.uk/planning-building/planning-policy/masterplans>

- 3.6 The Council has already established a series of 'Steering Groups' across the district. These were set up to consider, review and critically assess emerging masterplans for the strategic site allocations in the District Plan. These groups have been very successful in allowing communities and other stakeholders to engage much earlier in the planning process.
- 3.7 Involving communities in proposals prior to formal planning processes provides an opportunity to contribute, share views and improve understanding of proposals, thereby reducing the risk of objections at a later stage.
- 3.8 The Council's approach to masterplanning and involvement of key stakeholders as part the masterplanning steering groups has provided a valuable contribution at an early stage of the planning process. Furthermore, engagement with existing and new residents is recognised as being vital as development starts happening on the ground. This is supported by recent experience at Bishop's Stortford North where poor communications from the housebuilders has meant that there has been little information about the development as it progresses and how issues on the ground are being managed

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<sup>1</sup> The significance of a development will be measured not only on its scale, but on the potential impact on the community and local character of the place into which it is to be introduced. Generally, a threshold of fifty homes or more will apply. However, in some cases, a smaller scale of development may be considered to have a significant effect.

as they arise.

3.9 In recognition of this and building on the success of the Masterplanning Steering Group approach, the Council proposes to set up Community Forums for large strategic sites being developed across the district to provide an opportunity for developer/s, residents, community groups, elected members and council officers to engage with each other over the lifetime of the development. The Forums will offer an opportunity for existing and new communities to raise issues of interest and concern, with a view to enhancing the quality of community life and communication.

3.10 **Appendix A** sets out the terms of reference for the Community Forums and initially it is proposed that the following Community Forums are established immediately:

- Stortford Fields (Part of Bishop's Stortford North)
- Gilston Area

3.11 In addition to this, it is anticipated that Community Forums will be required in the near future for:

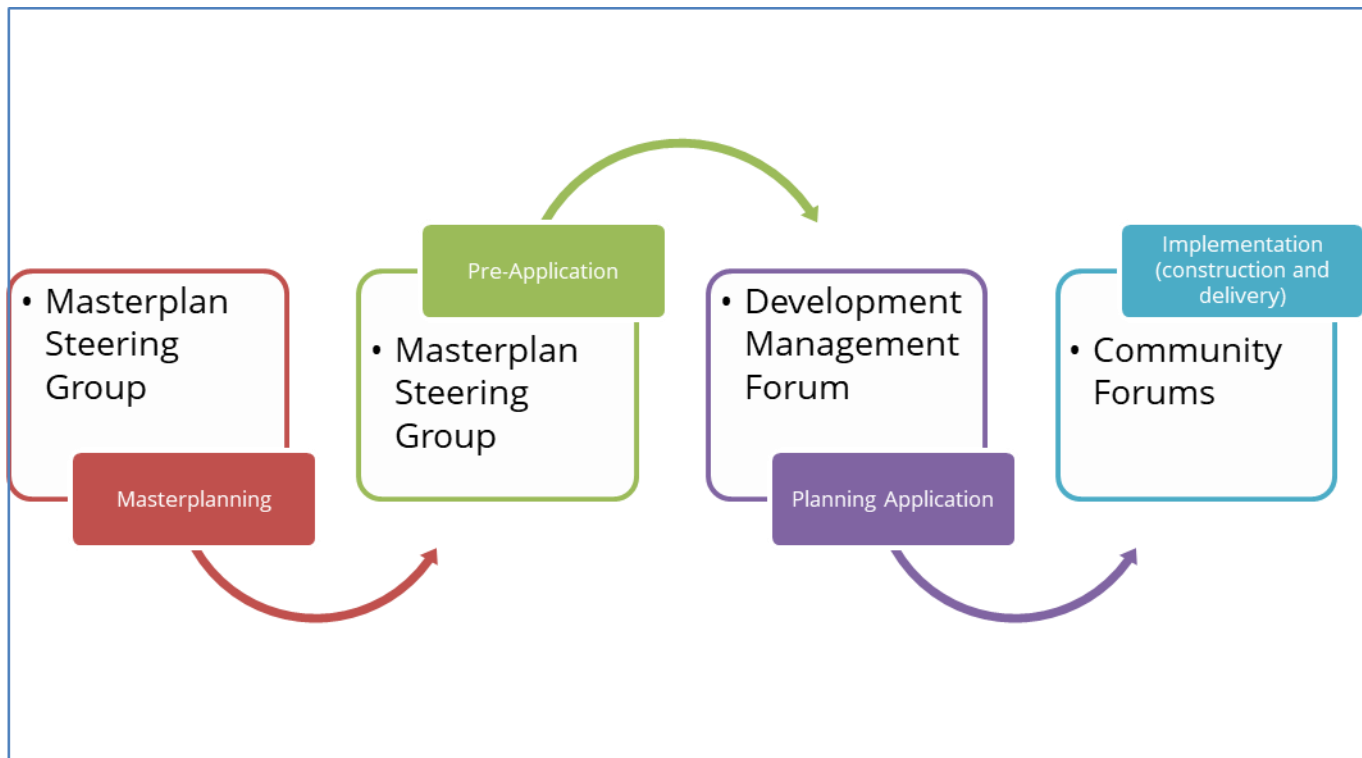
- East of Stevenage
- Hert3

3.12 This is not an exhaustive list and it can be kept under review depending on the timing of other strategic sites coming forward. For example, Community Forums for Ware 2 and Birchall Garden Suburb will also be appropriate depending on the outcome of the outline planning applications. Equally, the Community Forum proposed for Stortfields Fields may only be short term whilst the Community Trust is being established.

3.13 In addition to setting up Community Forums for certain large strategic sites, the Council is also proposing to establish a

Development Management Forum for planning applications which meet certain criteria. Generally, these would be complex/sensitive major planning applications for development of 50 or more homes. If all the criteria are met then a Development Management Forum can be held early on in the planning application process to facilitate the sharing of residents planning concerns and opportunities to enhance proposals with Members, Officers and Applicants in an open and transparent way.

- 3.14 A Development Management Forum is a meeting where residents can present their views to councillors, planning officers and the applicant early on in the planning application process prior to a decision on the planning application. It is an informal meeting and the forum will not determine the application. The decision on planning applications will still be determined by the Council's Development Management Committee or through delegation to officers.
- 3.15 **Appendix B** sets out the detail of how the Development Management Forum would operate. The aim of the Forum is to allow early and constructive discussion of the planning issues raised by residents, to explore the scope for building consensus and resolving concerns while allowing enhancements informed by local knowledge to be considered into a proactive manner.
- 3.16 The diagram below shows how Steering Groups, Community Forums and the Development Management Forum sit in the planning application process.



## 4.0 Options

4.1 The Council could continue with the current practice and arrange meetings with residents as appropriate. However, given the scale of development and issues that can arise on the ground, this would be a missed opportunity. Instead, both proposals would allow the Council to act as a facilitator in bringing relevant parties together to discuss planning matters in an open and transparent way. It also opens out Forums to all residents, should they be interested in the matters for discussion.

## 5.0 Risks

5.1 If the Council were to continue meeting on an ad hoc basis with residents or leaving it solely to developers/applicants, there is a possible reputational risk. Whilst it is not always within the Council's control to resolve potential issues, it can facilitate a discussion with the applicants and concerned residents.

## **6.0 Implications/Consultations**

### **Community Safety**

None arising directly from this report.

### **Data Protection**

None arising directly from this report.

### **Equalities**

None arising directly from this report. It is important that the Council reaches out to all residents and provide opportunities to listen to concerns. The Forums will be open to all, and compliment the approach outlined in the Councils Statement of Community Involvement.

### **Environmental Sustainability**

None arising directly from this report.

### **Financial**

None arising directly from this report. This is on the basis that the proposals can be implemented using current resources and do not require any additional financial support beyond existing budgets.

### **Health and Safety**

None arising directly from this report.

### **Human Resources**

None arising directly from this report.

### **Human Rights**

None arising directly from this report.

### **Legal**

The Council's Statement of Community Involvement sets out the relevant legislation and regulations relating to consultation



requirements for plan making and planning applications. The proposed forums do not affect these requirements.

### **Specific Wards**

None.

## **7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material**

**Appendix A:** Community Forums – Implementation of Strategic Sites

**Appendix B:** Development Management Forum for East Herts

### **Contact Member**

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