

East Herts Council Report

Executive

Date of meeting: Tuesday 28 November 2023

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

Report title: Listening Council: Community Forums and the Development Management Forum

Ward(s) affected: All

Summary

This report outlines 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 EXECUTIVE:

- (A) To agree the proposal for setting up Community Forums for Strategic Sites as outlined in Appendix A; and**
- (B) To agree the proposal for establishing a Development Management Forum as outlined in Appendix B.**

1.0 Proposal(s)

1.1 This report sets out the following proposals:

- A) To establish Community Forums for large strategic sites being developed across the district to provide an

opportunity for developer/s, residents, community groups¹, 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

- B) 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 in the planning application process to allow 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.

¹ To include but not be limited to parish councils, local residents associations, chambers of commerce and/or neighbourhood plan groups,

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 then 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

process². 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 as they arise.

² 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.

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 (including but not limited to Town and Parish Councils, Neighbourhood Planning Groups and Resident Associations), 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

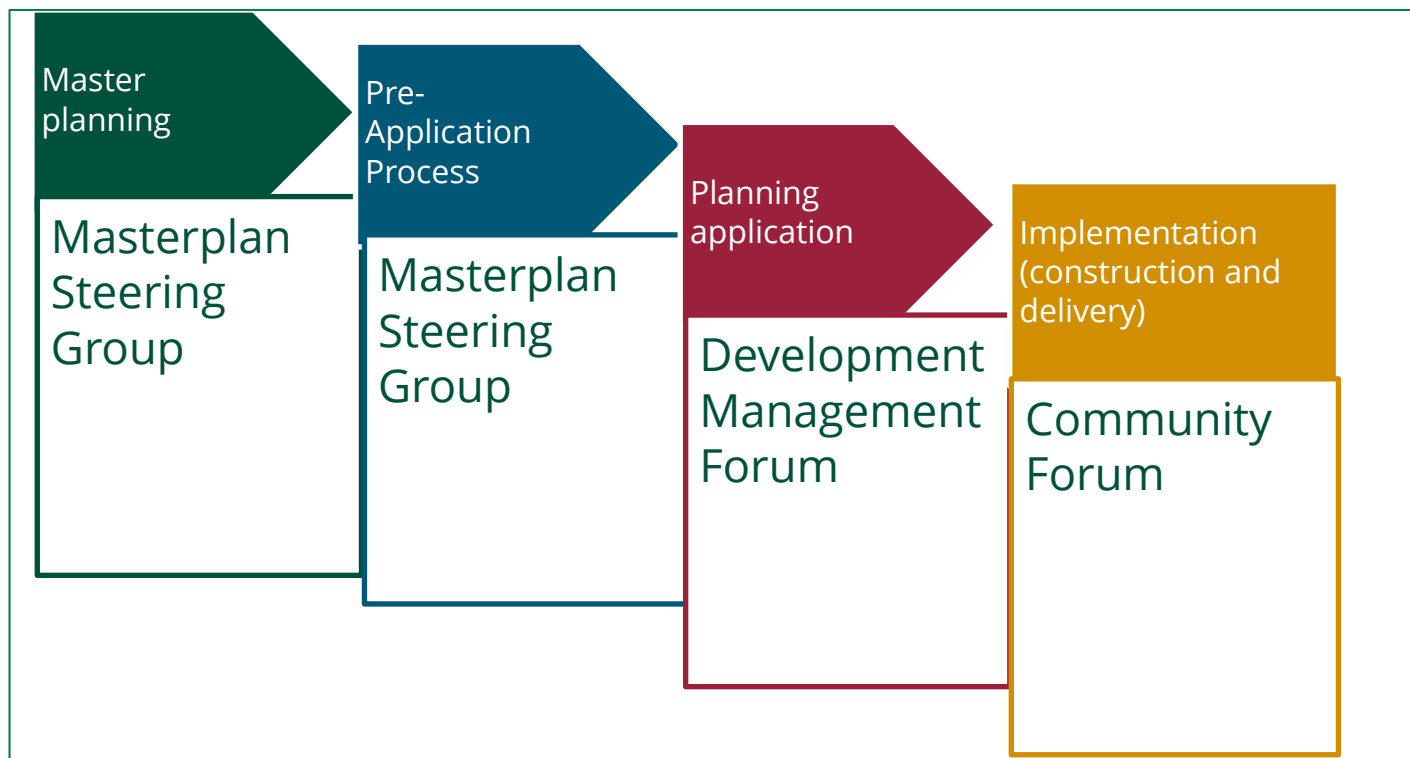
3.12 The lists included in 3.10 and 3.11 are not exhaustive lists and will be kept under review depending on the timing of other strategic sites coming forward. For example, Community Forums for Ware 2 and Birchall Garden Suburb will also be appropriate depending on the outcome of the outline planning applications. Equally, the Community Forum proposed for Stortfields Fields may only be short term whilst the Community Trust is being established, and for some areas such as Bishop's Stortford South, a successful developer led

community forum has been in operation for a couple of years, and therefore there is no need to duplicate

- 3.13 Community Forums will be scheduled for the year ahead and dates and venues will be made available on the Council's website. It is likely that the Community Forum for the Gilston area will occur every couple of months given the scale and complexity of development proposals.
- 3.14 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 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.
- 3.15 A Development Management Forum is a meeting where residents can present their views to councillors, planning officers and the applicant early 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.
- 3.16 **Appendix B** sets out the detail of how the Development Management Forum would operate. The aim of the Forum is to allow early, 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.

- 3.17 A number of Local Authorities operate successful Development Management Forums with Cambridge City Council being one of the first to develop the approach. Some Local Authorities have Forums at the pre application stage and others have them at the application stage. Given the Council's approach to masterplanning at the pre application stage for strategic sites, it was considered appropriate to set up a Development Management Forum at the application stage and then follow with a Community Forums as appropriate at the implementation stage. This approach at the application stage will also help facilitate discussions relating to sensitive speculative planning applications where there is significant local interest and concern.
- 3.18 The diagram below shows how Steering Groups, Community Forums and the Development Management Forum sit in the planning application process. A short description of each is outlined below the diagram.



Group or Forum	Description	Stage in the Planning Process
Masterplanning Steering Group	To provide an opportunity to consider, review and critically assess emerging masterplans for the strategic site allocations in the District Plan.	Pre Application
Development Management Forum	To provide an opportunity where residents can present their views to councillors, planning officers and the applicant early 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.	Planning Application
Community Forums	To provide an opportunity for developer/s, residents, community groups (including but not limited to town and parish councils,	Implementation (Construction & Delivery)

	<p>neighbourhood planning groups and resident associations), 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.</p>	
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3.17 In terms of resources, the Forums can be supported using current resources and do not require any additional financial support beyond existing budgets. The implementation of the Community Forums will be taken forward by the Council's Community Engagement and Stewardship Officer who sits within the Planning Service. This is a specific post that is part the Gilston Area team and the remit of the role is flexible enough to cover this area of community engagement. In the main, the Community Forums will be chaired by the Executive Councillor for Planning and Growth but a Deputy Chair will also be identified for each forum as this may vary depending on the location.

3.18 The Development Management Forum will be taken forward by the Development Management Team with support from the Council's Democratic Services Team.

3.19 The proposals outlined in this report were considered by Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 7 November 2023. In terms of feedback, the proposals were well received especially the proposal for Community Forums. The main areas of discussion included:

- That the Development Management Forums would be helpful in the event of sensitive speculative planning applications;

- Concern was expressed about whether the Council had appropriate resources to support the Forums including the chairing of Forums;
- Recognition that the Forums would be open to all including town and parish councils and neighbourhood planning groups;
- Examples from elsewhere; and
- Reporting back on the success of the Forums to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee after 1-2 years of operation with appropriate data and information.

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. This allows proactive resolution of issues on the ground and the combination of local knowledge and public and private sector know how to optimise design and implementation.

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 proactively avoiding complaints and over reliance on planning enforcement resources.

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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