

East Herts Council Report

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: Tuesday 4 November 2025

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

Report title: Community Forum and Development Management Forum Update

Ward(s) affected: All Wards

Summary

- This report provides members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an update on the Community Forums (CFs) and the Development Management Forums (DMFs).
- Members of the committee requested that Officers provide an update two years following the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 28 November 2023. This was to 'allow collation of meaningful data'.
- Information is provided about the operation of the forums and attendance by members of the community. The forums are considered as a positive way to enable open discussion about various aspects with development projects at different stages of the planning process. Forums are seen as an open and transparent way for different members of the community to engage with the planning system, developers and other stakeholders.
- There is a resource implication associated with the forums. However, the forums have not been in operation for a sufficiently long period of time for meaningful data to be collected, particularly in respect of DMFs.
- The report seeks any observations from the committee on the information provided as the Place Directorate further their work in enhancing and improving on the current CFs and DMFs.

RECOMMENDATION FOR OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:

- A. To consider the information provided in this report relating to the establishment of the Community Forum and Development Management Forum and provide any observations to the Executive Member for Planning and Growth.**

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The proposals for CFs and DMFs were reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 7 November 2023.
- 1.2 The CFs are a public meeting held approximately every 4-6 months, depending on the site and issues. CFs relate to large strategic development sites that form part of the Development Plan for the District. CFs provide an opportunity for developers, residents, community groups, elected members, council officers and other stakeholders involved in the planning process (such as Highways Officers) to engage with each other. Existing and new communities can raise issues of interest or concern at the CF as a dialogue and enhance the quality of community life by improved communication.
- 1.3 The DMFs relate to planning applications which meet certain criteria. Generally, they would relate to a complex or sensitive major planning applications for development of 50 or more homes. If the criteria are satisfied, then a Development Management Forum could be held early on in the planning application process. This allows for members of the community to share their planning concerns with Members, Officers and Applicants in an open and transparent way.
- 1.4 At the 7 November 2023 meeting, Members of the Overview and Scrutiny debated the forums at length. The below are the main observations, as recorded in the committee minutes:
- In terms of the CFs for strategic sites, the opportunity to steer and influence a development was considered a positive step forward.

- Members commented that there was already a Statement of Community Involvement and that a CF was seen as a duplication of effort.
- That there would be considerable resources implication from the viewpoint of Planning Officers and administrative staff needed to set up CFs and DMFs and the impact this would have on the planning service.
- Concerns about the impact on resources of Hertfordshire County Council Officers.

1.5 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee resolved that Officers report their observations to the Executive and report back to the committee in two years' time to 'allow collation of meaningful data'.

1.6 Two years have passed since that resolution and this report provides an overview of the data available.

1.7 At the Executive Committee Meeting on 28 November 2023, the Community Forum and Development Management Forum were both endorsed.

2.0 Data collection

Community Forums

2.1 Two community forums have now been established since the resolution made by the Executive:

- 1) Gilston Community Forum
- 2) Stortford Fields Forum

2.2 The below table provides dates of the forums and numbers of attendance of members of the community

Community Forum	Date	No of attendees
Gilston	27 February 2024	95
	17 April 2024	66
	11 Sept 2024	(not recorded)
	27 Feb 2025	14

	13 May 2025	27
	14 October 2025	TBC
Stortford Fields	20 July 2023	77
	26 Sept 2023	84
	29 Nov 2024	68
	5 June 2024	33
	25 June 2025	31

- 2.3 It should be noted that the Stortford Fields Community Forums noted on 20 July 2023 and 29 November 2023 took place prior to the resolution from the Executive Committee but were the basis for formalising the CFs. They are nonetheless included as they were the precursor to the community forum being formalised through the council's governance processes.
- 2.4 The agenda for the forums is published on the Councils website and through the Councils social media platforms. Notice for the Gilston CF is published through invites via email to those people who have indicated they wish to be kept informed of upcoming forum meetings. The Hunsdon, Eastwick and Gilston Neighbourhood Plan Group (HEGNPG) are notified and take various steps to ensure the community are made aware of the CF. Notice for the Stortford Fields forum is published on the Stortford Fields Community Trust website and other media managed by the Trust.
- 2.5 The two forums are at very different stages of the development project which largely influences the agenda.
- 2.6 Outline planning permission for the Gilston project was granted in January 2025. The development has not therefore started on site in terms of house building. There is much work being done by the developer regarding master planning process and other detailed design work. At the Gilston CF, updates are typically provided by the developers as to their progress on these matters. This is then followed by a deep dive into different aspects of the development proposals. For example, at the 11 September 2024 forum, a representative from Thames Water attended and provided an overview of drainage and sewerage matters as these were of significant concern to the local community.

2.7 The Stortford Fields development is at a very different stage compared to Gilston. The development has been substantially started. The site now has approximately 1000 homes being occupied. The forum therefore focuses on detailed implementation matters, timescales and issues which the community have raised to the Council and members. Compliance with approved plans and highway matters are topical matters that are raised and are of particular interest to the local community. Representatives from Hertfordshire Council Highways attend the CF.

2.8 The format for both the Gilston and Stortford Fields Forum is as follows:

- 1) Informal meet and greet with refreshments available. Planning Officers, councillors and Developers are available for any member of the community to ask questions.
- 2) Formal meeting, chaired by Executive Member for Planning and Growth. Presentations by Developers, Officers and other guest speakers. Opportunities for Q&A throughout and at the end of presentations.
- 3) Meeting closes but Planning Officers and Developers remain on-hand to answer questions from the community.

2.9 The Council do not record any other information or data associated with the forums other than the number of attendees. Officers do however meet after each forum to discuss any actions and to reflect on any discussion points that were raised by members of the community. The below is a summary of officer's observations in terms of the forums:

- 1) The format of the meeting – allowing Planning Officers and Developers to be available for questions before and after the formal part of the forum, enables a way of questions being asked and inquiries to be answered. This works well as it enables face-to-face contact (rather than on email or on the phone) which breaks down barriers and humanises what may start as a 'them and us' relationship. It also provides an opportunity for people to ask questions who may otherwise not ask questions in the formal part of the forum.

- 2) It enables Planning Officers to provide clear updates and answers to questions about progress and current matters and avoids potential for misinformation and scaremongering amongst the community.
- 3) It provides an opportunity for Developers to be held accountable and hear from the community about the issues that they are facing in a real-world situation.
- 4) The forums have resulted in the number of correspondence and complaints reducing. This frees-up Officer time with managing key priorities with their workstream and help maintain key performance indicators.
- 5) Various issues are raised or identified by the community which are sometimes non-planning in nature and relate to operational issues for the developers or other stakeholders, such as the Highway Authority. This is helpful as developers are able to listen to the concerns raised and, where appropriate take action. However, it raises expectations on the Local Planning Authority that they can deal with these matters.
- 6) CFs can result in fractious discussions which are difficult to chair, and sometimes on-the-spot answers cannot always be provided by officers or developers. This can lead to a sense of frustration from the community that their questions are not being answered. Whilst frustrations can monopolise discussion, other views about positive aspects do come through. For example, in the case of Stortford Fields, the positive engagement the Stortford Fields Trust have in community engagement projects.

Development Management Forum

2.10 There have been two DMF's as follows:

- 31 July 2024 – Land North of Hare Street Road, Buntingford (2/24/0294/OUT)
- 24 September 2024 – Land West of the A10 (3/24/0966/OUT)

- 2.11 The process for the forum is explained on the Councils website. For a DMF to be considered a petition with at least 25 signatures is required which clearly states the planning concerns.
- 2.12 DMF's are scheduled into the Council's Calendar of committees with a date and time allocated every month. The forum is chaired by the Executive Member for Planning and Growth and there is a set agenda, which is explained on the council's website. It involves the presentation of the application by the applicant and is followed by a presentation by the petitioners. Questions and issues are discussed and the Chair sums up. The meeting is a public event with a recording placed on the Councils website.
- 2.13 Attendance of the committee in person has been relatively limited in terms of members of the community. Some ward members and members of the development management committee have however attended.
- 2.14 As with Community Forums no formal data is collected, but Officers would make the following observations:
- 1) Like the CFs, the DMF enables two parties (developer and objectors) who have very different views to meet together and have an open discussion about the issues. Officers' observations are that this is positive. It helps communities feel that their voice has been heard and it helps developers drill-down to the main issues and consider how the impact can be better mitigated.
 - 2) In this way, the DMFs have, in Officers opinion, helped to break down barriers between developers and objectors and provides a forum for open and transparent discussion. This aligns with the corporate objective as a listening council.
 - 3) Like CFs, DMFs are public events which any member of the community can attend, and a recording is posted on the councils website. The Council is therefore able to demonstrate the process in an open and transparent way.

3.0 Analysis

Community Forums

- 3.1 Evidence suggests that attendance of the CFs was high when they were introduced and, that they have steadily reduced to approximately 30 attendees. This correlates approximately with the reduction in the volume of complaints and correspondence being received by the Executive Member for Planning and Growth. Whether or not this can be directly attributed to the CFs or other factors cannot be determined.
- 3.2 Notwithstanding this, the CFs are considered by Officers to be a positive way of supporting the community in engaging with the planning process. There are opportunities for members of the community to speak directly with Officers, developers and other stakeholders on a 1-2-1 basis. This helps break down barriers and helps support the community in raising issues and for stakeholders to explain process or decisions.
- 3.3 Formal presentations to the community provide important information and updates and allows discussion and issues to be raised for both officers and developers to consider and potentially act upon.
- 3.4 There is a resource impact associated with CFs which is explained below in section 6. However, this impact is not considered to be significant, especially given the positive impact that CFs have in terms of aligning with the councils corporate plan.

Development Management Forum

- 3.5 As there have only been two forums, insufficient data is available to properly understand the benefits. However, initial observations are that it does provide a useful and helpful opportunity to bring two parties, often diametrically opposed to each other in terms of their views, together for an open discussion about ways to improve the quality of the development. Officers have seen developers come away from the DMF with a considerably better understanding about the issues that the community have with the development and ways and measures that they can put in place to make improvements.
- 3.6 There is an impact on resources associated with DMF's (see section 6 below for financial implications). However, as there have only been two DMF's to date, the data is inconclusive and it

likely that costs and officer time will reduce as the process and procedures are integrated and known to Officers.

4.0 Options

- 4.1 The council could consider ceasing the CFs and DMFs. However, for the reasons explained in this report, the positives CFs and DMFs provide in meeting the corporate objectives (particularly as a listening council) of the council are considered to be outweighed by any disbenefits.
- 4.2 More importantly, opportunities to improve the quality of the data we have about the forums is a better option to help the council consider their effectiveness. This includes obtaining more qualitative data about how all customers and stakeholders feel about the CFs and DMFs. Officers will be exploring with colleagues as to how such data and information can be obtained and used to help makes changes to procedure.
- 4.3 In addition, further work can be done to promote the CFs, especially their branding and the positive impact that they can have.

5.0 Risks

- 5.1 Ceasing the CFs and DMFs is likely, in Officers' opinion, to impact negatively in the way in which the community interacts with the council and other stakeholders in the planning process. There is likely to be an increase in the number of complaints that are received and negative impact in terms of how the council can demonstrate it is meeting its corporate objectives as being listening and open and transparent.
- 5.2 There are resource implications associated with the CFs and DMFs. However, the financial impact is modest and is outweighed by other factors.

6.0 Implications/Consultations

Community Safety

No

Data Protection

Officers maintain a record of attendance for the CFs and, in some instances (where it is provided) contact details for those attending. Any such data is retained and kept secure in accordance with the council's relevant data protection policies. Consent is sought from any members of public who share their contact details as to whether they are happy to receive further communications specially about upcoming CFs.

Equalities

The forums are held in person at either the Council Chamber or other external venues which are accessible. The CFs and DMFs are publicised in a range of ways which is explained in the report together with information provided on the council's website.

Environmental Sustainability

No

Financial

The estimated costs associated with the community forum is £3,000 per forum. This includes the associated hiring of a venue and officers time associated with preparation and attending the forum. It should be noted that the cost of venue hire associated with Gilston CF is shared with the developers, Taylor Wimpy and Places for People.

The estimated costs associated with the DMF is £1,200 per forum. This mainly includes officer time associated with the preparation and attendance of the forum. It should be noted that this is based on just two DMFs and it is anticipated that this cost will likely reduce, depending on the nature of the application being considered.

Health and Safety

No

Human Resources

No

Human Rights

No

Legal

No

Specific Wards

No

7.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

7.1 None

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