

REGENERATION, COMMUNITY & CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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MEDWAY STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

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Summary

This report outlines the review of the Medway Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) and the associated consultation process.

The purpose of the SCI is to lay out, in a concise and clear way, how the Council will engage with stakeholders in matters relating to the Local Plan and the principles to be considered in consulting on planning applications. This includes publicity methods at key stages in the planning process to reach all sectors of the community.

1. Budget and Policy Framework

- 1.1 Producing a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) is a statutory requirement to support development policy and is a key document needed in order to progress through the stages to an adopted Local Plan. The Development Plan forms part of the Council's policy framework and is currently provided by the Medway Local Plan 2003, with supporting supplementary planning documents that provide additional guidance to the Local Plan policies. The Council has commenced work on a replacement Local Plan and it wishes to update its SCI to align to this work.
- 1.2 The costs of the preparation of the SCI and the consultation and engagement activities that are promoted for the plan making process are met through the Planning Service budget.

2. Background

- 2.1 Planning has an important role in influencing the development of towns and villages, and the effective engagement of local people in helping to shape these plans is central to the planning process. This is recognised by government and there are statutory requirements on local planning authorities to consult on planning proposals and plans. The Council must produce a SCI outlining how and when it will engage people in the planning process.

Medway Council wants to ensure the community can become involved in plan-making and in expressing its views on planning applications.

- 2.2 The Council first adopted a SCI in 2006. The current SCI was adopted in January 2012, however since then there have been a number of changes to national planning guidelines and significant changes within our planning service and the wider context of local organisations, businesses and networks. As a guide to the engagement requirements for the planning service as well as for establishing stakeholder understanding, the current SCI adopted in 2012 needs revising. This is to ensure that Medway has a 'fit-for-purpose' approach to reflect the requirements of a new Local Plan, as well as to consider changes to improve the way the Planning Service interacts with the general public and key stakeholders to aid effectiveness.
- 2.3 The updated Consultation Draft SCI 2014 is set out at Appendix 1. This seeks to update the policy context for the document, and provide clearer guidance on the principles and methods of consultation to be used. A flexible approach is suggested to reflect the needs and circumstances of different groups in order that all sections of the community have an opportunity to be involved in planning for Medway.
- 2.4 It is intended that following consideration of the comments received during the consultation process, that an updated version of the SCI is reported to Cabinet in September 2014, seeking approval to adopt this document.

3. Options

- 3.1 The Council could consider the retention of the current SCI and choose not to revise the version adopted in January 2012. However this document is dated, and does not reflect the current legislative context following the introduction of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the revocation of the South East Plan. It is appropriate to update the current document. There is a risk that the current SCI would not be accepted as 'sound' in the Examination of the new Local Plan. The commencement of work on a replacement Medway Local Plan presents an opportune time to publish the updated SCI.
- 3.2 It should be noted that the revised draft SCI considers a broad range of consultation and engagement mechanisms. It encourages the design of consultation and engagement mechanisms that are appropriate to the needs of different community sectors and areas.

4. Advice and analysis

- 4.1 The current SCI has become outdated; the start of the replacement Local Plan process is an appropriate time to review the adopted SCI so that sound principles of engagement can be built into the process.
- 4.2 The purpose of town planning is to enable sustainable development, meeting social, economic and environmental needs. The SCI supports this process through consideration of effective communications, information collation and involvement.
- 4.3 A Diversity Impact Assessment screening has been completed for the revised draft SCI and is attached at Appendix 2. This assessment concludes that

there are no disproportionate impacts on particular sectors of the community. The purpose of the SCI is to make explicit considerations of the diverse needs of the communities across Medway. It is therefore a helpful tool in contributing to the awareness of equalities issues to be addressed through the plan making process. Contact has been made during the consultation process with a number of interest groups representing those with 'protected characteristics' - to seek the views of stakeholders with disabilities, from BME groups and younger residents, amongst other groups.

5. Risk management

- 5.1 The Consultation Draft SCI is an updated version of a document that has been in place for a number of years. The limited risks associated with this work are set out below.

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Not adopting an updated SCI	Is a prerequisite of an adopted Local Plan guiding consultation through the key stages.	Preparation of revised draft SCI to support a new Local Plan.	E3

6. Consultation

- 6.1 The council consulted on the draft SCI from 20 June to 4 August 2014. The revised draft SCI has been broadly publicised, with all documentation being made available on the Council's Planning web pages, with printed copies available at Gun Wharf reception and Medway libraries. The Local Plan database was used to seek the views of statutory consultees and wider stakeholders. The database includes contacts for over 1000 organisations, community groups, businesses and residents with an interest in planning for Medway.
- 6.2 As part of the engagement process, consultees were invited to take part in a focus group discussion on the draft SCI. This meeting was conducted at the end of July and was well attended with a cross section of stakeholders, including Parish Councils, planning consultants, businesses, various interest groups/forums, notably the Local Access Forum, Medway Countryside Forum and Urban Parks and Green Spaces Forum, as well as members of the public. Feedback was generally positive, with suggestions made for improving the content and clarity of the draft SCI. The group welcomed steps to encourage and facilitate better engagement in Planning and understanding of the Local Plan. There was general support for information being made available on the Council's website. However issues were noted in the use of the online search functionality, occasional delays in uploading planning documents, and large files caused difficulties for users with poor broadband speeds and older computers. There was mixed experience of the use of online consultation software, creating difficulties in sharing information submitted on behalf of a community group. The group requested that summaries are produced for all key planning documents to reach a wider

audience. The cost of hard copies of documents such as the Local Plan could be a concern for some community groups. The fixed length of the formal consultation periods was often too short to accommodate discussion at group meetings that were held quarterly. The group welcomed the use of exhibitions to provide information on planning proposals to the wider public. The focus group members were not active users of social media, and did not favour this medium for communications on planning matters. There was support for the role of elected members in helping to promote and involve residents in Planning. There was discussion of the Planning Committee process and some members of the focus group sought opportunities for public speaking in this venue.

6.3 These comments are being considered alongside other consultation responses in producing the final version of the updated SCI.

6.4 At the time of producing this report, it has not been possible to assess the comments received during the consultation process to produce an updated version of the SCI. A summary of the comments received and the Council's suggested response is set out at Appendix 3.

7. Financial implications

7.1 The costs of the preparation of the revised SCI and associated consultation work are being met through existing Planning Service budgets.

8. Legal implications

8.1 Section 18 (1) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 states that a local planning authority must prepare a Statement of Community Involvement. More recently there have been changes to the Planning system, notably the introduction of the Localism Act in 2011 and the publication of the National Planning Policy Framework in 2012. These changes need to be reflected in the Statement of Community of Involvement.

9. Recommendations

9.1 That the committee consider the draft revision to the SCI. Comments received at committee will be included in the subsequent report to Cabinet.

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Background papers

Medway Statement of Community Involvement January 2012
(<http://www.medway.gov.uk/pdf/Statement%20of%20Community%20Involvement%202012.pdf>)