

TO: All members of Council

Our reference CS
Your reference N/A
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Dear Councillor

Council - Tuesday 15 December 2020

Attached are the written responses to the questions/statements raised at the above meeting, as referred to in the minutes.

Yours sincerely

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West Suffolk
Council

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15 December 2020

"Councillors,

Having spoken to many residents of The Fornhams on another matter, I am extremely disappointed in the Council's lack of democratic engagement with respect to the Local Plan.

- Many residents of The Fornhams are senior citizens and many of them, and other people, do not have access to the internet. Yet 'on-line' is the only way people can access the excellent exhibition the council has mounted.
- Even for those of us who are computer literate, accessing the vast quantity of documents on a small screen is difficult, as are the maps. I believe the Council has had to send out hard copies to community groups as even their advisors have had difficulties with the digital information.
- Our Parish Council have informed us of the Local Plan consultation - but not with any factual information. There are no maps on lamp posts or notices on the village noticeboards, to draw attention to what is going on.
- Why could the Council not have had its display in the foyer of West Suffolk House where residents could engage with the process? If supermarkets, pubs, restaurants and shops can provide a Covid-safe environment, why has the Council used Covid as an excuse to shut-down the democratic process? Even now, opening WSH, by appointment if need be, and extend the consultation by a couple of months would not be difficult, but would be more democratic and allow all residents in Suffolk to engage in the process.

With more imagination and now some foresight, please allow every resident access to engage in future plans.

PS If I am not in attendance at this meeting it is because I have been unable to access the agenda link. "

RESPONSE

Thank you for your questions.

The Local Plan develops, protects, and shapes the area and provides certainty for the community and stakeholders on where and how development will be built. It is the starting point for decision making.

Without an up to date Local Plan, the area is at risk of speculative development – resulting in the wrong type of growth, in the wrong locations, without the necessary strategic infrastructure to meet West Suffolk communities' future needs.

In March, MHCLG issued a letter in respect of local plan making and the implications of Covid-19, encouraging 'all local planning authorities to continue, as much as possible, to work proactively with their community and other stakeholders to progress plans, even if some adjustments to timetables are necessary.

This resulted in a change to our programme and the council chose not to commence consultation in May 2020. The council used this time to review how it can engage with communities and stakeholders in an inclusive but also safe way.

By May 2020, MHCLG announced that Local Authorities should progress Plan making given its link to the local economy. The need to have a Local Plan in place by December 2023 remains a MHCLG requirement.

Consultation therefore commenced in October 2020.

Community engagement with all the different sectors of society is a priority for the council as we develop the Local Plan.

The advent of Covid-19 has meant we have reconsidered and used different methods of consultation at a time when face to face meetings are discouraged as a precautionary measure to ensure our communities are safe.

The council has certainly NOT shut down democracy.

We want everyone to engage and have provided a range of promotional material which is partly electronic, but we have also utilised the more traditional methods such as posters and flyers in order to reach out to the community in a safe way.

Our offices have needed to remain closed to the public during the pandemic, but we have placed Local Plan flyers and posters in libraries, sports centres and supermarkets throughout West Suffolk area.

The first part of our consultation strategy was to innovate the on-line offer.

At a time when we cannot meet face-to-face, a virtual exhibition room was created. This summarises the Local Plan contents into 10 information boards in addition to providing access to FAQs and the documents themselves. It has a link to complete feedback questions.

The exhibition room has had over 3,000 visits so far. This is far more than we would have usually received from the face-to-face exhibitions. The on-line chat function has also been a very helpful additional feature for those within the exhibition to chat with a planning officer if they have any queries or would like some assistance on a particular issue.

The Local Plan featured in the Council's online Parish Forum in early November. A series of virtual workshops were also arranged early in the consultation. Town and parish councils were invited to a specific workshop and over 40 parish/town councils attended the workshops. We also held workshops for statutory consultees such as water companies and the Highways Agency, businesses, and local community groups.

In addition, we have been attending town and parish council meetings on request. I attended The Fornhams Parish Council meeting. We are finding that the parish council meetings are well attended with between 30 to 80 residents attending these meetings. These have been entirely online during this year's consultation.

The second part was to engage with as many range of different groups in West Suffolk as possible.

- The young and families are a particular group who have not engaged historically. Therefore, the council worked with schools affiliated with the Western Assembly of Youth (WAY) to prepare alternative promotional material – the coproduced posters and flyers were distributed to all of these linked schools in West Suffolk. A series of classroom conversations and virtual workshops were also held with the schools, colleges and further education centres.
- Recognising that some of our community are not comfortable with the internet, we promoted the consultation through the press with several press releases before and throughout the duration of the consultation. We also asked village magazines to place an article on the Local Plan as we launched consultation.
- The council also took to the radio and an advert about the Local Plan was aired on Radio Heart Suffolk and Smooth - both FM and DAB.
- We also contacted the Rural Coffee Caravan who assisted in promoting the consultation with promotional materials.
- We liaised with Suffolk Coalition of Disabled People, who featured the Local Plan in their newsletter and questionnaire to people on their mailing list. They also shared articles online. Suffolk Ordinary Lives (Suffolk Learning Disability Partnership) also has a news article about the Local Plan on their website.
- The council ran webinars to businesses at Suffolk Chamber and community groups such as Bury Assembly of Associations
- The council will send out hard copies of the documents. If there is a map or section you are particularly interested in, the council have sent those through the post to individuals or groups. Officers are more than happy to help individuals with a particular request by phone or email.
- A dedicated number for individuals to call.
- The Parish Council and Members were sent consultation and engagement packs before the consultation started to promote the consultation

The Packs included:

- Flyers
- Posters
- Frequently asked questions
- User guide - How to make a representation
- Social media imagery

To be placed on notice boards, village stores, pubs, lamp posts and even empty shop windows, etc.

There was also an issue of business continuity for the consultation once it had started. Planning to display materials, with or without staff on hand, in any public

place, council building or otherwise, would have been, and remains, hard to guarantee. As we've seen, during the consultation period we have had another national lockdown and tiering regulations to contend with and no certainty yet about what will happen in the new year. And throughout that time, the Government advice has been clear about not creating avoidable social interaction. So, relying upon physical exhibitions as a main part of the engagement strategy would not have been the right strategy for public participation as it might in the past, before such excellent online options existed. It was better to create an approach that could operate in any national or local Covid restrictions.

In terms of using the council offices for an exhibition, there is also a business continuity dimension to the use of these spaces. Namely, the Council has been instructed to keep existing public services going, including planning, throughout the pandemic. Whilst at the same time having to redeploy staff from all services into the Covid response to support the most vulnerable in society and local businesses. In that context, keeping council offices as Covid-secure as possible (and reducing the chance of them being involved in a local outbreak) is really important because a number of staff have had to continue to work in them throughout 2020 to ensure services kept operating. Not just in the Council but among our partners who share our buildings with us, such as the Job Centre, Adult and Children's Care, Public Health England and Community Nurses. And, in order to keep premises Covid-secure, any public access to them would have had to be supervised and controlled by staff, whether from the planning team or not. So, again, opening offices and providing staff to support exhibitions would have not been consistent with either Government guidelines or our need to protect essential public services.

Statutorily, Local Plans at this stage go on consultation for 6 weeks. The West Suffolk Local Plan Issues and Options consultation runs for 10 weeks. It is not appropriate for us to extend the time to respond beyond this, because the Government requires Local Plans to be produced in a timely manner.

We would encourage as many people as possible to make send us your thoughts and if you are aware of someone who is unable to access the computer or struggling to understand the documents – please ask them to contact the council's dedicated local plan number in order for us to help them.

At this stage the Council is raising 'questions' more than 'answers' – as the Plan has not already been drafted.

A further two formal rounds of consultation will take place before Plan is finalised. We will continue to explore different ways to consult as we move forward with the local plan in an inclusive and safe way.

Council: 15 December 2020 - written responses to questions/statements

Item 5: Leader's Statement: Question from Councillor Diane Hind to Councillor Sarah Broughton, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Performance, following referral by Councillor John Griffiths:

What concession following the impact of Covid-19 has been made in response to the late or non-payment of council tax? Are ARP using the same procedure that applied pre-Covid or are they offering deferral, or advising how to register for council tax support?

Response from Councillor Broughton:

Through Anglia Revenues Partnership, West Suffolk Council has and continues to offer support to our residents regarding the payment of Council Tax. This support has included:

- offering residents the ability to extend their payment terms with many taking up 12 month payment instalments
- issuing soft reminder letters to encourage residents to contact and engage with ARP before going down the statutory collection route
- suspension of enforcement action during the March lockdown up until August 2020
- awarding Government hardship funding of up to £150 on to Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme claimants
- offering advice on further extended payment terms prior to court hearings being reinstated January 2021
- signposting to support services such as the Suffolk Advice and Support Service which offers support and information relating to debt, benefits, housing or employment

Further details can be found on the ARP website:

<https://www.angliarevenues.gov.uk/coronavirus/>

Item 5: Leader’s Statement: Question from Councillor Max Clarke to Councillor Sara Mildmay-White, Portfolio Holder for Housing, following referral by Councillor John Griffiths:

How many units of temporary accommodation do we have available throughout the year, not just for Christmas or the winter; and how many units of supported accommodation do we have and whether West Suffolk Council has been given any indication that a Covid-19 recession may affect our capability to support vulnerable people in the future?

Response from Councillor Mildmay-White:

The Council has access to 109 units of temporary accommodation throughout the year. Of this 109, 36 are directly owned by the Council with a further nine being added from January 2021. The remaining units of accommodation are either leased from, or directly provided by, a registered provider.

In addition to temporary accommodation, the Council uses bed and breakfast and hotels if required in an emergency (such as fleeing violence). Further accommodation is provided for rough sleepers and short-term winter provision.

Supported accommodation is provided by Suffolk County Council’s Housing Related Support (HRS) contract. In West Suffolk 187 units of housing related support is available for adults and young people. Further supported accommodation is provided by other services such as mental health and learning disability.

The impact of Covid is ongoing and the Council is working with colleagues across Suffolk to provide the necessary support for vulnerable people. The Home But Not Alone (HBNA) continues to provide support to access to food and essential goods. The Suffolk Advice and Support Service (SASS) provides access to financial and budgeting support and access to the Local Welfare Assistance Scheme (LWAS) for those experiencing severe financial hardship due to Covid-19.

Item 7B1: Referral from Cabinet: Delivering a Sustainable Medium-Term Budget - Question from Councillor Diane Hind to Councillor Sarah Broughton, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Performance:

In the context of referring to what the figures were for loans/investment facilities to Abbeycroft and Barley Homes, Councillor Hind asked:

What are the levels of reserves in the different reserve categories?

Response from Councillor Sarah Broughton:

At the meeting Councillor Broughton referred to Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee (PASC) that includes reserves monitoring for the in-year budget position, which can be found in the link below to the most recent PASC meeting.

[Agenda for Performance and Audit Scrutiny Committee on Thursday 19 November 2020, 5.00 pm](#)

The level of reserves across our medium term plans vary and an updated position will form part of the main budget and council tax setting report, due to be considered by members in February 2021.

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