

**13 July 2020**

**ITEM: 9**

**Local Development Plan Task Force**

**Thurrock Local Plan – Next Steps**

**This report is Public**

**Executive Summary**

This report summarises the steps that the Council will need to take to prepare a sound Local Plan in accordance with all relevant legal and procedural requirements and consistent with national policy. It provides an addendum to the previous Thurrock Local Plan - Next Steps Report which the Task Force considered at its last meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and sets out some of the steps that the Council will take to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the local process.

**1. Introduction and Background.**

- 1.1 This Report provides an update to the previous Thurrock Local Plan – Next Steps Report which was considered by the Taskforce at its meeting on March 9<sup>th</sup> 2020. At the time when the original report was written, the Government had yet to announce the Covid-19 Lockdown and there was little clarity on the implications of the pandemic on timescales for preparing the plan or on how the Council goes about engaging with stakeholders and the local community in a safe and effective manner during its production.
- 1.2 The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will have significant and potentially long lasting economic, social and environmental impacts all of which could have profound impacts on how we live, work and travel in the future. Notwithstanding the inherent difficulties that this causes the plan-making in trying to predict what this all means in terms of the demand or use of land and infrastructure, the Government now requires all local authorities to have an adopted local plan in place by December 2023.
- 1.3 While this represents a considerable challenge to many authorities who have yet to adopt a new local plan, it is of an even greater challenge in Thurrock given the scale nature and complexity of the issues and opportunities which need to be addressed in bringing forward a Local Plan which can effectively drive transformational change. These include planning for the construction of the Lower Thames Crossing and making the most of a once in a lifetime opportunity to harness the Borough’s future growth potential to the benefit all sections of the local community.

**2 Thurrock Local Plan – Next Steps Update**

## Timescales and Programme

- 2.1 Although the effects of the Covid-19 lockdown has led to some delay in progressing the Plan, it is not considered that the timetable set out in the previous Report will slip considerably. Work has continued on the commissioning and completion of necessary technical work with only limited delays being experienced in getting this work completed.
- 2.2 Additional work is now being undertaken to develop a more detailed project plan with a view to the Council publishing an updated Local Development Scheme (LDS) in September 2020. The Local Development Scheme sets out the programme for the preparation of the Local Plan and progress in completing this review will be reported back to the Taskforce at its next meeting, together with further information on the steps that the Council are taking to expedite the production of the plan.

## Community Engagement

- 2.3 The Government has made clear that it wants authorities to continue to make progress on emerging Local Plans, reiterating its target of all authorities having up to date Plans in place by December 2023.
- 2.4 The Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) on Plan-making has been updated setting out how local authorities can review and update their Statements of Community Involvement. This states that where “any of the policies in the Statement of Community Involvement cannot be complied with due to current guidance to help combat the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), the local planning authority is encouraged to undertake an immediate review and update the policies where necessary so that plan-making can continue.” The PPG states that any temporary amendments should promote effective community engagement “by means which are reasonably practicable”. Various online engagement methods are suggested, including virtual exhibitions, digital consultations, video conferencing, social media, whilst requirements for physical documents to be publicly available for inspection, may be satisfied through online publication.
- 2.5 To ensure accessibility for those without internet access, authorities are advised to consider engaging directly with representative groups, focusing on those in areas specifically affected by proposals, whilst allowing individuals to nominate others to represent their views on their behalf. It also suggests that representations may be made by telephone or in writing where alternatives cannot be identified.
- 2.6 In order that the Council's approach to Community Engagement complies with Government Guidance, it is proposed to review the Local Plan Statement of Community Involvement and to identify any necessary amendments as may be required to ensure that the process of community engagement can be undertaken in a safe and effective manner over the course of the plan-making

process, This work will also seek to identify alternative means of public consultation and the costs and feasibility of rolling these out as should they be required in the future. It is anticipated that this review will be completed in autumn 2020 with any subsequent amendments to the Statement of Community Involvement following shortly after. A further report on this matter will be submitted to the Taskforce on this matter in due course.

### **Thurrock Design Charrettes**

- 2.7 As the Taskforce will be aware it was originally proposed to roll out the Design Charrette process successfully piloted in Aveley in 2019 across the Borough during summer 2020. However, due to the current situation it has been impossible to do this due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 Lockdown. In recognition of the fact that the impact of the current pandemic is likely to be with us for some time, the Council has been working with the Princes Foundation to develop a new programme for the roll out of the process making use of alternative means and mechanisms for engaging with the local community in developing an agreed vision and guiding principles to inform the future planning of their area.
- 2.8 Although a detailed programme for the roll out of the Charrette process has to be finalised, the broad timescales for this work have been agreed and are as follows.
- **July to August 2020** – Agree Study Brief and collect Baseline Borough/Settlement Information
  - **September** - Hold Council Stakeholder Briefing Workshops
  - **October to December** – Undertake Stakeholder/Landowner/Scheme Promoter Workshops
  - **February to March 2021** – Undertake Community Engagement
  - **April to May** – Complete Charrette Settlement Reports.
- 2.9 A further verbal update on the programme for rolling out the Design Charrette process will be provided to Members at the Local Development Plan Taskforce Meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> July.

### **Local Plan Planning Performance Agreements**

- 2.10 It is a well-established principle of the plan-making process that the preparation and review of all policies must be underpinned by relevant and up-to-date evidence. Equally important is the need for local plans to be shaped by early, proportionate, and effective engagement between plan makers and communities, local organisations, businesses, infrastructure providers and operators and statutory consultees. However, ensuring that both these considerations are addressed through the plan-making process can also significantly add to the cost and time it takes to prepare a new Local Plan. Reflecting this the Council is therefore seeking to promote the use of Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) as a means sharing the cost of preparing a

local plan as well as expediting the time it takes to progress the plan through to Adoption.

- 2.11 While the use of voluntary Planning Performance Agreements is now common in respect of the determination of planning applications, the Council considers that there is also a role for them in helping to deliver a faster and more effective plan-making process. Equally, by adopting a collaborative and proactive approach to evidence development during the plan-making stage, it should also help shorten the time it takes for a planning application to be determined and granted planning permission following the adoption of the plan. The participation of other parties in the PPA process should also enable early consideration of all the fundamental issues relating to whether a particular site or strategic development will be acceptable in principle as well as providing the opportunity for those involved to work together to secure the necessary funding and delivery of supporting infrastructure. The Council considers that this can be best achieved by adopting a 'Development Team' approach as the preferred way of working with stakeholders as part of an 'end-to-end' and seamless plan-making and development management process.

#### Joint Working

- 2.12 Wherever possible and appropriate the Council will encourage adjoining landowners and scheme promoters to work collaboratively in the assisting the Council in developing the evidence base to support the preparation of the Local Plan and the promotion of strategic sites or broad locations for growth. Adopting this approach will make the most of efficient use of existing resources and lead to cost savings and efficiencies in the procurement and commissioning of technical studies and reports.
- 2.13 To facilitate joint working a Joint Project Team will be established for the term of the Agreement. Membership of the Joint Project Team will be at the ultimate discretion of the parties. However, changes to the Joint Project Team will need to be notified and agreed in advance wherever possible. The Joint Project Team will comprise of a Site Promoters Team and a Thurrock Council Team. For larger and more complex sites or growth areas consideration should be given the benefits of widening membership of the Joint Project Team to include representatives from the following organisations:

- The Environment Agency
- Homes England
- Highways England
- Natural England
- Heritage England
- Public Utilities
- Public Health
- Transport providers and operators
- Others to be determined

#### Developing the Evidence Base

- 2.14 The Council is committed to ensuring that the preparation of Local Plan is based on an up-to-date and robust evidence base. However, given the high costs involved in producing a local plan there is a need to obtain additional funding to ensure that the necessary technical work is completed within the shortest possible timescales to enable the Local Plan to progress quickly to adoption. Although the Council will continue to take the lead in commissioning this work there is significant role for stakeholders and site promoters to contribute to resourcing the development of the evidence base through the PPA process. In many cases the information needed to support the allocation of a site for development and provide evidence of its deliverability will also be required at a later stage to support the determination of a future planning application. It is that by twin-tracking and frontloading the development of the evidence base that the overall timescales and costs associated with bringing development forward can be shortened to the benefit of all parties.
- 2.15 As with the Thurrock Design Charrettes, it was originally proposed to start the entering into PPAs with scheme promoters during summer 2020 as a natural progression following on from the start of the Charrette process. However, this has had to be postponed to the autumn of 2020 to both enable the alignment of the two processes and to enable the parties to put in place the necessary infrastructure required to hold virtual Development Team Meetings. Reflecting these considerations it is now proposed to start rolling out the PPA process in September 2020 as capacity and resources allow.

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