

Thurrock Charette Process Detailed Engagement Strategy – October 2020

Introduction

Thurrock Borough Council is in the early stages of developing a new Local Plan, providing a framework for the development of the borough over the next 20-30 year period. This covers not just homes, but also employment, leisure, education and other community amenities.

In line with best practice and with emerging government policy, Thurrock is implementing a detailed community and stakeholder engagement programme at the earliest stage of the process. This aims to pro-actively stimulate a positive borough-wide conversation on where, when and how development can and should take place.

As part of this, Thurrock Borough Council has partnered with the Princes Foundation and Snapdragon at PLMR to implement a series of ‘charettes’, in tandem with extensive online engagement to bring the community, landowners and key stakeholders into the process from the outset.

Given the current restrictions on physical gatherings and external events due to the COVID19 pandemic, the engagement processes will have a heavy emphasis on virtual and digital methods. However, it is vital to ensure that those who are not digitally enabled are not excluded from the process; measures will be put in place to facilitate engagement across all audiences and all demographics

‘Charette’ (noun)

A public meeting or workshop devoted to a concerted effort to solve a problem or plan the design of something.

Policy Background

Engagement with local communities is a fundamental part of the democratic planning process. There are a series of planning policies and guides at the national and local level which stress the need for applicants to engage with local authorities and the local community when bringing forward planning applications.

- The Localism Act 2011 enshrines in law a community right to consultation; it includes the “requirement to carry out pre-application consultation” and also requires a “duty to take account of response to consultation.” Meanwhile, the NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework), which came into force in March 2012, strengthens the need for front-loaded community engagement, and is based on the principle that consultation should not be a reactive process, but rather it should enable the local community to say what sort of place they want to live in at a stage when this can make a difference.
- The NPPF was revised in February 2019, building upon these core themes of community engagement and making changes which reflected the Government’s desire to increase housing delivery. Further, a raft of measures intended to “improve neighbourhood planning” were implemented in April 2017, with the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 coming into effect.
- Additionally, the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) has delivered a new expectation for local authorities and developers to use creative, digital consultation methods to ensure that engagement on planning applications continues. The outgoing Chief Planner at the Ministry

of Housing, Communities and local Government, Steve Quartermain CBE, sent a newsletter to all local planning authorities at the end on March 2020 on how this should be undertaken. This was then updated with further guidance in May 2020.

- More recently, the government published a White Paper on Planning Reform, which sets out a clear obligation to frontload community engagement at the Local Plan stage, maximising the input and influence which residents and businesses can have in shaping their local area and ensuring Local Plans reflect community aspirations.
- Thurrock Council also have an SCI which sets out a clear commitment to engaging with the community through a variety of methods on the preparation of all planning policy. The intention is to engage with as wide an audience as possible through a series of approaches which will facilitate many people to get involved.

Thurrock Council are implementing a process which both reflects our updated SCI (2020) as well as emerging government policy, putting in place an open engagement process which uses workshops, surveys and other means to secure community involvement at each stage in the process.

Process

The process which Thurrock Borough Council are implementing will ensure that as many individuals, stakeholders, community groups and businesses have an opportunity to be engaged in the formulation of the Local Plan.

The first stage in the process is to prepare all required materials and ensure that stakeholders within the Council, from Service Leads and Lead Members to frontline staff, are briefed on both the plans and the approach enabling them to both support and be part of the engagement as well as to champion the process externally. This will include:

- Preparing all briefing materials
- Briefing Lead Members and Service Leads on the engagement plan, process and timescales
- Internal communications to all frontline staff and switchboard staff
- Internal communications to wider staff body

The second stage in the process is to prepare for and implement external engagement, ensuring that information is accessible, legible and easy to engage with. This will involve engaging both with the public and with landowners who have a specific interest in the process; it is critical that landowners are involved at this early stage in order for the Local Plan team can get a clear understanding of which sites are likely to be promoted through the Local Plan. At the same time, the BIMBY* process enables the community views and aspirations to be viewed alongside landowners. This will include:

- Briefing local press
- Launching the consultation website and the BIMBY 1 process
- Holding landowner charettes

*BIMBY stands for 'Beauty in my Back Yard'. It is the toolkit designed and delivered by the Princes Foundation which enables communities, organisations and local authorities to develop a toolkit and manual which sets out collaborative design and development principles for a local area.

The third stage is to take the feedback and analysis from the earlier processes and utilise this in the next phase of the engagement programme. This will include:

- Launching the BIMBY 2 & 3 processes

- Launching an education and schools engagement process

Throughout the process, Snapdragon at PLMR will work with the Council to ensure that communications are clear and consistent, in line with Council policy on plain English and accessibility of communications.

Methodology

The primary objective of the engagement process is to ascertain the views, and encourage the participation of, members of the community and stakeholders in the processes of developing the Local Plan.

With the ongoing COVID19 pandemic, traditional physical engagement methods are likely to be limited. Furthermore, a comprehensive digital engagement programme is likely to generate far greater engagement across a more diverse audience than traditional methods on their own. Whilst the preferred approach would be to combine both traditional and more innovative methods of engagement, requirements of social distancing and the potential for local lockdowns means that greater emphasis is likely to be placed on digital and virtual engagement methods. At the same time, we are conscious of the need to ensure that those who may not be digitally enabled for a variety of reasons are not excluded from the process.

Charettes and the BIMBY engagement process

This engagement strategy aims to undertake an exploratory exercise at the outset through a key stakeholder technical workshop and public feedback sessions using the Prince's Foundation's BIMBY (www.bimby.org.uk) toolkit. Rather than presenting pre-determined proposals, this process will allow for the plans to gradually evolve in dialogue with key stakeholders and the community, with the aim being to gather views and ideas with interested parties and stakeholders that can 'shape' the proposals at an early stage as they evolve to incorporate local concerns and benefits

The methodology which will be utilised to undertake the engagement process will include, but not be limited to:

- Digital consultation through Bang the Table;
- A BIMBY 1 Survey held online and through workshops (physical and virtual);
- Local libraries to display information and physical surveys to enable a broader audience to engage;
- Working with the internal community engagement team to ensure direct physical outreach to communities across the borough;
- Utilisation of lamppost banners, posters and public displays of information;
- Bespoke newsletters to be distributed across the borough;
- Utilisation of existing community newsletters and information;
- Technical key stakeholder charettes;
- Formal consultation with landowners;
- Public exhibitions and workshops (virtual and physical where possible);
- Engagement with residents, businesses, third sector, schools and community groups.

The final results of the engagement programme will form a key part of the development of the Local Plan at the earliest stage of the process. Subsequent stages of the Local Plan development will continue to incorporate extensive and appropriate community engagement.