

Report to Sustainable development panel
01 October 2020
Report of Director of place
Subject Statement of Community involvement update

Item

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Purpose

To consider the proposed updates to the Statement of Community Involvement. The proposed updates are temporary and are in direct response to the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) upon our ability to engage with the community using some methods, such as public meetings. This is as a result of the social distancing guidance which is issued by the government.

Recommendation

To endorse the changes to the document and recommend to cabinet that the council adopts the updated Statement of Community Involvement.

Corporate and service priorities

The report helps to meet the corporate priority great neighbourhoods, housing and environment and people living well

Financial implications

None

Ward/s: All Wards

Cabinet member: Councillor Stonard - Sustainable and inclusive growth

Contact officers

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Background documents

None

Reference

Statement of Community Involvement (2016)

Report

Context

1. Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs) are codes of practice for setting out how councils intend to involve people in planning decisions. They cover decisions in relation to both planning policy and planning applications (development management). SCIs are required under section 18 of the Planning and Compulsory Act 2004. Norwich City Council's latest SCI was adopted in November 2016, and is published on our website here; https://www.norwich.gov.uk/downloads/file/2269/statement_of_community_involvement .
2. The coronavirus outbreak (Covid-19) has impacted on how we can currently engage with the community, with several methods in the 2016 SCI not possible under the current government guidelines on social distancing.
3. New planning guidance (updates to the National Planning Policy Guidance¹) has been published for Statement of Community Involvement policies which allows local planning authorities to review and update them accordingly. This guidance allows for temporary alterations to be made where the current policy cannot be complied with due to the current social distancing restrictions in response to the coronavirus outbreak. The guidance advises that temporary revisions to SCIs made under this guidance do not need to be publicly consulted on.
4. The proposed changes to the SCI are anticipated to be temporary, and are proposed to ensure the safety of our communities, key partners, businesses and council staff.
5. Also of note is an amendment to the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 (S.I. 2012/767) ("the 2012 Regulations") reference 2020 No.731². This amendment removes the requirement for local planning authorities to have certain documents available for inspection at a premise and to provide hard copies on request. These measures are temporary and apply until 31 December 2020. Policy documents will currently be considered made when they are made available on the local planning authority's website.
6. A more thorough review of the SCI is anticipated next year. Current guidance requires SCIs to be updated every 5 years, and so a review is due by November 2021. The current revision focuses on the impact of the virus only, and does not extend beyond this remit. The recently published Planning for the Future White Paper published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) has proposed significant changes to the way in which communities are consulted in relation to planning, placing more emphasis on the planning policy stage. At this point it is also unclear how the White Paper will impact the council's planning policies in the short to medium term, notably the draft Greater Norwich Local Plan. It is therefore recommended that a temporary update to the SCI is adopted with a future revision addressing the wider changes to planning.

Proposed changes

7. The current SCI has three main sections; introduction, consultations on planning policy documents, and consultations on planning applications (development management). All three sections have been amended (see track changes version at Appendix 1). The proposed changes in each section have been summarised below.

Introduction

8. Within the need for review section the additional paragraphs outline why the temporary amendments are proposed and provides some background.
9. Equality is a statutory duty under The Equality Act 2010 and for the public sector this means that public bodies have to consider all individuals when carrying out their day to day work, such as shaping policies, delivering services and in relation to their employees. Some individuals may be disproportionately impacted by the restrictions imposed by the social distancing guidance. An additional paragraph in the section titled “The Council’s commitment to equality” acknowledges this, and identifies that the council will assist any individual where a need is identified.
10. The Role of Councillors section includes a new paragraph which explains that planning applications committee meetings are currently being held virtually, as permitted under the Coronavirus Act 2020. The meetings are available live on the council’s YouTube channel. This situation will continue to be reviewed, and alternatives such as hybrid meetings may be considered (where some attendees are in-person and some are remote).

Consultations on planning policy documents

11. The Consultation methods sub-section has been amended, advising that not all of the consultation methods listed maybe possible at present due to the coronavirus pandemic. In particular hard copies and face to face events are unlikely to be readily available, dependent on the current government guidance.
12. Hard copies of consultation documents are usually available at the council’s office and at the Millennium library. Focus group sessions, public meetings and presentations/exhibitions are often held throughout the consultation process. The proposed amendments allow these to go ahead where possible and subject to social distancing guidelines. At the time of writing neither the Council’s offices nor the Millennium library are open to the public as widely as they were prior to the pandemic.

Consultations on planning applications

13. A section has been added advising that not all of the consultation methods listed maybe possible at present due to the coronavirus pandemic. In particular hard copies of planning applications committee papers are unlikely to be readily available, and face to face events such as the planning applications committee itself may be held remotely instead.
14. Details on the planning applications committee are repeated in this section from the Role of the Councillors section above.

15. The SCI strongly encourages applicants to consult the local community before submitting a planning application, in particular for housing developments of 10 or more and for any development with a floor area of 1,000 square metres or above. Applicants are also likely to be impacted by the government's social distancing guidance and are now advised to consider alternatives methods and explain their approach.
16. The alterations ensure that consultation methods that maybe impacted by the coronavirus pandemic can be varied or removed, dependent upon the current government guidance in relation to the coronavirus pandemic.

Conclusion

17. The proposed alterations to the SCI will allow the document to respond to the current pandemic and to set out how the community will be consulted by their local planning authority appropriately at this time. The measures are temporary, and whilst it is hoped that any change to the government guidance on social distancing results in a relaxation, the wording used for the amendments has been deliberate in allowing for the guidance to move either way.