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Environment and Housing Scrutiny Panel
Community Engagement with Planning
Evidence Gathering Session 2 – Comparative Policy and Practice
(31st January 2014)

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Present: Cllr Bloch, Cllr McNam6ara (Chair) and Cllr Weber

Apologies: Cllr Alexander, Cllr Bull, Cllr Ejiofor and Cllr Mallett

In attendance: Nancy Astley (Planning Aid for London), Alison Blom-Cooper (Haringey Council), Pat Castledine (Planning Aid for London), Simon Ford (AMEC, for Planning Advisory Service), Jonathan Gibb (Islington Council), Kevin Henson (Islington Council)), Clodagh McGuirk (Haringey Council), Sule Nisanlocgu (Haringey Council) and Emma Williamson (Haringey Council).

1.   Introduction

1.1   The aim and objectives of this investigation by the Environment and Housing Scrutiny Panel (EHSP) was outlined to those present. In summary the overarching aim of the investigation was to assess how the planning service engages and supports meaningful community involvement in planning developments and decision making with particular reference to:
   - Statement of Community Involvement
   - Role of members
   - Capacity building of community
   - Role of IT and new social media
   - Implications of recent legislation.

1.2   The current and future work programme of the EHSP in undertaking this investigation was as noted below:

Evidence session 1- Local Policy and Practice (November 2013)
   - AD Planning,
   - Planning Policy Officers,
   - Development Management Officers

Evidence Session 2 -Comparative Policy and Practice (January 2014)
   - Planning Aid For London
   - Planning Advisory Service
   - Islington
   - Camden (to schedule visit)

Evidence session 3 - Community stakeholders (February 2014)
   - Survey of consulted groups
   - Community groups
   - Developers (representatives/ agents)

2.   The following provides a summary of the areas of panel discussion together with key evidence heard from specialist contributors.

Planning Advisory Service

2.1 The Planning Advisory Service is funded through the Department of Communities and Local Government (as part of the Local Government Association) principally to provide planning advice, support and guidance for local authorities (portfolio holders, planning committee members, non executive members and planning officers).

> *"PAS exists to provide support to local planning authorities to provide efficient and effective planning services, to drive improvement in those services and to respond to and deliver changes in the planning system"*

Planning Aid for London

2.2 Planning Aid for London offers advice and training on planning processes for communities and individuals across London. This is service is provided by qualified volunteers including planners, architects and lawyers. The service has been in operation for approximately 40 years and provides support to those who are affected by planning proposals or decisions and who do not have the resources to pay for planning advice.

2.3 PAL operates at many levels and can facilitate community involvement in planning and regeneration at a specific site, within a local neighbourhood or Borough or even London wide. Some recent examples of PAL work include:
- Assisting Finsbury Park Action Group to develop the Isledon Road Community Plan
- Workshops and other consultation events with King's Cross Development Forum on King's Cross Central proposals.
- Providing "An Introduction to Planning" training to community groups such as the Wards Corner Community Coalition.

Statement of Community Involvement

2.4 The panel noted that the statement of community involvement (SCI) was of critical importance to local engagement as this document should set out the context, nature and approach of consultations undertaken by Local Planning Authorities. It was of critical importance that the SCI is developed in consultation and in agreement with the community to demonstrate that the prospective approach to involvement is endorsed by the community.

2.5 The Planning Advisory Service and members underscored the importance of local demography and in assessing local needs in shaping consultation methods detailed in the SCI. Planning Advisory Service also noted that it was important that the notion community engagement was seen to be ongoing, fluid and evolving to reflect the fact that local environment and community is ever-changing. An ongoing programme of community engagement is more likely to pick up and respond to changes as they occur.

2.6 Planning Officers noted that the current SCI was originally drafted in 2007 and was updated in 2011. The panel noted that it was expected that the conclusions and recommendations from project would guide and inform a further update of the SCI planned for summer 2014.

Development Management consultation

2.7 In respect of new development members of the panel reported that there were two main criticisms of local consultations:
1) that the consultation area for prospective development was too small, which meant that local residents that may be affected were omitted from the consultation process.
2)that the consultation for prospective development could take place earlier to allow people more time to engage and be involved.

Islington Council noted that there were large variations in the number of responses it received for development management consultations across individual wards.

New technologies

2.8 It was noted that both Islington and Camden have incorporated Geographical Information System (GIS) within notification systems for development management. It was noted that Wiltshire County Council uses GIS to map local planning information (e.g. conservation areas, flood zones, listed buildings, tree preservation orders) as well as details of local planning applications.

2.9 Panel members noted that whilst digitalisation cleanly offers numerous potential benefits to assist community engagement and involvement in local planning processes, there was an underlying concern about the accessibility of digital systems to a significant proportion of local residents, particularly the elderly, socially and economically disadvantaged and non-English speaking groups.

2.10 The panel noted that information technology advances has made it easier to consult and involve local people and to keep local residents up to date in planning issues. The panel noted that the current system of notification of planning applications via posters of lampposts was antiquated and liable to miss those to whom this is targeted. It can also be difficult to extrapolate details from these posters to find out further information about applications. It was noted that if you don't know the postcode or application number, then it can be difficult for local residents to locate and identify an application that they may wish to comment upon.

2.11 It was suggested that new technology could assist in local consultations in that this could provide a GIS linked map of applications where people can physically see what planning applications in a particular area (down to street level).

2.12 It was also suggested that GIS technology could also assist in relation to earlier notification of when planning applications received by the planning service. It was noted that a small number of authorities operate systems in which local residents can register with the council to receive email updates details of planning applications within a defined area when applications are initially logged into the system rather than just those applications going to committee.

Using existing community resources and capacity building

2.13 In evidence presented to the panel both PAS and PAL concurred that it was important that the local community is a significant resource to local planning services, and where possible it should seek to harness the such skills and expertise and local knowledge to the benefit of local planning processes. In addition, it was

also suggested that planning services should utilise existing community infrastructure rather than trying to create or invent new structures (e.g. existing community groups and residents associations).

2.14 Similarly, PAL indicated that it is important to work with existing institutions in the area to support development that could improve planning outcomes for local people. It cited its work with the British Library, UCL and K0ings Cross Station which have helped to bring further training and job opportunities for local people.

2.15 There was some concurrent amongst those attending that it was also important to build the capacity within existing community groups. Both PAL and Islington Council both indicated that they had worked with local voluntary sector umbrella groups to (Voluntary Action Camden and Voluntary Action Islington) to help build local capacity to engage and be involved in local planning processes. Capacity building was also an important step in supporting cultural change to encourage local leadership and responsibility for planning.

2.16 Some understanding of planning processes is needed to support meaningful engagement in consultations for new planning development or planning policies. In this context, the panel recognised the need to invest in planning training for local groups or individuals to help build local capacity to engage and meaningfully contribute to local planning processes. If effective, such training can then be cascaded throughout the community. Advice from PAL would suggest that such training should be focused on existing groups and community networks.

2.17 As part of a capacity building programme for the local community, the panel noted that it may be helpful to provide examples of what good engagement and consultation responses. Such examples (so long as they avoided a template response) could assist local residents or groups in the responses that they provide to planning consultation.

2.18 The panel noted that the issue of capacity building also extends to the role of local planning officers, in that it may be necessary to build and extend the community engagement skills of local planning officers. Attendees noted that it was rare to have dedicated community engagement or consultation expertise within planning services and this is carried out generically within existing planning officer roles. PAS also suggested that planning officers should, where possible, draw on the consultation and engagement experience across the council, in particular those in transport and parking.

2.19 The panel noted that it was important to demonstrate what impact consultation with local residents and community groups had upon individual planning proposals. That is, how had plans changed as a result of the feedback provided within individual planning consultations? The panel noted that it was important to provide a mechanism for such feedback to:
- Provide reassurance to participants that there contributions were useful, valid and contributed to the planning process;
- To provide a guide to p*otential* participants in planning consultations
- Facilitate further community engagement in the future.

2.20 In the context of the above, panel members noted that it was important to managing respondents expectations and to clearly spell out how involvement can possibly shape the outcomes.

2.21 The panel noted that it was important to maintain an organisational record of community engagement which contain an analysis of those methods which have successful or those which require further adaptation. Without this analysis, the organisation is liable to repetition of ineffective consultation processes. This record will also help to establish the journey that the planning service has embarked in relation to community engagement and involvement and guide and inform future processes.

2.22 The panel noted that Haringey Planning Service intended to organise a community conference during 2014. The purpose of this conference was to engage with local communities and to help identify what the service should do to improve in engaging local groups and involving them in planning processes.

2.23 In its evidence to the panel, PAS recommended that community engagement and capacity building should be focused and objective and properly evaluated to ensure that what work is undertaken is done well and builds up positive experiences with the public. Too much engagement, which is unfocused could end up being very expensive, lead to inconclusive outcomes and leave participants dem0oralised.

2.24 The Panel were unsure as to whether some small part of income derived from Community Infrastructure Levy could be used to fund community training and development in the locality, or if there were other examples from other local authorities?

Availability of independent advice
2.25 The panel sought to clarify the range of independent advice available to individuals and local communities to support their engagement with local planning processes. It was noted that there were a number of sources which included:
- Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) a charitable body supporting spatial, sustainable and inclusive planning;
- Planning Portal;
- Planning Advisory Service;
- Planning Aid for London.

2.26 The panel recommended that an advice sheet is developed for local residents and community groups in Haringey which provides details of those organisations from which independent planning advice can be obtained.

Approach of planning officers
2.27 The panel noted that different planning officers adopt different approaches in supporting local development plans. It was suggested that those officers that adopted a more holistic approach by facilitating sites visits, involving related council and other services and where the views of local stakeholders actively sought were evidently more successful.

Early involvement in planning applications

2.28 It was noted by the panel, that developers recognised the importance of local capacity building and early engagement. It was noted that a registered housing provider (Family Mosaic) had trained up members of local tenant forums to help consider planning issues. It was suggested that such early investment in local communities had a number of benefits:

- Allows more time for a greater representation local stakeholders to be involved including community groups, local councillors as well as local residents
- More time for meaningful engagement and for opinions to be canvassed fully and objections dealt with at an early stage;
- It minimises the risk of later (and more costly) legal challenge later in the planning process – it was estimated that a 1% investment in community engagement can help to bring a 4% saving on the scheme overall.

2.29 Traditionally, local planning services have been wary of involving councillors at any reapplication stage to avoid any notion of predetermination. It is recognised however, that members can play an important role in pre-application discussions as their involvement can assist the planning process through:

- Local knowledge (groups, representatives, area);
- Understanding of community views;
- The early identification of problem issues.

2.30 As a result of provisions within the Localism Act (2011) the panel noted that there was new probity guidance for Councillors and officers particularly in relation to the consideration of planning proposals at the pre-application stage. Provisions within the Act allows Councillors more freedom to engage, express their views and question the applications so long as this is done with an 'open-mind' and without pre-determination.

2.31 The panel noted that a Pre-application Planning Group is in operation in Islington at which Planning members can attend alongside executive members and local planning officers.

2.32 It was noted that PAS was intending to provide further support to local authorities develop and improve local pre-application processes. It was envisaged that this support would be programme of workshops which could be operated locally, to help services evaluate and improve existing pre-application processes.

2.33 In verbal evidence received by the scrutiny service from another authority, it was noted that the pre-application consultation was particularly important as this helped to identify problems and solutions early in the planning process. It was acknowledged however, that it was often difficult for people to meaningfully engage when plans may be still in their infancy and fully worked up (i.e. exactly what it planned, what this will it look like and what impact that it may have in the community).

2.34 It may also be useful and important to establish rules of engagement for developers, members and the local community at the pre-application stage. In this context, the panel's attention was drawn to the recent joint publication by the Local Government

Association and British Property Federation: 10 Commitments for effective pre-application engagement.[1] These commitments cover the following areas:

- Parameters of consultation (timing, proportionality;
- Open exchange of information;
- Collaborative working to find deliverable outcomes;
- The need to involve members in.
- Need to keep a record of meetings held.

Member Development

2.35 It was noted that local councillors play an important role in local planning processes as they embrace a number of key roles:

- Strategic leadership: setting the vision and direction
- Plan making: to reflect local values and priorities in policies
- Ward level representation: representing local views
- Neighbourhood planning: – link between community and the council and council services.

2.36 Local Councillors have a particularly important role in Development Management to help ensure that:

- Involvement with the community and developers is at an early stage
- Areas of local concern are raised
- There is an informed debate on the issues presented
- A wide range of issues and material considerations are considered in helping to make the right decision.

2.37 In relation to member development it was noted that there was a Councillor area on the Planning Advisory Service website which provided briefings, updates and training to support their role in local planning processes.

2.38 The need to support members in their advocacy / champion role in planning consultation – need a dedicated web page for members on how to support individual and local community groups through the planning consultation process.... one stop page for all independent advice.

Planning Enforcement

2.39 The panel noted the work that had been undertaken in a neighbouring authority (Camden) in relation to planning enforcement. In response to the huge amount of time and resources devoted to enforcement, every developer and every agent working in the borough were consulted to identify those planning issues of most concern for which pre-application information guidance (Top Ten Issues) could be developed. Through involving local developers, it was hoped that this would prevent or minimise later enforcement action as this guide would set out 'up front' what is needed and expected from developers. This process can also help to speed up the planning process.

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[1] 10 Commitments for effective pre-application engagement, Local Government Association (2014)