

APPENDIX 2: PROPOSED CONSULTATION PAPER ON THE STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Introduction

The Council needs to have a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), which sets out how the authority will involve the community in preparing planning documents in their area. The SCI also covers how the community will be engaged in major development proposals, particularly before a planning application is made.

Reading's existing SCI was adopted on 19th March 2014, and is included as Appendix 1 to this consultation paper. The document has guided community involvement and consultation in producing the Council's Local Plan, which has recently been subject to public examination, as well as a number of supplementary planning documents.

We are now consulting on whether there should be any changes to the SCI. We know that there are some areas where an update is required (for instance related to neighbourhood planning) but we would like your views on whether the document remains fit for purpose, particularly since means of communication evolve quite quickly.

Please provide any comments by **3rd May 2019**.

Comments should be made in writing, either by e-mail or post. We would prefer responses that address the specific questions asked throughout this document (shown in grey boxes). A form, setting out these questions, is available alongside this document. However, you do not need to answer all questions, so if you only wish to address certain parts of the consultation, please feel free to respond without using the form.

Please send any comments by 5 pm on Friday 3rd May to

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Principles

The SCI is based on seven key principles that emerge from the Council document 'Working Better With You: Community Involvement Guidance' in 2012, as follows:

- **Accessibility and choice:** We will ensure that you are informed/consulted/involved in a way that considers your needs. It is your choice whether to be involved, how to get involved and to what extent (within legal boundaries).
- **Timeliness:** We will inform, consult and/or involve you as early as possible.

- **Inclusiveness and equity:** We will seek and welcome all views. We value diversity. Opportunities to get involved will be equally accessible to everyone, young people’s views are considered equal to those of adults.
- **Transparency and honesty:** We will be open from the start about our proposals, the process, outcomes, timeframes for implementation and levels of influence, any resource limitations or statutory requirements. You have the right to challenge any barrier to your involvement (e.g. process, approach, assumptions) and to work with us to seek solutions.
- **Respect and listening:** We value, listen to, respect and learn from the contribution of all participants.
- **Accountability:** We will demonstrate what difference your involvement makes in processes or outcomes.
- **Flexibility and evolution:** We will regularly re-evaluate our involvement processes and methods and modify them in response to feedback or changing or developing needs. We will seek and share innovative and creative ways to improve involvement.

These principles are divided into detailed actions for consulting and involving on planning matters and are listed on page 7 of the current SCI in Appendix 1.

Q1. Do you agree that the SCI should continue to be based on the principles from the Council’s Community Involvement Guidance?

Methods

Under the principle of ‘inclusiveness and equity’, the current SCI identifies a number of hard-to-reach groups, which tend to be underrepresented in planning consultations in Reading. These are as follows:

- Younger people (under 40);
- Black and minority ethnic populations; and
- Residents of less affluent communities, including much of South Reading and parts of West and Central Reading.

In the consultations that have taken place for the Local Plan process, the Council has not asked for details of age or ethnicity. Anecdotally, there is no indication that Local Plan consultations have been any more successful in engaging younger people or ethnic minorities than previous consultations, but this is not possible to conclusively demonstrate.

However, it is possible to record the parts of Reading from which Local Plan responses were received. The number of responses from members of the public in each part of Reading is shown below.

	Issues and Options	Draft	Pre-Submission
Central	0	0	0
South	2	1	1
West	7	18	7
North	32	23	58
East	3	3	3

Out of Borough	3	2	3
Not recorded	26	24	26

Broadly, the areas which would see the highest levels of development within the Local Plan (Central and South) saw the fewest responses, whilst the area which would see the lowest levels of development (North, i.e. Caversham and Emmer Green) saw the highest amount. Where significant amounts of responses were received, this was related to specific sites, but it is notable that only sites in North and West Reading generated this level of representations. There is therefore an issue in that the communities likely to see the greatest change are those least involved.

We would therefore welcome any views on how to better reach out to those who we struggle to reach in planning consultations, for instance consultation methods, timing or presentation.

Q2. Do you have any views on how the Council can best engage hard to reach groups?

Under the principle of “accessibility and choice,” the current SCI states that “measures to involve and consult the community will be appropriate to the type, scope and stage of the policy or plan, and to the community itself.” It adds that “methods of community involvement will be designed to maximise accessibility insofar as possible”.

At the current time, planning consultations for planning policy documents usually involve at least one ‘drop-in’ event where officers are available informally to discuss proposals with the members of the public and answer any questions. These are usually held in the afternoon and evening hours on weekdays in a location that is relevant to the proposal (for example, a development framework for a park may be held at the leisure centre on site, while proposals that affect the entire Borough will be held at the Civic Offices).

Visual displays are somewhat limited, with hard copies of the document made available and some key maps, charts or text enlarged to prompt discussion, as models or other custom-made displays can be very resource-intensive.

Written or verbal representations are not usually collected at the events themselves, rather individuals are directed to review the document further and submit comments online or by post.

Community involvement on proposals are front-loaded, meaning that the most wide-ranging involvement (such as an interactive workshop) takes place at the earliest stage, when the opportunity to shape the outcome is greatest, and is more targeted as details develop further.

Q3. Do you have any views on how worthwhile the Council’s drop-in sessions are and/or what can be done to improve them?

Under the principle of “accessibility and choice” the current SCI states that “the Council maintains a list of individuals, groups and organisations that have

expressed interest in being involved in consultations on planning matters and will consult them on all relevant planning matters”.

The contacts on this list are notified by e-mail at the start of each consultation period. With limited resources, this is generally felt to represent the most efficient approach. The consultation is advertised on the Council’s website and accompanied by a press release. Leaflets are posted or distributed proportionately depending on the scale or impact of the proposals.

All consultation materials, whether the documents themselves or any leaflets or e-mails, clearly state the methods of responding and the timescale, as specified in the SCI under “accessibility and choice.”

Q4a. Do you agree that consultations are notified in a way that is most effective with limited resources? If not, how could this be improved?

Q4b. Is information about how and when to respond clearly communicated? If not, how could this be improved?

Under the principle of “accessibility and choice,” the current SCI states that “the materials, documents and methods of community involvement will be designed to maximise accessibility insofar as possible”.

Electronic publication is now the primary method for consultations. This is the most resource-efficient method and allows distribution to the widest number of individuals, groups and organisations. All documents are made available for download on the Council’s website. Hard copies of consultation materials are made available at public libraries throughout the Borough, as well as in reception at the Civic Offices. Generally, hard copies are not available for individuals unless required due to a special need or disability.

Q5. Do you agree that documents are adequately accessible for consideration?

Written representations are accepted by e-mail or post. This is the most resource-efficient method, as it prevents officers from having to type or scan handwritten notes at the close of the consultation.

If the consultation is quite specific (with few possible options or proposals that are in a later stage of development) respondents are usually asked to respond to particular questions (for example, do you agree or disagree...), and in those cases web forms are sometimes available. Early consultations on planning documents (such as this) may also ask direct questions, often accompanied by a web form, to direct discussion. For later consultations where a draft document is available, it is often considered more appropriate to allow respondents make any comment on any part of the draft, and therefore questionnaires or web forms are less likely to be used.

Q6a. Do you agree that e-mail or post is the best way to submit a representation?

Q6b. Would you like to see forms available for completion at drop-in events?

Q6c. Would you like to see web forms available with specific questions for respondents to answer?

Under the principle of “accountability,” the current SCI states that “a report of the consultation will be published which summarises the consultation undertaken, and summaries the representations received and the Council response to those representations”.

Following a close of a consultation period, the Council publishes a statement on the consultation. Where the number of responses is reasonably low, this may be done by publishing each representation and responding individually. Where significant numbers of responses are received or where the same point has been made repeatedly, these may be grouped together and summarised as a whole.

The statement of consultation will respond to the representations received and explain the reasoning behind changing (or not changing) the draft document or proposal based on the representations.

Statements of consultation are then made available on the Council’s website.

Q7. Do you agree that the outcomes of consultations are clearly communicated? If not, how could this be improved?

Duty to Co-operate

The current SCI contains a section on the ‘duty to co-operate’, a legal duty on local planning authorities, county councils and some other bodies to co-operate on planning for sustainable development. It is one of the main considerations in making development plans. As the SCI states, it is a requirement related to, but distinct from, community involvement, and therefore is not dealt with by the SCI. However, there have been some changes since the SCI was adopted, and these need to be reflected in this section.

It is therefore proposed to replace paragraph 3.3 of the SCI with the following paragraphs.

“3.3 As the duty to co-operate is a separate task from community involvement, and will also be dependent on the timescales and processes of other bodies, this SCI does not set out proposals for how it will be undertaken. However, it is important to be aware of its existence, as it means that consultation with the bodies prescribed in the Regulations³ will only be part of an overall picture of how those bodies are engaged.

3.4 The Council has a Duty to Co-operate Scoping Strategy which identifies the main strategic matters that will need co-operation, and the key duty to co-operate partners for each matter. The most recent version of this strategy is from December 2015⁴, but it will be updated as and when required. There are also a variety of Memoranda of Understanding and/or Statements

of Common Ground with other local planning authorities on key topics that guide how the duty to co-operate will be undertaken with those bodies.”

³ Regulation 4 of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012

⁴ http://www.reading.gov.uk/media/4412/Duty-to-cooperate-scoping-strategy/pdf/RBC_Duty_to_Cooperate_Scoping_Strategy_1215.pdf”

Q8. Do you have any comments on the proposed revised text on the duty to co-operate?

Neighbourhood Planning

The neighbourhood planning system was introduced by the Localism Act in 2011. It enables neighbourhoods to plan for the development they wish to see in their area, with the local authority in a supporting role. This covers neighbourhood development plans, which set out neighbourhood policies to be used in deciding planning applications, and neighbourhood development orders, which allow neighbourhoods to grant planning permission for a specific type of development.

Within Reading, there has been no neighbourhood planning since its introduction. Parish and town councils are able to undertake neighbourhood planning, but there are no such bodies in Reading. Otherwise, the regulations require neighbourhoods to organise into neighbourhood forums if they wish to prepare a neighbourhood plan. There are minimum requirements for what a neighbourhood forum should consist of, and they require the approval of the Council to be formally designated. No applications for neighbourhood forum status have been made so far in Reading.

Without any existing parish or town councils or neighbourhood forums, there is no current active neighbourhood planning in Reading. However, it is possible that forums could be established and neighbourhood plans produced. It is also a legal requirement that the Statement of Community Involvement set out the Council’s policy on providing advice and assistance to neighbourhood planning, whether or not relevant bodies currently exist. The SCI therefore needs to be amended to cover this.

It is therefore proposed to add a new paragraph 2.6 to section 2 on statutory requirements in the SCI.

“2.6 There is a statutory requirement under Section 18 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended by the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017) for Statements of Community Involvement to set out the local planning authority’s policies for giving advice or assistance on neighbourhood development plans and orders. This is set out in Section 6 of the SCI, and this includes summarising out the statutory role of the local planning authority in that process.”

It is further proposed to replace paragraphs 6.21 and 6.22 of the SCI with the following text.

“Neighbourhood Development Plans and Orders

- 6.21 *Local communities are able to plan for the development that they wish to see through making a neighbourhood development plan or order for their area. Only parish and town councils and designated neighbourhood forums (plus, in the case of a neighbourhood development order, certain community groups) can make use of such powers. There are no parish or town councils in Reading, and currently no designated neighbourhood forums, although there is potential for the latter to be established within the lifetime of the SCI.*
- 6.22 *Should proposals for neighbourhood development plans or orders be brought forward, it will be for the neighbourhood forum to take the lead on the document, albeit with support from the Council. The emphasis at every stage of such a document is therefore to **empower**.*
- 6.23 *There are a number of statutory roles that the Council must fulfil within the process of making a neighbourhood development plan or order:*
- Consult on and determine any application for neighbourhood forum and area status within set timescales;*
 - Check whether a submitted plan or order complies with the relevant legislation;*
 - Publicise the submitted plan and notify consultation bodies;*
 - Appoint an independent examiner;*
 - Publicise the report of the examiner, reach its own view on the plan or order and decide whether to send it to local referendum; and*
 - Organise the local referendum, and make the plan or order if the results show that more than half of those voting are in favour.*
- 6.24 *As well as the statutory roles, the Council will also provide support and guidance throughout the process. This may include the following general areas:*
- Giving initial advice on the scope of the plan or order;*
 - Providing comments on emerging drafts;*
 - Assisting with preparing, commissioning or assembling evidence, including Strategic Environmental Assessment;*
 - Access to technical tools and expertise, for instance on mapping;*
 - Giving support to consultation*
- It should be noted that the support that the Council can give over and above its statutory role may be limited by the resources available at the time.*
- 6.25 *Neighbourhood plans are not required by law to comply with the SCI, so it is not for this document to dictate how community involvement is carried out. However, the principles set out in section 4 are a useful guide to how to undertake consultation and involvement on planning matters. The Planning Advisory Service also has a useful series of publications and toolkits, giving advice and guidance on neighbourhood planning⁵.”*

⁵ <https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/pas-topics/neighbourhood-plans>”

Q9. Do you have any comments on the proposed new text on neighbourhood planning?

Other matters

Please feel free to make comments on any other elements of the SCI not covered by your answers to questions 1 to 10.

Q10. Do you have any other comments on the SCI?

Next Steps

The Council will consider consultation responses and whether there is a need to make changes to the document other than the wording changes already set out in above (with regard to the duty to co-operate and neighbourhood planning). If significant changes are required, there will need to be a consultation on a revised draft SCI before it can be adopted.

Once the SCI is adopted, it will be used to guide future consultations on planning policy documents and major development proposals.

APPENDIX 1 STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT (Adopted March 2014)