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**Greater Cambridge Planning Agents’ Forum**

**Notes of the meeting Tuesday 20th March 2018**

**Council Chamber,**

**South Cambs District Council, Cambourne**

**8.30am-10.30am**

**Attendees:**

Cllr Robert Turner SCDC (Chair) (RT)

Cllr Kevin Blencowe City Council (KB)

Sarah Dyer City Council (SD)

Sharon Brown City Council (SB)

Stephen Kelly SCDC (SK)

Jane Green SCDC (JG)

Caroline Hunt SCDC (CH)

Alison Twyford SCDC

Cat Quy SCDC

Ian Papworth SCDC

Cllr Pippa Corney SCDC

Heather Jones 3C Building Control (HJ)

Colin Brown Carter Jonas

Ben Pridgeon Cheffins

Richard O’Connor Ditto Architecture

Kevin Sherwood Sherwood Architecture

Nicky Parsons Pegasus Group

Adam Davies Strutt & Parker

Janine Richardson Beacon Planning

Mark Parsons University of Cambridge

Peter Cutmore Peter Cutmore Architect

David Mean Partners in Planning

Richard Maung Deloitte LLP

Sophie Pain Beacon Planning

Edward Clarke PlanSurv

Amy Richards Howes Percival

Henrik Dorbeck Porta Planning

Rob Shrimplin Shrimplin Brown

Timothy Poulson Poulson Architecture

Tim Christy Tim Christy Architect

Stuart Liles Saunders Boston Architects

**Apologies:**

David Pitts RIBA AABC, Pitts Architects

Adrian Fleet, MCIAT, Chartered Architectural Technologist

Fiona, English Listed

Matt Lowther, Workshop76 Ltd

Carol Alderton – no Company name given

Megan Bonner, KWA Architects (Cambridge) Ltd

**1.Welcome and Introductions –** RT welcomed everyone, we then all introduced ourselves around the room.

**2. Notes of the last meeting Monday 7th September 2017 and matters arising.**

Notes agreed.

**3. Invalids – Ian Papworth**

Ian introduces himself and presents the ppt.

Questions:

* In terms of Pre-App form, useful to post word documents – everything online. 2nd proportion approach to validate approach. If you tick the wrong box, minor amendments are needed. This then takes two weeks to validate. Could TSO telephone agent to check to save time.

**ACTION**: IP to action this

* When contacting SCDC some are told they can’t make payment until the application is validated and issued a number. This is not communicated well.

**ACTION**: IP to take this point to the Contacts Centre.

* Useful to break data into different applications. Majors, Minors.

**ACTION**: IP to do.

Cllr Turner: To reduce the number of invalids, both Agents and Teams here need to work together better.

SK: One agent had a perfect record of applications being validated. If you have thoughts and comments, issues you would like us to consider, let us know. In a number of cases, online apps, in paying there is a slight delay. We may need to slow things down to allow portal system to catch up with payments.

**4. Local Plan and CIL Update & Response to Questions (CH & SS)**

* Timescale for adoption of the City and South Cambs Local Plans

(SS) Moving to adoption. Processed and submitted to Inspector. Do not have specific dates yet in terms of the Inspector issuing her Report or for final adoption of the Plans. We are working on a joint plan in 2019. Timescales in that policy are consistent with the City Deal 2022.

Q–how were the local authorities involved in the non-statutory spatial plan work?().

A: CH: A report was considered by the board in Autumn. 1st phase reaching a conclusion. Bringing together the strategy together. Looking at what combined authority wants to do. 2nd phase: looking further ahead to 2015. Commitment for a long strategy plan. At Councils we are involved in a number of forums.

Q –What is the current position on CIL: aware both councils previously had separate CIL schemes? (CH/SS) In autumn both withdrew CILs as clearly needed to progress further joint work. The intention is to prepare a Joint CIL scheme going forward and we need to keep an eye on what is happening at national level.

A: SK: In combined the non-statutory spatial plan. Papers aren’t published yet. They will be online – so good to check.

Economic review: Work being done on the Barker Review. Forecast growth rates around population of the growth area. Technical working group formed to look at this to feed in to economic review.

Refreshed transport strategy. Adopted a strategy alongside local plans. Oxford to Cambs express way is part of moving forward.

Other work stream being progressed include supplementary planning documents (SPDs) for Land North of Cherry Hinton, Bourn Airfield and Waterbeach, which are progressing at different rates. The councils have also committed to progressing an Area Action Plan (AAP) for Northern Fringe East and there will be a separate process for relocation of the Anglian Water Treatment Works. The AAP work will accelerate and we will have more details on this at the next forum.

Q: What concerns have you re local plan. Not enough inspectors to go round to carry this through?

A: CH: we have an Inspector that we have dealt with for a number of years and we are working with them.

Q: A lot of my work is in Bedfordshire. How are we working on Express Rail the work is the link between Bedford and Cambridge.

A: SK: Ian Stewart Government appointed Adviser was in Cambs meetings. Including Fenland. He has been appointed because of the concerns. Referred to as the messy middle. We are discussing the issues around this eastern section. Route Passes through Huntington. Mayor has aspirations for St Neots. Growth on the 428 corridor. Government is keen to promote growth along that corridor. Balance needed between houses and employment. How do we support those economic geographies. We are working with Hunts, West Suffolk with what they want. Ian reporting back to the Government in May with findings.

Q: Section 5. Extra work for the policy team – what are the council doing to make sure staffing is up to cope with the extra work.

A: SK: Both councils have gone through budget rounds to identify resourcing needs. Significant commitment, £7000.000. We are currently seeking to fill a number of vacant posts2 new planning policy staff will be joining the existing team shortly and we have two consultants supporting the team as well. Both councils have maintained levels of staffing budget for the years ahead. There will be future efficiencies because of only needing to produce one Local Plan instead of two. GCP has also funded resources/work streams.. There has been an SCDC bid to Government for £130,000 to work with villages, with regard to applications on the 5year land supply. Trying to find a way of working with these communities, who at first were not keen.

However, we recongise that it continues to be a challenge to find more experienced staff. We have been more successful in “growing our own” and recruiting at planner level.

Q: Local Plan. Are there further modifications; delay on adopted as the time gap closes will there be a problem.

A: CH: Both plans over a 1000 representations made. Time needed so that the Inspector can review them, together with her Assistant Inspector. There may be potential further hearings. We can’t really answer if there will be any further delays.

**5. Shared Service Update, Aligning Processes & Response to Questions**

* Team structure for the Greater Cambridge (combined) Planning Department.

SK refers to new management structure and those employed by City will transfer to SCDC employment under TUPE provisions. We are developing new IT solutions. Expect to roll through this year.

We are intending to change the Development Management and create three geographical areas but this will not happen until end of year. Advertising for a Shared Service Implementation Manager and a Development Management Manager, to replace Sarah Dyer as she is leaving.

Starting alignment processes in particular around our Pre App charges over the year.

Q: Red patch are they brand new posts?

A: SK: Staff transfer process. Some jobs are the same or similar. Simulation process. Vacancies, or where there is no match for the posts, you will see that some adverts will be released shortly. Where possible we will simulate staff.

Q: Will that mean a net reduction in staff.

A: SK: No. There are posts that are additional. Splitting out the policy posts. Likewise we have development management. Therefore, there will be no reduction in staff.

* Pre-Application Charging (Sharon Brown)

Officers have been reviewing the officer hourly rates in both pre-application charging schemes. The current schemes which have not been updated for some time do not provide for a sufficient level of costs recovery. The new hourly rates proposed require member approval via the SCDC Portfolio Holder meeting (some of you may have seen this report which has been published) and City planning portfolio holder. The proposed new officer hourly rates are £80 (manager), £65 (principal) , £50 (planner/officer) exc VAT. It is likely that the new charges, once approved, will come into effect on 1 April.

A wider review of the pre application charging schemes will follow in due course, moving towards an improved cost recovery position and alignment between the two charging schemes to create a single combined charging scheme. We also need to improve our performance. There will be a work stream moving forward over the next few months, to review processes and procedures and improve performance. This will also include improvements to monitoring procedures in terms of speeding up timescales for responses

Q: Can we choose who we would like to deal with a scheme. And, if performance not there can we get a refund.

A: SK: It depends on the complexity of the scheme. Whilst there needs to be regard to customer satisfaction, we need to take a proportionate and practical approach. We would try to avoid the need to offer refunds as would defeat the object. However, we take on board your concerns about timings. Some of you will not use the pre-application process due to the time it takes. We would like to understand what type of pre-application process you would like from us, , so that we can invest in resources.

Q: Delays in terms of not living up to promises. Limiting those expectations.

A: SK: We are reviewing our performance data which in past we’ve not been very good at. Over Christmas we made great improvements, but in general we need to continue to improve.

Q: PPA – Pre- App Changing.

A: Sharon: We are looking at introducing a more standardised PPA approach across the two Councils.. New settlement/large scale major development projects may have a more bespoke approach.

A: SK: looking at offering a menu of pricing for advice. Pre-app is fixed at moment. We may be able to build in a menu of options, depending on the complexities of individual proposals.

Comment: Sliding Scale is a good idea and a few agents have already done this.

Q: Any basic statistics on how much spent on Pre-Apps? Is it worth looking at a Pre-App team for the first line planning response, then the team to have a skill of totally understanding what’s needed when dealing with a Pre-App.

A: SK: We need better data to understand the pre-application time spent by officers. There is the potential to secure more costs recovery through as we currently massively undercharge for those. More complicated schemes need pre-app to take to final application. We will give these issues further thought.

Q: Looking at performance targets. Preparing is part of the meeting itself. A lot of officers come along to the meetings unprepared so we are not getting very much from the pre-app meeting so this is why people are not engaging with it.

A: SB: Valid point. Will take this into account. **ACTION**

Q: Pre-app menu – we as agents may have a different idea of what the clients needs. Dedicated pre app team could help that.

A: SK: thinking about the forms that you fill in. Be explicit in what you want.

Q: Pre-app 2points. Focus is useful. What to limit costs. During determination that an issue may arise, which will low process – applicant cannot be forces to withdraw an application. Eg: this wasn’t raised at pre-app.

Comment: Highways: aligning pre app with highways. They can become difficult everyone pushing everyone else. Better engagement.

Q: Timescales: difficulty with clients. Recently Signed PPA not adhered to and now asked to submit a Pre-App, still waiting to move this forward. So you proceed without a Pre-App or end up appealing. You’re not hitting timescales.

A: SK: recognises points you’re raising. Getting data around these things and recognised the areas we’re not strong in.

SB: Scoping out meeting before it happens. In terms the point of amendments, it is more difficult if you have a complicated projects.

Q: Cost of a Pre-App, negligible of what the pre app will be, or a flat rate? Eg: listed building in a conservation area. Do you pay extra for the conservation officer?

A: SB: In the charging scheme at the moment there are rates for additional officer. Bringing the charges together, tailor that to a menu. Put examples of charges in there.

Q: DEP before Christmas as scheme had no plans to move forward, it was a fishing trip as to what they could get away with, wasting resources and time.

A: SK: at the moment our costs are not covered. If they want advice, they can have it but not at the expense of other departments.

What is the Council’s stance on negotiating amendments to a scheme during the course of an application, and does this depend on whether we have had pre-app first?

**6. Pre-Application & Increase in Officers Hourly Rate:** Discussed at point 5.

**7. Questions raised by Forum members**

* SCDC staffing resources and length of time it takes for consultee comments to be made available on the website.  (Bidwell)

SK: How do we attract more people. We have put consultee online. This is an area we have been trying to improve. It is important we get packages of amendments not dribs and drabs. Staffing resources, always comes up and this part of the world we are continually trying to find people to fill our posts. We are encouraging staff to talk to you.

JG: DM is fully staffed apart from two posts. Validation Team: fully staffed and two additional staff. Paul Mumford left just before Christmas. Policy fully staffed. Enforcement fully staffed.

Comment: Communications and dialogue. Weeks and weeks go by before getting an answer.

SK: JG has put in more case reviews and case management meetings, in that there is more of a join up. Let us know about these things so that we can address them.

Q: Heritage: maternity cover for Juliette – JG: Yes

Q: There were two applications that is on its 5th Case Officer the other on 6th officer. One approach 13 week deadline, we tried to contact a Team Leader, no response. The Team Leader only contacted us when the 13 weeks were nearly up.

SK: We have problems retaining staff. Can we improve the national profile of this place? The problem that what we have is that it is not visible. How can we encourage Planners to come here? Collective response can seem to encourage staff to come here, too far away. Collectively we’re not selling us.

A: Kate: Pegasus: Young people want to be in the city. Certain age, bills to be paid. So pay me what I’m worth. You need to look at salaries.

Comment: Looking at what’s happening with the structure, this could be making staff uncertain therefore looking elsewhere.

Kate: Pegasus: What is the Council’s stance on negotiating amendments to a scheme during the course of an application, and does this depend on whether we have had a pre-app first? We struggled with officers to engage. Then 3 days to go, we are asked to withdraw, I say no, then we have an extension of time. This happens time and time again.

A: JG: Looking at applications not only looking at older cases, but also looking at the newer ones. We will make it clear with the officers to engage earlier. **ACTION**

Q: Consultee response made available. Rang SCDC did not know who they were. Said worked for Anglian Water, rang Anglian Water, and did not know that person. Advised to call the City, rang City, not there. Could not get an extension of time, got a refusal. It was one of our officers at SCDC.

A: JG: Asked to discuss this with the gentleman after the meeting.

Q: When to do amendments, not knowing when, knowing the new dates not put on line. Parish Council Forum recently, applications not sure when to go to Chairman’s Delegation and how does our Heritage colleagues feed into applications?

A: JG: Only one recently, the one at Barrington. An amendment came in and had to look at that separately. You might see more in the future coming back. Under 10 we will say no we can’t deal with them. Parish do get upset about the number of 10 or 15 houses applications.

Q: Amendments to conditions, cannot be done, why does this cause a holdup.

A: JG: we need applicants to understand what conditions are coming their way.

**8. General Questions and Answers.** Covered above.

**9. Suggested topics and arrangements for future Forums**

**ACTION:** Email items to Beverley Childs/Melanie Jones

**10.  AOB**

\* **Building Regulations Review:**

As you may be aware there is a National Independent Review of the current Building Regulations and system following the tragedy of Grenfell.  Dame Judith Hackitt, tasked by the Government to take this forward, produced an interim report in December 2017.  The final report is due to be published in May 2018.

Areas Dame Hackitt has been investigating into include fire safety, competencies and systems in other countries.

LABC Local Authority Building Control have been feeding into this process as members of the various working groups.

There is likely to be a revised Approved Document Part B to be issued, at the end of 2018, although this will seek to provide clarity to the current interpretations only rather than a wholescale review.

Dame Hackitt has been reviewing the Welsh regulations which include sprinklers in all new dwellings and the Scottish regulations which utilise a warrant system.

I encourage everyone to read the interim report if you have not already done so, link below.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-building-regulations-and-fire-safety-interim-report>.

If I can assist you in any other way, please let me know.  Contact details for 3C Shared Services Building Control are 0300 7729622 or [buildingcontrol@3csharedservices.org](mailto:buildingcontrol@3csharedservices.org)

**11. Date of next meeting:**

September/October – date TBC (NB Venue: City) Kevin Blencowe to host.