

TITLE	Statement of Community Involvement (adoption)
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on Thursday, 14 March 2024
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Place and Growth - Giorgio Framallicco
LEAD MEMBER	Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan - Lindsay Ferris

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

The purpose of this report is to consider the adoption of a new Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). A review of the SCI is required by planning law every five years, which is now due.

The review ensures that residents, businesses and other interested parties will understand how the council will ensure effective community involvement at all stages in the land use planning process. Effective engagement ensures that decisions are made with reference to local opinion.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Executive:

- 1) Notes the outcome of the consultation on the draft Statement of Community Involvement as set out in the Consultation Statement.
- 2) Adopts the Statement of Community Involvement (March 2024).
- 3) Publish the Consultation and Adoption Statement in order to give effect to the above recommendation.
- 4) Delegates to the Director of Place & Growth, in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan, to make any spelling or grammatical, typological or factual correction to the SCI and supporting documents.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) is a document that sets how the council will ensure effective community involvement at all stages in the land use planning process. This includes the preparation of local plans, neighbourhood development plans, and supplementary planning guidance, as well as in the consideration of planning applications. It also sets out what is expected of those proposing developments.

The council is required by planning law to publish a SCI and review it every five years, which is now due.

A draft SCI was approved by the Lead Member for Planning and Local Plan in August 2023. The draft SCI included a number of improvements, including the proposal to extend the consultation period for major planning applications from the statutory requirement of 21 days to 28 days (excluding bank holidays). This change sought to ensure sufficient opportunity for residents and stakeholders to review such applications and provide comments, whilst balancing performance in decision making as required by the government.

The council consulted on the draft SCI for a six-week period between 4 September and 16 October 2023. A total of 28 representations were received and have been considered by officers in drafting the recommended SCI (March 2024). A detailed summary of all representations and recommended amendments to the SCI is set out in the accompanying Consultation Statement (Appendix A). A copy of the recommended final SCI is attached as Appendix B. The change to the consultation period for major planning applications was generally supported.

If the recommendation is agreed, the SCI (March 2024) will supersede the current adopted SCI which was adopted in 2019.

BACKGROUND

The Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) is a document that sets how the council will ensure effective community involvement at all stages in the land use planning process. This includes the preparation of local plans, neighbourhood development plans, and supplementary planning guidance, as well as in the consideration of planning applications. It also sets out what is expected of those proposing developments.

BUSINESS CASE

The council is required by planning law to publish a SCI and review it every five years.

The current adopted SCI was adopted in 2019. Since then, new engagement tools have emerged, and we have learnt new ways of engaging with our communities following the pandemic. A review of the SCI therefore ensures the council meets statutory duties. A review also provides the opportunity to refresh and clarify how engagement will be approached to anyone who is interested in the land use planning process.

Whilst a review of the SCI may be progressed without external engagement, the Executive Member for Planning and Local Plan approved a draft SCI for consultation, which occurred for a six-week period between 4 September and 16 October 2023.

The draft SCI included a number of improvements including the proposal to extend the consultation period for major planning applications from the statutory requirement of 21 days to 28 days (excluding bank holidays). This change sought to ensure sufficient opportunity for residents and stakeholders to review such applications and provide comments, whilst balancing performance in decision making as required by the government.

A total of 28 responses were received at the closure of consultation. These responses have been analysed and considered by officers. The main areas/issues raised can be summarised as follows.

- Requests that planning documents are made available in paper format at libraries and community hubs to support public engagement.
- Actions that are listed as 'may' should be more definitive and included in the 'we will' section when referring to both plan preparation and planning applications
- Representations submitted in response to planning applications and as part of preparing local plans are not fully considered, and are not answered in full.
- Requests that all consultees should be specifically named in the SCI.
- Various updates to correct typographical errors and ensure consistency and clarity.

The change to the consultation period for major planning applications was generally supported.

A detailed summary of all representations and recommended amendments to the SCI is set out in the accompanying Consultation Statement (Appendix A). A copy of the recommended final SCI is attached as Appendix B.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	Nil	Yes The costs of implementing the recommended SCI are contained within existing budgets.	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	Nil	See above.	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	Nil	See above.	Revenue

Other Financial Information

There are no direct financial implications of publishing the SCI. All work undertaken to update the SCI has been done within existing budgets.

The costs of implementing the recommended SCI are contained within existing budgets, with actions such as the proposed extension to the consultation period for major applications not changing the costs of consultation.

Legal Implications arising from the Recommendation(s)

Section 18(1) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 states that “The local planning authority must prepare a statement of community involvement.” Section 18 sets out the matters that must be included in a SCI.

Section 18(3) of the Act provides that a SCI is a local development document. It is therefore subject to sections 17(8) and 23(5) of the Planning and Compulsory Act 2004, which state that local development documents must be adopted by resolution of the authority, and that they will only be local development documents insofar as they are adopted by resolution of the local planning authority. In accordance with Schedule 3, footnote 7 of the Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000, functions relating to local development documents which are not development plan documents are the responsibility of the executive of an authority.

For these reasons, a resolution of Executive to adopt the recommended SCI amounts to a resolution of the local planning authority for these purposes.

Regulation 10A of the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 requires that SCIs are reviewed every five years. This update to the SCI will bring ensure the council continues to meet this duty.

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation

Public consultation on the draft SCI was open for a period of six-weeks from 4 September and 16 October 2023. Consultation documents were made available on the council's website. Stakeholders were made aware of the consultation through notification to our planning consultation database and through a press release.

A total of 28 representations were received during the consultation period. As a result of these comments, some modifications are recommended.

Public Sector Equality Duty

A Stage 1 Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken to support the preparation of the recommended SCI. The assessment concluded the recommendation would have a neutral or no impact.

Whilst it is acknowledged that a greater emphasis on digital engagement has taken place, the recommended SCI has been careful to consider the potential impacts of this on particular groups that may have limited access to digital mediums, such as older generations. The recommended approach to engagement has therefore sought to continue to engage these groups by utilising a range of consultation methods, including providing hard copies of documents in specific locations and hosting in-person events.

Climate Emergency – This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030

There is not considered to be a direct impact on the environment through the recommended SCI.

Reasons for considering the report in Closed Session

Not applicable.

List of Background Papers

WBC Statement of Community Involvement, 2019.

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