

To:

UDC Leader, Cllr Howard Rolfe
Uttlesford District Council
London Road
Saffron Walden
Essex
CB11 4ER

Cc: Cllr Joanne Parry
Cllr John Lodge
Cllr Alan Dean
Cllr Mark Lemon
9 January 2015

Dear Cllr Rolfe

Re: Revamped Local Plan Working Group

Residents for Uttlesford formally accepts our position on the revamped Local Plan Working Group. Cllr Joanna Parry will be joining the Group as our representative.

We are grateful that you have opened up the Working Group meetings to public scrutiny. This was clearly a governance shortcoming before. We are however disappointed that the Council leadership has not gone far enough and seems to be unwilling to learn from the previous experience. We hope this is not the case. Given recent comments by the Council leadership in the local press, we are also concerned that the Inspector's comments and guidance may not be fully taken on board. His comments should not be taken lightly and this would be a mistake.

We would like to see the following happen as part of the revamped local plan process:

1. **Only one Cabinet Member:** We are concerned that both the Leader and Deputy Leader are participating in the new Working Group. Best practice governance seeks a level of independent separation. A composition that includes the two most senior Cabinet positions could be perceived to, or actually, unduly influence the Working Group. It is of course wholly appropriate that the Cabinet portfolio responsible for the Local Plan is on the Group, but we don't think it is appropriate for the role of Leader to also be represented. The function of the Group is to recommend and report to the Cabinet and Leader. With two such roles already on the Group it may not be independent and will in effect be reporting to itself.
2. **Real Participation from Town/Parish Councils and the Public:** From the examination and throughout the previous local plan process, it is clear that town/parish councils and residents want a real seat at the table. Currently these groups have no seat at the table. All they are allowed to do is make a short statement at the beginning of a meeting, and then they must return to the galleries and be quiet for any discussion. What was abundantly clear during the examinations and previous process was that these groups know more about the issues that affect them than many of the councillors or officers. By not giving them a seat at the table we are excluding an important, knowledgeable and willing group of participants that can help us all achieve a better result. We need them to be 'part of the solution'. As such we would like to see the type of engagement used in Neighbourhood Plan adopted, i.e. one that gives these groups a seat at the table. As part of Neighbourhood Planning it has been shown to work all over the country so there is no reason to believe it could not work

for our Local Plan. These groups are the people we represent and need a real seat at the table and to be part of formulating the new plan itself. Anything else is lip-service.

3. **Vote of Chair should only break a tie:** The Group as proposed contains an even number of members, which means there is an opportunity for a tie on votes. From a governance perspective, it is clearly inappropriate for the chair to hold 2 votes, irrespective of the party they are from. To prevent a tie we believe that the chair should hold no vote during normal proceedings, unless there are absentees and only an even number of members present.
4. **Agenda for participation:** For Planning Meetings the agenda often seems ‘sat on’ to the last minute, making it difficult for members of the public, town and parish councils to register to speak. It would be beneficial for the Council to provide 2 weeks’ notice of the agenda for each Working Group meeting and also to proactively manage an email list of interested parties so that we can maximise participation.
5. **Properly taking on board the Inspector’s Comments:** From discussions I have had with the public there is a belief that the Council is not willing to really listen and learn from the Inspector’s findings. The concern is that “UDC will simply swap out Elsenham for another large settlement location and push a rejigged plan through”. I have read the Inspector’s full report a number of times and that approach *will* be rejected again. The Inspector has made it quite clear that, as well as Elsenham being totally unsuitable, ‘Major Modifications’ are required for Saffron Walden and there are also significant concerns raised about Dunmow and Stansted. He didn’t have time to review many other key villages as he stopped the examination early, but I’m sure there are issues there too. It is clear that the Inspector and the public will except nothing short of a major rewrite of the Local Plan – and not just swapping the Elsenham allocation for somewhere else. As a first action of the revamped working group, we would like to see a punch list published of the issues raised by the Inspector which will act as a parting point for a new plan. And this must all be done in public.
6. **Own the failure:** Finally it is clear to all that the rejection of the Local Plan is a huge failure for the Council. Instead of owning the failure and moving on, the Council has been seen to stick its head in sand and issue comments such as “many parts were found sound” and “the Local Plan for Saffron Walden is generally sound”. If the report is read, nothing could be further from the truth and the public we represent know it. By failing to own up to and own the failure, the Council leadership is undermining trust in the Council lowering the morale of employees. All good leaders own up and move on. We need the same here at UDC. The bare minimum the public expects is an apology for the waste of their council tax. And many are expecting structural changes in the Council. We ask that these be seriously considered.

We are ready to roll up our sleeves and join the revamped Local Plan working group. I look forward to your point-by-point response to what I have raised above.

Yours sincerely

Keith Mackman
R4U Leader at Uttlesford District Council

