

Case Study – Uttlesford Community Stakeholder Forum
Submission to the RTPI Awards for Planning Excellence 2021

An online initiative, engaging with representative interest groups, to explore innovative ideas on creating a sustainable, inclusive and responsive net zero carbon future.

Uttlesford District Council is preparing a new local plan for the district within a strict timetable and is keen to ensure that residents and stakeholders can shape planning policies from the earliest stages of plan making. The Council decided to take a different approach to the first Issues and Options stage. Instead of the more traditional way of the Council preparing a document for consultation and then asking for comments, planners were keen to work with the community from the beginning, to engage in a debate first, with 20 recommended representatives from our community in a feedback process so that the document would be the product of that informed conversation.

The Council also wanted to involve voices that are more difficult to ‘hear’ in the discussion and to present issues rather than solutions to allow new ideas and thinking to be generated and openly debated. Whilst members and officers could observe, planners deliberately had no direct involvement in the initial discussion, and indeed appointed a chairperson, influential in the arts and cultural sector, as an independent co-ordinator. Nine debates took place in sessions between Autumn 2020 and late Spring 2021. In each case an accessible and graphical information document was prepared for the specific themes and shared with the Forum members before each online ‘Zoom’ event.

In order to fit within the timescale in the approved Local Development Scheme, the project had to take place between November 2020 and April 2021, in the middle of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant that the process had to be held and be made accessible to the wider public wholly online.

It was decided the optimal approach to meet the objectives of inclusivity and early engagement in critical planning issues was to set up a Forum. It was chaired by Angela Dixon, Chief Executive of the respected arts venue at Saffron Hall. She is independent, knowledgeable about the district and managing outreach work with community arts and cultural activities. Planners worked with the Council’s community development officers and voluntary sector colleagues to invite representatives from a range of special interest areas:

- Health and Wellbeing
- Youth activities, Youth Council and Young people
- Arts and culture
- Cycling/Walking
- Diversity
- Climate Change
- Education
- Faiths
- Heritage
- Economy and Employment
- Rural Affairs and Farming
- Developers
- Business



- Retail
- Sports
- Tenants' Panel
- Transport
- Voluntary Sector

The Forum met fortnightly and online. Each evening meeting commenced with a presentation from a leading outside practitioner on one of the nine themes. The nature of the presentation was intended to inform, entertain and to provoke debate using non-technical language and an engaging style. Each guest speaker was able to speak freely about their own opinions. The Forum members then debated the issues in front of an online audience who would post questions for the Forum Chair to select the most popular to discuss.

Outcomes for People and Communities

Local Economy was a specific theme for the Community Stakeholder Forum with a presentation by Dr Paul Cowie, Innovation Research Fellow at Newcastle University. The added value of the Forum has been to highlight the case for innovative approaches to employment in the rural areas. For instance, Dr Cowie questioned the orthodoxy of using a hierarchy of settlements for employment provision when many family run businesses in the rural areas need the flexibility and support to grow in-situ. Other themes encompassed the need for a strong vision for future green industries and, in a post Covid-19 world, the importance of local production (including food), local purchasing and procurement, and adopting an integrated approach to rural land and farm management and economic diversification.

The Forum has had the ability to focus on the needs of specific groups either through direct representation on the Forum or through a well-informed online debate. The Forum included two members of Uttlesford Youth Council, a resident engaged in the council's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion events, a tenant on the Uttlesford Tenant Forum and the chief executive of a local charity representing the voluntary sector. Together these representatives, with their Forum colleagues highlighted specific needs across all nine themes; health inequalities, for instance, evidenced by increased use of the local food bank, and the importance of easy access to community facilities in the district.

Leisure, Culture and Healthy Lifestyles was another specific topic with a presentation by Julia Thrift, Director of Healthier Placemaking at the TCPA with follow-on discussion on healthy placemaking. Ideas including better support for day centres and community centres, more provision for active travel, all year round use of public spaces, pushing for health and wellbeing to feature in all planning decisions, more allotments and farm shops, and design for mental health based around healthy homes, standard living conditions with healthy streets and walkable neighbourhoods in new developments. Participants spoke about the need to reduce traffic speeds and volumes and make roads safer to encourage more walking and cycling to support wellbeing, as well as considerable improvement to local bus connections to health facilities.

There was a balance in membership of the Forum and the presenters and discussions that took place reflected an awareness of cross-gender issues such as mental health and community safety.

On addressing the Issues of Inequality - the membership of the Forum and the choice of speakers has encouraged open debate which may not have been so transparent or targeted in the more traditional approach to the Issues and Options phase.

The Forum has done what it has been designed to do and to bring to the fore issues that will openly be addressed in the plan making process. Further improvements to the Forum will be to widen the diversity of membership. In combination, the discussions at the forum aired new issues and informed representations on the Local Plan, improving the quality of representations and the diversity of issues discussed which was then shared with Council members.

Planning Contribution

Effective community involvement is a core value for all planners and this professional commitment to engagement can be seen in our commitment to make the Forum initiative succeed. There is a genuine belief that a local plan can be more responsive and related to local issues and needs if local communities can help shape the plan and it is the role of the planner to facilitate this outcome.

The planner roles have been in designing, establishing and briefing the Forum and in devising the themes, arranging appropriate speakers and in processing the feedback received from the public. The outputs from the Forum have directly influenced the Vision and Objectives (Section 5) of the Local Plan set by the Council thereby contributing to effective leadership in the plan making process.

At the outset it was decided that the whole Planning Policy Team would support arrangements for the Forum and each officer was assigned a theme to prepare and to identify an inspirational speaker who represented the latest in best practice. This approach ensured that specialist knowledge could be applied to the appropriate theme but presented in an easy-to-understand way.

Partnership involvement is a core part of the Forum approach, firstly by engaging with a range of special interest partners and then in working with all the stakeholders in a collaborative process.

Management and implementation of the Forum process was linked to the Local Plan Project Plan and active project management was built into the approach. Some issues arose early on in the process to ensure that membership of the Forum provided balanced engagement across the district and it was necessary to adapt the model accordingly; similarly Forum members specifically asked for a session on biodiversity as a discreet session and this was absorbed into the adapted programme accordingly.

The Forum allowed all members of the public to engage. All the events were livestreamed and recorded. The public was invited to comment in writing on each theme and debate over the ensuing four weeks. All events had been advertised using the full range of social media and household leaflet drops.

After the four week period, the comments made by the public were consolidated and discussed by the Forum and, finally, all the material for each theme was reported to the Council's Local Plan Leadership Group comprising district councillors overseeing the preparation of the local plan. In this way the elected members have been fully informed and have been able to then comment back to the Forum thereby creating a valuable feedback loop.

Outcomes for climate action

Climate change has been a theme that is marbled throughout the work of the Forum, and Samantha Kennedy, Director of Environment and Climate Action at Essex County Council made a presentation on this topic.

All the Forum topics related to climate change in some way and this was the underlying theme with one specific session on climate and renewable energies. The session was led by the County on behalf of the Essex Climate Change Commission which comprises external experts in the field working with stakeholders across the county, and the districts. Some recommendations can be taken up in local planning policy and inform the debate at the Forum e.g. the interim policy goals of net zero homes.

The Forum received a forward-thinking presentation from Samantha Kennedy, the County Director of the Essex Climate Change Commission. Its commissioners have worked with county and regional organisations to propose challenging carbon reduction targets across the built, natural and resource environmental sectors. Welcomed by the Forum, the District's Climate Change Officer has further been able to bring together support and funding for a carbon retrofit project working alongside the Forum members. It is early days, but we are confident that such integrated partnership working will help to promote wider resident buy-in and understanding of climate change matters.

The climate change agenda informed discussion on the development of a transport strategy and Vision to the Local Plan, taking a place-based approach rather than the more conventional transportation planning approach of 'predict and provide'. This Forum discussion has connected climate action with the local plan process and introduced participants to the latest thinking and issues for a more informed consideration of policies at the later stages of the local plan process.

Discussion within the Forum was lively on 15-20 Minute neighbourhoods, active travel, how to enhance cycling and became a theme returned to in several Forum discussions. It has resulted in the (potential) development of specific spatial strategies such as the Velo-City Villages' rural 'hub and spoke' concept and Walkable Neighbourhoods. Our urban designer is currently developing these ideas into a District Design Code and Public Realm Guidance.

One issue of particular concern to the Forum was the impact of pressure on water supply from the aquifer and increasing impact on the rare chalk streams. This was a topic frequently referred to and is now included as a specific issue to be addressed in the Water Cycle Study that is being commissioned. Related to this were concerns raised by the Forum about the particular characteristics of a District very rural in nature, such as the carbon impacts of the need to travel for work, to access facilities or for leisure, and the impact on greenhouse gases from farming. The latter has led to a focus on how we as planners can consider integrated land management for the larger estates and how this can be secured, along with stewardship, through the planning system and on our strategic development or new settlement sites.

Outcomes for sustainable development

Examples of the role of the Forum in addressing sustainability goals is illustrated by the presentations of Dr Noha Nasser (Architect and Urban Designer) and Noel Farrer (Chair of the Essex Quality Review Panel). Both speakers promoted the case for 15-minute walkable neighbourhoods and the Forum embraced and supported this concept.

As a result of this discussion, local plan officers have incorporated the walkable neighbourhood concept into the plan making work. Specific work has been commissioned using Transportation Research and Analysis Computing Center (TRACC) software to map the accessibility of the district to all key community facilities (including shops) by transport modes (including walking and cycling). This approach will allow the local plan to consider both applying the walkable neighbourhood concept and development options that maximise sustainable transport modes.

Other speakers covered topics directly relevant to sustainable development goals and these include Jo Mills (senior housing consultant) on providing homes to meet local needs, Andrew Lovett (an academic from the University of East Anglia on the provision of green infrastructure, and Andrew Summers (Strategy Director at transport East) on sustainable transport.(180/500)

Community Engagement

Please outline how the project has: Provided positive and constructive engagement and dialogue with local people and businesses and how that dialogue directly influenced the scheme.

Please make sure to let us know how inclusive this engagement was. Were there any groups that did participate? Did you have particular success with a group that might ordinarily not have participated? If so which group and what was your process of engagement?

Revisions 2

The Forum has engaged with Groups that have not hitherto taken an active involvement in the previous local plan exercises, in particular the following 'new voices' have given significant added value to the process:

- RETHINK Partners (an innovation and transformation consultancy in health and social care in the region);
- Essex Boys and Girls Clubs;
- Faircroft House Community Interest Company (local arts and culture organisation);
- Equality and Diversity (local resident who has worked with the Equality and Human Rights Commission);
- Local headteacher and education consultant;
- Local Baptist minister (representing inter-church and inter-faith matters);
- Local Heritage groups (local resident);
- School Games Organiser
- Local Tenants Panel
- Mind (Mental health charity)
- Youth Council (member of local Youth Council)

In addition to these groups, the Forum comprises participants who have previously been involved in local plan conversations such as:

- Local Heritage groups (local resident);
- Cycling and Walking Representative (local resident);
- Campaign for the Protection of the Rural England;
- Chartered Surveying and Property Development (retired property director);
- Local retailer;
- Local transport groups (local resident)

It is clear that at least two thirds of the membership of the panel represented groups that had not previously been active contributors to the local plan debate.

The Forum has thereby brought fresh perspectives to the process. One example of this is the framing of the Vision for the local plan which includes points made by the Forum such as 'Uttlesford will be known for its beautiful rolling countryside, its market towns and



villages with a rich heritage ...'In this way the broader engagement of the community has provided considerable added value to the emerging local plan. This has been achieved by using online processes which are, in themselves, capable of being net zero carbon when compared to traditional approaches that lead to additional carbon emissions through travelling and other energy usage.

Leading Practice

Please use this space to:

Speakers and panel members were very positive about the way in which the Forum was set and up and run. For many of the panel members it was a first time opportunity to engage in a debate about the full range of issues involved in plan making.

The Forum debated innovative approaches to placemaking that are relevant to the district which is largely rural. One example of this was a presentation made by Jennifer Ross and Petra Marko from VeloCity. The concept being that several villages are connected by high quality cycle and pedestrian routes and development is permitted with shared facilities allocated between the settlements, thereby creating more sustainable patterns of development without changing the essential character and scale of those rural places.

The process was also innovative in the integrated way in which the Forum shared and debated information online and then provided the opportunity for the public and other stakeholders to participate in the conversation. It allowed participants a means to engage during the public health emergency whilst still staying safe. The approach also allowed practitioners to see a wider range of interconnected issues that support more effective policy making by the Council.

The process was established at the outset with a clear timescale commencing in December 2020 and to be completed by May 2020. This timescale was achieved within the agreed budget for the exercise.

The process has had such value to the Council that it is now intended to continue with the Forum, subject to some adaptations, through subsequent stages of plan making.

Does the scheme or project have particular significance to the region?

The initiative is completely transferable, subject to minor adjustment, to other local authorities or development projects and is entirely consistent with the objectives set out in the Planning Reform proposals. It could for example be replicated in the community engagement aspects of the proposed National Model Design Code.

The strength of the approach is to bring together a panel of individuals representing a broad range of perspectives with leading commentators who can represent best practice and innovation. The result of that discussion can then be shared with elected members and politicians with the resulting feedback 'sense tested' by the panel. The whole process being shared online with anyone having the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The output from this process can then inform policy and plan makers.

This approach may be applied at any level, from site specific to regional and anywhere in between.

A community engagement process designed and implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic using online resources to present innovative ideas that support a net zero carbon future delivered through a new local plan for Uttlesford. The process, which considers nine environmental themes, combines livestreamed and recorded YouTube presentations and succinct, visual consultation material with online panel debates involving local interest groups. Feedback is then sought from residents and stakeholders, conveyed formally to councillors to inform the earliest stages of local plan preparation.