

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL
ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

**AGENDA
ITEM NO**

15 OCTOBER 2020

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Report Title	TEMPORARY CHANGES TO THE COUNCIL'S STATEMENT OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT			
	To approve temporary changes to the Council's Statement of Community Involvement to comply with Covid-19 Government guidance.			
Decision(s)	The Committee RESOLVES to approve temporary changes to the Statement of Community Involvement set out in Appendix A			
Consultation and Feedback	A draft report has been subject to discussions at Planning Review Panel and the views incorporated into the final report.			
Report Author	Mark Russell, Head of Planning Strategy Email: mark.russell@stroud.gov.uk			
Options	The proposed changes are intended to be temporary but some or all could be made permanent if Committee considers this appropriate.			
Background Papers	None			
Appendices	Appendix A – Amended Statement of Community Involvement			
Implications (further details at the end of the report)	Financial	Legal	Equality	Environmental
	No	Yes	Yes	No

1. INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

- 1.1** Section 18 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires local planning authorities to produce a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), which should explain how they will engage local communities and other interested parties in producing their Local Plan and determining planning applications. The SCI should be published on the local planning authority's website.
- 1.2** Stroud District Council approved its latest SCI at a meeting of Environment Committee on 28 March 2019 and published the document on its website.
- 1.3** On 13 May 2020, the Government published updated planning practice guidance which identified that local planning authorities would need to assess whether their SCIs are consistent with current guidance on social distancing to help combat the spread of coronavirus (Covid-19 pandemic). In addition, new legislation has now come into force for Local Plans which temporarily removes the requirement for physical deposit points, replacing this with requirements for documents to be available for inspection online only.

- 1.4** If policies in SCIs are considered inconsistent with Government requirements and guidance, for example, holding face-to-face community consultation events or providing physical documents for inspection, then the local planning authority should make temporary amendments to allow plan making to progress and promote effective community consultation by means which are reasonably practicable.

2. MAIN POINTS

- 2.1** Although national guidance on responding to Covid-19 has changed since May 2020, the latest guidance remains to socially distance. Recently, new requirements have been put in place to restrict social gatherings to no more than six people and for people to work from home if they can. There is also the potential for further changes to Government policy and guidance at short notice, for example the introduction of local lockdowns or more restrictive national guidelines. In addition, many people remain cautious about venturing out and about. For all of these reasons, it is considered sensible to review the SCI to provide for robust practical and inclusive consultation events for the foreseeable future.
- 2.2** A review of the Council's SCI has therefore been undertaken to identify whether any of its contents may require temporary amendment to respond to the latest Government legislation and guidance on social distancing and potential future changes.
- 2.3** The most significant commitment which could either be impractical to implement in the event of a local lockdown or potentially could increase the risks of spreading Covid-19 would be the commitment to make available to view copies of consultation documents at specific locations, currently including town and parish council offices open to the public, public libraries and at Ebley Mill reception. This is now inconsistent with legislative changes to the Local Planning Regulations 2012 making the requirement for documents to be available for inspection online only until 31 December 2020. As a result these temporary legislative changes should be reflected in the Council's SCI.
- 2.4** Generally, the SCI is not prescriptive about the methods of consultation that the Council will carry out. It states that "we will use a variety of methods and techniques to reach the intended audience. We will tailor the methods to the specific stage of preparation" (SCI, para. 2.11). Examples are given of types of methods, but with no commitment that they will be undertaken in all circumstances. As a result, it is considered that it is unlikely that restrictions of movement due to Covid-19 will result in chosen consultation methods being explicitly contrary to the SCI.
- 2.5** Government guidance states that local planning authorities are strongly encouraged to use online engagement methods to their full potential, including virtual exhibitions, digital consultations, video conferencing, social media and providing documents for inspection on a public website. Although our SCI refers to exhibitions, public events, conferences, workshops and even face to face meetings, all of these methods can in practice be undertaken online rather than necessitating a physical presence. However, there is scope for minor amendments to the SCI to support the use of online engagement methods, such as use of social media.
- 2.6** Government guidance states that authorities should nevertheless take reasonable steps to ensure sections of the community that don't have internet access are involved, through for example engaging with representative groups and allowing individuals to nominate an advocate to share views on their behalf.

- 2.7** Our SCI does refer to using a variety of methods and techniques to engage and consult with hard to reach groups and using methods to engage with both individuals and registered interest groups. Depending upon the nature and scope of future consultations, it will be important to incorporate methods designed to capture the views of those without internet access and this could be made explicit within the amendments.

3. CONCLUSION

- 3.1** A review of the Council's SCI has been undertaken to identify whether any of its contents may require temporary amendment to respond to the latest Government guidance on social distancing and potential future changes.

- 3.2** Wording is proposed to:

- Alert the reader to temporary changes reflecting the need to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic
- Remove the commitment for copies of documents to be made available at physical deposit points until 31 December 2020 or, if subsequently extended by Government, until these legislative changes are reversed
- Identify the need for methods to reflect social distancing guidance and best practice
- Provide positive support for online engagement methods whilst providing for those without internet access
- Highlight the commitment to review temporary changes if and when the Covid-19 pandemic has ended

- 3.3** The proposed changes are highlighted in the amended SCI set out in Appendix A.

4. IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Financial Implications

There are no significant financial implications arising from this report.

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4.2 Legal Implications

The legal implications are set out in the body of the report.

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4.3 Equality Implications

An EIA has been carried out and due regard will be given to any implications identified in it.

4.4 Environmental Implications

There are no significant implications within this category although it is likely that online consultation will have a lower overall impact than face to face consultation in terms of carbon emissions.