

Deputation to GIR Scrutiny Committee

13th August 2020

From: C J Bacon Chair. Rutland Parish Council Working Group

This deputation concerns the changes proposed to Rutland County Council Statement of Community Involvement, on which consultation closed on 17th July 2020. Council have recently issued their response to the consultation. Your attention is respectfully drawn to the following content of **Report 97/2020**

- i) It is clear that the Parish Council Forum has, for many years, provided a useful opportunity to bring the Parishes together to share knowledge and experience. This should also have been seen as helpful to RCC, enabling it to respond to issues of concern and interest to parishes and also to act as sounding board and an opportunity to test its own ideas and new initiatives. **It is clearly a concern that this Forum is not more explicitly recognised in the revised SCI**
- ii) **Section 4 page 38** in which emphasis is placed in meeting **the MINIMUM requirements** for public participation. This aim is repeated in various other sections of the Report. What is lacking in this report is a clear statement suggesting that it is RCC's intention, wherever possible, to consult beyond the minimum, effectively to seek to work constructively with the community. Moreover, there is no mention that RCC would like to see much more real public participation, not just consultation, with people and community representatives on matters of interest in Rutland to us all.
- iii) **Paragraph 4.5 Table 1 pages 39 to 41** in which there is overt reference to engagement with Rutland Water Partnership. **It is clearly unacceptable to not give an equal clarity of reference to the Parish Council Forum. In rural areas especially, parishes are the lifeblood of the community, something that Covid 19 has again brought into sharp relief. A co-ordinating opportunity and voice for the Parishes is never more important and should be clearly reflected in the SCI**
- iv) **Appendix 2 Schedule of Main Issues Raised page 70** in which the "officer response" describes the Parish Council Forum as an "***un-constituted body***" -- "***not established for the purpose of responding to consultations and therefore does not have a role in making representation***"
Many bodies are able to respond to documents produced by a Local Planning Authority, without being specifically constituted to do so. Furthermore, for consultation wider than an individual Parish, it is reasonable for a body bringing together the parishes to discuss such issues and comment if considered appropriate. This is what community engagement is all about, after all.

May we invite you, as the GIR Scrutiny Committee, to review the content of these specific remarks in the overall context of a Statement of Community Involvement and consider whether you come to the same or a different conclusion from the authority who released this Report.

In the light of report 97/20 we wish to bring to the attention of the Scrutiny Committee the agreed minutes of the Parish Council Working Group Meeting held on 20th July 2020, which are set out below.

MINUTES

Parish Council Working Group

20th July 2020

Present: Cliff Bacon, Peter Coe, Jennifer Maskell, Neil Newton, Christopher Renner. (The two County Council representatives were invited to the Zoom meeting but did not attend)

1. Introduction:

This Parish Council Working Group meeting has been convened on the 20th July 2020 on the initiative of the Chairman of the PCWG because he has received notification from Governance that RCC are not prepared to convene a meeting of the PCWG at the present time under present circumstances.

2. Implications of the SCI Consultation on the Future of the Parish Council Forum and the Parish Council Working Group

It was agreed by all present that the recent SCI consultation has omitted all reference to the PCF and the PCWG as future consultation partners of Rutland County Council. Although this may only be during the Covid restrictions, the PCWG would expect that when these are lifted the Council would reinstate the PCF and the PCWG in their current form. The PCWG agreed to inform all Parish Councils of this situation and to canvass their views with regard to how they would like to see the future of the PCF and PCWG

It was observed that “consultation partners” are not necessarily bound to agree and that RCC have not appeared willing to listen and enter a constructive dialogue in response to valid and well-presented arguments at recent PCF meetings, which happen to be contrary to leadership thinking.

3. Corporate Peer Review Challenge Report November 2019

The content of this report was noted. Specifically in the Executive Summary it says that ***“mechanisms to facilitate continuous community engagement that is more than consulting on options but instead engages residents in co-designing and co-producing solutions at all levels --- A clear strategy that distinguishes between communications, consultation and engagement is needed.”*** This is summarised in **Key Recommendations numbers 1 and 3.**

The Executive Summary of the report encouraged RCC to work ***“with Town and Parish Councils to co-design and co-produce a framework for future engagement which may mean reviewing the current format of the Parish Council Forum and strengthening its role and remit so that it operates as a partnership”*** In view of this it appears to the PCWG all the more surprising that RCC are not planning to engage with the PCF and PCWG at the present time and shortly before a crucial public consultation process is due to open on Rutland’s Regulation 19 Local Plan.

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4. The Future of the Parish Council Forum.

- i) It was unanimously agreed that the Chief Executive, the appointed interim Chief Executive, Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council should be encouraged to publicly endorse the value of the PCF and the PCWG as a pillar of community engagement, and to assure the parish communities of their continued support both during the Covid crisis and following the easing of the crisis. This should be evidenced by restoring the PCF and the PCWG as an important element of community involvement within the revised SCI after changes have been introduced following consultation responses.
- ii) It was unanimously agreed to report to the Chief Executive, the appointed interim Chief Executive, the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council that the PCWG considered it entirely inappropriate to open consultation on the Regulation 19 Local Plan at a time of public health crisis and during a normal holiday period when public consultation capability is likely to be at its weakest and least effective status.
- iii) We formally ask the Council leadership to postpone the start of the consultation period and to prolong the consultation period when it does commence. The commencement of consultation should not commence until hard copies of the final consultation version of the Regulation 19 Local Plan are readily available for all residents to gain immediate access to them.
- iv) It was noted that the Planning Department would usually require a developer proposing a significant development to avoid submitting proposals during a holiday period.
- v) It was unanimously proposed that a meeting of the PCF should be convened in the near future in which the Leader and Deputy Leader be asked to explain and present the case as to why they wish to shift the spatial strategy and the settlement hierarchy of Rutland away from the well established pattern and to urbanise the County by the creation of a new town larger than Uppingham. There would then be an opportunity for a presentation by representatives of Parish Councils to put forward their views.
- vi) It was unanimously agreed that the PCWG would be writing to all parishes with the intention of
 - Advising parishes of the content of this meeting.
 - Advising parishes of the urbanisation risks to Rutland embodied in the Reg 19 Local Plan
 - Inviting parishes to attend a PC Forum Meeting on Zoom, advising only 1 representative to join the meeting from each parish.
 - Advising parishes of how to respond appropriately to the Regulation 19 Local Plan and providing assistance where necessary.

Unanimously agreed.

Cliff Bacon, Peter Coe, Jennifer Maskell, Neil Newton, Christopher Renner

Conclusion

The Corporate Peer Review Challenge of November 2019 made clear that real concerns were expressed about RCC's approach to community involvement and engagement. This was a constant theme also in the responses to the SCI consultation and we do not believe that these concerns have been adequately addressed in the proposed changes to the SCI.

Commencing during the period 2017 to 2018 there has been a noticeable progressive trend for RCC to move to suppress community involvement in vital planning issues concerning the future of Rutland, and, when the community have made their opinions known, to fail to publish those responses within a reasonable timescale, thus keeping the community unaware of the trend of opinion for as long as possible. Neither have the Council made any constructive intention to modify plans to meet community advice to consider changes of course.

If community involvement (or rather the lack of it) continues along these lines, the community response to the Regulation 19 Local Plan will include representations to the Inspectorate on this subject, among others.

Cliff Bacon.

Chairman Parish Council Working Group.

10th August 2020