

Growth, Infrastructure and Resources Scrutiny Committee Meeting: 13 August

Question from Mr J Orme

Background

The proposed SCI provides for the Council to consult direct with Parishes (Parish Councils and Parish Meetings). The papers submitted to the Committee report that in response to the draft SCI a number of requests were made that, in addition to such direct consultation, the Parish Council Forum be recognised as a stakeholder and have a settled part in consultation arrangements.

The papers submitted to the Committee propose no amendment to the draft SCI – i.e. the Forum is not to have a settled place in future arrangements. The principal paper to the Committee says:

2.7.5 Role of the Parish Forum:

There is concern amongst some Parish Councils about the removal of a specific reference to the Parish Forum, as this is seen as playing an important role in identifying issues and concerns of the general population.

Rather than specify that the Parish Forum is a stakeholder, changes proposed to the SCI set out that each Parish and Town Council and the parish meetings were key stakeholders in their own right and that the Council would use a variety of means to engage with them (this could include amongst other formats the Parish Forums and/or the weekly Parish Briefings introduced to communicate through the Covid19 pandemic). In this way the changes make the SCI more flexible and adaptive to changing circumstances, therefore no further change is proposed to this paragraph.

In addition, the 'schedule of main issues' records the Officer Response on this issue as follows:

Noted. The Parish Forum is an un-constituted body which is chaired by the Chairmen of the County Council. The Forum was not established for the purpose of responding to consultations and therefore does not have a role in making representation. Each individual Town and Parish Council and Parish Meeting is individually consulted in their own right as a statutory consultee. The parish briefings originally set up by the Council as part of Covid-19 arrangements offer an opportunity for parish councils to ask questions and communicate with the Parishes. However, Table 1 sets out that existing partnerships, forums and groups will be engaged and through meetings, workshops and focus groups. The SCI therefore allows the flexibility to use forums such as the Parish Forum to engage different groups in the process.

The effect of the above

The effect of the above is that Parishes will have no certainty that a Forum meeting will be held in relation to Plan and Plan Document consultations. It will be a matter in the gift of the Council or its Chairman.

That is less than ideal. The Forum is a valuable mechanism, especially on contentious issues, whereby individual Parishes can get a better understanding (and thus improve their individual responses) by hearing and participating in the Forum discussion; in addition, Parishes as well as the Council, benefit from hearing Council participants respond to challenges raised at the Forum.

To have the matter proceed on the basis that Forum involvement will be possible, but is not obligatory and will be at the discretion of the Council, risks damaging public confidence in the Council's attitude to consultation.

Questions

“Is the Committee satisfied that officers have fully analysed and set out the considerations which ought to be taken into account in finalising the SCI in relation to the Parish Council Forum?”

“If so, does the Committee agree with the conclusion that the SCI not be amended in respect of the Parish Council Forum?”

“If so, how does the Committee propose that the Council avoid damage to the Council's reputation”

Jeremy Orme