

Councillor Questions for Cabinet 19 January 2021

Question from Councillor David Tooke

1. Consultation on the Local Plan

Regarding the Consultation on the Local Plan; currently I understand that it is proposed to put 5 copies of the Consultation Document in Public Libraries which, due to Corona Virus restrictions will be available via the order and collect system. It seems quite probable that issuing copies via this collect scheme – with its concomitant delays for hygiene as well as a loan period of up to 3 weeks – will severely restrict the number of people who can see the document in this way. This also makes it difficult for those who neither drive nor use the internet to make a contribution.

Whilst I accept that mailing a copy to every household would be prohibitively expensive, would it not be possible to mail out “on-demand”?

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning

We have been moving away from printed copies in many areas of our work, as part of our commitment to reducing environmental impacts. And during the pandemic we have of course been holding all our meetings online. Nationally, approximately 93% of the population has internet access and this is increasing.

We have five printed copies of the Local Plan consultation document in each of our 23 libraries. These will be available for ‘click and collect’ loan and they will be quarantined in between loans so as to minimise the risk. We can also arrange for them to be delivered to people who are unable to get to the libraries.

There is no requirement in legislation to make individual hard copies available. At this first stage of consultation we are only obliged to notify people and invite their representations: at the next stage the regulations require us to make the document available on the website and hard copies ‘for inspection’ at our offices and anywhere else we consider appropriate. During last year, this legislation was amended in response to the coronavirus pandemic, to remove the requirement for even inspection hard copies to be available.

The cost of printing and posting ‘on-demand’ copies would be approximately £55 per copy, but would also require officers to make otherwise unnecessary trips into the offices to undertake the printing.

While consultation during the lockdown is certainly challenging, we are offering a range of approaches including the loaned copies at libraries as mentioned; a series of online webinars and podcasts; and a dedicated telephone line for people who would like to discuss anything to do with the plan.

Question from Councillor Ryan Holloway

2. Dorset Local Plan

In regard to the Dorset Local plan that is going out for consultation to the public on the 18th January to the 15th March. I understand that the consultation will be going out on online and webinars too. Considering I know that most of our residents do have access to online. What is the council doing to help our residents who don't have internet access?

With also Dorset now back in a national lockdown and we are likely to stay until March, would it not be best to delay the Public consultation in order to ensure that our residents can see the draft plans in detail, So that we can present the plan when we are out of lockdown.

Response from the Portfolio Holder for Planning

As explained in the response to the previous question, we have been moving away from printed copies and towards more digital approaches in many areas of our work, as part of our commitment to reducing environmental impacts.

For those without access to the internet, we have five printed copies of the Local Plan consultation document in each of our 23 libraries. These will be available for 'click and collect' loan and they will be quarantined in between loans so as to minimise the risk. We can also arrange for them to be delivered to people who are unable to get to the libraries.

We also have a dedicated telephone line so that residents can talk to members of the planning policy team about the issues in the plan, and we can send out paper copies of the response form for those who would prefer to respond that way. Residents can also telephone in to listen to the webinars, as an alternative to viewing them online.

We do not know how long coronavirus restrictions will last, and delaying the consultation would have a major impact on the programme for preparing the local plan. It is very important that we make progress on the plan, as without an up to date local plan in place, the weight that can be given to local policies is less and we therefore have less control over the development that takes place in the Dorset Council area.