

Norton St Philip Parish Council

Response to Consultation on Draft Statement of Community Involvement

Norton St Philip Parish Council (the PC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on this document, which it regards as critical to the democratic future of the new unitary authority. Involving local communities should be an essential part of the planning process.

4.1 The Local Plan

The PC has grave concerns about the mechanisms suggested for the involvement of PCs and the communities they represent during the Local Plan making process.

The new Local Plan will have a huge affect on the new authority's Districts, Parish Councils and residents. It is critical that rural communities and their Parish Councils are fully consulted at each stage of the Plan making process. Parish Councils are the tier of Local Government closest to these communities and it is fundamentally important to involve them at the earliest opportunity.

It is of great concern to the PC that although Parish Councils are listed as one of the "Specific Consultation Bodies" there is no more consultation proposed with them than other statutory bodies. This is surprising as the Local Plan Policies will be, as the NPPF states, "*a platform for local people to shape their surroundings.*" The NPPF also makes it clear that Local Plans should "*be shaped by early, proportionate and effective engagement between plan-makers and communities, local organisations, businesses, infrastructure providers and operators and statutory consultees*" (§16c)

Of particular concern to the PC is the apparent absence of informal consultation at a local level at an early stage in the Plan Making process. The PC suggests this should include an "Issues and Options" consultation as carried out by MDC during the preparation of LPP2. Such a consultation exercise would be the ideal forum to explore options and raise local issues.

Instead of this, the proposals seem unclear. The summary box on page 6 states:

"Evidence gathering and identification of issues for the Local Plans:

- The Council researches and gathers evidence to guide the content of the Local Plan. In this early stage of plan production, informal engagement can continue throughout this period and using a variety of formats.*
- The Council may use methods such as workshops or surveys to ensure that the Council receives the relevant specialist and local opinions at an early stage. Where appropriate, individuals and parties on the Council's consultee database will be notified."*

There should be an unequivocal commitment to engage with communities and their elected representatives at an early stage; to put forward options for community involvement and discussion and for the result of this consultation to be appropriately considered. The Draft SCI merely says that Council will "*research and gather evidence*"; and that it "*may use methods such as workshops or surveys*".

The evidence gathering summary goes on to state:

“Dedicated briefings and workshops may be held for specific evidence base studies. Invitations to attend will depend upon the subject matter and targeted consultation may be undertaken with specific interest groups to check the findings or look at information in more detail.”

The PC considers that this statement gives no assurance whatsoever that communities will be involved at the evidence gathering stage. Again, there is no commitment to local engagement here; simply a woolly statement that the Council “*may*” choose to involve “*specific interest groups*”.

The PC requests that a commitment is made to:

- 1) Engage with Parish Councils during the research stage of the Local Plan Making process
- 2) Share information relevant to the PC and local community
- 3) Discuss local issues and potential options
- 4) Consider and evaluate feedback from PCs and their communities
- 5) Ensure that the needs of the communities are addressed and wherever possible met

The PC suggests that without these commitments the Local Plan process will not be a democratic one.

4.3 Neighbourhood Development Plans

The PC is concerned that there is no statement of support for the principle of Neighbourhood Plans; neither is there any commitment to:

- 1) Nominate a Council Planning Policy Officer as the point of contact.
- 2) if considered appropriate and constructive, attend meetings where such attendance by the nominated Officer would assist the Neighbourhood Planning Group.
- 3) be actively and constructively engaged during the Neighbourhood Plan making process including the requirements for community engagement and the statutory periods of consultation (S14 & S16).
- 4) respond as quickly as possible to requests for assistance from the designated body.

The Draft SCI goes no further than committing the Council to the statutory requirements. Much more than the minimum is needed from the Council in assisting Neighbourhood Planning groups.

Summary

Adopting a SCI is likely to be a priority for the new Somerset authority. NSP PC recognises the urgent need to have a SCI in place. Nevertheless, the aim of achieving a high level of accessibility and community involvement is not addressed in the current Draft. The PC would like to see greater detail of how the authority will encourage and facilitate community involvement from the earliest stages of the making of Planning Policy. This involvement should be open, transparent and easily accessible.

Norton St Philip PC
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