



St Helens Borough Council

Statement of Community Involvement – Addendum

Temporary measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic

May 2021

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on day to day life over the past months, changing the way in which people behave and undertake daily tasks to reduce the risks associated with contracting and / or spreading the virus. Changes in behaviour have not just been voluntarily made by an individual or organisation's own choice, but have also been driven by the need to ensure compliance with Government rules and restrictions in response to curbing the spread of the virus, to protect the NHS.

Some of the restrictions having the biggest impact include:

- Stay at home orders
- Social distancing
- Closure of services / buildings
- Limitations on public gatherings / multiple households meeting

Whilst the previous months have seen restrictions fluctuating between periods of tightening and loosening, the impacts continue to be felt daily, and will likely continue to be felt to some extent for more time to come. For example, there could be further lockdowns and restrictions introduced (either nationally or locally) should any further waves of Covid-19 be experienced.

Consequently, this has an impact on the Council's plan making processes, and most notably in relation to public consultation in the plan making process. For example, Covid-19 has resulted in some of the libraries in St Helens being closed for prolonged periods. Even when open, restrictions may be in place in terms of capacity. On this basis, it is not possible to guarantee that hard copies of documents will be available in the libraries for viewing during periods of public consultation.

The current St Helens Council Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), entitled 'Revised Statement of Community Involvement' sets out how the community is to be engaged in the planning processes within St Helens Borough (in respect of both plan making and decision taking). It was adopted in November 2013 and has been complied with in the preparation of planning policy documents to date. This SCI addendum must be read in conjunction with the 2013 SCI. The provisions of this 2021 SCI addendum take precedence over the provisions of the 2013 SCI during the temporary period that the SCI addendum is in effect.

Government Guidance

The Government's National Planning Practice Guidance advises the following:

"How can a Statement of Community Involvement be reviewed and updated to comply with COVID-19 guidance?"

Local planning authorities will need to assess their Statements of Community Involvement to identify which policies are inconsistent with current guidance on staying at home and away

from others or any superseding guidance. This could include, for example, holding face-to-face community consultation events or providing physical documents for inspection.

The local planning authority should then make any temporary amendments that are necessary to allow plan-making to progress, and that continue to promote effective community engagement by means which are reasonably practicable”

(Source: National Planning Practice Guidance, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-making# covid19>, paragraph 078)

Further to this, and in reflection of the difficulty of doing so in a Covid-19 compliant way, the Government has amended The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012 to remove the requirement to make certain documents available in hard copy until 31 December 2021, as currently set out.

It is therefore clearly the case that SCIs can and should be updated to reflect updated plan making processes, which comply with Government restrictions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Overarching consultation principles

Whilst the impacts of Covid-19 mean that there need to be some changes over the following months to how the Council is able to consult as part of the plan making process, the Council remains committed to engaging with all interested individuals and organisations, as a priority. This will include providing access to consultation documents, and opportunities to make comments through public consultation, providing the opportunity to inform, influence and shape the plan making process.

It is acknowledged that digital exclusion remains an issue for some in the Borough. Where people may struggle to access information or engage in the process digitally, they are encouraged to contact the Planning Policy Team for assistance.

This addendum seeks to provide clarity around the process, and limits proposed changes to only those needed as an absolute necessity to ensure consultation can be undertaken in a Covid-19 compliant way, in accordance with Government rules, and for only as long as such measures are necessary. This is done to protect our communities and staff, and to reduce the spread of the virus.

Temporary Measures

In response to the pandemic and Government restrictions, this addendum clarifies how the Council will consult with the community throughout this challenging period. This means:

- 1) The Council cannot commit to making hard copies of documents available from public buildings (including the St Helens Town Hall and public libraries) during public consultation periods, or beyond. Likewise, documents in hard copy cannot be

provided to other organisations (such as Parish Councils). Instead, all documents will be made available on the Council's website, specifically the Local Plan pages, and with regard to the Local Plan Examination, all relevant documents will be available on the main Local Plan Examination and Examination Library pages;

- 2) Local Plan public consultations that need to be undertaken whilst restrictions remain in place will be done without consultation events / public meetings taking place in a physical setting. This is to ensure the safety of all potential attendees and staff, ensuring Government rules around public gatherings and social distancing can be respected. Instead, consultation will be undertaken digitally as appropriate, and be made as accessible as possible to all;
- 3) The distribution of consultation posters around supermarkets, Parish halls, and elsewhere cannot be guaranteed; and
- 4) Any other changes of approach required to ensure the safety of the public and Council staff will be allowed, whilst the pandemic has ongoing effects on daily life.

The Council website will continue to be used to provide information, updates on plan making processes as appropriate, and access to documents. The Council's social media channels will also be used to provide information to as wide an audience as possible. The Council will remain open to exploring different and innovative ways in which to engage people in the plan making process through this time.

For those that have difficulty accessing consultation documents digitally, help can be sought by contacting the Development Plans Team using the following details:

Contact Centre
Wesley House
Corporation Street
St Helens
WA10 1HF

Email: planningpolicy@sthelens.gov.uk or telephone: 01744 676190

Also, where people may have preferred to attend public consultation events to ask questions and gain a better understanding of proposals, they are encouraged to contact the Development Plans Team separately (as above), who will assist in answering questions and providing information where possible.

Timescale, and next steps

To reflect similar updates to the legislation as previously referenced, the primary access to documents, both during consultation periods, and beyond, will be in a digital format, and this will remain the case until 31 December 2021. This does not mean that hard copies might not be available to some degree during this period, only that it cannot be committed to. The other measures referred to will remain in place until Government advice changes and restrictions are lifted to such an extent that the Council considers it safe to hold public events in a physical setting or practical to distribute consultation posters.