

To: Dr Michael Bingham
MHCLG Acting Chief Planner
by email only

Jeremy Potter
Spatial Planning Services Manager
Chelmsford City Council
12 May 2020

Dear Michael

Public consultation on Local Plans, SA/SEA, Neighbourhood Plans, SPDs and other associated Documents

As Chairman of the Essex Planning Officers' Association (EPOA), I am writing to you on behalf of chief officers of Essex local planning authorities to promote further changes to the relevant legislation/regulations to aid continued public consultation on local plans and other planning policy documents through the current COVID-19 restrictions.

At present, there are statutory requirements for physical copies of public consultation documents to be made available for inspection at deposit locations. As I know you are aware, this is not currently proving possible, as these locations are not open to the public and the latest Government guidance indicates that these restrictions are likely to be in place for at least the short to medium term.

Local planning authorities are adapting well to the challenges raised by the current restrictions and many across Essex are using the flexibility created by new legislation regarding virtual meetings to ensure the decision and plan-making processes continue. For example, Chelmsford has a virtual full Council meeting scheduled on 27 May 2020 to adopt its new Local Plan.

Many local planning authorities are investigating new and innovative engagement and consultation methods such as virtual public exhibitions, workshops and presentations. However, the relevant Regulations on local and neighbourhood Plans, SA/SEAs and supplementary planning documents require a physical copy of the consultation material to be placed at a deposit location. This is often also reiterated in approved statements of community involvement.

Therefore, to ensure policy and plan-making continues there is an urgent need to amend these regulatory requirements. It would also be very useful for changes to legislation to recognise the primacy of any amended regulations over any requirements in approved statements of community involvement.

On behalf of officers of Essex local planning authorities, I very much hope these matters can be given your urgent consideration to enable the continuation of plan-making through these difficult and challenging times.

Yours sincerely

Jeremy Potter
Chairperson - Essex Planning Officer Association