

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO Development Control and Conservation Committee 4th February 2004
AUTHOR/S: Director of Development Services

CAMBOURNE DEVELOPMENT: REVIEW OF THE DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENT GROUP (DEG)

Purpose

1. This report reviews the current effectiveness of the Cambourne Design and Environment Group, and recommends appropriate changes to the way pre-application discussions take place.

Background

2. The Design and Environment Group (DEG) was established following a meeting of the Planning Committee on 24th April 1996 to consider the Cambourne Masterplan and Design Guide. The DEG resulted from the amalgamation of a Design Steering Group and an Environment Committee that had been proposed through the Masterplan and Design Guide. The purpose of the DEG was, and is, to oversee the implementation of the Masterplan and Design Guide. In practice this means that the group receives draft proposals and compares them with the documents that set the standards including Masterplan, design guide, highway design guide, play strategy, area briefs; to identify any desirable changes to the proposals or the standards and make recommendations. It is not a decision making group, but aims to speed up the planning process by bringing together a range of interested parties to iron out any problems, such that the planning application submitted as a result of the meeting should have smoother progress through the system and give greater certainty to the developer. As well as development proposals, the group also considers and informally agrees the standards documents, in particular briefing plans for each phase of development, and updates to the Masterplan. The interested parties that usually attend are the Council's architectural consultant, landscape consultant, landscape officer and planners; the County highways officer; the developers' project director, landscape, master planning and engineering consultants; and a representative of the Cambourne MLC (forerunner to a Parish Council). The meeting is minuted by an officer of the Democratic Services Team.
3. As the development of Cambourne has progressed, it has become apparent to SCDC Officers that the DEG has served its purpose, but now no longer works effectively. It has become a barrier to the planning process by being too large, too formal and too bureaucratic. Its members and users have lost sight of the remit and applicants have become confused into thinking that the DEG is part of the formal planning process and have assumed that the majority views taken at the DEG would be the outcome of the planning application. Many of the members and regular applicants have stated anecdotally that the meeting wastes time in terms of what it actually achieves. The Council has been criticised for agreeing standards documents at the DEG (especially

briefing plans where density issues are included), without wider consultation. Additionally, as we have now got to the stage of having approved half the housing and significant proportions of business and infrastructure proposals, relationships between parties have been developed to the extent where the DEG can satisfactorily be replaced by other means.

4. The good points about the DEG are that changes can be made to draft layouts and any knock-on effects dealt with immediately. For example, if it is stated at the meeting that an additional turning head is required in a road, requiring a house to be moved closer to a boundary, the impact on landscaping can be addressed at the same time. However, too much reliance is placed on the meeting to obtain specialist advice, rather than address such issues earlier in the pre-application process. Some schemes are also rushed in order to meet the deadline for the meeting, rather than being discussed when ready. It is considered that a change in the pre-application process could keep the good aspects of communication whilst removing the delays and time wasted.

Considerations

5. A new pre-application protocol is suggested below, which will give all parties a more efficient and effective input at the right time and give clear guidance to applicants as to what they should expect to do before making a planning application. It ensures that specialist advice is sought early, and that the MLC planning sub-committee, which is consulted as a Parish Council anyway, is helped with understanding the planning considerations when necessary. It also formalises the approval process for the standards documents, by ensuring better consultation and the formal approval of the Development and Conservation Control Committee.
6. Instead of the DEG, officers will:
 - Strongly encourage all applicants and developers to partake in pre-application discussions and discussions on master planning / standards issues;
 - Ensure early participation of the landscape, ecology, housing and County highways officers in pre-application discussions;
 - Ensure that committee reports of planning applications include a paragraph on compliance or otherwise with the Cambourne Masterplan and Design Guide as part of the planning considerations;
 - Consult the MLC, statutory consultees and interested parties on briefing plans, strategies, amendments to the Masterplan, etc. as submitted for approval by the consortium, and report to the Development Control and Conservation Committee for formal approval;
 - Attend MLC planning sub-committees when necessary to assist in the interpretation of plans, planning considerations, etc.
7. The DEG considered this report at its meeting on 23rd January 2004 and any comments, recommendations or representations arising therefrom will be reported verbally.

Financial and Staffing Implications

8. There would be no need for pre-application discussions to be formally minuted, thereby freeing the time of the democratic services officer. Planning and landscape officers' time would be better used.

Legal Implications

9. None

Sustainability Implications

10. None.

Conclusions/Summary

11. The DEG has been a useful tool in progressing the development of Cambourne in its early days. Now that the processes and relationships have been established, it has outgrown its useful life and has become more of a negative influence. It should therefore be replaced with a different procedure to ensure the continued efficiency and effectiveness of the progress of development.

Recommendations

12. Disband the Cambourne DEG in favour of standard pre-application discussions, including the protocol set out in paragraph 6 above.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: none.

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