

Dear Church Leader,

Anytown District Council has recently announced a very important consultation – issues and options for the future development of Anytown District. Please could you arrange for this information to be circulated widely as it's important that local people know what the proposals are, and have a chance to comment before the deadline. The details of the consultation are on the Council's website (if you google Anytown District Council Local Plan you should find it)

In general terms, the Local Plan (sometimes called a Core Strategy) is a Council's plan for the future. It will influence future planning decisions and shape the development of the District for the next 20 years and beyond.

A Local Plan sets out the vision for what a Council wants to achieve in the future, where and how change will happen, as well as the Council's approach to important issues including how the Council will seek to improve the built environment, provide more affordable housing and employment spaces, respond to climate change, and provide facilities for local communities.

Once the consultation about issues and options ends, the responses will help the Council draw up a 2nd document giving the preferred options. There will be another consultation period at this point. The next stage will be the publication of the draft report, when people will again be consulted, and the final stage is the examination in public by an independent examiner. The whole process will take 2 – 3 years, and sometimes longer.

It's usual for a Council to organise public consultation meetings, and exhibitions in libraries and sometimes in places like supermarkets. There should be a list on the Council's website. If you can't find any information, you should contact the Council planning department or speak to a local Councillor as information should be accessible for the people in the area. If you think the proposed schedule is a bit thin, you may want to organise some meetings for the community at church halls - this can be a very good way for the church to engage with the local community - but you will need to liaise with the Council about whether Council staff will be available.

Churches can make a real contribution to the process of shaping the future development of the District because they're in touch with people who live locally. These people probably know more about their area than Council planners who usually live elsewhere and travel in to work in the Council Offices. It's important that Christians are involved in this process as we "seek the peace and prosperity" of the place where we live (Jeremiah 29:7). Christians will also want to speak up for people who cannot speak for themselves and defend the rights of the poor and needy (Proverbs 31:8 & 9).

This consultation is the right time to make comments about the importance of places of worship and especially about the provision of places of worship in any new housing areas eg the possibility of the Church being involved as a partner in a community centre built as part of a new housing development. Basically, if it's not mentioned at the consultation stage it probably won't be in the Local Plan document, and it will be more difficult to get agreement in future.

My advice is to encourage people to respond individually, as the actual number of responses is important. It's fine to send in a group response (eg from a deanery), but it would only count as one response. If people send in their own responses saying similar things it will be more effective.

Yours faithfully,

Carol Richards
Diocese of Chelmsford Mission in Regeneration Adviser