



SENT BY EMAIL

Mrs Joanne Mitchell (Clerk)
Dronfield Town Council

Our Ref: NB/JH
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Date: 21 November 2023

Dear Mrs Mitchell

LOCAL PLAN WORKING GROUP

Thank you for your letter dated 8 November 2023 regarding the concerns that Dronfield Town Council has in relation to the North East Derbyshire Local Plan Working Group. The Town Council's concerns are as follows:

1. The composition of the Working Group is not politically proportionate. This results in underrepresentation of the main opposition group on the Council and thereby the underrepresentation of several communities within the District;
2. The political groups on the Council have not been given the freedom to choose their own representatives, as is ordinarily the case in any other committee or working group of the Council; and
3. The formal governance of the Working Group has not been clarified. This results in concerns around how discussions at the meeting will be recorded and the implications for transparency.

I will respond to each of the above points in turn.

1. The composition of the Working Group

A decision was made at the North East Derbyshire Council full Council meeting on 25 September 2023 to form a Working Group as per the recommendation in the report at item 8 on the agenda for that meeting. The draft Terms of Reference presented were included as part of that decision.

The agreed Terms of Reference states that 'The Local Plan Review Working Group is an informal group whose purpose is to advise Officers and Members in reaching any decisions to moving forward planning policy'. These are attached.

The Working Group is not a committee and as such there is no legal requirement for it to be politically proportionate. As a working party it is not a decision making body. As reflected in its terms of reference it is there to advise.

The report considered by Council included 4 potential options, one of which was to not set up a Group at all. This would have resulted in Cabinet alone providing Member input into the Local Plan development process. The Cabinet, of course, is not required to be politically proportionate.

The other two discounted options were considered to be weaker than the recommended route, in part due to the lack of direct link to the work of the Council's Scrutiny Committees. That link connects the activity in the Working Group to the committees that focus on the corporate priorities of the Council. The Scrutiny Committees are politically proportionate and have a specific role in terms of making recommendations to Cabinet, which Cabinet then has a duty to respond to. This engagement with the Scrutiny Committees is new.

North East Derbyshire has 24 wards. To have a representative from each ward would have resulted in a Working Group that would be too large to operate efficiently. I emphasise that the role of the Group is to act in the interests of the District as a whole and not to make decisions for the Council, or on behalf of residents. The role of the Group is to facilitate Member input into the broad direction of travel that officers are recommending before documents are produced. Ultimately those documents have to be approved by the Council where all Councillors may input into the decisions.

There are regulatory requirements to consult the public at certain stages of the Local Plan process. Those consultation exercises will be undertaken at the appropriate time and will involve all parts of the District.

2. Political groups have not been able to choose their own representatives.

There was no requirement to do this because the Working Group is not a decision making body.

3. The formal governance of the Working Group has not been clarified.

It was agreed at the Council meeting on 25 September that notes would be taken at each meeting of the Working Group. The notes of the meetings held within each quarter will be appended to the quarterly update reports that will be submitted to the Scrutiny committees and to Cabinet, as per the Terms of Reference for the Local Plan Working Group. Those reports (to the Committees) will be published in advance of the relevant meetings in accordance with the usual timescales for Committee reports.

I trust the above responses clarify the position.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Nigel Barker
Leader of the Council