

The importance of engagement before submitting a major planning application



tCI commentary:

A proposal promising this amount of employment space has the potential to help the council make in-roads to those targets – but it also has the potential to divide the town, which is no stranger to controversial planning applications for greenbelt and agricultural land. Nor is it a stranger to sustained and strategic campaigns being galvanised to thwart the intentions of developers – quite often founded on misunderstandings, misinformation and a lack of understanding about need and context of the development.

Early engagement and subsequent consultation can – and has been proven to – mitigate these issues, smoothing the path through the planning process. While consultation and engagement cannot promise to satisfy everyone, it can improve the relationships between the two sides and help both parties to understand why the project is being brought forward (and why there is resistance/concern), why the site is preferred (and views about why the site should not be developed), what the benefits are (and why the community/stakeholders may not appreciate the benefits) and what the need is (and why this may not be immediately obvious to critics). The scale of the consultation requirement of developers is set out in the councils' own Statement of Community Involvement, and the engagement strategy in this case needs to ensure it addresses the immediately identified concerns about traffic and noise (the usual suspects with any development proposal) as well as issues around the green belt and loss of agricultural land, without losing sight of the more generic worries a project like this will generate.

Article:

WARRINGTON Borough Council has told developers 'it will be very important to gauge the views' of residents before submitting a planning application for a major 24-hour distribution hub.

As reported last month, Spawforths, on behalf of Langtree Property Partners and First Panattoni, will be submitting an outline planning application for the development of the site, which will be accompanied by an environmental statement.

It will propose the construction of up to 325,150m² of employment floor space on the land – adjacent to junction 20 of the M6 and junction 9 of the M56 at Lymm – following demolition work.

The land is bounded by Grappenhall Lane and Cliff Lane to the north, with the motorway slip road to the east.

A request for an environmental impact assessment (EIA) 'scoping opinion' was lodged to the council in February.

And the council has now issued a 'screening opinion', in which it has raised concerns over traffic and noise.

It also highlighted the need for consultation with the public, as well as councillors.

In the decision notice, the council said: "The local planning authority (LPA) have received a number of representations from residents/parish councils/councillors as part of the current scoping opinion request and it will be very important to gauge their views/take into account their concerns before submitting any formal planning application/EIA.

"The ward councillor has raised concerns about the loss of higher quality agricultural land and bearing in mind that potential loss, the LPA consider that an assessment of the impact of the loss of such land should be scoped into the final EIA for the site.

"In particular, the subsequent EIA will need to demonstrate that, in policy terms, the proposed development is not premature in the light of the status of the local plan and the current status of the land as green belt."

The land put forward by Spawforths falls within the 'garden city suburb' identified in the local plan preferred development option.

Following the receipt of a request, the council has a statutory requirement to provide a 'scoping opinion'.

It is a formal view on what issues an environmental statement, which a developer must prepare in support of any future planning application, should contain.

The 'screening opinion' is the authority's assessment of whether an environmental statement should be submitted with any future application.

Furthermore, a key aim of an EIA is to ensure that the public are given 'early and effective opportunities to participate in the decision-making procedures'.