

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE
Council Chamber, Town Hall, Main Road, Romford RM1 3BD
3 March 2026 (7.00 - 9.01 pm)**

Present:

COUNCILLORS

Conservative Group Ray Best and Timothy Ryan

Havering Residents' Group Reg Whitney (Chairman), Robby Misir (Vice-Chair) and John Crowder

Labour Group Jane Keane

Also present for the meeting were Councillors Oscar Ford, Chris Wilkins, Jacqueline Williams and Keith Prince.

There were about 15 members of the public present at the meeting.

20 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman reminded Members of the action to be taken in an emergency.

21 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There was no apologies for absence.

22 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

There were no disclosures of interests.

23 APPLICATIONS FOR DECISION

The Committee noted the report without discussion.

24 LAND NORTH OF FEN LANE, NORTH OCKENDON

The Committee received the Local Development Order (LDO) proposals for the land north of Fen Lane.

It was confirmed that the report had reached the stage where the Committee was being asked to approve the commencement of the statutory consultation. A comprehensive set of appendices had been provided to give Members the full amount of information on the proposed site. Several representatives from the project management team and external consultants were in attendance in support of the item.

Officers explained that an LDO is a legally binding document that grants permitted planning approval for specified development within a designated zone. Only the works included within the LDO could be undertaken and anything outside its scope would require separate consent. Members noted that data centres, which was the proposed use for the land, had been nationally prioritised at a similar level to water and energy infrastructure and the proposed LDO would support urgently needed digital capacity for London and the wider UK.

Members were informed that the proposal included a major ecology park and visitor centre to deliver biodiversity improvements within the Green Belt. The LDO would streamline the planning process, although significant preparatory work was required upfront. Officers outlined the four stages involved; preparation, statutory consultation, consideration of representations and final adoption by formal resolution. The Committee's decision at this meeting related solely to authorising officers to begin the consultation process.

Officers summarised the geography of the site. It was located in the east of the borough, adjoining Thurrock, with several residential properties and listed buildings in proximity, within the North Ockendon Conservation Area. The substation was cited as a key determining factor in the choice of location. A care home was situated close to the site. The site measured approximately 218.8 hectares, was entirely within the Green Belt, and consisted of four arable farms. There were two main vehicle access points from Fen Lane, with a further small access point and the topography sloped from west to east.

Officers detailed the permitted development parameters within the LDO, including; Data centre floor space up to 340,000m², Indoor horticulture up to 50,000m², District heating centre up to 3,300m², Campus management up to 2,700m², Visitor centre up to 600m².

The LDO itself was structured around four broad components; the erection of buildings, other development such as the ecology park and play area, associated infrastructure including roads, parking, servicing, utilities, drainage, CCTV and lighting and site preparation works such as earthworks and temporary site facilities.

Members were advised that the eastern portion of the site would be the principal ecology park, although ecological enhancements extended around much of the perimeter. A number of public rights of way and cycle routes passed around the area.

Officers then outlined the documents forming the draft LDO, which included the Order, Design Code, Code of Construction, Landscape & Ecological Management and Monitoring Plan, Travel Plan which was noted as a live document, detailed plans, a Statement of Reasons and a Section 106 agreement. The LDO would operate for a 20-year period with continuous monitoring and two key conditions applied: the Local Planning Authority

(LPA) must confirm that plans complied with the LDO and that the LPA retained powers to revoke the LDO if necessary.

Members were assured that the level of detail matched that of a major planning application and was supported by an Environmental Statement, HRA Screening, EQIA and HHIA.

The proposed consultation period would run from 6th March 2026 to 7th April 2026 which would meet statutory requirements of a minimum 28 days or 30 for EIA-related consultations. Information would be provided through a dedicated webpage and the planning portal with hard copies at Romford Town Hall and Upminster Library. Notifications would include neighbour letters, landowner and tenant notifications, stakeholder emails, site notices, a statutory notice in the Romford Recorder, a press release and social media coverage.

Three consultation events were planned: two public sessions and one stakeholder session with consultees would be able to submit comments in the same way as for any planning application. Following the consultation, officers would report back to the Committee for a further debate and for the Committee to decide on whether to adopt the LDO.

A representative speaking on behalf of North Ockendon residents and Havering Friends of the Earth requested that the consultation be extended from the statutory minimum to 12 weeks and that it should not begin until after the upcoming local election period. They argued that the documentation, which was over 2,700 pages, was too extensive for adequate analysis within the statutory timeframe, particularly given the scale of proposed development within the Green Belt. They expressed concern that residents, ward councillors and expert bodies had not been sufficiently engaged during the preparation phase, noting that statutory consultees had only been offered a single one-hour online session. They also highlighted that purdah and potential changes to the Committee's membership made the timing inappropriate.

Ward Members, along with a further non-ward Member, addressed the Committee and expressed concerns regarding the length and timing of the consultation, the scale of the documentation, and the lack of early involvement. Cllr Williams stated that residents were not experts in planning law and would struggle to interpret the complex material without more time. She also referred to extensive housing development proposals in nearby Thurrock and Brentwood and the cumulative impact on the area. Cllr Ford reported that all three ward councillors had met residents who strongly favoured either extending the consultation or postponing it until after the election. Cllr Wilkins felt that both ward councillors and Cabinet Members had been excluded from the process until the same time as residents and that it was unreasonable to expect meaningful responses within the minimum timeframe. Cllr Prince described the pace as unacceptable, particularly with the consultation cutting across the Easter holiday period.

Statutory consultees' ability to respond within the timeframe, given the impact of national budget reductions, was also raised as a concern.

Officers reiterated that while there was no prescribed maximum consultation length, statutory consultees routinely responded to highly complex applications within the standard 28-day period.

Members engaged in extensive debate. Several expressed dissatisfaction with the short reading time afforded to them and the public, given the scale of documentation. Concerns were raised about a lack of clarity throughout the process, the absence of updates to the Local Plan, the limited community engagement opportunities and uncertainties relating to potential post-election changes in the Committee's membership.

Officers advised that any adjustment to the meeting timetable would also require altering the dates set out in the report. They noted potential procedural implications if decisions were postponed until after the local elections and subsequent council meetings. It was explained that in some scenarios, the decision could fall to the Secretary of State and not the Committee. It was also noted that, had the Local Plan been brought forward as intended, consultation would likely have been six weeks rather than four.

The following recommendations were put forward:

To adjourn the SPC meeting for one week. The recommendation was **not carried** by 3 votes to 2, with 1 abstention.

To adjourn the SPC meeting until after the May 2026 local elections and Annual Council. The recommendation was **not carried** by 4 votes to 3, following the Chairman's casting vote.

To extend the consultation to 12 weeks. The recommendation was **not carried** by 4 votes to 3, following the Chairman's casting vote.

The votes on the substantive recommendations as set out in the report were recorded as follows:

The Committee **agreed** to the publication of the East Havering Data Centre Campus Draft Local Development Order, Statement of Reasons and associated documents for consultation by 5 votes to none, with 1 abstention.

The Committee **agreed** to the publication of the East Havering Data Centre Campus Environmental Statement and Non-Technical Summary of the Environmental Statement ("the NTS") for consultation by 4 votes to none, with 1 abstention.

Chairman