

The role of the Stakeholder Panel is to offer specialist advice to support the Councils' assessment of potential development sites as part of our work on the HELAA, particularly with regard to the viability and deliverability of those sites. On this basis, the Panel intentionally has a bias towards technical expertise and insight. As set out in the published [HELAA methodology](#), we specifically sought expressions of interest from individuals currently engaged in the property and development industry in northern Devon. These individuals offer the skills, knowledge and experience to assist the Councils with the site assessment process and allow the Council to understand the potential of individual sites to deliver development.

The number of panel members is deliberately limited to ensure it can operate efficiently and effectively. The panel is supported by a range of expert consultees from local authorities, public bodies and other stakeholder organisations who bring specific skills and local knowledge in relation to the natural environment, heritage, infrastructure and other key areas that the HELAA needs to address. The use of a panel, made up of a limited number of expert 'stakeholders', is recognised as good practice and is widely used to support the HELAA site assessment process in other areas.

It is important to recognise that the Panel is only advisory, and it is ultimately the Councils who conduct the overall site assessments as part of the HELAA. Full details of the panel's role in the HELAA process and the rules relating to conduct of panel members, are set out in the published [HELAA methodology](#). The methodology has been subject to public consultation and has been endorsed by elected representatives from both Councils. The site assessment process set out in the HELAA methodology is in accordance with national planning policy and government planning practice guidance.

The appointment of community representatives to the Panel is intended to complement the role of other Panel members. They will be expected to support, and where necessary moderate, panel discussions to ensure that wider interests and concerns of local communities across the two districts are given due consideration. Community representatives would be expected to provide input into the process across each local planning authority area. In consultation with the relevant senior leadership of the two Councils and following discussion with members of the Joint Planning Policy Committee, it was therefore agreed that one elected member from each Council will be invited to fulfil the role of community representatives on the HELAA stakeholder panel. Given the need for this community representation to consider the wider communities of both Councils, it was deemed appropriate, in consultation with the respective senior leadership teams, for Councillor Ken James (Leader, Torridge District Council) and Councillor Malcom Prowse (Lead Member for Economic Development and Strategic Planning Policy, North Devon Council) to be selected.

We do acknowledge the request from the Town Council to have more localised representation upon the Panel; however, we genuinely do not believe that this is a practical proposition. As noted in your correspondence it clearly would not be practical to have all representatives of local Councils or other relevant community organisations in attendance at each Panel meeting; noting that there are well over 100 Town and Parish Councils and many more local community representative groups across northern Devon and this would be clearly unmanageable.

We note the alternate proposal from the Town Council to invite specific local representatives to the relevant meeting(s) whereby sites in a particular locality would be subject to consideration, however unfortunately we still believe this to be unmanageable. A significant number of sites are subject to consideration at each individual Panel meeting, covering a broad geographical area and spanning multiple parishes. As such, each Panel meeting

would still require many local community representatives in order to provide the necessary coverage. Allied to this, there is the consideration of the practicalities of administering a Panel with such a quantum of representatives and the associated training, dissemination of confidential materials and collation of feedback.

We do recognise the importance of communities having their say on how northern Devon and their individual places and communities develop in the future and work hard to ensure that opportunities are provided to do this as part of the plan-making process. We do not feel however that the Stakeholder Panel offers the most appropriate mechanism to enable this engagement, with its focus being on a technical appraisal of development potential on sites. For the avoidance of doubt, the HELAA does not make decisions on the sites or locations that should be taken forward for development across northern Devon; it is the plan-making process that takes on that role or the determination of individual planning applications.

It is therefore the range of public consultation exercise and community engagement activities in support of the wider preparation of the local plan that will provide the opportunity for wider communities and their representatives to be more involved in influencing the way the area develops and the sites that may be taken forward and proposed for development. We want to ensure that a wide range of voices from our local communities are heard and given the opportunity to help shape the future development of our local areas as we recognise the value they can offer and the impact that decisions can have on their future.

This is reflected in our [Statement of Community Involvement](#) which sets out the opportunities to get involved and the Councils commitment to engage with stakeholders and communities. It is a fundamental aim of the [People and Place project](#) that local communities across northern Devon play a key role in developing shared social, economic and environmental objectives and work with us to identify locations for development which are best suited to help meet these objectives.

We do note the concerns around the results of the HELAA becoming a material consideration in the determination of planning applications and it is correct that this can be the case. I would note however that there are a broad range of other material considerations that can also be taken into account when determining a planning application. Importantly the views and perspectives of community organisations and Town and Parish Councils can also legitimately be a material consideration in such decisions, in circumstances whereby they are raising relevant planning matters, alongside those views of other key statutory and non-statutory consultees.

We are confident that the approach being taken towards the HELAA is fully compliant with national planning policy and associated planning practice guidance. The element of Planning Practice Guidance cited by the Town Council applies to the preparation of a HELAA more widely and not only to the specific operation of the Stakeholder Panel. The Council has sought to ensure that *local organisations; parish and town councils and neighbourhood forums preparing neighbourhood plans* are involved in the preparation of the HELAA. Involvement of these groups has been achieved through the formal opportunity to provide representation and comment on the draft HELAA methodology along with the potential to identify and submit details of potential development sites through the Call for Sites.

Having regard to all of the above, the Council is confident with the approach being taken towards the composition of the Stakeholder Panel and does not feel the need to re-open this matter and revisit its make-up. We recognise that this may not be the outcome that Members of the Town Council may be seeking however we do feel that the approach to the Stakeholder Panel, the HELAA and the wider process of community engagement is correct and appropriate.

Please do not hesitate to get back in touch if you have any further questions or would like further clarification. Equally, if you feel that it would be beneficial, we would be happy to meet with representatives of the Town Council in order to discuss this matter further.

Yours sincerely,



Ian Rowland

Senior Planning Policy Officer

ian.rowland@torridge.gov.uk

01237 428748