

# ***‘Working Together’***

Code of Practice for engaging with local authorities in  
Northampton, Daventry and Towcester

West Northamptonshire Development Corporation

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# 1. Introduction

WNDC is the organisation established by Government to help realise the visions of sustainable regeneration and growth promoted by the local authorities of West Northamptonshire. WNDC's role is to enable major physical development, delivered to the highest achievable standards. This necessitates close working relationships with our local authority customers.

This Code of Practice explains the Corporation's approach to engaging with local authorities within its urban development area. It sets out the principles that WNDC will follow when working with local authorities as well as a number of the key initiatives that will be employed to ensure effective engagement. It is intended that these key principles will be shared by WNDC and the local authorities and that the commitment to effective engagement will be reciprocal, where appropriate.

Effective engagement relates to more than just periodic consultation. It is about fostering close, open and honest working relationships, leading to mutual benefits. Effective engagement increases transparency and understanding between WNDC and its stakeholders. By working seamlessly with local authorities, WNDC's eventual transition to a local authority led vehicle will be smoother and its legacy to West Northamptonshire will be strengthened.

Ultimately, it will help achieve our shared vision for the growth and regeneration of Northampton, Daventry and Towcester, achieving the best possible outcomes for the communities of the area.

## 2. Scope

This document is WNDP's Code of Practice on Engagement with Local Authorities under section 140 of the Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980. It covers engagement between WNDP and all three tiers of the local authority structure in its urban development area (County/District/Parish). For the purposes of this document, engagement is defined as:

*“Maintaining an open and productive dialogue between WNDP and the local authorities at a Councillor and officer level. This includes consultation, collaborative working and relationship building activities.”*

## 3. Benefits

Effective engagement will help deliver a number of benefits, including:

- Having shared priorities: agreeing *what* should be delivered, *where*, *when* and *how* in the growth and regeneration of Northampton, Daventry and Towcester. These priorities will flow from the Local Development Framework for West Northamptonshire, which in turn reflects the democratically agreed Sustainable Community Strategies for each area.
- Transparency: ensuring all decision making is done in a clear and open fashion, following robust consultation.
- Expediting delivery: improving the pace and efficiency of delivery activity by working in partnership.

- Legacy: many of WNDC's key projects will only be partially completed within our lifetime. Lasting partnerships will continue delivery after WNDC's existence.
- Better outcomes for local people: public money will be invested more effectively and deliver high quality places for people to live, work and invest.
- Operational efficiency: sharing resources to deliver at less cost.

## 4. Key Relationships

There is a wide range of groups and individuals with an interest in the delivery of new homes, jobs and investment across WNDC's urban development area. Within this myriad of different interests, the local authorities play the key role.

They represent the local communities within WNDC's area of operation and are the long term custodians of the area. As the planning policy authorities, they create and own the vision for the growth and regeneration of Northampton, Daventry and Towcester. It is WNDC's role to help deliver this vision, so in effect WNDC works for the local authorities. In addition, the local authorities are simultaneously one of WNDC's key delivery partners in their function as a landowner, funder and public service provider.

<b>WNDC's Customers</b>
Northamptonshire County Council, Northampton Borough Council, Daventry District Council, South Northamptonshire Council
<b>Key Stakeholders</b>
Local Parish Councils, Local Residents, Statutory Agencies, Third Sector Groups, Local MPs, Local Councillors, other public sector groups
<b>Delivery Partners</b>
Joint Strategic Planning Committee, Joint Planning Unit, Landowners, Developers, Homes and Communities Agency, Utilities Companies, Infrastructure Providers, Public Service Providers, Northamptonshire Enterprise, Local Authorities
<b>Investors in WNDC</b>
Communities and Local Government, Regional Development Agency, European Union, Private sector investors

## 5. Key Principles

WNDC has identified a number of key principles which underpin this Code of Practice.

1. Engage at all levels
2. Take a consistent and transparent approach to engagement
3. Prioritise existing governance structures
4. Coordinate agencies & bring people together
5. Share capacity and align activity
6. Use the full communications mix
7. Best practice consultation

These principles have been distilled using specific feedback from the local authorities:

- Northampton Borough Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee (2009): This committee examined partnership working between WNDC and NBC, with a view to identifying ways to continue improving the relationship.
- Parish Council discussions (2010): Feedback has been gathered from local parish councils about how WNDC engages with them on an ongoing basis.
- Ipsos Mori, Telephone Research (2009): A total of 28 senior individuals were interviewed from WNDC's key stakeholder groups. This exercise was designed to explore perceptions of the organisation at a strategic level and highlight opportunities for improved engagement and partnership working.
- Face-to-face group sessions (2009): This project focused on working relationships at an operational level. It involved 10 face-to-face sessions between 'teams' of WNDC employees and their counterparts at local authorities, developers and government agencies.

## 6. WNDC Charter

### 1. Engage at all levels

- WNDC recognises the leading role of District and County Councils as the principal local authorities (within the terms of the Local Government Act 1972). However, the Corporation is aware that parish councils play a crucial role in engaging both rural and urban communities at the most local level possible.
- Successful engagement should take place at a strategic and operational level, with both councillors and officers. It should also cover the full local authority construct, from county to parish.
- WNDC will ensure it has sufficient exposure to local authorities at a political level by conducting regular project related meetings with relevant Ward councillors and by participating in the countywide overview and scrutiny function.
- When engaging with members, WNDC is committed to using the existing committees and other democratic arrangements available through the local authorities. It will also follow the Code of Conduct of each local authority, as appropriate. WNDC will seek to liaise with a single point of contact at each local authority so they are aware of all the Corporation's meetings with members.
- It is committed to listening and responding to any county, district or parish councillor with an interest in the growth and regeneration of the area. Where necessary, it will host bespoke forums to engage councillors on a specific issue (e.g a planning application) and will use existing local authority forums where they exist.
- Where appropriate, WNDC will engage with parish councils that are outside of

its urban development area, if they are directly or indirectly affected by any of its activities. It will also actively engage with the umbrella organisations which represent more than one parish.

- At an operational level, WNDC is committed to a regular programme of meetings between its officers and their counterparts at the local authorities. This includes meetings between the Chair and Chief Executive of WNDC and the Leader and Chief Executive of each local authority every two months.

## **2. Take a consistent and transparent approach to engagement**

- At an operational level, WNDC's development control, regeneration and communications teams will liaise effectively on a day-to-day basis with their counterparts at the local authorities.
- It is essential that expectations on both sides of the relationship are well understood and consistently met.
- Bespoke protocols will be used to agree key processes, standards and timings, while they can also be used to monitor the quality and consistency of engagement. Such protocols are being put in place to guide how the planning functions of WNDC and the local authorities interact.
- WNDC is committed to a 'Development Team' approach with the local authorities as it seeks to deliver its key projects. This helps ensure a consistent approach to engagement and enables local authority involvement in decision making, as well as representation on project boards, steering groups and other relevant groups.
- WNDC is considering mechanisms to increase local authority engagement in section 106 agreements and these will be reviewed, consulted upon and agreed through the revision of its Planning Obligations Strategy.

- Members and officers from local authorities will be involved on the ‘inside’ of key initiatives and projects wherever possible, as project board/team members or in similar roles. For planning related activities, WNDC is committed to regular working groups, including the Officers Programme Board for the Joint Core Strategy.

### **3. Prioritise existing governance structures**

- WNDC does not operate in isolation. Northamptonshire has a Sustainable Communities Strategy and a governance structure has been established to preside over this activity. WNDC is committed to taking an active role in the relevant groups under this structure.
- Where possible, WNDC will also engage in the individual Local Strategic Partnerships of the district and borough councils in the area, making an appropriate contribution to their corporate priorities and Sustainable Communities Strategies.
- In addition to this activity, WNDC is committed to participating in other relevant meetings, including full council meetings at a county, district and parish level.

### **4. Coordinate agencies & bring people together**

- One of WNDC’s most important roles is to act as a key interface between the local authorities and Central government. It will reflect the view of the local area when lobbying for resources and representing the area to key government departments, including its sponsor, Communities and Local Government.

- WNDC will act as the central point for key agencies involved in the delivery of regeneration and development across its urban development area.
- Where appropriate, it will be a point of liaison between the local authorities and other key stakeholders involved in the delivery of regeneration and development, including the private sector and statutory agencies such as the Environment Agency and Highways Agency.

## **5. Share capacity and align activity**

- There are a number of opportunities for WNDC and its local authority partners to harmonise their operations and help improve capacity in key areas.
- As well as ensuring consistency and making the best use of public money, this approach will help create suitable legacy arrangements when WNDC no longer exists.
- There are several activities which can assist in this process. This includes holding stakeholder forums to share best practice or information on a key area and encouraging work shadowing between WNDC employees and their counterparts in the local authorities. Where necessary, secondments involving employees of WNDC and the local authorities may also be beneficial.
- Some of WNDC processes and procedures can also be more closely aligned with those of the local authorities and enable a smoother transition to a local authority led delivery vehicle in later years. The Corporation will therefore explore opportunities to remove any major inconsistencies between the ways it operates key functions, including its planning committees.
- WNDC has invested in a shared electronic information resource for internal use. This resource can also be used as a project management/information portal that can be accessed and contributed to by its external partners. The potential of this system for joint working will be explored by WNDC and all its

delivery partners, particularly the local authorities.

## **6. Use the full communications mix**

- It is recognised that WNDC will be unable to sufficiently engage the full breadth of local council members through meetings alone. It will therefore enhance its corporate communications activity to make it as easy as possible for people to engage with WNDC and remain informed of its operations.
- WNDC is committed to using all available channels of communication at its disposal, including the local media, electronic newsletters, bespoke events, the social media (e.g twitter) and its corporate website, which has been re-designed to make it more accessible. All information and communications initiatives will be delivered to the highest standards of accessibility, catering for people of all abilities, and using plain English.

## **7. Best practice consultation**

- As part of its full engagement with local authorities, WNDC will adopt best practice process and procedures when consulting with the authorities on its delivery priorities, relevant planning applications, and strategic documents.
- Local authorities will be involved in the earliest possible instance, and will be given private briefings prior to public consultation exercises.
- WNDC commits itself to using the democratic institutions and Statements of Community Involvement, consultation tool kits and other adopted practices of the individual local authorities when engaging with the wider community.
- This includes the Northamptonshire Partnership Principles – a set of common

guidelines for use by public sector agencies in Northamptonshire for engagement with communities and parish partnerships.