How to comment on the Core Strategy and related consultation documents

The single most important thing you can do is comment on the council website by responding to the online consultation documents. It's not as hard as it looks using these simple instructions. Remember to comment on the at least the Emerging Core Strategy and Land for Housing Outside Urban Areas Document.

1. Go to the following website http://consult.welhat.gov.uk/portal/ and register by clicking the Login/Register button, top right:

2. You must enter a valid email address.
3. Once logged in you will see the following:

4. These are the six documents that you can comment on. As an example click on the top entry 'Emerging Core Strategy'. Scroll down and you will the following:
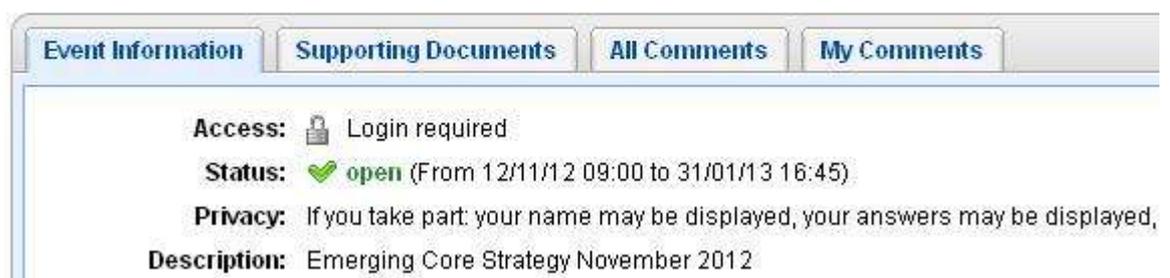
5. Here you can do several things:

    a) Clicking on the Supporting Documents tab allows you to see all the documents that are referenced in the doc you are currently in, which is Core Strategy in this case.

    b) Clicking on All Comments allows you to read the comments from anybody else, provided the council have seen fit to process them.

    c) Clicking on My Comments allows you to see the comment you have made on this document.

    Clicking on **Supporting Documents** shows the further list of documents as below:

    The Statement of community involvement is also a good place to comment on how well you think the council engages with residents and takes on board their views.

6. Above the table you can also see the following link button. Click on it and you are ready to start reading and commenting:

7. On the left hand side you will see a menu. You can comment on any or all of the headings listed by clicking on them.

8. For example: Click on **15 Welwyn Garden City** (**Click the text for the link**)

9. You can now read and comment on the text in sections 15.1 to 15.34, as well as Core Strategy Policies CS 13 CS14 CS15.

10. To add your own comments click the **Add Comments** box on the right at the appropriate place (text section or CS policy section in green) as below:

   Note: You might want to click on **View Comments** first to see what others have said.

11. Once in the blue coloured Add Comments section you are faced with two check boxes:

   Note: Do not leave the checkbox blank as this may invalidate your comment.

12. Most people will want to click the 'No, object' checkbox. **Do not forget to do this!**

13. You can then type your reason for objecting in the text window below the check box.
14. You will then be asked:

15. Most of the time you will probably want to click Yes.
16. The next text box says "If you are suggesting a change, please state what it is"

This can be a problem if you have commented on several numbered sections in the same page. If it is simple to add your suggested change do so, however as you are not a planning professional you may not have all the answers. The council can consider your comment in point 11 and consult the appropriate professionals in order to find options and solutions that could be applied to your comment text. We residents cannot provide ALL the answers.

Also, if you don't type in the box at all your comment will still register, it is not mandatory.

Finally, click the 'Next' button to go to the submission screen, which will ask you if you want to fill out the feedback form for the section you have just commented on. If you click on the Yes option you can make a further comment.

If you see a problem with how the section was worded, or feel that something was omitted you can add it here under "What do you think we can do to improve our consultation?" This option appears on every comment you make, you could draft a general statement of your own, which could be pasted into every comment's feedback form. If you're comfortable with cut and paste!

17. Now you have two options:

    a) Click Save as draft in the system (not on your PC) to save your comment for future editing.
    b) Click Submit to send it. Once submitted you cannot change it.

18. Once submitted you will see the following:

Note that the system will allow you to submit a completely blank comment and will not warn you that no text has been entered, unlike most online forms elsewhere on the internet. **Be alert to this.**

A good precaution is to click on the PDF icon button and save a copy of your comment on your own PC the same way you would save any other PDF file. Note; to read PDF files you need free software such as Adobe Reader or Foxit Reader.

Doing this has two benefits, you can verify your comments, and you have a record that you sent them in case they never appear as comments on the consultation website. If they don't appear at all you should complain to WHBC and publicise the fact.

Once you have done this your comment entry is complete!

19. Whenever you are logged in you will see the My Account box, clicking on it gives you the following:

Here you can see how many comments you've created and what their status is. The number in the brackets is the tally of the comments in that category.
Click on any category to review them. This is also how you can come back later to look at your draft comments from earlier sessions.

Note: An Inadmissible comment is defined as

"Comments that have been marked as Inadmissible have been deemed not appropriate or relevant for use against the relevant consultation. An e-mail will be sent to you detailing the reasons why your comment has been marked as Inadmissible. Please note that inadmissible comments will not become publicly viewable at any point.

*Any inadmissible comments will also appear in the **Inadmissible** section of your personal area showing you all comments that you have submitted that have been marked as Inadmissible."*

Comments go from Submitted status to be processed by council staff. If they are happy with the contents it will be marked as processed and appear on the website with the others. If they don't approve of your comment for some reason they will mark it as inadmissible and you will get an email telling you so.

BIG NOTE: Comments seem very slow to appear on the consultation website. They only began to appear after some prompting from residents to council staff. The last time the Core Strategy was reviewed in 2009 comments appeared quickly, this time round it seems to be taking considerably longer for council staff to process comments. If your comments are not being processed in a timely fashion you could complain to the Planning Office at: planningpolicy@welhat.gov.uk

Seeing other people's comments can be useful and is how the consultation software is intended to work. It also shows WHBC is operating in a transparent and participatory manner.

20. Emails:

You will get emails from the system every time there is a change in status of one of your comments. You can change when they are sent by clicking on the My Details text shown above. In this screen you can choose preferences for how you get email:

Immediately is a good option as if you select this option you'll get a confirmation email a few seconds or minutes after submitting your comment. Note that you can send multiple comments on any section of the document.

Note that this guide focuses on the Core Strategy document. Commenting on the **Land for Housing Outside Urban Areas** document is equally important. The process for commenting on this is exactly the same, but it offers more details about the justification and proposal for Panshanger. The hardcopy of this document is the red covered 28 page glossy document; it should also be freely available from council outlets.

The Draft Infrastructure Delivery plan is also very similar to comment on.

The remaining two:

Sustainability Appraisal of the Emerging Core Strategy

Habitats Regulations Assessment of the Emerging Core Strategy

Do not document wording alongside the comments, the document has to be downloaded first and opened separately. You then have to cross reference this by section number to the Add a Comment page on the consultation website. This makes for a more time consuming and longwinded operation and you have to wonder why it was designed this way?

Remember: The more comments there are, the more notice they will be compelled to take of local people. The new Localism Act should be on our side!

Note: All of these documents are available in paper form, but the larger ones are charged for by WHBC. The 190 page Core Strategy document costs £5.50 for residents. You have to wonder how they can claim to have made this consultation accessible to all; you need computer skills or money in order to participate, but that's a comment you may wish to make in the Statement of Community Involvement document which can also be found here:

http://consult.welhat.gov.uk/portal/planning_policy/local_plan_consultation_november_2012/sci2012?pointId=2316370

That's all there is to it...simples.

Happy commenting!