

Duty to cooperate response from the Western Berkshire housing market area authorities to Slough Borough Council

1.0 The SHMA and Housing Market Areas

1.1 The “Berkshire (including South Bucks) Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2016” (hereafter referred to as the Berkshire SHMA) was jointly commissioned by the six Berkshire authorities. In terms of “Housing Market Areas” (HMAs) the Berkshire SHMA states at paragraph 5:

“Using a best fit to local authority boundaries, there is strong evidence to support definition of two separate HMAs containing the Berkshire authorities and South Bucks – a Western Berkshire HMA covering Bracknell Forest, Wokingham Borough, Reading Borough and West Berkshire; and an Eastern Berks and South Bucks HMA comprising Slough Borough and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM) together with South Bucks”.

1.2 In addition, paragraph 6 states:

“There is also a significant level of self-containment within both HMAs with the Eastern Berks & South Bucks area having a lower level due to its proximity to London and the volume of people moving to and from the capital.”

2.0 The Western Berkshire Housing Market Area

2.1 The six Berkshire authorities support the findings of the Berkshire SHMA and are preparing their local plans in line with these findings, i.e. using the two separate HMAs identified.

2.2 The authorities within the Western Berkshire HMA have produced an additional, non-statutory, document, “*The West of Berkshire Spatial Planning Framework*”, which is clear evidence of joint working within the defined HMA. It demonstrates that, notwithstanding the different constraints discussed below which each authority must consider as part of the process; Bracknell Forest, Reading, West Berkshire and Wokingham will work collectively and meet the Western Berkshire HMA’s identified housing needs.

3.0 Bracknell Forest

3.1 The north/north eastern area of the Borough (approx. 35%) forms part of the London Metropolitan Green Belt in which development is strictly controlled. Small areas of land in the north eastern part of the Borough also fall within the Windsor Forest and Great Park Special Area of Conservation and an extensive area of land in the south/south eastern area of the Borough falls within the Thames Basin Heath Special Protection Area (SPA) (1,300 hectares). This means that there are severe restrictions on any net increase in dwellings, up to 7km from the boundary of the SPA.

3.2 Further constraints to development include areas subject to flooding (fluvial, surface water and groundwater issues), the need to respect heritage assets, minimise impacts on biodiversity and the capacity of existing infrastructure.

3.3 Following an assessment of sites submitted for consideration for future development, a Draft Bracknell Forest Local Plan was published for consultation during February/March 2018. Whilst the document identifies possible sites to meet the local housing need, the process has proved challenging due to the range of constraints limiting development potential. The capacity of sites is yet to be finalised in the light of comments received and new evidence. It appears that it will not be possible to meet the need for employment development, as set out in the Central Berkshire Economic Development Needs Assessment and that discussions on dealing with the shortfall will need to continue with other authorities in the Central Berkshire Functional Economic Market Area (FEMA).

4.0 Reading

4.1 Reading, like Slough, is a geographically small authority forming the core of a contiguous urban area that extends beyond the local authority boundary. The area is almost entirely built up, and what little undeveloped land exists is largely at high risk of flooding.

4.2 In terms of housing, Reading is in a similar position to Slough, in that it cannot meet its full objectively assessed need within its boundaries, albeit that the scale of Reading's shortfall is likely to be significantly lower than Slough's. A thorough assessment of the capacity to meet needs in Reading has been undertaken in a Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment, and informed the Draft Local Plan, which comes to the conclusion that there is a shortfall of 943 dwellings to 2036, which will need to be accommodated elsewhere. Reading Borough Council made a formal request to West Berkshire District Council and Wokingham Borough Council to consider accommodating this shortfall in January 2017, and discussions across the Western Berkshire HMA about this issue are still ongoing.

4.3 In terms of employment development, Reading has been able to identify broadly sufficient land to meet its own significant industrial and warehouse needs as set out in the Central Berkshire Economic Development Needs Assessment, but no capacity to exceed these needs has been identified. For offices, on current figures, Reading may exceed identified needs, due largely to the high number of existing planning permissions. It is conceivable that this could contribute to making up a shortfall elsewhere, but the priority in that case would be any unmet needs within the Central Berkshire FEMA which also contains Wokingham, Bracknell Forest and RBWM, in line with the principles of planning for functional areas.

5.0 West Berkshire

5.1 West Berkshire lies on the western fringe of the South East Region. It makes up over half of the geographical area of the county of Berkshire and is primarily a rural district. Just under three quarters of the District (74%) forms part of The North Wessex Downs Area of

Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), Within the AONB, housing is focused on meeting identified local needs in accordance with government policy.

5.2 The urban area in the east of the District is constrained by the immediately adjacent AONB and by extensive areas of floodplain. There are constraints in the East Kennet Valley area associated with the presence of Atomic Weapons Establishments at Aldermaston and Burghfield. Further constraints to development include those associated with infrastructure provision, areas subject to flooding and the need to respect the historic environment, including a number of Historic Parks and Gardens and the area to the west of Newbury which is a designated Historic Battlefield.

5.3 Work on the local plan review has commenced and through the local plan process, West Berkshire will seek to meet its identified housing need and employment need within its borders.

6.0 Wokingham

6.1 Wokingham is a small authority situated on the edge of Reading and comprises of a number of settlements intermixed with surrounding countryside and linked by a largely rural road network. High levels of traffic towards Reading, Basingstoke and London pass through the borough. The built up areas of Woodley, Earley and Winnersh are contiguous with Reading.

6.2 The northern area of the Wokingham Borough (approx. 16%) forms part of the London Metropolitan Green Belt in which development is strictly controlled. The borough is also affected by flooding with the River Thames to the north, the rivers Loddon and Blackwater flowing through the centre and a number of other brooks.

6.3 The Burghfield Atomic Weapons Establishment is situated beyond the borough's western boundary (within West Berkshire Council). The Detailed Emergency Planning Zone extends into Wokingham Borough with further 5km and 7km consultation zone extending further.

6.4 The Thames Basin Heath Special Protection Area (TBH SPA) spreads across a number of local authorities within the counties of Surrey, Hampshire and Berkshire. Whilst Wokingham Borough does not include any of the TBH SPA itself, the borough's main settlements lie within the 5km and 7km buffer zones around the heaths. This means that there are severe restrictions on any net increase in dwellings, up to 7km from the boundary of the SPA.

6.5 Work on the new local plan has commenced. Wokingham Borough has been assessed as having the highest housing need within the Western Berkshire HMA. Providing for development needs whilst retaining the separate identity of settlements and dealing with existing traffic congestion and potential new traffic presents a considerable challenge.

7.0 Slough Borough Council's position

7.1 The Western Berkshire HMA authorities understand that Slough Borough Council, which is located within the Eastern Berkshire HMA, has looked at various options for trying to accommodate its housing need, as identified in the SHMA, including:

- intensifying development in the town centre,
- releasing all Green Belt sites, and
- estate renewal.

Notwithstanding this the Western Berkshire HMA authorities accept that Slough Borough Council will still struggle to meet its housing needs.

8.0 The Western Berkshire HMA authorities' position

8.1 The Western Berkshire HMA authorities note that Slough's local plan 'Issues and Options' document refers to a possible northern expansion into South Bucks and a southern expansion (involving small sites) into the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM).

8.2 Given that RBWM and part of South Bucks form the Eastern Berkshire HMA together with Slough; the Western Berkshire HMA authorities support this approach. Areas adjacent to the urban area of Slough and within easy reach of Slough town centre and its transport links clearly have significantly greater potential to meet Slough's housing needs than the Western Berkshire HMA where the functional relationship with Slough is far less clear.

8.3 Furthermore, given the findings of the Berkshire SHMA and the constraints which each of the authorities in the Western Berkshire HMA must consider; the authorities do not consider that it would be appropriate for any of Slough's unmet need to be located within the Western Berkshire HMA.