

TITLE	Future Housing Consultation
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	The Executive on 30 May 2019
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD MEMBER	Leader of the Council

PURPOSE OF REPORT (INC STRATEGIC OUTCOMES)

To approve a public consultation on future housing in Wokingham Borough.

RECOMMENDATION

That Executive:

- 1) approve the future housing consultation, in the form set out in paragraph 3.1;
- 2) authorise a supplementary estimate of £45,000 - £80,000 to fund the consultation;
- 3) authorise the Director of Corporate Services and Director Locality and Customer Services, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to agree minor amendments, if necessary, prior to consultation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report seeks approval from Executive to commence a consultation seeking residents' opinion on the Government's housing requirement for Wokingham Borough.

Through our engagement with residents, residents have expressed concern regarding the housing development Wokingham Borough is being asked to accommodate by Government.

The Government's National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires local authorities to prepare Local Plans informed by a local housing needs assessment, calculated using a standard method. The housing need figure for Wokingham Borough has varied from 752 dwellings per annum (dpa) to 876 dwellings per annum, and some planning inspectors have suggested higher figures are appropriate. Local housing need currently calculates as 804 dwellings per annum.

This scale of requirement exceeds what Wokingham Borough has been required to accommodate previously. It is also 40-50% higher than the average growth in the number of households projected by the Office for National Statistics.

The Core Strategy sets out the council's current approach to growth, which is fully meeting the defined housing needs of Wokingham Borough. This approach enables sustainable, infrastructure rich new development, including new roads, schools and significant affordable housing provision. Despite this delivery, planning appeals have been allowed for developments outside the areas where development is planned. This fundamentally undermines the plan-led system established by the Core Strategy Local Plan, and forces communities to accept additional development that has not been planned for.

This report recommends a consultation to gauge residents' opinion on the Government's housing requirement by asking:

Do you support the government imposed housing numbers?

In order to provide a robust evidence base to support WBC's case to Government, the consultation will:

- Be easy to complete and well-publicised in order to encourage a high response rate
- Safeguard against abuse of the process through measures to reduce risk of multiple responses from individuals

It is recommended to achieve this by:

- An advanced publicity campaign to increase awareness of the consultation and to notify residents that they will receive a consultation post card in the post.
- Postcards or letter with freepost response provided to be sent directly to all households in the borough with a short explanation of the issue and the question being asked. The post card would include the web address with more information and an online survey for residents to submit their response. If a freepost option is included, this would be included in the letter sent to all households.
- Each postcard or letter would a unique reference code (URC) that residents can use when submitting responses online.
- The online survey will require respondents to input either the URC or their postal address. This will allow more than one residents from a household to take part in the consultation while allowing WBC the opportunity to investigate incidents of potential multiple responses from individuals.
- Due to timing and the additional cost implications, responses will be submitted through an online survey. However, residents will also be able to contact the council by phone in order for a hard copy of the form to be sent out.

BACKGROUND

1.1 Through our engagement with residents, residents have expressed concern regarding the housing development Wokingham Borough is being asked to accommodate by Government.

1.2 Our residents' concern can be split into two primary issues:

1. The overall amount of housing being required; and
2. The allowing of developments which are contrary to our planning strategy by Government Planning Inspectors.

Analysis of Issues

2.1 As a matter of statute, local authorities must prepare a Local Plan which sets out planning policies for the management of development. Amongst a wide range of issues, the Local Plan must set out the approach to housing.

2.2 Local Plans must be review and updated so they remain up to date. Where Local Plans are older, planning inspectors may give little or no weight to its policies. Our Core Strategy Local Plan was adopted in 2010 with additional policies adopted in 2014. Being more than five years since its adoption, some policies have been regarded by some (but not all) planning inspectors as out of date; a position which we are challenging.

Overall amount of housing

2.3 The Government's planning policy is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This requires a Local Plan to be informed by a local housing needs assessment. This was previously prepared using an Objectively Assessed Need (OAN) assessment but more recently the Government has introduced a simple 'standard methodology'. Prior to these approaches, local plans were prepared to accord with a regional planning strategy which set housing requirements for each local authority.

2.4 Using the standard method, the local housing need for Wokingham Borough calculates at 804 dwellings per annum. This figure is recalculated each year meaning there is a high degree of uncertainty as to how much housing should be planned for. Over the last few years, the local housing need for Wokingham Borough has varied between 752 and 876 dwellings per annum; and some planning inspectors have suggested higher figures are appropriate. The housing requirement set out in our Core Strategy Local Plan s 662 dwellings per annum on average however under the NPPF regard must currently be had to the standard method.

2,5 The outcome of the standard method is substantially higher than the projected growth households. National projections of household growth prepared by the Office for National Statistics predict an average of around 550 new households forming each year in Wokingham Borough. The standard method thereby requires an uplift over the demographic starting point of 40-50%; currently arriving at the 804 figure.

2.6 Government policy on housebuilding is to deliver 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s. The standard method is designed to drive this level, however in doing so it takes no account of local context or the strategic impacts of doing so.

2.7 The Government have indicated they will make further changes to how housing need should be calculated. Currently no details are available.

Unplanned developments

2.8 As an organisation, Wokingham Borough Council understands and supports the need to provide homes and the Government's desire to speed up delivery. That is why we are a proactive planning authority, seeking to shape future development through a carefully managed approach.

2.9 Our approach is enabling the delivery of sustainable, infrastructure rich new communities including £500m+ investments in new primary and secondary schools; new strategic roads, new neighbourhood and district centres, new and enhanced sports hubs, parkland and improvements to public transport, as well as over 30% affordable housing (valued at almost £500m also).

2.10 The strategy established by our Core Strategy Local Plan is working to fully meet the defined housing needs of Wokingham Borough. There should be no doubt that we have made tough choices regarding development and have placed resources towards doing our part in delivering new homes. Our last assessment found the deliverable housing land supply to be 6.83 years (5 years is required by Government policy) and performance against the new Housing Delivery Test was 157%.

2.11 Notwithstanding this record in delivery, planning appeals have been allowed for developments in locations which are outside areas where development is planned. In effect, communities are having to accept additional development coming forward in an unplanned manner. It is not acceptable for the plan-led system to be undermined in this way.

2.12 Given that the strategy established by our Core Strategy Local Plan is meeting the past and future requirements set out in the Government's NPPF, including the level of housing need calculated by the standard method, our planning policies should be found up-to-date and given full weight in decisions. Public interest is clearly engaged here, as residents are being asked to accommodate very large amounts of new housing and the plans to which they have contributed should be given a great deal of respect.

Recommended consultation

3.1 To fully gauge the opinion of residents, this report recommends a dedicated consultation on future housing delivery. The proposed question is:

Do you support the government imposed housing numbers?

Consultation process

3.2 A postcard or letter with freepost response included will be sent to every household in the borough setting out the background and purpose of the consultation. This would provide a link to a website with the online survey that asks the above question, alongside a unique identifying number that will need to be entered when completing the survey. This will allow a more detailed understanding of responses from each part of the borough. The freepost option would provide an opportunity for residents to provide a hard copy response.

3.3 The consultation will take place in summer 2019, with exact dates to be confirmed.

3.4 . The views expressed through the consultation will help us engage with the Government to get them to be more reasonable regarding expected development levels going forward.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe financial challenges over the coming years as a result of the austerity measures implemented by the Government and subsequent reductions to public sector funding. It is estimated that Wokingham Borough Council will be required to make budget reductions in excess of £20m over the next three years and all Executive decisions should be made in this context.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£45-80k	No. £45-80k	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	n/a	n/a
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	n/a	n/a

Other Financial Information

None

Stakeholder Considerations and Consultation

Consultation will be undertaken in summer 2019, with exact dates to be confirmed. A postcard or letter will be sent to each household in the borough setting out the background to the consultation, including a website address where the survey can be completed.

Resourcing and Timeline for Next Steps

The consultation will be undertaken in summer 2019, with the exact dates to be confirmed. There is anticipated to be sufficient resource to prepare the consultation.

Timeline for Review and Evaluation

Once the consultation has closed responses will be reviewed in order to inform the future approach with government.

List of Background Papers

None

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