

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 15 JANUARY 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.25 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batth, UllaKarin Clark, Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Pauline Jorgensen, Charles Margetts, Gregor Murray and Wayne Smith

Other Councillors Present

Rachel Bishop-Firth
Gary Cowan
Paul Fishwick
Clive Jones
Sarah Kerr
Adrian Mather
Andrew Mickleburgh
Barrie Patman
Malcolm Richards
Imogen Shepherd-DuBey
Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey
Caroline Smith

66. APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Stuart Munro.

67. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

68. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited members of the public to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

68.1 Dennis Goodlad asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

I want to understand the decision making process leading to the proposal for 250 houses to be built at Winnersh Farms. The documentation for tonight's meeting states that sites listed "have been discussed with and are preferred by the relevant Town and Parish Council". The Parish Councillors at Winnersh (3 of whom are also Members of Wokingham Borough Council) are adamant that they recommended against any development at Winnersh Farm. Indeed as recently as February 2019, less than 12 months ago, Winnersh Parish Council submitted a comprehensive list of objections to the last Planning Application to be submitted for development of this land. This is a substantial disconnect. My question is: Who has made the decision to include Winnersh Farm in the list of sites in the local plan update and why was the decision made after all previous planning applications were refused for significant and valid non-compliance with adopted Planning Policies?

Answer

I accept that the Parish Council did not support the residential development at Winnersh Farm in our discussions with them in November 2017. The reasons put forward included flooding, access and noise.

The proposed allocation now includes a wider area than what was discussed with the Parish Council. The wider area presents an opportunity to provide a well-designed development which addresses the issues of access and does not require building on that area that floods. We are also confident that the issues of noise can be suitably addressed.

With part of the wider area being owned by the Council this site is an opportunity to deliver increased numbers of affordable homes to support those who cannot access suitable housing elsewhere.

In terms of process, all of the proposed allocations in the recommended Draft Plan were discussed and agreed by a cross party Planning and Transport Member Working Group.

The recommended consultation provides an opportunity for residents and others to let us know whether they agree or disagree with our proposals.

Supplementary Question

Much has been said about the Council wanting to take back control of the planning process from developers and that is fine; I totally agree with that. However it seems that that ethos does not apply to Winnersh. In reality it seems that developers such as Taylor Wimpey, for instance, seem to call the shots.

The Council has not followed their own procedures as laid out in the documentation. I ask tonight whether the Council will reject this flawed plan and commission an independent and external investigation into the probity of this decision to build 250 houses at Winnersh Farm.

Supplementary Answer

As I said you will have an opportunity through the consultation process. This tonight is only to take us to an agreement to go to the consultation process and through that process you, along with the Ward Members, along with the Parish Council, will have the opportunity to feed all that information back to us.

68.2 Anthony Pollock asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

Wokingham Borough Council's track record of winning planning appeals in Shinfield South is very poor and has resulted in the 2010 local plan number of 2,500 houses increasing to over 4,000. How do you propose to protect the sites owned by the University of Reading and others within Spencer's Wood and Shinfield from being approved for development at future planning appeals?

Answer

There is no hiding that changes to the Government planning policy have unnecessarily and unacceptably undermined our local planning decision making. We continue to put considerable resources into defending our decisions and I am glad to say that we have

won the majority of appeals involving developments in unplanned locations over the last few years.

In November this Council approved a £630,000 'fighting fund' to help defend our decisions against speculative developers. For the current public inquiry at Cutbush Lane, Shinfield we have employed Neil Cameron QC, one of the Country's top barristers to present our case.

As you know, the main defence against unplanned development is to have a local plan which ensures that our planning policies continue to be effective and demonstrates that we meet our planning development needs. The recommended Draft Plan consultation is a vital step to achieving this.

Without effective planning policies, there would be no real control or influence over the new housing and what type of development will take place. This is because our position to defend appeals becomes untenable.

Supplementary Question

Your answer reminds me of when I sat where you are today approving the 2010 Local Plan and I approved it on the basis that there was a limit in my ward of 2,500 houses. The system has not delivered and I am concerned. What guarantee does the residents of the area where I live, and also where all of you live? Where is the defence from Government and from yourselves for residents because as I said in my question from your track record I do not see you winning 50% in Shinfield for sure. The track record and Government policy leads me to be concerned, and you know this as I have said it to all of you, that we will end up with Grazeley plus 10,000 houses because you have allowed Grazeley to go ahead. They will say tick the box thank you very much and the other developers and land owners in Twyford or in Arborfield or Barkham will make good arguments at the public inquiry and the Inspector will look at his numbers and say how many can I get to the 300,000 a year. Oh I can get a bit more – tick box thank you very much.

My concern and my question to you is do not think that by approving Grazeley that actually you do a disservice to the Borough because you actually open the door to extra housing in all of your wards because the Government want to build houses and there is nothing in the last five years that I have seen that really protects this Council or the residents from excessive housing anywhere.

How are you going to protect us given that you have not managed to do it in the last five years?

Supplementary Answer

I think there is a lot there. If you look at the draft Plan there is a specific note around what we need to do for Shinfield, Three Mile Cross and Spencer's Wood around a buffer zone to no development.

I think the big point will be at Grazeley and how that development is managed. I do not think it can be conventionally managed how other sites have been managed. I know we have got good and bad examples. I would say Arborfield is a great example. I would say some of our other SDLs are not because as you know you only need a big land owner or a Parish Council working against a previous local plan and it can go against you. You know better than me what has happened and that is why we have got the problems in Cutbush Lane.

I think having Grazeley and taking it down the route of a Council led or a development led approach may help us in making sure that we do not have these dips and there are people in the room tonight that know in the past the five year land supply has been our Achilles heel. That is now moving away and it is no longer our Achilles heel it is the fact that what has recently come out in one of the Inspector's report is that if you do not have a Local Plan, that is within the last five years, it is deemed that you do not have a Plan. So that is now the latest argument. So by not having a Plan we are putting this Borough at risk.

I have had many conversations with you and I do take on board all of your points. We are going to have to fight and that is why this Council spent the extra money getting the best of the best to defend our unplanned development through appeal.

68.3 David Lee asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

You are proposing some 15,000 houses in Grazeley to meet the required housing numbers. This should, as you have said, provide for the excessive housing imposed on our region by central Government for quite a few years to come.

However as a Borough we have seen large sites allocated in the last plan being slow at delivery so how will you ensure that such a large site as Grazeley with the huge infrastructure required does not present the same problems. Should you split it into smaller packages to ensure you meet the five year land supply problems experienced in the past?

Answer

We together with West Berkshire Council and Reading Borough Council have submitted a bid to the Housing Infrastructure Fund to help accelerate the delivery of the recommended Grazeley garden market allocation. The joint bid is key to the comprehensive approach to governance, design, planning and delivery.

In order to specifically address the risk of deliverability, as you were referring to, we are considering whether a delivery model such as a Locally Led New Town Development Corporation would be a good fit for the Grazeley garden town proposal. A Development Corporation is a delivery model and potentially puts the control of development and speed of delivery in the hands of the Council through enhanced land assembly, investment, development and planning powers. It is a model that can adapt more easily to ensure the continuous supply of new housing.

A successful outcome of the joint bid will enable the provision of upfront infrastructure, one of the principal messages we have had from residents, and remove one of the key early costs of delivery from the development industry. The upfront provision of primary infrastructure will open up the entire site, maximising the delivery area and enabling accelerated development.

As you say we would expect delivery to be, or could be, through smaller packages of land all conforming to the overall strategic vision and supporting the master planning. One of these packages could be Council owned land.

Separate to the recommended consultation we are continuing to have dialogue with the Government through the Garden Settlement Programme and the HIF bid with a view to securing freedoms and flexibilities in recognition of the housing delivery and its proposals at Grazeley.

Supplementary Comment

I don't really have a supplementary question but I would urge you please that the Government is giving you a green light. It does not matter what the landowner says you can impose smaller development sites to ensure you meet that 5 year land supply. If you do not with absolute certainty you will fall into the same elephant trap that we have done with South Wokingham and with North Wokingham. So please look at it very seriously. It is the answer to the problems that we will otherwise experience.

68.4 Jackie Rance asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

What will be the benefit of the proposed Grazeley development of 15,000 houses be to the current and future residents of Shinfield South?

Answer

As you know it is 15,000 across West Berkshire, Reading and Wokingham.

The recommended creation of the Grazeley garden town offers the opportunity to create a self-contained, infrastructure rich new community limiting the need to travel by car for everyday journeys, with rail links to Reading and Basingstoke, and a dedicated public transport route into Reading, providing a viable alternative to the car. This meets our climate change emergency agenda and is consistent with the direction of our wellbeing strategy.

A successful outcome of the bid to the Housing Infrastructure Fund will enable the upfront delivery of a wide range of infrastructure projects including measures designed to mitigate the traffic issues and effects.

The delivery of the garden town at Grazeley supplements our current strategic developments, reducing or eliminating the need for large scale development on the edge of other towns and villages, including those in the Shinfield Parish, allowing the new and expanded communities to fully form and mature.

It will also provide, as I mentioned earlier, the 5,000 affordable homes to support those who cannot access suitable housing elsewhere.

Due to the proximity of Grazeley to the current strategic development in Shinfield Parish, the recommended approach expressly seeks to protect the area from larger further development in this area. Furthermore residents of Shinfield should benefit from the transport infrastructure and the community facilities as part of the large scale Grazeley development which will also provide improved access via pedestrian, cycle and bus links across the A33. These facilities will include a new railway station, at least one new secondary school, a health hub, indoor and outdoor leisure facilities, community buildings, public parks and children's play areas.

Supplementary Question

How much infrastructure spending will take place outside the boundary of the proposed Grazeley development to alleviate the additional traffic impact of the Grazeley development on the residents of Shinfield South?

Supplementary Answer

At this moment in time the proposed infrastructure early or rich, as you refer to it, is around £252m. There is a further £600m that will come from CIL receipts for the whole of that area and there will obviously need to be masterplanning to work through the links. I have spoken at a very high level about links across the A33, links into Green Park etc, etc. There will need to be a lot of traffic modelling.

I fully understand the issues on the A33 and I fully understand the issues of Shinfield and that is all the area that we are going to have to make sure they improve the lives for those people.

68.5 Laura Edmonds had asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question which was asked by Jonathan Pollock in her absence:

Question

This local plan update proposal is based on large development sites. The experience with all of the current Strategic Development Locations since 2010 is that the houses are delivered late. Does this plan therefore imply that many of the 300 rejected sites will be approved by the Planning Inspectorate to compensate for the delays in delivering the houses identified in the local plan update?

Answer

I believe the recommended strategy is the right one.

Our four existing Strategic Development Locations will continue to make a significant contribution to meeting the housing needs in the new plan. The vast majority of the proposed housing on the SDLs are under construction and have planning permission.

Through consultations, respondents have clear preferences for development needs to be met through large scale developments, where infrastructure can be planned, funded and provided alongside. That is why the recommended strategy proposes the creation of a garden town at Grazeley.

We have greater choice over potential delivery models for the Grazeley garden town proposal than compared to what we do for the existing SDLs. For example we are considering, and I mentioned this earlier, whether a delivery model such as a Locally Led New Town Development Corporation would be a good fit for Grazeley garden town proposal. A Development Corporation is a delivery model that potentially puts control of the development and speed of delivery in the hands of the Councils through enhanced land assembly, investment, development and planning powers. It is a model that can adapt more easily and ensure a continuous supply of new housing.

We, together with West Berkshire and Reading Borough Councils, have submitted a bid to the Housing Infrastructure Fund to help unlock and accelerate the delivery of the recommended Grazeley town allocation. The joint bid will help us increase the volume

and rate of housebuilding through an early investment in primary infrastructure, opening up the site and unlocking suitable development.

The other proposed allocations are a mix of size and types of sites that are spread across the whole Borough.

68.6 Martin Haitham Taylor asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

Does this Council and its Executive believe in transparency, democracy and accountability?

I was dismayed to read about the recommendations as set out in this report on Page Five. Recommendations Three and Four, if implemented as written, set out that this Executive will only agree that 'minor changes' will be taken forward into the final Local Plan, following this consultation. The recommendations also set out that the decision on these 'minor changes' ('minor' is not defined) will be a delegated decision. This means that any amendments will not be brought back before the Executive for further scrutiny. Therefore, how can this consultation be meaningful, and will the public not simply conclude that this exercise is a total charade? Furthermore, how can any future amendments made to this plan have democratic legitimacy, when they are signed off behind closed doors?

Answer

Unfortunately I think Martin you have misunderstood the recommendations and I can assure you that decisions on the Local Plan will be transparent.

The delegation of minor changes to the Director of Locality and Customer Services, in consultation with the Lead Member of Planning, is standard practice in preparing for a consultation and we are talking about a consultation not a Plan.

The delegation solely relates to the documentation for the consultation. It does not relate to, or impact on, future decisions of the Council or the Executive.

Following this consultation we will need to reflect whether the changes are required. It will be for the future meetings of the Executive and Council to consider these and approve the plan to be consulted on at the next stage.

The Local Development Scheme is simply the document that sets out the programme for reviewing the local plan. We are required to produce this and keep it up-to-date so people are able to understand when consultations are likely to occur.

Supplementary Question

If following the consultation support emerges for some additional new housing for example affordable housing to be built on green belt would this Council consider amending the current planning conditions as contained in the Local Plan draft?

Supplementary Answer

The purpose of a consultation is to hear the views of the people you are consulting and yes.

69. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited Members to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

69.1 Gary Cowan asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

The report states and I quote “Analysis of the housing market clearly shows a number of failings with the way the Government has calculated the minimum number of homes a Council must plan for. A case will be advanced to demonstrate exceptional circumstances exist to deviate from the normal application of this Government planning policy reducing the requirement to 769.2 dwellings per annum. We will review and adjust this figure downwards if the future circumstances permit.”

Why then since 2013 every time the housing numbers were increased, this Council never challenged them and just accepted them along with the implications that it had for housing numbers and the 5 year housing land supply?

Answer

Since 2013 the Council has been tenacious and doggedly fought a fairer housing number. All Leaders of this Council have taken the challenge to Governments, Secretary of States, Ministers, through our MPs and directly.

To support our position we have directly engaged with residents to demonstrate the strength of feeling and welcome the support we have received from all Members and Town and Parish Councils in our efforts. This fight must go on and will continue.

The answer to why we are putting forward a case for exceptional circumstances now, is simply that the time is right.

A case for exceptional circumstances to deviate from the Government policy can only be made through the Local Plan itself. This has been confirmed by one of the top planning barristers.

The recommended Draft Plan consultation is the first opportunity for us to put forward our case. Until now we have had estimated housing need based on the Government's policy and guidance. The outcome of the previous studies, and the current standard method, simply reflects this.

The element of discretion we have within Government planning policy is limited and any argument we made will no doubt be challenged by the development industry. Ultimately a Government Planning Inspector will decide whether the case will be accepted or not.

Supplementary Question

Best of luck with that. I would be more than happy to support you on that.

My question did talk about numbers but linked to numbers is actual locations. When Grazeley was first raised, when it became public four years' ago I think there is a reference in EM5 which is a question linked to that, the Conservative Leader of the Council then, Keith Baker, stated on 16th December that if the Council's bid for £250m is successful,

along with £5.38m for technical studies, and the plans for Grazeley are approved then another £5m will be raised via CIL and you mentioned £600m a second ago.

Nearly three years' later on 26 March 2019 the then Conservative Leader, Julian McGhee-Sumner, admitted that he was surprised as just having made a statement on housing 'Enough is Enough' to hear that the Government had given them £750k to fast track the proposals which is largely supported. He added that "they had given us money to work out whether it was feasible or not" and he added "that it was not feasible before".

This would suggest that £600m CIL alone without the extra £255.38m to unlock Grazeley's potential would make Grazeley not suitable and become a non-starter.

The question is as Grazeley has always been the Conservative's intention to develop for well over four years, whether they get the requested £255.38m or not, is in the new Local Plan consultation. Is it worth the paper it is written on?

Supplementary Answer

I think it is a rhetorical question.

69.2 Rachelle Shepherd-DuBey asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

What is the backup plan (plan b?) for yearly housing delivery quota if there is a housing slowdown/recession (like 2007/8) or any delay in the yearly delivery of housing in Grazeley?

Answer

In order to specifically address the risk of slowdown or recession we are considering, and I am going into it again, such delivery models like a Locally Led New Town Development Corporation which would fit the garden town proposal. As I have said earlier the Development Corporation is a model that offers potential to put control and speed of delivery in the hands of the Councils and enhances it through land supply and I have said this previously so you have heard me twice already.

Other factors and actions also reduce the risk. We currently have a healthy bank of land with planning permission for homes, as a result of our existing Core Strategy and part of our Local Plan. We know that these permissions will continue to deliver over the coming years.

A successful outcome of the bid to the Housing Infrastructure Fund will accelerate delivery of the garden town at Grazeley by supporting the upfront infrastructure, removing the key costs and opening up the site early.

The recommended strategy also includes a range and size of other types of sites, and reasonable flexibility in supply, all helping to maintain a healthy supply across the Borough. As an organisation we can also use our ownership of land to influence other developments that come along.

Supplementary Question

In the past we have been forced to have a larger quota because we were not delivering the number of houses we were supposed to deliver during that time and they are not

selling them as is happening in North Wokingham, what is happening in Hatch Farm, what is happening all over the Borough. What are we going to do because at this point Grazeley is not going to come on line for a while and we are expecting all of the houses to come from the existing SDLs and they are not selling them and they are not going to do that so we are going to increase our quota? Where are you going to put the extra 100 houses or something like we got in the last round?

Supplementary Answer

It is a very good point and you know we have discussed this on many occasions. I think what you have got to look at is if Grazeley, through the consultation, gets the go ahead infrastructure will start very early and you will potentially have buildings start in 2024. You are absolutely right we have got a gap between now and 2024 to ensure that these other areas are delivering and that is why our own housing corporate companies, which John will support me on, can actually help deliver those and step in on those areas where we can either develop with the developer or do a joint relationship where we can accelerate the housing.

The good thing about Grazeley, and I know everybody will not sing from the same hymn sheet, is 5,000 plus of those houses will be affordable and if we go down the route of a housing corporation we are in control not the developers.

The problem we have got with our SDLs at the moment, apart from, and John knows far more about Arborfield than I do, is Arborfield seems to be working because they have got this commitment to the MOD whereas at other sites, as you quite rightly say, the developers will sell when it is right for them to sell and that is why we have got to look at other models for Grazeley to try and even out the ups and downs.

But you must also look at Wokingham as an area. I know that there are these statements out there that some are selling and some are not selling. They are selling far better in Wokingham than they are across the whole of the rest of the country if you just look at the sales. Last year we did 1,250, the year before we did 1,565. The reason why this housing is coming late is because the SDL approach was backended; it was never designed to deliver in the early stages it was like the old hockey stick of setting up a new business and they will develop and grow as we go along. But you are right the next few years we have got to make sure they continue to deliver because if Grazeley does go ahead we have got to bridge that gap.

The Leader of Council provided the following response:

I would just add that the current Plan is a Plan from 2019-2036. Of the 13,000 houses presumed there only 3,000 are due to come from Grazeley; the other 10,000 are from other sites or the majority from the hangover of the current Core Strategy. So the current Plan that we are looking at in the consultation is not talking about 10,000 or 15,000 houses from Grazeley; we are talking about 3,000.

69.3 Paul Fishwick asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

Under Policy H2, sites allocated for residential use/mixed use on page 80 of the Local Plan Update it indicates that Winnersh Farm, Winnersh will be allocated 250 dwellings. Up until now the Winnersh Borough Councillors have been informed that Winnersh would only have a couple of small sites allocated.

Why have these 250 dwellings suddenly been added to this schedule?

Answer

Firstly I would like to clarify that there has never been a position where Winnersh Parish Council will only accommodate a couple of small sites.

However the land at Winnersh Farm presents an opportunity to provide a well-designed development. With part of the land being owned by the Council, and it builds up the point I mentioned to Rachele just a moment ago about having more flexibility in owning our own land and therefore controlling development, this site is an opportunity to deliver the increased numbers of affordable homes to support those who cannot access suitable housing elsewhere in the Borough.

Supplementary Question

As this was a material change to the original consultation by combining a number of sites together forming one due process should have been followed. Therefore why were the Ward Borough Councillors and Winnersh Parish Council not consulted prior to the meeting of the Planning and Transport Policy Member Working Group so that their views could have been put forward to the Member Working Group so they were properly informed? The Ward Borough Councillors and Winnersh Parish Council are against this new site.

Supplementary Answer

There are two answers to that. The agenda goes out before so the cross-party can discuss with their various Members, including the Ward Members, so if there is somebody there who wants to discuss the sites then they could have done that. Equally at that meeting they could have put forward an objection or asked for further information or there is a whole range of things they could have asked for at the various meetings where all site allocations were discussed.

I was at that meeting and Members of your Party were also at that meeting.

69.4 Adrian Mather asked the Executive Member for Climate Emergency the following question:

Question

For the WBC carbon neutral objective, what specific standards e.g. triple glazing, renewable energy, no gas boilers/appliances are going to be mandated?

Answer

One of our key priorities in creating this Local Plan was to seek to achieve net zero carbon emissions from new homes built in the major residential and commercial developments across the Borough. The Local Plan Update is in the process of being developed so there is an opportunity to implement sustainable planning policies.

To this end, developments will embrace innovative sustainable design solutions for energy efficiency and renewable energy generation and will enable the use of walking, cycling and public transport through ensuring that these options are central to the design and layout of the new development.

The Government is also proposing changes to Building Regulations that would increase the energy efficiency requirement for new homes from 2020; so this year. This is seen as a

stepping stone to the introduction of the Future Homes Standard from 2025. The intention is to make new homes more energy efficient so that they may produce 75-80% less CO₂ emissions than one built to current requirements. Energy efficiency will be achieved through the introduction of more efficient boilers, waste water heat recovery, improvement to ventilation and airtightness standards, improvements in fabric efficiency of walls, roofs, floors and windows and as you said triple glazing.

The Council also plans to encourage the owners of existing homes to retrofit and improve their own homes so that they can become as energy efficient as is possible.

Supplementary Question

Where will this information be documented?

Supplementary Answer

Many of the plans will be put forward as part of the Local Plan and some will go as part of our Borough Design Guide and some will be included as part of the Carbon Emergency Action Plan going forward.

69.5 Clive Jones asked the Leader of the Council the following question:

Question

As you know Grazeley was kept secret by senior Conservative Councillors in 2016. With hindsight do you think that was the right thing to have done?

Answer

I do not actually know as I was not a senior Conservative Councillor at that time.

I believe that the original proposals for Grazeley were when there was a Liberal administration which goes back some 20 years which you probably also do not remember. I believe and I understand that a confidential Expression of Interest (EoI) to the locally led Garden Villages, Towns and Cities Prospectus was made by West Berks, Reading and Wokingham Councils in 2016 following the encouragement of the Government. I understand that the EoI allowed the Borough to outline a case for upfront funding of infrastructure and to discuss planning freedoms which could help us address the problem of appeals for speculative developments, with the submission allowing us to keep the lines open which are currently being exploited.

The submission was made, I understand, with the full understanding that the concept was at a formative stage and that no Council was committed to the proposal. Given this position all of the Councils agreed the submission should remain confidential until such time as we were able to assess other possible planning strategies and engage with residents.

I believe that not submitting an EoI would have potentially passed up an opportunity for significant investment funding; one of the key messages we hear from residents.

Supplementary Question

You appear to be acting in the belief that Grazeley will protect the rest of the Borough from development. I do not agree with this and believe that there will be many, many planning appeals that could cost the council tax payers of Wokingham Borough Council many thousands of pounds and perhaps many millions of pounds.

Why are you so confident that Grazeley protects the rest of the Borough from development?

Supplementary Answer

First of all we are currently in the situation where we are spending a lot of money on appeals. We have engaged the leading barristers in the UK to defend the Borough's position. Wokingham Borough is unfortunate in that it is surrounded by protected land and it is a very desirable place for putting houses and people want to live here. So we are a prime opportunity for developers to attack and that is why we have strengthened our defences and we are winning appeals and I suggest that is the right thing to do.

I am not confident that we can do anything because we are a local authority and we have certain powers and we have certain guidelines which are given by central Government to us. But the approach we have taken is the strongest approach that we can possibly take to strengthen the position of the Borough and that is all I can really say. There are no guarantees because we are at the behest of Government and almost all parties seem to agree uniformly and without reservation that the country needs more homes and the calculation of the homes they believe we need are 300,000 and that filters down to a number for us and we have to find provision for that. If we do not do that we will find ourselves in the same sort of problems that your colleagues in South Oxfordshire are finding themselves in where central Government will take over our Planning Department.

So I think what we are proposing is the only route which protects our position.

69.6 Barrie Patman asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

Has the Council come to a formal signed agreement with Central Government on the £252 million Housing Infrastructure Bid?

Answer

The simple answer is no we have no formal agreement in place. The bid is currently under consideration following the due diligence process as part of the bid. We do hope for an announcement early this year.

Feedback to date would indicate that the Grazeley Garden Town proposal is an 'exciting proposition' with sufficiently strong appeal for Ministers to be willing to announce Government support. In fact the HIF bid submission included a letter of support from Teresa May, at the time Prime Minister, identifying it as the best option for growth in Wokingham Borough.

It is also worth noting that in March 2019 the Government, in a demonstration of its support for our proposals, designated Grazeley with Garden Town status under its Garden Communities Prospectus. This included £750,000 in capacity funding to support the delivery of the Grazeley Garden Town. It is expected that will become an annual tranche of capacity funding to help us in our bid.

Supplementary Question

Without the Housing Infrastructure Funding is the Grazeley development viable?

Supplementary Answer provided by the Leader of Council

Our plan is based upon having that Infrastructure Funding.

69.7 Caroline Smith asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

In the new Local Plan it states that Wokingham will require affordable homes to be provided in all new developments of five or more houses of about 20% to 40% depending on the site. This departure from Conservative Government Policy which only requires affordable housing on developments of 10 or more. What reason do you have for believing that Wokingham will be allowed to insist on a more generous policy that is currently allowed by Government?

Answer

Access to affordable, high quality, housing is a challenge for people living in Wokingham Borough, and in particular the young, given that they are more likely to be on lower incomes and less able to secure mortgages, finance or access to the private sector in the rental side. High house prices and rents mean that there is a high need for affordable housing and it is a priority for this Council to increase the numbers of affordable homes as I have mentioned earlier on the 5,000 at Grazeley etc.

The proposed approach in the Draft Plan is to continue what has already been applied successfully through the adopted Core Strategy local plan in the Borough. This requires developments of five or more dwellings to make proportionate contributions to affordable housing.

Whilst this deviates from the Government's planning policy I believe there is a clear need for affordable housing in the Borough and it is sufficient justification to be more ambitious. Deviating from the Government policy has been achieved elsewhere including Reading Borough Council, if you have seen their recent Local Plan.

We know from applying our current policy that the approach is achievable.

Supplementary Question

How many additional affordable homes do we expect to be delivered through this policy compared to the numbers that you have delivered under current Government policy?

Supplementary Answer

I do not have the actual numbers, I am looking at John, but am I giving you a hospital pass. I do not have them but I will get them to you.

70. LOCAL PLAN UPDATE: DRAFT PLAN CONSULTATION

The Executive considered a report seeking approval to carry out consultation on a proposed Local Plan Update: Draft Plan which once adopted would guide how development was managed.

The Leader of Council introduced the report and clarified that what was being considered was only the carrying out of a planned consultation and not approving the final Local Plan. The consultation, which was the beginning of the due process for adopting the Local Plan, would be the means by which people could formally comment on the proposals in the draft Plan. Councillor Halsall pointed out that there were a number of steps that were required

to be taken before the adoption of the Local Plan including: signing up with the Government for the HIF bid; seeking protection for the Council's planning policies; and referral to Executive and Council to consider representations to this consultation and approve any amendments to the Local Plan going forward. If approved by Council then it would still need to go through the Examination in Public process.

Councillor Haitham Taylor, Member for Shinfield South, voiced her disappointment with the proposals for a new town in Grazeley particularly when these proposals followed on from the tremendous and unprecedented response from residents against the Government's housing targets during the Council's 'Enough is Enough' campaign.

From a ward perspective Councillor Haitham Taylor felt that this was a 'kick in the teeth' for residents who had already suffered mass development from the last Core Strategy local plan which had changed the nature and character of Shinfield, Three Mile Cross, Ryeish Green and Spencer's Wood. She believed that a new town could never be self-contained as promised in the draft Plan.

In addition Councillor Haitham Taylor stated that because of the following reasons, and the fact that she did not believe that residents' responses to the consultation would be taken seriously, she would not be able to support the draft Plan:

- The Local Plan Update was based on the assumption that the Council would be successful in winning the HIF bid which would unlock a £252m infrastructure fund to forward fund projects to make Grazeley sustainable. However she did not believe that due to the time limit imposed on the funds that the money could be spent within such a short timeframe;
- It assumes that the Government would allow a moratorium on development numbers for the rest of the Borough which would stop speculative sites coming forward; however there was no guarantee that this would happen. It could however end up with a new town the size of Wokingham in a totally unsustainable location and hundreds of speculative applications elsewhere;
- It dismisses many other viable and very sustainable developments in other parts of the Borough and it was likely that developers would still submit planning applications for these sites which could lead to more appeals being lost at a substantial cost to the Council;
- Grazeley, as a much smaller development site, was proposed over 20 years ago and it failed at the Examination in Public stage. She felt that many of the reasons it failed then were still appropriate now;
- The reasons why the site was not sustainable for a new town were as follows:
 - the site was currently under water;
 - the roads were already at full capacity with the A33 causing tailbacks of 3-4 miles in the morning and Junction 11 onto the M4 at full capacity;
 - it was unlikely that residents in Mortimer and surrounding areas would stand by and watch their railway station being shut;
 - the types of houses needed to make this development sustainable were high rise blocks which were not suitable for the location;
 - there were constraints on the site in relation to the Atomic Weapons Establishment;
 - the Borough had the highest car ownership in the UK therefore the assumption that everyone would make use of public transport could not be backed up;
 - there was a total lack of capacity in the health service.

Councillor Haitham Taylor highlighted that Grazeley was a rural community containing small businesses, farms, a small number of social housing, GRT sites and mobile homes and was not an affluent area that was necessarily engaged with the Council as much as residents in other areas of the Borough. It was therefore important that the Council should be making every effort to ensure that these residents' views were heard.

In response the Leader of Council reiterated that if the Council did not have a Local Plan that set out how it would meet the Government's target it would end up with unplanned development and subsequently lose a large number of appeals. Developers who were unhappy with the proposals in the Local Plan Update would start submitting appeals for their sites. The Local Plan Update consultation sets out how the 13,000 houses would be delivered i.e. 750 per year; which was considerably less than the 1,200 previously expected. Of those 13,000 houses 3,000 were from the Grazeley development and the rest were either the remainder of the SDLs or new small sites.

Councillor Halsall reminded Members that discussions on the Grazeley site had been ongoing over the last 20 years, and not just the last four years as had been asserted, and Grazeley was the only site that the Government was prepared to consider for the provision of an infrastructure-led delivery. If sites were lost by appeal no infrastructure would be provided.

In relation to the 'Enough is Enough' campaign Councillor Halsall confirmed that a complete moratorium on house building across the Borough was never a realistic option.

The Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement clarified that if the HIF bid was successful 3,000 houses would be built at Grazeley between now and 2036; not 15,000. This was in addition to development on the smaller packages of sites across 10 towns and parishes whilst also ensuring that the other sites set out in the Core Strategy local plan were still delivered. If a Corporation was set up this would provide the Council with greater control.

In relation to a Plan 'B' option, as mentioned by one of the questioners, Councillor Smith confirmed that the only other option was to take all the 300 sites and downsize them to achieve the prescribed number however this would lead to development across the whole Borough and a lack of necessary infrastructure. This type of approach would also lead to the Council having to borrow millions of pounds. Whereas the approach proposed would deliver £252m; which was the equivalent based on current CIL receipts of 6,500 homes. In addition to the £252m CIL receipts from the Grazeley development amounting to around £600m would also be received.

Although the formal adoption of the Local Plan Update would not be for some time Councillor Smith advised that the fact that the Local Plan process had formally started helped in the defence of planning appeals.

Councillor Jorgensen stated that she believed that the housing targets were too high and that the issue was that there was too much growth in the south east and not enough across the country. Borough residents had suffered from too much development too fast without sufficient infrastructure which had caused amongst other things traffic jams, lack of facilities etc. Therefore despite feeling that the Council was being pushed into a corner in relation to housing numbers, which she believed were fundamentally wrong, Councillor Jorgensen felt that the proposal being put forward was the only solution.

Councillor Kaiser advised that in relation to the Arborfield development he and the neighbouring Ward Councillor had had to fight very hard to ensure that the relevant infrastructure was provided eg relief road and new school which would never have been made available if the 3,500 houses had not been accepted. Councillor Kaiser did not believe that there was a more suitable site than Grazeley but wanted to ensure that the correct infrastructure would be delivered before the houses are built. He hoped that the infrastructure that would be provided with the development would solve some of the existing problems in the area particularly as services and schools were under huge pressure. Councillor Kaiser also felt that the housing numbers were too high and cited the fact that the Council had discussed the matter with Ministers on many occasions. He felt that the Council should be able to make its own decision on what its housing numbers should be.

RECOMMENDATION that:

- 1) the Local Plan Update: Draft Plan (as set out in Appendix 2 to the report) and other supporting documents be agreed for consultation;
- 2) the proposed consultation framework be agreed;
- 3) any minor changes to the Draft Plan and material produced to support the consultation be delegated to the Director of Locality and Customer Services, in consultation with the Lead Member for Planning and Enforcement; and
- 4) the Local Development Scheme 2019 (as set out in Appendix 3 to the report) be adopted.

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