

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 12 NOVEMBER 2021 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.05 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), Parry Batth, Graham Howe, Gregor Murray, Wayne Smith and Bill Soane

Other Councillors Present

Rachel Bishop-Firth
Stephen Conway
Peter Dennis
Lindsay Ferris
Jim Frewin
Andrew Mickleburgh

59. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors John Kaiser, Charles Margetts and Stuart Munro.

Councillor Pauline Jorgensen was unable to attend in person but took part virtually.

60. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Councillor John Halsall declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 62, Local Plan Update: Revised Growth Strategy, on the grounds that he was the founder member and was a director of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wokingham Ltd and also a member of the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

Councillor Graham Howe declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 62, Local Plan Update: Revised Growth Strategy on the grounds that he was a member of the Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wokingham Ltd.

61. STATEMENT BY THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

The Leader of Council made the following statement:

The rate of new Covid cases within the Borough has been decreasing over half term but remains high. The current rate is 390 per 100,000. The rate within the Borough remains slightly above, but very much in line with, the rates across South-East England and England as a whole. Most cases continue to occur within our school age population and their parents, in line with the rest of the country.

The current rate reflects the cases across the week 28th October to 3rd November, and therefore incorporates half term. We will continue to see a decrease in cases for another week or so but as school activities continue across this half term, we expect the case rate to begin to increase once again. We will work closely with our head teachers and school communities through the Children's Services Taskforce across the term to make schools as safe as possible.

Officers across the Council are working to maximise the effectiveness of the Government's Plan A for our residents; ensuring people are getting tested when it is right for them to do so (rapid lateral flow testing routinely when someone has shown symptoms, and PCR

testing when someone has symptoms or is a contact of a case) and encouraging subsequent isolation. We continue to work with health partners on the delivery of the vaccination programme across the Borough and are promoting the use of preventative measures such as ventilation and face coverings where appropriate.

The coming weeks will see many occasions and celebrations bringing people together in the run up to Christmas. We must remain cautious and continue to employ all measures we can to make these occasions as safe as possible and keep our rates as low as we can as we head into Winter.

Vaccination is the most important action to promote. Please encourage anyone and everyone who is eligible to have all the vaccinations that they are due.

It is that time again when we are required to produce by central Government an updated local plan which will supersede the previous one. This one runs through to 2038 but will require updates along the way to ensure it remains current and delivers the housing numbers as dictated to the Council using the Government formula.

Local Plans are key documents which set out the strategy and associated policies for managing development. Not having a current local plan means that developers can successfully apply for planning permission anywhere. This speculative development occurs with little infrastructure and a greater housing requirement.

Today is only a consultation. Please respond to the consultation either online, by email or by post. We are seeking your views and want to hear what you want to say but please note extraneous actions and petitions do not form any part of the consultation. If you disagree with us, we are very interested in hearing your proposed alternatives.

There are councils near here who have refused the Local Plan process and have had one imposed by the Ministry of Housing and can in extreme cases of non-cooperation result in the loss of the local authority right to determine planning applications.

All English national parties set similar housing targets; Conservatives and Liberal Democrats both at 300,000pa.

Local Plans set out where development should go and the improvements to infrastructure that are required alongside, ensuring residents have access to facilities such as schools and green spaces.

Our current Local Plan, the Core Strategy, was designed to manage development to 2026. It has work well, with most of the development occurring in places where planned and being supported by millions of pounds of investment in infrastructure including new schools, roads, and green spaces. More importantly, it has allowed the Council to refuse and win at appeals against developers proposing unsuitable sites.

Refreshing our Local Plan will mean our planning policies continue to be effective and will be difficult for developers to challenge with inappropriate alternative sites. Without a new plan, there will be less control over where development happens, and it will be much harder to try and improve the infrastructure alongside.

A local plan must enable land to come forward to meet development needs unless there are compelling reasons why this cannot be achieved.

For housing, the Government introduced a standard method which calculates the housing need for each local authority. For Wokingham Borough the housing need currently calculates as 768 new homes each year.

The Council have engaged the leading planning barrister in England and statistician to help understand whether we could progress a case for exceptional circumstances. The outcome was that there are no compelling reasons under the current Government framework to do so.

Whilst the housing need is challenging, the Government proposed revised to their standard method that would have more than doubled our annual requirement to over 1,600 dwellings a year. We campaigned hard and submitted robust technical challenges against the proposal, which was subsequently abandoned by the Government, thankfully.

To be clear, if we progress a local plan which does not enable this amount of housing expected by the Government, it will not pass examination in public, bringing all the negatives of loss of control.

We consulted on a Draft Local Plan in 2020. A central plank of that plan was the creation of a garden town at Grazeley. After agreeing the plan for consultation, a change in legislation resulted in the unexpected extension of the area where emergency plans must be in place around AWE Burghfield to incorporate for the first time both the area of Grazeley as well as the villages of Three Mile Cross and Spencer's Wood. The change means that the Grazeley garden town proposal, and therefore the strategy proposed by the plan, is no longer achievable. This came very much as a surprise as the money for the exploratory work had come from a Government grant.

The clear benefits of refreshing the Local Plan remain. We have therefore been forced to go back and consider alternative approaches.

Central to our thinking on an alternative strategy has been the preference of our residents.

Residents have told us through earlier consultations their preference is for the need for new housing to be met through large scale development, where infrastructure can be provided alongside. They also wish to see use made of previously developed land know as brown field sites.

Large scale developments are often also the best technical solution for providing new housing in ways which respond to the challenge of climate change.

They offer the opportunity to design in sustainability from the outset, including measures to lessen the need to travel by private car, so reducing our carbon footprint and impact on the environment and air quality compared to dispersed development. Large developments also allow to plan for accessible green spaces, drainage management, biodiversity enhancements and renewable energy.

The recommended alternative strategy includes available suitable sites in our town centres for development and makes an allowance for development we can reasonably expect to come forward in our towns and villages. There is however simply not enough available previously developed land, i.e. brownfield land, to meet the housing the Government

expects us to enable. It is not true to suggest there is; that solution simply does not exist and progressing a plan on such a hope would fail at examination.

The recommended strategy therefore recommends the allocation of a large new development on land between Shinfield, Arborfield and Sindlesham, referred to as Hall Farm / Loddon Valley.

This is the most deliverable and sustainable large development option. Others were considered but our judgement is that this is the best opportunity.

It offers the opportunity to provide homes alongside jobs with the area in proximity to the Thames Valley Science and Innovation Park, Shinfield, a key location for economic and jobs growth, the M4 and with good transport links buses and rail.

The Hall Farm / Loddon Valley opportunity also allows the creation of a large publicly accessible green space or park along the River Loddon Valley, an area currently without public access. The river corridor provides a significant opportunity for comprehensive habitat management, restoration and enhancement, improving biodiversity.

The new community would be supported by a comprehensive package of infrastructure to incentivise sustainable behaviours and travel choices. This would include a framework to maximise opportunities for walking and cycling both within the new community and between the surrounding places, including a new connection over the M4 to Earley, primary schools and a secondary school and neighbourhood centres.

Whilst this provides for most new homes within the plan period, and beyond, there is need for development elsewhere across the Borough to meet the Government's housing expectations.

This needs to be proportional and targeted to suitable locations. The new strategy identifies opportunities which are now available within and around our existing major developments, as well as a range of sites on the edge of other towns and villages.

Local Green Space is an options designation that allows communities to identify and protect green areas that are of particular importance to them. The use of Local Green Space will not be suitable in all instances. Guidance is set out in national planning policies.

The Draft Local Plan included proposals for eight Local Green Spaces across the Borough with only a surprisingly small number of areas being nominated by communities.

As communities may not have recognised this opportunity, the Council wrote to all the parish and town councils, and amenity groups across the Borough inviting them to nominate further areas and to explain why they felt these areas were important. I am delighted to say the response was over 100 new areas were nominated.

Officers have reviewed each site against national planning policy and recommend proposing allocations of 71 out of the 100 nominated new Local Green Spaces.

To summarise this is a consultation. It is to discover your views and residents' views and adopt the plan accordingly. We are both on the same side of delivering a target imposed elsewhere. We would like as many residents as possible to respond to this consultation so that we can get the next iteration right. Please respond online, or by letter or by email.

Other channels such as petitions will not be taken into account. We are very interested in what you have to say and if you disagree with us what your alternatives are.

62. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

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

62.1 Paul Stevens asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

Why have Wokingham Borough Council chosen to ignore the views of local residents as expressed in the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan regarding the site of a new "Garden Village" at Hall Farm?

I refer specifically to the following key policies: IRS1, IRS2, IRS3, but also the view that Arborfield and Barkham have no local need for further housing and we have already made significant contribution to the wider need for housing through the SDL at Arborfield Garrison, otherwise known as Arborfield Green.

Answer

The Government require all local authorities to create plans to manage development in their area. A plan must enable land to come forward to meet development needs. With regards to housing, the Government introduced a standard methodology, I appreciate that John has referred to this earlier, which calculates the housing need for each local authority and Wokingham Borough's need calculates as 768 new homes each year.

Meeting this scale of development requires us to make some difficult decisions. We must however make these decisions. Not having an effective plan would mean less control over where development comes forward. It is much harder to invest in improvements to infrastructure such as roads and schools if development is driven by developers in an ad-hoc and dispersed pattern.

Through previous consultation on the local plan, the most supported approach was for development needs to be met through large scale developments, where infrastructure could be planned, funded and provided alongside.

Experience has shown us that large scale developments are often the best solution to meeting development needs in a way that responds to sustainability challenges, including climate change. They also allow us to respond to the lessons of Covid more fully.

To identify the most suitable sites for development, all areas of land promoted by landowners to us for potential development have been assessed. This exceeds over 300 different areas.

The area of land at Hall Farm / Loddon Valley is one of three large scale opportunities we have considered, the others being:

- land situated to the north of Wokingham (between the M4 and A329(M)) known as Ashridge; and
- land to the east of Twyford in Ruscombe Parish.

At least one of these areas is required to meet the housing expectations.

Following technical appraisals by our Officers, with external support from AECOM, and discussions with the cross-party group of Councillors, the recommended strategy proposes the creation of a new sustainable community at land at Hall Farm / Loddon Valley. This is considered to be the most deliverable and sustainable strategic option to meet the Borough needs required for our plan.

It offers the opportunity to provide homes alongside jobs with the area in proximity to the Thames Valley Science and Innovation Park, as well as the Creative Media Hub development that was approved at the Council's Planning Committee meeting on 13th October 2021.

Given the potential scale of the opportunity, the vision is able to extend beyond merely the built development into the wider environment and social benefits of the community. Integral to this vision would be the creation of a large publicly accessible green space or park along the River Loddon Valley, which is an area currently without public access. The river corridor provides a significant opportunity for comprehensive habitat management, restoration and enhancement, improving biodiversity.

I accept that any development needs to lead to change, however the community we propose to create will be high quality. Aspects highlighted in the proposed policy includes a requirement for development to draw on and enhance its context and the considerable natural assets, such as hedgerows, trees, woodland, and incorporate measures to protect and retain the permanent physical and visual sense of separation of Arborfield, Arborfield Cross and Shinfield.

Supplementary Question

The Core Strategy and the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan recognised the importance of restricting development outside the settlement boundaries, or development in the countryside.

Can the Executive Member confirm that the Local Plan Update will take account of the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan and will respect the existing settlement boundaries, and the boundary of the strategic development limits near Arborfield Green, and will not propose additional infill development between settlements or ribbon development along the Arborfield Cross relief road?

Supplementary Answer

Without having the actual Plan I cannot confirm that here now but I will give you a written statement as to the actual area that you are referring to.

62.2 Nigel Penford had asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question but as he was unable to attend the meeting the following written answer was provided:

Question

Why do WBC insist on building on green field sites, with global warming any green space is valuable? Building on green fields is bad; grass absorbs CO₂ all the year round and stores it in the soil. British trees do a good job but only for half the year. Housing also accelerates flooding as grassland absorb water, houses/roads etc.

Another problem is services as long as I have lived in Winnersh the water pressure has slowly gone down, with the new high-tech boilers installed in new build need good water flow. Keep tacking more houses on old infrastructure is bad; sewage, power etc, once the builder has gone, it is the householder who is left with the problem. I am a retired gas heating engineer of fifty years' experience.

Answer

The Government require all local authorities to create plans to manage development in their area.

There are clear benefits in refreshing our local plans. A new plan will mean our planning policies continue to be effective. Without a new plan, there will be less control over where development happens, meaning it is likely to come forward in poorly located places. It will be much harder to try and improve infrastructure alongside if development is driven by developers in an ad-hoc and dispersed pattern; this is not theory. It has happened in the past and many residents expressed their concerns to the Council about this.

A local plan must enable land to come forward to meet development needs unless there are compelling reasons why this cannot be achieved. We have engaged the leading planning barrister and a statistician on this and there are no compelling reasons we could progress.

With regards to housing, the Government introduced a standard method which calculates the housing need for each local authority. For Wokingham Borough the housing need currently calculates as 768 new homes each year.

If we progress a local plan which does enable this amount of housing, it will not pass examination, bringing all the negatives of loss of control.

Turning to the issue of previously developed land, we have sought to maximise all available and suitable sites within the proposed strategy. We review vacant land within employment areas to see whether it could be repurposed for housing and reviewed Council owned land. We have also asked Councillors to use their local knowledge to identify any land they believe was available and suitable within their areas.

These actions have allowed us to increase the number of previously developed sites within the recommended strategy. In addition we have made an allowance for development we can reasonably expect to come forward elsewhere in our towns and villages within our supply calculations.

The hard truth, however, is that there is simply not enough available previously developed land to meet the housing the Government expects. To say there is denies reality. We are therefore required to make difficult decisions.

Through previous consultation on the local plan, the most supported single approach was for development needs to be met through large scale developments, where infrastructure could be planned, funded, and provided alongside.

Large scale developments are also often the best technical solution for providing new housing in ways which respond to the challenge of climate change and minimise other environmental impacts.

They offer the opportunity to design in sustainability from the outset, including measures to lessen the need to travel by private car, so reducing our carbon footprint and impact on the environment and air quality compared to dispersed development. Large developments also allow to plan for accessible green spaces, drainage management, biodiversity enhancements and renewable energy.

62.3 David Lyons had asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question but as he was unable to attend the meeting the following written answer was provided:

Question

What is more important for the Council and Executive Members; maximising house builders' profitability by destroying green open spaces, more flooding of the river Loddon up and down its reaches, or the existing paying and contributing local residents health and wellbeing, local agriculture production, the environment and habitat in which is being damaged and lost by these swathes of soulless new build estates? Surely all brownfield sites should be exhausted and redeveloped before green virgin land is covered in concrete. Brownfield sites have not been exhausted in the slightest.

Answer

The Government require all local authorities to create plans to manage development in their area.

There are clear benefits in refreshing our local plans. A new plan will mean our planning policies continue to be effective. Without a new plan, there will be less control over where development happens, meaning it is likely to come forward in poorly located places. It will be much harder to try and improve infrastructure alongside if development is driven by developers in an ad-hoc and dispersed pattern; this is not theory. It has happened in the past and many residents expressed their concerns to the Council about this.

A local plan must enable land to come forward to meet development needs unless there are compelling reasons why this cannot be achieved. We have engaged the leading planning barrister and a statistician on this and there are no compelling reasons we could progress.

With regards to housing, the Government introduced a standard method which calculates the housing need for each local authority. For Wokingham Borough the housing need currently calculates as 768 new homes each year.

If we progress a local plan which does enable this amount of housing, it will not pass examination, bringing all the negatives of loss of control.

Turning to the issue of previously developed land, we have sought to maximise all available and suitable sites within the proposed strategy. We review vacant land within employment areas to see whether it could be repurposed for housing and reviewed Council owned land. We have also asked Councillors to use their local knowledge to identify any land they believe was available and suitable within their areas.

These actions have allowed us to increase the number of previously developed sites within the recommended strategy. In addition we have made an allowance for development we can reasonably expect to come forward elsewhere in our towns and villages within our supply calculations.

The hard truth, however, is that there is simply not enough available previously developed land to meet the housing the Government expects. To say there is denies reality. We are therefore required to make difficult decisions.

Through previous consultation on the local plan, the most supported single approach was for development needs to be met through large scale developments, where infrastructure could be planned, funded and provided alongside.

Large scale developments are also often the best technical solution for providing new housing in ways which respond to the challenge of climate change and minimise other environmental impacts.

They offer the opportunity to design in sustainability from the outset, including measures to lessen the need to travel by private car, so reducing our carbon footprint and impact on the environment and air quality compared to dispersed development. Large developments also allow to plan for accessible green spaces, drainage management, biodiversity enhancements and renewable energy.

Lastly, I disagree with the comment about soulless housing estates. The new communities we are delivering are vibrant communities, supported by new infrastructure and, from our annual survey of new residents, receive a high level of satisfaction. This is not to say that we need to stop learning and continue to improve where we can.

62.4 Laura Clarke asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

How will the impact of the proposed garden village at Hall Farm be assessed in light of the extensive development already underway in Shinfield and Arborfield and how will any cumulative effects be mitigated?

Answer

A range of technical work has been undertaken to help inform all of the impacts of the proposed Hall Farm / Loddon Valley proposal.

The masterplanning approach includes an indicative framework and infrastructure interventions which will have been informed by the transport modelling that has been undertaken. Part of this process includes a high-level viability exercise.

The transport impact of the proposal has been assessed on top of all current local plan (to 2026) developments. With regard to the range of other potential sites flooding modelling has also been undertaken.

As I have stated in response to other questions, the new community would be supported by a comprehensive package of infrastructure to incentivise sustainability behaviours and travel choices. This will include a framework to maximise opportunities for walking and cycling, both within the new community and between the surrounding places, including connection over the M4 to Earley, primary schools and a secondary school and neighbourhood centres.

Notwithstanding the assessment undertaken to support the plan making process, a future planning application would require further detailed modelling. This would help refine our assessment and the necessary infrastructure packages that will be required.

Supplementary Question

Could you please explain if any additional or extra consideration will be included in that Plan and if there are any specific mitigations because of the proximity of the development in the areas of Shinfield and Arborfield?

Supplementary Answer

As I said in my statement this is just an outline proposal at consultation. We haven't got anywhere near that stage. Once we get closer if it goes through consultation this is classed as Regulation 18. If it gets to Regulation 19 it has still got to go through the Inspector and then you have got to go through outline planning. So, at that point all of those considerations will be taken into account.

62.5 Colin Watts asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

The scale of the Hall Farm/Loddon Valley SDL is quite extraordinary. It is less than two years since an application for a single dwelling within this area (Ref 193337) was refused in part because of "the effect of the proposal upon the character of the countryside", yet now 4,500 homes are being proposed in the same area.

Why was the character of the countryside important in 2019 but is not important in these proposals in 2021?

Answer

Planning law requires applications to be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The development plan currently comprises our adopted Core Strategy and Managing Development Delivery plans as well as the Berkshire local plans covering minerals and waste matters.

The application you reference was made against our adopted policies, which did not support the proposed development. What we are considering now is different.

As I have explained in previous answers, the local plan will enable land to come forward to meet the development needs, which in the case of housing are set out by Government, unless there is a compelling reason why this cannot be achieved. We have engaged the local planning barrister, I appreciate that this was referred to earlier by John, and a statistician but there was no compelling reasons we could progress. We are therefore required to make some very difficult decisions.

Our current local plans direct development towards specific places. This would work well, providing the certainty of where change is expected and allow us to plan infrastructure alongside.

We would need to decide where to direct development once again. This means that we need to reconsider areas where we have previously steered development away from, because there were better options at the time. Sometimes these areas will not be the best option to any of us.

Supplementary Question

I just wonder do you actually agree though that these proposals will have a significant impact on the character of the countryside?

Supplementary Answer

I think it is how you build the development. We have built some very nice SDLs I mean as you mentioned earlier Arborfield is one; or not you that mentioned it but somebody mentioned it. We have got an SDL at Arborfield, It is all to do with how you develop the site and how you build that and make sure it is a sustainable place to live.

62.6 Mike Heard asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

Why was Hurst not considered a suitable location for the new garden village given its close proximity to rail links?

Answer

Three large scale opportunities were identified across the Borough:

- land to the south of the M4 between Shinfield, Arborfield and Sindlesham, known as Hall Farm / Loddon Valley, the site that you were referring to;
- land situated to the north of Wokingham, between the M4 and the A329(M), in the parish of Hurst; and
- land to the east of Twyford in the Ruscombe Parish.

Following a technical appraisal by Officers the recommended strategy proposes the creation of a new sustainable community at Hall Farm / Loddon Valley opportunity. This is considered to be the most deliverable and sustainable strategic option. I have outlined previously the benefits in other questions so I will not repeat them here but I am more than happy to send them to you.

Land promoted elsewhere in the Borough, including other areas of land promoted in Hurst are not large enough to support a comprehensive package of infrastructure necessary to create a new sustainable community.

62.7 Michael Holdstock had asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question which was asked on his behalf by James Burgess:

Question

Are the Council aware that 4.6 hectares of land, forming part of the original Bentley Lane Piggeries (adjacent to the Council's own land at Winnersh Farms) is capable of delivering 100+ housing units and of being accessed and delivered without any impediment from flooding and of the community benefits of including this land, in a wider application as previously proposed?

Answer

All sites promoted for potential development by landowners and developers has been assessed and considered in line with the requirements of national planning policy. The

Officers' technical assessments of all the sites will be published as part of the recommended consultation.

With regards to the land you refer, I assume you are referring to the land to the east of Blackberry Gardens, between it and the A329(M). The Environment Agency flood map shows a large part of this area is in a high risk of flood. The part of the land behind this adjacent to the A329(M) slip road where account would need to be taken of the levels of noise. Linking this land into the draft allocated site would require bridging the area liable to flood at a considerable cost.

The consultation provides everyone the opportunity to respond to our technical assessments. Where someone disagrees with the flood data, clear evidence, in the form of a Flood Map Challenge, would need to be presented and agreed by the Environment Agency.

62.8 Paul Townsend had asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question but as he was unable to attend the meeting the following written answer was provided:

Question

Given the absence of any evidence to support 4,500 homes at Hall Farm, on a number of key topics including transport, infrastructure, flooding, biodiversity, climate change, and viability; on what, exactly, will Members be basing their decision on the Revised Growth Strategy (as opposed to alternatives) being recommended for approval?

Answer

A great amount of detailed work has been undertaken to support the recommended consultation. This includes sustainability appraisal (incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment), a habitats regulation assessment, masterplanning (including high level viability), transport modelling, housing and economic land availability assessment and local green space assessment.

This material has been used to inform decision making to date and will be published as soon as possible and no later than the start of the consultation on 22 November.

62.9 Jim Murphy had asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question but as he was unable to attend the meeting the following written answer was provided:

Question

Officers state that from work they have undertaken assessing the potential sites; Hall Farm / London Valley, displays the most deliverable and sustainable strategic option. I question how this can be when it offers so little in comparison to other more suitable and better located sites.

Except for the fact that this site offers the benefit for WBC to deal with only one readily compliant landowner, I cannot see what other factors cause this site to be selected with such high suitability as to warrant it more suitable than other potential sites. I appreciate that the ability to be able to deliver the plan is one of the key requirements but feel in this instance this one factor must have been disproportionately applied in comparison to the weight given to the other equally important factors.

Therefore, can you please tell what weight, in percentage terms of the overall decision-making criteria, has the benefit of only having to deal with one compliant landowner been the deciding factor in this instance?

Answer

A great amount of detailed work has been undertaken to support the recommended consultation. This includes sustainability appraisal (incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment), a habitats regulation assessment, masterplanning (including high level viability), transport modelling, housing and economic land availability assessment and local green space assessment.

This material has been used to inform decision making to date and will be published alongside the consultation on 22 November. I would encourage you to review this and provide any comments in response to the consultation.

Deliverability is a key consideration when considering where development could take place. National planning policy recognises that there needs to be a realistic prospect of the land being available for development at the envisaged point in time. If sites do not come forward for development, or development is delayed, this can impact the Council's ability to demonstrate a five-year housing land supply or pass the Housing Delivery Test. Failing either of these increases the possibility of unplanned, speculative development.

Deliverability is not the sole reason for the proposed.

Following a technical appraisal by Officers supported by AECOM and discussions with a cross party group of Councillors, the creation of a new sustainable community at the Hall Farm / Loddon Valley is considered to be the most deliverable and sustainable strategic option.

It offers the opportunity to provide homes alongside jobs with the area in proximity to the Thames Valley Science and Innovation Park, Shinfield, a key location for economic and jobs growth.

The Hall Farm / Loddon Valley opportunity also allows the creation of a large publicly accessible green space or park along the River Loddon Valley, an area currently without public access. The river corridor provides a significant opportunity for comprehensive habitat management, restoration and enhancement, improving biodiversity.

The new community would be supported by a comprehensive package of infrastructure to incentivise sustainable behaviours and travel choices. This would include a framework to maximise opportunities for walking and cycling both within the new community and between the surrounding places (including a new connection over the M4 to Earley), primary schools and a secondary school, and neighbourhood centres.

The consultation provides an opportunity for everyone to let us know whether they agree or disagree with our judgement.

63. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

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

63.1 Gary Cowan had asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question but as he was unable to attend the meeting the following written answer was provided:

Question

My apologies as I cannot attend the meeting, but the Executive proposed plan identifies a new garden village on land south of the M4 between Shinfield, Arborfield and Sindlesham, referred to as Hall Farm / Loddon Valley and the identification of a significant area of additional housing within the South Wokingham Strategic Development Location.

My question is why has Hurst been omitted from consideration when its location perfectly fits the Council's criteria in very many ways for a new garden village as against Hall Farm with its proximity to the flood plain and all its associated risks, not forgetting climate change?

Answer

No land across the Borough has been omitted from consideration. All sites promoted for potential development by landowners and developers has been assessed and considered in line with the requirements of national planning policy.

With regards to land within Hurst, I assume you are referring to the land situated to the north of Wokingham between the M4 and the A309(M) which is within the Parish.

This is one of three large scale opportunities we have considered, the others being:

- land to the south of the M4 between Shinfield, Arborfield and Sindlesham, known as Hall Farm / Loddon Valley; and
- land to the east of Twyford in Ruscombe Parish.

Central to our thinking on the recommended strategy has been the wish to establish an approach that allows for more people to choose to live and work where more journeys can be undertaken in ways that do not add to climate change. Enabling our residents to make the choice for healthier and more environmentally sensitive options such as walking and cycling for shorter journeys, including links to facilities, services, bus stops and train stations will help meet our collective commitments to address climate change.

Following a technical appraisal by Officers with external support from AECOM, and discussion with the cross-party group of Councillors, the recommended strategy proposes the creation of a new sustainable community at the Hall Farm / Loddon Valley opportunity. This is considered to be the most deliverable and sustainable strategic option.

It offers the opportunity to provide homes alongside jobs with the area in proximity to the Thames Valley Science and Innovation Park, Shinfield, a key location for economic and jobs growth.

The Hall Farm / Loddon Valley opportunity also allows the creation of a large publicly accessible green space or park along the River Loddon Valley, an area currently without public access. The river corridor provides a significant opportunity for comprehensive habitat management, restoration and enhancement, improving biodiversity.

The new community would be supported by a comprehensive package of infrastructure to incentivise sustainable behaviours and travel choices. This would include a framework to

maximise opportunities for walking and cycling both within the new community and between the surrounding places (including a new connection over the M4 to Earley), primary schools and a secondary school and neighbourhood centres.

So, in summary the recommended strategy puts forward what we believe is the best option. This includes the creation of a new sustainable community at Hall Farm / Loddon Valley. The land situated to the north of Wokingham between the M4 and the A309(M) has been considered but, in our judgement, it is comparatively less sustainable and deliverable, and as such is not recommended.

The consultation provides an opportunity for everyone to let us know whether they agree or disagree with our judgement.

63.2 Andrew Mickleburgh asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

Given the imperative of tackling our Climate Emergency, can you please provide a couple of illustrative examples of how the proposals in the Revised Growth Strategy have been informed by the Climate Emergency?

Answer

The Draft Local Plan we consulted on in 2020 included a suite of policies designed to manage the impacts of development. These included policies to require:

- Net carbon zero developments;
- Biodiversity net gain;
- Affordable housing;
- Quality design;
- Health and wellbeing; and
- Walking and cycling.

Whilst these policies are not part of the proposed consultation, we propose to continue our broad approach and we hope to receive support from the Government's appointed inspector who will examine our plan.

Central to the recommended Revised Growth Strategy it is the wish to manage development in the best option we have to respond to the challenge of climate change and minimise any impacts on the environment.

This is best achieved through large scale developments which offer the opportunity to design in sustainability from the outset, which includes measures to lessen travel by the private car, so reducing our carbon footprint and impact on the environment and air quality compared to dispersed development. Large developments also allow to plan for accessible green spaces, drainage management, biodiversity enhancements and renewable energy.

Supplementary Question

There are of course so many examples that you could have referred to and you cited many of them. But I would like to drill down specifically on the matter of flooding. There are many reasons why the risks of flooding in our Borough will grow significantly during the time period covered by the revised Growth Strategy and beyond. The reasons include the

already evident increase in and severity of extreme weather events locally that is also being experienced around the world and the contribution of some existing, as well as already planned, housing developments to more flooding within our Borough.

Do you have any concerns that building on any of the sites identified in this revised growth strategy could contribute to flooding in any of these sites and/or further afield?

Supplementary Answer

Well, I think as I have said earlier Andrew, we have a very experienced Strategic Planning Team at Wokingham. But not only that we have put our plans out to AECOM and they have got some very experienced, and they are not just experienced locally they are experienced across the country. They are suggesting to us as a group that these are the best sites. If in any of that they were suggesting that these sites are at risk of flooding, then obviously we would have to take that into major consideration.

So, my answer would be that is not something that has been brought to my attention, so no.

63.3 Stephen Conway asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Stephen Conway asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

The second draft of the local plan includes many sites that appeared in the first draft. Will the comments made by residents on those sites in the first consultation be carried forward or do they need to submit comments again as part of the second consultation?

Answer

The Draft Local Plan we consulted on, you are quite right, in 2020 proposed 21 smaller sites for residential/mixed development.

Officers have reviewed all those comments, you may be aware that after that we produced a document which was a draft document on the response, to all the consultation and recommend that all of these sites are retained within this Revised Growth Strategy. In some circumstances, the indicative minimum capacity has been changed to reflect the constraints or pursue opportunities for higher densities.

The consultation will be supported by an updated assessment of all sites across the Borough. I would encourage everyone to review the updated assessment and respond to the consultation.

Supplementary Question

Thank you for that. That is very much the advice I would give them too.

Further to this question on the process of consultation, given that many people will want to comment on the new draft, will the Executive agree to extend the consultation period by a week to 24th January?

I ask this because much of the consultation period coincides with the run-up to Christmas itself and the new year. Given that last year Christmas was notoriously cancelled many of our residents will understandably be focussing on family get togethers for much of

December into early January so an additional week would provide some compensation for Christmas distractions.

Supplementary Answer

I don't think that will be an issue. It was a six week consultation and we extended it to eight weeks to go from 22nd November to 17th January but I do not think it will be a problem to extend it by one week.

The Leader of Council responded:

We wish to have as great a response as we possibly can to the consultation. It is a consultation; we are doing it to gather intelligence and to understand the wishes of our residents. So, the higher the level of consultation the better really. But I would add, again, petitions and other demonstrations really are not part of the response to the consultation.

63.4 Lindsay Ferris asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

There are a total of 15,513 homes within the consultation to cover the period of the draft local plan to 2036. This is extremely close to the number required within the timeframe. Can you advise how the Council would proceed if a significant number of the housing developments being proposed received significant objections?

Answer

Yes it is 2038, not 2036.

The figure of 15,513 homes is the minimum number of homes required by the Government's standard method over that plan period. The Revised Growth Strategy identifies a land supply which reasonably exceeds this, providing some flexibility for delivery.

The clear benefits of refreshing our local plans. A new plan will mean our planning policies will continue to be effective. Without a plan, there will be less control over where development happens, meaning it is likely to come forward in poorly located places. It will be much harder to try and improve the infrastructure alongside it.

As you know, if we progress a local plan which does not meet the Government's housing expectations it will not pass the examination in public. We have taken advice on this from a leading barrister, and I am sorry I have mentioned this before, and statistician expert.

We will of course review all the comments we receive to the consultation and amend our strategy if necessary, however, let us be clear. There is little scope to remove land from the strategy without having to find suitable land elsewhere. If somebody wishes to object to a particular site, it is equally important for them to tell us where they would support building new homes to meet our plan.

Supplementary Question

It would appear that major objections have already started, even before the consultation has commenced; in particular with a major petition relating to the Pinewood site in Wokingham Without.

Can the Executive Member explain why this popular community site was included for housing in this consultation when many other community sites have been recommended for Local Green Open Space status?

Supplementary Answer

I am glad you brought that up Lindsay as I was going to bring that up later. The point that you are referring to, and if you do not mind I will read it as it is very important because like you I am very frustrated at what is being put out on social media. Page 44, paragraph 6.1.7 states:

“In addition to the sites identified above, it is further proposed to allocate Pinewood, Old Wokingham Road for self-funded regeneration. Pinewood accommodates a number of valued community facilities but the premises on site are of varied quality and they would benefit from investment. Proposals would be drawn up in consultation with the existing occupiers. Some of the income from any housing (and I say any housing) achieved on this site would be invested back into community facilities onsite, or if appropriate, their relocation to a new home.”

So, I do not read that as we are going to build all over that site. I read that, that we are going to plough back money into areas, and I know it is a very valuable site, and we will want to keep it and we will want to look after that site. I am amazed at what has been put out on Facebook, absolutely amazed.

63.5 Jim Frewin asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

Can the Executive please explain why the impact on the local plan Grazeley proposal of the AWE Planning Exclusion Zone expansion was unexpected?

Answer

AWE Burghfield is a licensed nuclear installation within the adjoining local authority of West Berkshire District; and I know that you know that.

The Grazeley Town proposal was devised in partnership with West Berkshire District Council and Reading Borough Council, and with the capacity funding from Homes England. Grazeley was awarded Garden City Status by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. All the masterplanning process involved representatives from AWE.

At the time of researching this option, the land where masterplanning placed building was outside of the Detailed Emergency Planning Zone where the emergency planning arrangements are required in case of an incident.

Whilst we were aware of a change in legislation requiring a review of all arrangements for all nuclear licensed installations in the country, we were only advised that there was a potential change at AWE when we were verbally informed of such by an Officer at West Berkshire Council in December 2019. Until then we were entirely unaware and even at that point the consequences were unknown given the little information we were provided with.

The formal change to the Detailed Emergency Planning Zone was confirmed by West Berkshire Council on 12 March.

A subsequent legal challenge was lodged by the affected landowners. This was dismissed by the courts on 12 February this year.

Supplementary Question

I have been reliably informed that the Council was informed in 2018 of the fact that the Ministry of Defence would actually object to development in that area; so is that information wrong? If you could send me those dates that would help, and I could check them.

Supplementary Answer from the Leader of Council

Jim, can I say that your “reliably informed” was unreliable.

I can say that we were receiving funding from the Government to proceed with the Garden Village in 2019 and I was here on 23 December 2019, just packing up my things, at midday, or two o'clock in the afternoon, when somebody from West Berkshire came along and said that there was a problem, and the problem was not specific, and we were held to secrecy. In fact, I was not supposed to know. So, no it is not true and it came as a real surprise to us and we fought it for three to five months to make sure that it was right and it was only when the MOD was asked, and asked, and asked again by politicians and Officers that they then said we will object and definitively to anything. So, it is not true.

63.6 Rachel Bishop-Firth asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

It is clear that residents want the necessary infrastructure in place earlier rather than later. You have miserably failed to get the infrastructure in place before the houses are occupied under your current Local Plan. What can you point to in this new document that will get the infrastructure in place next time?

Answer

Funding for infrastructure in the UK is paid to Councils after the commencement of development, whether this is via S106 or CIL. It is therefore remarkable that Wokingham Borough Council has forward funded and delivered much of the 2010 Core Strategy local plan (which runs to 2026) £574m worth of infrastructure programme as early as it has been brought forward and it has been delivered directly. Not only is this a programme of massive scale, it has also been incredibly successful in transforming the capability of the Council so that it is recognised externally as a delivery authority. This status was recognised in 2016 by a Peer Review where the final report said:

“Wokingham is the Department of Communities and Local Government’s ‘go to’ example of successful delivery of strategic housing development accompanied by the infrastructure to create sustainable communities. This is far from the norm. WBC has demonstrated a strong vision in this area of activity, coupled with leadership and commitment to achieving that vision, and quite rightly the Officers and members of the Council are proud of what has been achieved to date and what is in train.”

Clearly, we would like always to have done more sooner, however I expect the current Peer Review to have similar findings because the Council's performance on infrastructure delivery is spectacular on a national scale, and it is regrettable that this is still not more widely understood particularly within Wokingham itself. The highlights of our programme are

£250m of Highway initiatives: -

- The Eastern Shinfield Relief Road, completed early.
- The Northern Distributor almost complete and the Coppid Beech section is due after 2026.
- Arborfield Cross Relief Road, completed early.
- The Nine Mile Ride Extension, half complete and the other in hand.
- The Station Link Road, early.
- Mere oak Park and Ride complete.
- Thames Valley Park and Ride complete.
- Winnersh Park and Ride in design.
- Barkham Bridge widening.

£226m of Community, Sports and Leisure initiatives:

- 110Ha of new publicly accessible greenspace, country parks and play areas completed and an extra 130Ha to come.
- 20 Miles of greenways, now many KM completed and many more KM in design.
- 12.5Ha comprising around 400 new community allotments.
- California Country Destination play area completed.
- Dinton Activity Centre completed.
- Cantley Destination Play Area in design.
- Finchampstead Designation Play Area.
- Sports hub at Ryeish Green completed.
- Sports hub at Arborfield completed.
- Sports Hub at Grays Farm in design.
- Bulmershe Leisure Centre rebuild completed.
- Five Community Centres at Shinfield, Matthews Green, South Wokingham, Arborfield and Montague Park.

£98m of Schools initiatives; one Secondary and seven Primary:

- Arborfield Secondary, early.
- Montague Park Primary, early.
- Shinfield West, early.
- North Arborfield Primary early.
- Matthews Green Primary under construction.
- Three primary schools to come at Spencer's Wood, South Wokingham and South Arborfield when they are needed.

The route to success has been the delivery capability of Wokingham Borough Council have combined with one of the highest CIL rates in the UK, as well as strategic planning which is fit for purpose. We have no intention of changing this formula in the new plan other than to build on the existing policy, capability and continue with our delivery successes.

Supplementary Question

To fight the climate crisis, we need full local services including doctors and schools, local employment and good public transport links, as well as cycle routes. How does what you are proposing provide any of these things?

Supplementary Answer

I think it is very clear Rachel. I read your statement where it says that we are not providing infrastructure and we have failed miserably. From what I have just read out we are not failing miserably, and all of those items will be taken into consideration as we move forward with this Plan and all the work that Gregor is doing on the climate emergency.

The Leader of Council responded:

We have no capability of increasing the number of medical centres or GPs. It is not within our hands. We are trying to get them to do better but that is all we can do.

63.7 Jackie Rance had asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question but as she was unable to attend the meeting the following written response was provided:

Question

The Executive summary clearly states that local plans must be prepared in consultation with the local community and local stakeholders. As a local Councillor I am not aware of any consultation beyond limited consultation on Halls Farm. Could the Executive please provide a list of all sites on which local community consultations have taken place (except Halls Farm) and how they were evaluated?

Answer

The purpose of this report to Executive this evening is to approve undertaking consultation on the recommended Revised Growth Strategy. This will allow residents, businesses, and other stakeholders to comment on the proposal relating to Hall Farm / Loddon Valley, as well as other proposals and supporting technical assessments, which includes an assessment of all promoted areas of land.

As detailed in the report, the Council has previously undertaken a number of consultations:

- Issues and Options Consultation (August 2016).
- Homes for the Future (November 2018 – February 2019).
- Draft Plan Consultation (February 2020).

Reports of each consultation are available on our website and details a summary of the main issues raised by respondents.

63.8 Peter Dennis asked the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement the following question:

Question

How does this local plan update with the proposed sites within it, impact current and forthcoming planning applications on those sites, especially ones where prior applications have been rejected?

Answer

Planning law requires applications to be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The development plan currently comprises of our adopted Core Strategy and Managing Development Delivery local plans as well as the Berkshire local plans covering minerals and waste.

Weight may be placed on emerging plans according to their stage of preparation. Emerging plans at consultative stage attract no or very limited weight. Plans which are further progressed attract more weight, with potentially significant weight will be placed on plans which have been submitted for examination or where the Inspector has reported, depending on the context.

We are at the consultative stage in the plan making process. As such I would not expect the recommended consultation to have in itself carry more than limited weight when determining future planning applications.

Supplementary Question

Just to be clear on that with any planning application that is currently going through the process right now then this proposed local plan update will have no weight with it then because it has not reached the consultation.

Supplementary Answer

It will be our adopted policies as they stand right now.

64. LOCAL PLAN UPDATE: REVISED GROWTH STRATEGY

(Councillors John Halsall and Graham Howe declared personal interests in this item)

The Executive considered a report relating to the Local Plan Update which was the document that would guide how development would be managed in most circumstances.

During his introduction the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement drew the meeting's attention to the extensive consultation process that was to be carried out, which would start on 22 November 2021, and was outlined in the report. This included the fact that anyone registered on the existing Planning Policy consultation database and other information databases would be notified about the consultation. In addition, all households in the Borough would receive 'postcard' notification of the consultation, including details of the six engagement events; some of which would be held in person and others virtually.

Councillor Smith highlighted the extensive work undertaken by Officers to try and find brownfield sites within the Borough that could be used for housing. Some of those sites that they did manage to find were currently used for employment purposes and the owners of these sites were not willing to give them up for housing as they were more valuable to them for employment. Giving the difficulty finding available and suitable brownfield sites Councillor Smith urged residents to come forward if they knew of any such sites that the Council had not previously looked at.

As stated earlier in the meeting Councillor Smith confirmed that the end date of the consultation would now be 24th January 2022.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the Local Plan Update: Revised Growth Strategy consultation document (as set out in enclosure 1 to the report) be agreed for consultation;
- 2) the consultation framework, as set out in the report, be agreed;
- 3) that minor changes to the content of the Local Plan Update: Revised Growth Strategy consultation document, and the production of studies and materials produced to support the consultation, be delegated to the Director of Place and Growth in consultation with the Executive Member for Planning and Enforcement.