

## **REPORT ON LOCAL PLAN REVIEW(LPR)**

The examination of the Local Plan by the Inspector has now dealt with the proposed NE Thatcham development(SP17) of most interest to Bucklebury. This report has drawn upon comments from our planning consultant, Andrew Black, Cllr Peter Spours and myself who, along with Andrew and supporting transport and ecology specialists, attended the public hearings on SP17.

As a reminder let me refresh you with the tests of soundness of the LPR the Inspector applies. The LP is assessed for positive preparation, justification(is it an appropriate strategy taking account of reasonable alternatives),effective(is it deliverable) and is it consistent with national policy.

The following topics relating to SP17 were considered by the Inspector:

### **Reasonable alternatives and West Berkshire Strategic Vision**

We reiterated the point that the TSGS(Thatcham Strategic Growth Study)was paid for by the developers and reasonable alternatives not considered properly.

### **Transport infrastructure**

Our transport consultant did a very good job on showing how impact on Bucklebury / Cold Ash had simply not been assessed - despite council saying there was limited impact.

- The council are simply obtuse about the true impact that the development would have on traffic through the villages.
- Some significant ambiguity on what was being provided on this point. Talk of a shuttle bus from the development, although evidence shows there would likely be little take up, but not properly costed.
- Further ambiguity on how / when this would be provided.

### **Education infrastructure**

Further evidence of funding gap. For a secondary school developers will only offer the land and a financial contribution at 1,500 homes and trying to use this as leverage for a higher number of units as that would deliver larger school to which they would offer 50% of the cost.

- No evidence of timing for delivery, size of site, location, funding for other 50% from council
- A proposal was mooted for a 6<sup>th</sup> Form centre for Kennet School on the site which would relieve pupil over-capacity on current site.
- Two Primary Schools are proposed.

### **Health care infrastructure**

- The developers showed their hand in wanting this off site rather on site as SP17 for 1500 homes would not big enough to warrant a new GP practice.
- Again unclear on timings, funding, location etc.

## **Landscape and green infrastructure**

- A fair amount of discussion on AONB and impact.
- Further ambiguity from council about status of land outside of development boundary but helpful that if the council did find the plan sound the Inspector would consider a modification to make it clear that this was green infrastructure.
- Also further submissions from us that now development boundary is fixed as part of the modification for the map for SP17 that the rest of land should be designated as green gap (this is what the plan says should happen.) Council dithered on this point saying more work required ( can't see what that would be). Inspector said he would think on this point.
- Also no costings in viability on how this land would be created / managed.

## **Biodiversity**

- We pointed out the lack of any survey work and consideration of impact by the council.
- No significant information offered from council. Developers said required biodiversity net gain of 10% would be achieved on site.

## **Flood risk and surface water**

Again, further ambiguity on work undertaken on this and how it would be costed/paid for.

- Further gap revealed in developers' assumptions on sewage treatment work. A sewage treatment plant capable of handling SP17 will need to be operational before any SP17 house is occupied. The developers say that Thames Water (who are massively financially challenged) will pay and have not allowed for this.

## **Masterplanning and Thatcham Strategic Growth Study**

Some detailed discussion on this point.

- Council said that they see masterplanning coming forward first then a planning application once agreed - however this not within the wording of LP or proposed modifications.
- Developers said they would bring forward masterplan as part of a planning application in a 'collaborative' way and that they were aiming for submission by end of year. Delivery of houses to start in 2029/30. Multiple representations to the Inspector queried this over-ambitious trajectory.
- TSGS again mentioned by the developers as basis for masterplan and site which we are very uncomfortable with.
- Inspector to come back on the points on this.

## **Viability and delivery**

Lack of evidence from developers and council that 1,500 units would be deliverable within the plan period which is a key test.

- Lack of costing on key matters and co-ordination of infrastructure delivery.

### **Policies map**

Detailed discussions on settlement boundary. Council suggested this could be set after application submitted / determined which would not be acceptable.

- Inspector to think about how best to deal with this through modifications.

### **North East Thatcham map**

As above. Area of green infrastructure in main modification to LP very unclear on how this will be defined and controlled. Inspector to consider.

### **Strategic Gap**

The council had reviewed all the listed strategic gaps between settlements in West Berks .All had been reaffirmed save that between Upper Bucklebury and Thatcham. The need for this strategic gap will now be revisited by the council.

### **Summary**

The developers were very clear that 2500 homes were needed for SP17 to be economically viable. The council has relied upon work done by the developers with little financial analysis, especially over the impact of the council's decision to reduce the number of SP17 houses in the LP to 1500.The Inspector reminded the hearing on several occasions he was examining the LP for 1500 houses.

A significant number of ambiguities and unresolved issues on SP17 arose during the hearing. It will be for the Inspector to determine the implications and relevance of these and their bearing on the plan before him.

Andrew Black's analysis of where we are is:

There can only be three outcomes from the process.

1. The inspector finds the plan sound as submitted. Highly unlikely given what he has heard and the modifications suggested by the council. It would then still be up to council to vote for adoption of the plan.
2. The inspector finds the plan unsound - in which case the council would be left with having to start again. The report would set out the detailed areas where the plan is unsound and it would be for the council to address these as part of a new plan submission which is likely to take some time.

3. The inspector finds the plan sound subject to significant modification and likely an update of evidence base including the Sustainability Appraisal. This would then require consultation and final adoption by council .

Barry Dickens      Chairman Bucklebury Parish Council