



LAURA FARRIS MP

Member of Parliament for Newbury

Councillor Lynne Doherty
Leader
West Berkshire Council
Market Street
Newbury
RG14 5LD

Dear Lynne,

I am writing to you following a public meeting that I held at the Bucklebury Memorial Hall on 31 August to discuss constituents' concerns about the proposed North East Thatcham allocation in the emerging draft Local Plan.

Whilst fully acknowledging that as an MP I have no special powers to influence local planning decisions, I must say from the outset of this letter that I was struck by the strength of feeling from those who attended my public meeting and who wrote to me in advance of the meeting to express their concerns about the proposed North East Thatcham allocation. As their Member of Parliament, I want to accurately reflect their views to you within this letter, with many of which I agree.

The majority of constituents who have written to me about the proposed allocation for up to 2,500 homes at North East Thatcham in West Berkshire Council's Local Plan Review 2020-2037: Emerging Draft (Policy SP 17: North East Thatcham Strategic Site Allocation) have made clear that they do not wish to see any housing allocated to this site. This was the overriding view expressed on the night. They are virtually unanimous that this is an important site for West Berkshire residents - and one which should remain as undeveloped greenfield land.

There is also a view, which I share, that the Council should reconsider whether the housing target set out in the emerging Draft Local Plan is excessively high. A range of 520 to 575 dwellings per annum is currently presented (which equates to a target range of between 8,840 and 9,775 dwellings over the course of the Local Plan period). On top of this upper target range of 9,775 dwellings, there are also additional dwellings allocated for within the emerging Draft Local Plan - over and above the current 9,775 Council target - which equates to more than the 10% 'buffer' required by the Government. Constituents and I therefore question if too many houses are being allocated in the current emerging Draft Local Plan.

Notwithstanding this, I also recognise the inherent pressure that West Berkshire is under - and the housing allocation obligations which it must fulfil - and I have said I will go and speak to the new Housing Secretary, Michael Gove, at the earliest opportunity to discuss this.

I set out below the other key points that were raised on the night:

1. Constituents wish to see brownfield land use maximised and they raised the potential adaptation of vacant commercial properties given the post-pandemic change in working patterns. They said that the projected number of dwellings achievable via future windfall sites seems underplayed in the current version of the emerging Local Plan.

2. There was a strong belief that alternative sites, or combinations of sites, could be selected as allocations in the final draft Local Plan which would avoid the serious impact on the rural character of this part of the constituency. They are particularly concerned that the proposed North East Thatcham allocation is perceived to have been considered in much more detail than other sites, such as Colthrop, which would reportedly provide a bridge to solve the long-standing problem of lengthy delays at the level-crossing.

3. There was a concern that the evidence base was flawed. Residents do not believe the bulk of new traffic would use the A4 accessed via Floral Way. They pointed to the fact that back routes through Cold Ash (to the A34) and Bucklebury (to the M4) are already well-established and frequently used alternatives at busy times. The proposed number of houses could place an unsustainable burden on these roads, which are not designed for such traffic volumes. They are firmly of the opinion that the current emerging draft Local Plan would be found to be unsound in its current state without SP 17 being removed as an allocation. They believe that a detailed Traffic Assessment of the wider rural road network should be undertaken to assess traffic safety implications. They also wish to see a detailed assessment of the impact such a proposed allocation would have on the existing long wait times for vehicles to cross the Thatcham railway line crossing.

4. Further, without a detailed traffic assessment of the wider rural road network, constituents feel it will also be impossible to understand the proposed allocation's urbanising impact on the rural character of the affected surrounding villages. Roads through these villages are ill-suited to additional traffic, being rural, single carriageway roads, with some blind bends, often lacking footpaths. Such potential urbanisation of surrounding villages has the potential to irreversibly change their character and constituents therefore ask that these effects be fully assessed before any allocations in the eventual draft Local Plan are finalised.

5. Concerned constituents are also sceptical of the Council's ability to secure their 'wish list' of infrastructure requirements, as set out in Policy SP 17. One of the primary aims of building on this greenfield site on the edge of an AONB is that it is essential for the necessary regeneration of Thatcham. Constituents consider assurances over infrastructure in the current evidence base to be unreliable, however. The lack of a cohesive Infrastructure Delivery Plan exacerbates the mistrust and scepticism over this point, including concerns over flooding impacts and education provision. They note, for example, that a new secondary school is only promised to be fully built out in Phase 4 of the scheme (and therefore question what certainty there can be that it will come to fruition). Constituents also cite the lack of infrastructure that Thatcham has seen over the last 20 years and believe it imperative that a full analysis is undertaken

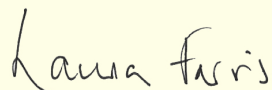
to better understand why. Wherever strategic housing allocations are made, it is vital that there is certainty that infrastructure will come on stream when needed.

6. Constituents also made powerful points about their wish to protect this treasured greenfield site in order to safeguard the nearby AONB, Ancient Woodland and ecosystems for future generations. They are keen for more work to be undertaken to understand how valuable the site is in providing a green lung for Thatcham residents; and how widely appreciated the site and surrounding villages are by people from much further afield and across the wider constituency.

7. Underpinning all of this is a fundamental perception that the Council did not undertake an adequate consultation with them. Residents are keen to ensure that future consultations involve a larger cross-section of society. I would like to know if external expert support could be commissioned by the Council to maximise future engagement. Given the level of concern on this point, I also wonder whether there is scope for a new round of consultation to be held prior to the eventual consultation on the draft Local Plan. In any event, I would urge the Council to continue to consider ways to deepen their engagement with residents across the constituency so that there is confidence in any final Local Plan.

I believe this fully reflects the concerns that have been raised with me about the proposed North East Thatcham allocation in the emerging Draft Local Plan - and I respectfully request that these are fully considered by the Council.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laura Farris". The script is cursive and fluid.

Laura Farris MP