

NEW LOCAL PLAN – CONSULTATION DRAFT

Cabinet Member: Councillor David Johncock

Wards Affected: All

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PROPOSED DECISION

That:

- (i) the Council publish a Draft Local Plan for public consultation purposes commencing at the end of June 2016 for a six week period; and
- (ii) delegated authority be granted to the Head of Planning and Sustainability in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Sustainability and the Leader to agree the detailed consultation document.

Reason for Decision

To enable the public and stakeholders to input into the emerging Local Plan and help shape it before it is finalised towards the end of the year.

Corporate Implications

1. The Local Plan is prepared under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (2004) (as amended). The detailed regulations for preparing a Local Plan are set out in the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations (2012) (as amended). The preparation of this consultation draft Local Plan is not a statutory stage in itself but forms part of the wider public and stakeholder engagement on preparing the plan as part of Regulation 18 of the 2012 regulations.
2. The budget for the preparation of the Local Plan was agreed at Cabinet in March 2016. This consultation is included within that budget. The draft plan includes a number of sites that are in the Council's ownership (and many more that are not) that would have financial implications for the Council also.
3. There are a wide range of risks associated with preparing the Local Plan including the risk of the plan being found unsound following the examination stage. Undertaking the consultation stage will help in highlighting key issues and concerns about the Plan and help address those risks in advance of finalising the Plan.

Executive Summary

4. This report seeks agreement to consult on a draft Local Plan to enable the public and stakeholders the opportunity to help shape the plan before it is finalised by the end of the year. Building on the main Local Plan options

consultation from 2014, the draft plan will include proposals for addressing the housing and economic development needs of the District whilst attaching great weight to the Chilterns AONB and the Green Belt. The plan will propose that around 10,000 homes be provided within the District out of the 15,000 needed in total and that the remaining 5,000 homes of the District's needs would be provided in the Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan. Around half the homes would be provided on brownfield sites. Only limited developed is proposed in the AONB in carefully assessed locations and only limited amounts of land are proposed to be released from the Green Belt to help meet housing and economic development needs as a result of the Green Belt review process. The consultation will take place from late June until early August including a number of drop-in sessions focused on those areas of the District most affected by the proposals.

Sustainable Community Strategy/Council Priorities - Implications

5. The draft Local Plan is seeking to bring forward sustainable growth of the district in line with the Corporate Plan's objective of sustainably regenerating the area. A key objective of the Plan is focusing on bringing forward the infrastructure provision to support that growth in line with the current emphasis on ensuring that new development is supported by the right infrastructure. The extensive engagement with the community and stakeholders in the preparation of the draft plan, and this proposed consultation is in accordance with the "People" priority of the Corporate Plan which focuses on engaging and working with our communities. The Plan will include a long term vision building on the objectives/aspirations set out in the Sustainable Communities Strategy.

Background and Issues

6. In February – April 2014 the Council undertook a major consultation on the Options for the new Local Plan. This put forward a wide range of options to address the much higher level of housing need identified. A wide range of responses to the options consultation was received and are taken account in this plan where possible.
7. Since that consultation an extensive amount of work has been undertaken to take forward the plan. This has included a range of technical studies, often undertaken jointly with other local authorities in Buckinghamshire as part of joint working under the "Duty to Cooperate" – the mechanism now in place nationally to deal with strategic planning issues in the absence of regional plans. Key areas of work have included:
 - A joint Bucks-wide study to identify the appropriate Housing Market Area and Functional Economic Market Area – i.e. to identify the right geography for determine housing and economic requirements;
 - A joint Bucks Housing and Economic Development Needs Assessment – following on from the above study;
 - A joint Bucks-wide Gypsy and Traveller Needs Assessment and updates to it;

- Preparation of a Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment following a joint Bucks-wide agreed methodology;
- A joint Bucks-wide Green Belt Assessment and subsequent second stage of work to test potential areas of Green Belt land for the developability where they are relatively weakly performing against the purposes of the Green Belt.
- Joint traffic modelling of growth across Buckinghamshire.

This and other work has been shared with Members and stakeholders at appropriate times to keep people up to date with progress on the Plan.

8. The key issues arising from this work are:

- The housing need for Wycombe District over the period 2013-33 is currently assessed to be 15,100 homes – significantly higher than the figures available when the Options consultation took place in 2014 when the figures were around 11,000 – 12,000 homes (2011-31). This increase is due primarily to changes in the Government methodology for assessing housing need. Across the whole of Buckinghamshire (recognised now as the “best fit “for the housing market area based on local authority boundaries) the need is around 50,000 homes over the same period;
- The Green Belt around the County, and including Wycombe District, is important and generally performing the purposes intended of Green Belt. There are only limited opportunities arising from the work undertaken to help meet the needs without causing significant harm to the Green Belt;
- The overall assessment of potential housing sites, having explored all the reasonable alternatives, identifies scope for around 10,000 homes in Wycombe District in the period 2013-33, although further work is required to firm up this figure before the plan is finalised;
- This leaves a shortfall of around 5,000 homes that cannot be met within the District;
- There is only limited scope for new employment land provision due to the scale of the forecast demand, planning and environmental constraints, and the wider picture of employment provision across the functional economic market area (i.e. Bucks).

9. The joint working on the evidence base for the Local Plan has formed part of the ongoing Duty to Cooperate discussions with the other Buckinghamshire authorities. It is clear that across the county area, the three southern districts of Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe will not be able to meet all of their needs within their own administrative areas due to the planning and environmental constraints in those areas, primarily Green Belt and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Discussions have resulted in an agreement in principle through a “Memorandum of Understanding” for Aylesbury Vale to accommodate “unmet needs” from the south of the county. However this is being tested and the detailed “numbers” have yet to be agreed at this stage

until further work is undertaken. This further work will also include an update to the Housing and Economic Development Needs Assessment to take account of more recent demographic information and economic forecasts.

10. The authorities are preparing a "Position Statement" which, based on information at the time, will indicate the potential distribution of growth across the four Districts. This will help inform Duty to Cooperate discussions with authorities outside of Buckinghamshire as well as provide an informed basis for the consultation not only on the Draft Wycombe District Local Plan but also the Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan that is due to be published for consultation at a similar time.
11. The report to the Council's Cabinet in March 2016 set out a new timetable for the preparation of the Local Plan and the related but separate Princes Risborough Town Plan. This timetable for preparing the main Local Plan is quicker than before by some 8 months to respond to the Ministerial Statements requiring Councils to produce a local plan by "early 2017". It involves the Council agreeing the "publication" version of the Plan in December 2016, the plan being published for formal consultation in January-February 2017, and being submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for its subsequent examination in March 2017.
12. The work on the evidence, the progress made with Duty to Cooperate discussions, and the tightening of the timetable nationally to "get a plan in place" means it is the right time to draw together the current thinking on the content of the new Local Plan in the shape of a draft plan. There is a statutory requirement to produce a plan that is positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policies (S.20 planning Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 as amended), and although this does not require the production of a consultation draft plan at this stage, it is considered appropriate to do this to share with the public and stakeholders the direction that the plan is taking and to seek input prior to the plan being formally published and submitted for examination. Once the formal publication stage is reached the Local Plan Regulations restrict the ability the Council to change the Plan, so it is right to "test" the plan before that statutory stage is reached.
13. Appendix A summarises the main elements of what the draft plan contains. However delegated authority is sought for the Head of Planning and Sustainability, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Sustainability and the Leader, to agree the detailed plan for consultation.
14. Key points to note about the draft plan are:
 - It proposes a housing target for Wycombe District of around 10,000 homes for the period 2013-33, subject to the outcome of further work;
 - Around half of those 10,000 homes in Wycombe District would still be on brownfield sites;
 - It assumes around a further 5,000 homes would be accommodated in the Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan under the Duty to Cooperate;

- The need for some limited amount of Green Belt land to be released for homes and economic development where there are exceptional circumstances for re-drawing the Green Belt boundary. The amount of Green Belt proposed to be allocated for new homes and economic development would amount to around 0.5% of all the Green Belt land in the District – the vast majority of the Green Belt would remain in place and protected;
 - The Chilterns AONB would be protected by attaching great weight to its significance with only a limited amount of development in the AONB, and only in specifically tested locations where the impact on the special Chilterns landscape is considered acceptable;
 - Over half of the homes would be provided in the High Wycombe area (including on the reserve sites), and around a quarter at Princes Risborough through the Princes Risborough Town Plan;
 - It proposes additional employment land at Wycombe Air Park, but does not include proposals for a “Junction 3A” due to ongoing work with Highways England.
15. The draft plan also includes draft policies for the “reserve sites” which will complement the emerging development briefs for the sites. In the absence of planning permissions for the sites, it is appropriate for the plan to set down the key requirements for them.
16. The draft plan does not include any detailed proposals at Princes Risborough as these are included in the draft Princes Risborough Town Plan which was the subject of an extensive consultation in February – March this year. The intention was to take the final version of that Plan for agreement to Cabinet in June also. However in order to respond to issues arising from the consultation, including in relation to the new road infrastructure for the town, further work is being undertaken which means it is not possible to finalise this plan yet.

Consultation

17. Extensive consultation took place on the options for the plan in 2014, the proposal to release the reserve sites later in 2014, and further sharing of the emerging new evidence base has taken place since then.
18. The report recommends that the draft plan is published for public consultation commencing towards the end of June, probably the 27th June. The consultation would then run until 8th August. The intention is to hold a number of “drop-in” exhibitions around the District to help explain the plan’s proposals. These will be focused on the areas where greatest change is proposed and will be programmed for the first two weeks of July to ensure they take place before the start of the school summer holidays. The approach suggested is consistent with the Council’s Statement of Community Involvement – the document that sets out how people can get involved in the planning process.

Options

19. The main options are:
 1. To not publish a consultation draft plan but progress straight to the formal publication and submission of the Plan for its examination;
 2. To publish a consultation draft plan before finalising the plan.
20. Option 1 is feasible under the Local Plan Regulations but would mean that the public and stakeholders would have no exposure to the Council's thinking on the content of the plan before it is published and submitted for examination. This would mean that there would be no opportunity for them to influence the content of the plan because once formally published the Council cannot materially change the plan. Failure to consult at this stage could also mean that there may be technical issues that need resolving that could not be flagged up (e.g. by technical consultees) until it is effectively too late. This results in a greater risk of the plan being found unsound or the Duty to Co-operate not being complied with.
21. Option 2, whilst introducing an additional stage into the process, reduces the risks associated with Option 1 and is the recommended option. It also will act as a focus for Duty to Co-operate discussions with other authorities, particularly those outside of Bucks.

Conclusions

22. For the reasons set out in this report it is recommended that a consultation draft plan is published for public consultation purposes commencing at the end of June. This plan will set out the Council's emerging thinking on the plan to "test" with the public and stakeholders prior to finalising the plan.

Next Steps

23. Once the consultation is complete the responses will be analysed and the final version of the Plan for publication and submission for examination by an independent planning inspector will be prepared. Duty to Cooperate agreements will also need to be put in place with relevant authorities and agencies whilst finalising the Plan. The intention then is to:
 - Agree the publication version of the Plan at Cabinet and Council in December 2016;
 - Undertake a statutory six week consultation on the published Plan in January and February 2017;
 - Submit the Plan, all the associated evidence, and the representations received to the Planning Inspectorate in March 2017 for examination;
 - The examination hearing will then determine the timing of an examination – this could be around the summer of 2017.

- Aim to adopt the Plan by the end of 2017, subject to the outcome of the examination.

Background Papers

New Local Plan Issues and Options Consultation Document February 2014

Options Consultation feedback report (October 2014)