

CONSIDERATION OF THE PETITION - RISBOROUGH AREA RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION: BETTER TOWN PLAN FOR PRINCES RISBOROUGH & SURROUNDING AREAS

Cabinet Member: Councillor David Johncock

Ward Affected: The Risboroughs and surrounding wards

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PROPOSED DECISION

The Council thanks the residents of Princes Risborough for the petition and Cabinet note its contents.

Reason for Decision

Cabinet is required to consider the petition under the Council's Petition Scheme.

Corporate Implications

1. Standing Order 9 of the Council Procedure Standing Orders sets out the Council's rules for dealing with petitions.
2. In accordance with these rules, petitions with between 1,501 and 7,999 signatures are referred to Cabinet for response.

Executive Summary

3. A petition was handed in at April's Full Council meeting entitled "Risborough Area Residents Association: Better Town Plan for Princes Risborough & Surrounding Areas". The Chairman indicated at that meeting that the petition would be validated against the Council's Petitions Scheme and that all Members of the Council would be informed outside of the meeting how the petition would be administered once the validation had taken place.
4. The Council consulted on a draft Town Plan for Princes Risborough in February 2016. The next stage of the Town Plan will be incorporated into the District Wide Local Plan. A formal decision on the final content will be made by Cabinet and Council in the summer of 2017.
5. The draft Town Plan sets out a major expansion to the town, increasing the town from – in broad terms – its current 3,500 homes, to over 6,000 homes, over a period of about 20 years. The draft Town Plan includes an infrastructure strategy that provides for green space and sports pitches, new primary schools, land to relocate one of the town's doctor's surgeries, a new road to relieve the existing A4010, improvements to the town centre, and other improvements.

Sustainable Community Strategy/Council Priorities - Implications

6. The Plan is seeking to bring forward sustainable growth of the District in line with the Corporate Plan's objective of sustainably regenerating the area.
7. The Princes Risborough Town Plan is a sustainable approach to delivering the housing needs of Wycombe District. The District is heavily constrained by Green Belt and the Chiltern's Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The area to the north west of Princes Risborough is outside of these designations. It will allow the town to grow (there has been no significant housing growth in Princes Risborough since the 1970's), and will help to support the town centre and other town facilities, as well as providing new infrastructure to benefit the town.
8. Other options to accommodate some or all of the proposed growth at Princes Risborough would be less sustainable, as is set out below.

Validation

9. The validation has taken place and as there are 3,758 signatures the Council's response to the petition is set out as either:
 - (1) Referral to Cabinet (as it comes within the band of 1,501 – 7,999 signatures); or
 - (2) A full Council debate (for local issues that only affect one ward this requires 500 signatures, which need to be from the ward affected)
10. In accordance with the provisions of the Council's Petitions Scheme, the Head of Democratic, Legal and Policy Services has considered the petition wording and, in summary, considered that it would impact on more than one ward.
11. The petition has therefore been referred to this Cabinet meeting for discussion.

Wording of the Petition

12. The petition states:

"Wycombe District Council is proposing that Princes Risborough expands by more than 2,600 houses as part of their Local Plan, with vague, deficient and divisive infrastructure recommendations. With current developments and plans for development in the area surrounding Princes Risborough, this number swells to over 3,200 homes.

"Risborough Area Residents Association (RARA) acknowledges the need for growth in the town, but is opposed to this scale of development. RARA believes that Princes Risborough deserves a better Town Plan, with lower housing numbers (e.g. 1000 – 1500 new homes) and more detailed and thought through infrastructure improvements that support a sustainable town and surrounding area.

"We, the undersigned, support RARA in their demand for a better Town Plan for Princes Risborough and surrounding area, and call on the Planning Inspector to:

- Force WDC to reconsider its plan for Princes Risborough, and propose a lower scale of development;
- Investigate better solutions for the Wycombe District that makes better use of available land;
- Fully consult with local residents on future proposals and act on their views and feedback.”

Petition signed by 3,758

Background and Issues

Consultation on the Draft Town Plan

13. Consultation took place on the Draft Town Plan for Princes Risborough in February 2016 for a 6 week period. This built on a number of exhibitions and consultation events that had been held during the preparation of the draft Plan – further information is given below.
14. At the start of the consultation period WDC sent a letter, with a leaflet, via Royal Mail, to all households in Princes Risborough and the surrounding area, to be to proactively ensure residents were aware of key proposals for the town. This set out the ways they could find out more information.
15. A stall was taken at the market, two exhibitions were held, one on a weekday evening, one on a Saturday, and a public meeting was also held. All events were very well attended, and allowed comments and feedback to be made, as well as allowing for questions to be answered by the planning team.
16. There was coverage in the Bucks Herald, the Bucks Free Press, and items on Mix 96, and an item on ‘Cross talk’, which is the newsletter produced by the Town Council that is distributed to all households.
17. There was a good response to the consultation. 367 people and organisations sent in comments. The summary of these comments was published in November 2016, and has been available on the Council’s website since then.
18. The main themes from the consultation were:
 - Scale of growth proposed with differing views depending on whether it was the public responding or other interests;
 - Whether economic needs of the town would be met whether the needs of additional commuters would be catered for;
 - Views on the need for a relief road;
 - Impact of development on other infrastructure including schools, health and public transport;
 - Environmental concerns including loss of countryside and flood risk.
19. The draft Princes Risborough Town Plan is now being incorporated into the District-wide Local Plan. Statutory consultation will take place for a further 6 weeks once the Plan has been approved by Cabinet and Council, which is likely to be in the summer of this year. The plan is then submitted to Government for examination, along with all comments received at that stage.

Content of the draft Town Plan

20. 'Place making' has been central to the preparation of the draft Town Plan. This means ensuring that what gets built are communities where people can enjoy living their lives, as an integral part of the town, rather than barren housing estates, isolated from other communities and facilities they need.
21. From the start the 'Crowbrook Stream' has been seen as an important feature, along which a linear park will be established. This has the additional benefit of providing a green setting for the existing hamlet of Alscot, which is a Conservation Area – an area protected because of its historic buildings, and for the two areas on the stream that are important to wildlife, one towards Mill Lane, and the other at Longwick Bog.
22. Local areas for play will be included within the residential areas, and sports pitches provided alongside the B4009 – to separate Princes Risborough and Longwick – and to the north of Mill Lane.
23. A network of green infrastructure, for wildlife, for recreation, and to provide undeveloped areas within the new area of housing, has been built into the plan. Most of the existing hedges will be kept, and tree planting will be included in the residential areas. The two existing footpaths that run from the railway out to the B4009, parallel to the Longwick Road, are to be retained as 'green lanes' for off-road cycling and walking, and a new 'twin-track trail' – again for walking and cycling – is proposed alongside the railway. This will also be used to provide access to the railway when the dual track is laid.
24. Ensuring that there are good connections between the existing town and the expansion area has also been key to the plan. The current level crossing from Wades Park to Park Mill Farm, which is on an embankment, will be replaced by a wide and generous underpass, for both pedestrians and cyclists. Improvements will be made for pedestrians and cyclists to the existing underbridges, and the proposed new road will ensure the residents of the expansion area can easily gain access to the station. A new town bus service, extending out to Longwick, and serving the town centre and station, will also help to connect the town together.
25. A new road, as an alternative to the current A4010, is proposed, which will allow heavy goods vehicles to be taken out of the town centre. This will provide scope to improve the town centre for shoppers, and help the town centre to remain competitive. Additional parking will also help with this.
26. Two new primary schools are proposed, and funds would be available for secondary school provision, and provide land to allow for one of the doctor's surgeries to move into the expansion area, should they wish to.
27. Land for new businesses, or for existing businesses to relocate, is also being provided in the Plan.
28. More detailed information on aspects of the Plan are given below.

Housing numbers

29. The Town Plan is focusing on establishing a major urban extension to Princes Risborough, that nearly doubles the size of the town, from around 3,500 homes to over 6,000 homes. Up to 2500 homes are being proposed in the expansion area. However, not all these homes will be built in the period that the Local Plan

covers (to 2033). The number given in the Local Plan when it is published later this year will therefore be below 2,500 for the expansion area.

30. It will take between 10-20 years to build out the expansion area. The detail about how many houses will be built when is still under review, but the general rule of thumb is that once construction starts, each housebuilders looks to build about 60 homes a year. Infrastructure will need to be delivered 'in step' with the homes as they come forward.
31. 40% of the homes in the expansion area will be expected to be affordable – that means built by housing associations, or offered on 'part rent / part buy' schemes. A 'community land trust' is also a means of providing affordable housing. The plan is looking to include a trust, which can offer its homes to local people.
32. There are other sites in Princes Risborough that will be allocated for housing in the Local Plan, that have been built recently or that have planning permission. This is expected to provide around 300 additional homes, within the plan period – although this figure will fluctuate a little as actual planning applications are considered, and 'windfall' developments come forward. (Windfall developments are those that take place on small sites that are not individually identified in the plan).
33. The petition states 'more than 2,600 for Princes Risborough', which is broadly accurate.
34. Longwick is also taking new development. The new Local Plan allocates 300 to the village, and 209 of this already has planning permission, including a site lost on appeal for 160 homes.
35. The Kimbles are also being asked to take 160 homes over the lifetime of the plan.
36. The petition states that there will be more than 3,200 homes in "the area surrounding Princes Risborough". Assuming this includes Longwick and the Kimbles, taking into account recent permissions and the allocations in the Local Plan, and taking the full amount of the expansion area, not just that within the plan period, just under 3,200 would be built.

Schools

37. The Council has worked closely with Buckinghamshire County Council, which is responsible for seeing that the new places are provided.
38. The scale of development triggers the need for two new primary schools, each of 2 classes per year (known as 'forms of entry', or FE). Since the proposed expansion area falls into two main neighbourhoods, (north and south of the Crowbrook), the Local Plan is identifying that one of the schools needs to be located to the south of the Longwick Road, and the other in the northern neighbourhood.

39. The plan will require these schools to be provided by the developers, through a 's.106' agreement – a legal agreement that forms part of a planning permission, which is used to secure site specific infrastructure.
40. Secondary school places will also be needed. The plan identifies the need for two new forms of entry at Princes Risborough School, and more grammar school places. The new places will be funded by a mixture of grant from the Department for Education, and from Wycombe District Council's Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). CIL is a tariff set on new development and allows the Council to collect funds over a longer period and for a wider range of uses than a s.106 agreement.

Doctors Surgeries

41. The Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) advises that the expansion of the town does not result in the need for additional GP accommodation. However, the Council understands that there is some interest by the existing GPs surgeries to relocate and discussions in relation to this are ongoing. CIL funds could be used to contribute to the provision of a new GP facility. Disposal of the existing surgery sites is unlikely to generate any substantial funds to help to fund a new facility.

Parks and Green Space

42. The masterplan for the expansion of Princes Risborough includes a park along the Crowbrook, which flows from Mill Lane west through the expansion area. This incorporates two areas identified as important for nature conservation. The plan also allows for 25ha of open space which includes allotments, play areas, club houses with changing facilities, 6 playing pitches and 4 tennis courts.
43. The existing footpaths in the area will be kept, as 'green lanes' – off-road cycle and walking routes, to encourage walking and cycling for every day travel and for recreation. A further walking and cycling route is proposed along the north side of the railway. This has been dubbed the 'twin track trail', because it will allow for access to the railway line when in due course Network Rail needs to provide a second track on this railway.

Roads

44. To distribute the traffic from the town expansion effectively, a new road is proposed through the expansion area, connecting to the A4010 south of the town, and at the Grove Lane junction at Kimble. This road will be at 30 or 40mph through the area of new housing, as appropriate to an urban environment. It is not a dual carriageway.
45. The plan is requiring the costs of this road to be met by the developers. It will include improvements to the railway bridges over the road at Summerleys Road and Grove Lane to make them fit for future traffic.
46. The provision of the new road introduces the opportunity to calm and civilise traffic through the town centre, making it safer and more attractive.

47. The existing road network at Risborough is already very busy at peak times – particularly the ‘Tesco roundabout’. Widening the road through the town would be difficult and not consistent with the local vision for a people-friendly town centre. It would also not provide the town with long term resilience – particularly important as the A4010 is a ‘blue light’ route.

Rail

48. The plan makes provision to ‘future proof’ the future dual-tracking of the existing single track rail between Princes Risborough and Aylesbury, by safeguarding land to the north of the line.
49. We are working with Network Rail to secure the provision of an underpass under the railway at Wades Park to make sure that the new expansion is better connected to the existing town. The underpass will be designed to be broad and attractive; as people use it to go to and fro from the town centre, the Wades Park area will become busier and feel safer.
50. The plan therefore contains clear proposals for infrastructure, that meet the needs of the new development, and by complementing existing facilities in the town, bring benefits to new residents.

Steering Group and Engagement

51. Local consultation has been at the heart of this project. The Council has a long standing track record of going well beyond the statutory minimum, and aiming to follow ‘best practice’, in terms of community engagement on planning policy matters.
52. The Town Council was interested in preparing a Neighbourhood Plan, but it would not have conformed to the adopted District policies, and so was not appropriate. The District Council has confirmed to the Town Council that it will receive 25% of the CIL generated by the development in the town, as it would have done had it been able to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan. (CIL is the Community Infrastructure Levy, which developers pay to the District Council to fund infrastructure)
53. Because the Town Council could not prepare a Neighbourhood Plan, the District Council invited the Town Council to establish and chair a steering group – to be in effect the client for the project. The first meeting of this group was in June 2015. The notes of the meetings are available on the WDC website.
54. The Steering Group has representatives from the main groups of the town, such as RARA, RAP and the business group. The membership of the group is a matter for the Steering Group to decide. When new members have joined the group, they have been given full briefings by Council staff, and by the Chairman, to ensure that they are ‘brought up to speed’ so that they can play a full part in the discussion.
55. It has met frequently, on a whole range of issues. Some of the meetings were wider workshops to which other key stakeholders – such as the County Council – were invited.

56. Over 15 Steering Group meetings have been held, along with a number of whole day workshops, exploring different issues such as housing, the new road, viability and wider infrastructure needs, as well as sessions to scrutinise the content of the emerging plan.
57. The Steering Group has established a number of sub-groups, including on Transport, which has also met regularly, with an officer of WDC and an officer of the County Council normally attending as well.
58. In addition to the Steering Group, there have been wider public exhibitions and public meetings, which have always been well attended. The exhibition material and presentations from these events are all on the Council's website. The events included:
 - Drop-in event and public meeting during the January - March 2014 as part of the consultation on the District-wide new Local Plan Options consultation. This was the first time that significant expansion of the town was proposed.
 - Exhibition and questionnaire sharing some potential scenarios in September 2014
 - A public exhibition and town meeting in January 2015 – this was co-ordinated with Network Rail who held an exhibition on their proposals related to East West Rail at the same time.
 - A public exhibition, and a market stall, in July 2015 sharing the draft master plan for the expansion area.
 - In February-March 2016 we ran a major consultation exercise on the draft Town Plan for Princes Risborough, which is set out above.
59. In terms of the statutory requirements, in November/December 2015, we invited written responses on the formal Regulation 18 stage for the Risborough Town Plan. The next statutory stage is consultation prior to submitting the plan for examination. This is likely to be in the summer of 2017, although a formal decision on the next stages has not yet been made.

Wider context of housing growth.

60. The Government requires the Council to prepare a plan, in co-operation with surrounding local authorities. In the summer of 2016, the draft Local Plan identified that we needed to plan for about 15,000 homes to meet the needs of Wycombe District up 2033, with about 50,000 homes required across the whole of Buckinghamshire. In the summer of 2016 the Office of National Statistics issued new population and household projections. Revised estimates based on this information have reduced the number, to 12,900 for Wycombe, and 45,000 for Buckinghamshire as a whole.
61. Wycombe District does not have many options to accommodate this growth. Seventy-one per cent (71%) of the District falls within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), which has the same status as a National Park, in terms of protecting the landscape. Forty-eight (48%) of the District falls

within the Metropolitan Green Belt, which runs all the way round London. Local councils can only change Green Belt boundaries in exceptional circumstances, and only through the process of revising the Local Plan. The AONB boundary is set by the Government, and cannot be altered by WDC. Because these strong protections limit the opportunities for growth in the District, we cannot accommodate the full 12,900 homes in the District. In December 2016 we entered into an agreement with Aylesbury Vale District Council, that we would provide 11,200 homes, and they would accommodate 1,700, to meet the revised requirement of 12,900 homes.

62. We have had a thorough review of the scope for meeting housing needs within the District. Aylesbury Vale District Council has scrutinised this, to make sure we are not passing to them any more homes than is necessary. This has included:

- Assessing the scope for development on previously developed (“brownfield”) sites (in urban and rural areas), including on former employment land where appropriate – which will provide around 5,000 homes;
- Development of a number of larger greenfield sites in and around High Wycombe which were previously held in reserve for housing but have since been released – which will provide around 1750 homes;
- Reviewing the scope for removing areas of land from the Green Belt where it would not be significantly harmful to the purposes of the Green Belt – which could provide around 1,100 homes;
- Identifying the scope for development in the larger villages outside of the Green Belt but in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – which will provide a few hundred homes.

63. If we were to provide fewer homes at Princes Risborough, those homes would have to be accommodated elsewhere. The options include:

- Building more homes at the villages of Longwick and the Kimbles, as these areas are not within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or the Green Belt. However, these villages are already taking substantial expansion, and do not have the facilities that Princes Risborough has.

Longwick is allocated 300 to the village: the Parish of Longwick has 560 homes. Longwick village has 449 homes. To accommodate 300 new homes means the village is accepting development on a similar scale to that being proposed at Princes Risborough.

The Kimbles is allocated 160 homes: the Parish has 438 homes. which is quite dispersed across a number of villages and hamlets, with Great Kimble and Smokey Row having 275 homes. This is not on quite the same scale as that of Longwick or Princes Risborough, but it is none the less a sizeable increase in population

- Taking more land out of the Green Belt. This is not an option if land is available for development that is not in the Green Belt
- Building more homes in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This would almost certainly result in 'major development' - national policy says we should not be looking to build 'major development' in the AONB if land is available outside of that protected landscape.
- Ask Aylesbury Vale District Council to take more. They will not do so if they believe there are legitimate development options within the District that have not been taken. In any event, if Aylesbury Vale District Council did take many more homes from us, or from other authorities, it may make their build rate simply too ambitious – they would be unable to build the homes each year that would be required. If this were the case, the Inspector examining the plan would not approve it, and their plan may fail.

Conclusion

64. The petition asks

- for a lower scale of development at Princes Risborough.

As is set out above, fewer homes at Risborough will require more homes to be provided elsewhere. AVDC is unlikely to be willing to take more homes: they would challenge why fewer homes would be provided at Princes Risborough. That would mean the homes have to be accommodated elsewhere in the District. The options include:

- looking for further sites outside of the AONB and Green Belt – such as at Longwick and the Kimbles – which are already taking considerable development
- taking further sites out of the Green Belt
- building more homes in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

There is a further option, that WDC puts a plan together that does not meet its objectively assessed housing need and where AVDC has not agreed to make up the whole gap. However, when the plan is being examined by the government appointed inspector, the inspector would require robust evidence as to why the Council cannot accommodate its housing need. The Council would not be able to advance such a case, and the plan would therefore fail its examination.

Without a plan the Council will not be able to control the location of development, and – as has happened in Longwick – speculative proposals will be submitted by developers on sites that may not be the most suitable, and the Council is likely to be unable to defend them on appeal. The Council would also be unable to secure significant infrastructure provision from the developments, putting further pressure on existing facilities.

- That WDC investigates better solutions that makes better use of available land;

All such investigations have been undertaken, and are documented in the 'Hearns' report, responding to AVDC challenge to the number of homes they were being asked to take.

- Fully consult with local residents and act on their views

This has been undertaken throughout the project, as set out above, and the RARA representative on the steering group has had a number of personal meetings with officers on key matters.

Consultation

65. Consultation on the draft Local Plan had been conducted.
66. A number of public exhibitions and meetings were held in advance of the draft Plan being made available for consultation.
67. To allow for more detailed discussion and scrutiny, a Steering Group was established. This is chaired by the Town Council and has representatives from a range of bodies from the town. It has met regularly.

Options

68. Cabinet has the following options:
 - a. Note the objections and accept them as a late representation on the Princes Risborough Town Plan and Local Plan consultations.
 - b. Note the objections but do not accept them as a late representation.

Recommendations

69. That the petition is noted.

Next Steps

70. The Council will work on publishing the plan for its statutory consultation as soon as possible.

Background Papers

Princes Risborough Town Plan – Draft Consultation Document February 2016

New Wycombe District Local Plan -Draft Consultation Document June 2016