

Question from Cllr Robin Stuchbury for the Cabinet meeting on 7 July 2020.

Following the “significant concerns” highlighted by the Inspector during the examination of the Chiltern and South Bucks Local Plan, and the ongoing delays and uncertainty surrounding the Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan – which looks less than likely to be a made plain in the foreseeable future, what will Buckinghamshire Council do by way of protecting Buckinghamshire from excessive development until plans are finally accepted by the inspector? We, Buckinghamshire council, re-engage with communities, including town and parish councils, to draw up new or improved local neighbourhood plans so they are fit for purpose in light of the pressures from outside the county, and the changing demand in housing which could arise now following the Covid 19 restriction. And will the Council be insuring that comprehensive engagement with other local authorities is carried out and undertaken so that unreasonable requests for Buckinghamshire to take on other local authority’s housing demands can be effectively rebuffed or curtailed?

Response

I’d like to thank Cllr Stuchbury for his question.

The Council will very soon be commencing the formal process of preparing the new Buckinghamshire Local Plan. This will provide us, for the first time, with County-wide coverage from a single Local Plan. However the new plan will not be adopted until 2025, so in the meantime our focus very much remains on securing up to date Local Plan coverage across the whole Council area. Having up to date plans is the single most important way of providing certainty to our residents and businesses and which is why I have highlighted these projects as one of my key priorities this year.

As you will know, the Wycombe area has an up-to-date local plan and the Aylesbury Local Plan (VALP), whilst delayed, is also in the final stages of examination. As a consequence, both the Wycombe and the Aylesbury Vale areas are able to demonstrate that they have more than five years’ supply of deliverable housing sites in accordance with Government policy. These measures help to protect communities from inappropriate and unsustainable development. The picture is slightly different in the Chiltern and South Bucks areas where the supply of available housing land equates to less than five years. However, here more than 87% of the land in is in the Green Belt where new housing and commercial development is generally held to be inappropriate.

We already have a number of town and parish Councils who have actively engaged in the planning process by preparing neighbourhood plans and we would support further approaches from town and parish councils interested in promoting some sustainable development in their areas. The preparation of neighbourhood plans is a very important part of the planning framework in Buckinghamshire and I am very happy to re-iterate the Council’s support for any town and parish council wishing to prepare a plan for their area. Following a recent update in Government guidance on neighbourhood planning in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, we are advising town and parish councils wishing to continue to prepare their neighbourhood plans to contact the relevant Planning Policy team for their area for detailed discussions.

Progress on neighbourhood plans continues to be made notwithstanding COVID-19. The Great and Little Kimble-cum-Marsh and Ickford Neighbourhood Plans are at their final stage pending referendums which cannot now be held until May 2021. Consequently, they can be given significant weight in decision-making insofar as the plans are material to a planning application. The Denham Neighbourhood Plan is also currently at pre-submission public consultation stage until 31 July.

In relation to neighbouring authorities, the Council is under a duty by law to have positive and ongoing dialogue with neighbouring councils in preparing our Local Plans. This is known as the 'duty to cooperate'. Therefore, as part of the preparations for the new Local Plan we are developing a strategy for how we respond to requests from neighbouring councils unable to meet the housing needs arising within their own administrative areas.

Our response to such requests will be to say that whilst we are happy to engage constructively, we will not be in a position to discuss our ability to meet development needs arising in other areas until the preparation of the Buckinghamshire Local Plan is at a more advanced stage and relevant evidence has been prepared. We will however be reminding any such Council that in the preparation of the current round of Local Plans, there was no evidence of additional capacity to accommodate housing needs from outside of Buckinghamshire, indeed in the southern parts of the County, there was insufficient capacity to even meet the needs arising locally requiring a significant re-distribution of growth to the north of the County.