

EXTRACT FROM THE UNCONFIRMED COUNCIL MINUTES - 23RD SEPTEMBER 2014

CL.16(1) Petition Relating to the Proposed Strategic Development Site at Chesterton, Cirencester

A Petition was presented by Mr. Mark Pratley of Cirencester, as follows:-

We, the undersigned, believe that the Cotswold District Council plan for an extra 3,360 (39.2%) new homes in Cirencester will significantly damage our town, and will not be a proper solution to the need for more housing in the Cotswolds. We are dismayed at the dismissive response to more than 2,000 objections, including those of the Town Council, and demand that far more of the housing be allocated across the 450 square miles of the District, including brownfield sites rather than productive farmland.

A supporting rationale had also been provided, as follows:-

Why is this important?

As part of the CDC's allocation of an extra 3,360 new homes in Cirencester their intention is to build an estate of 2,500 houses on the fields to the south-west of Cirencester.

We believe Cirencester's residents have not been made fully aware of CDC's plans, which would fundamentally change the character of our market town.

Cirencester's population of 19,000 would be increased by nearly 40%.

In contrast, other Cotswold towns will be proportionately much less developed, and most villages, despite their needs, will only have minimal, or no, new housing.

Focussing development on Cirencester, and specifically on one large site, risks dwarfing the existing historic town, and diminishing its distinctive character.

The distance from the planned estate to the town centre is too great to walk. Many will opt for the car, thereby exacerbating the existing traffic congestion and parking problems in the town.

Sustainable housing development should be distributed throughout the whole Cotswold region, and not disproportionately concentrated on one site in Cirencester.

The Chairman explained that, in accordance with the Council's approved Local Petitions Scheme, the issue would be the subject of a Council debate, as the Petition contained more than the threshold number of signatories (850).

Attention was drawn to a number of related questions that had been submitted by/through the petition organiser. The Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Forward Planning and Councillor Nick Parsons had provided answers thereto, copies of which had been circulated to Members and were also available for those present at the Meeting.

In accordance with the approved Scheme, Mr. Pratley was then invited to present the Petition. Mr. Pratley stated that the petition contained 2,708 signatories, which represented a strong feedback, and explained that the campaign had been welcomed by residents. He considered the two key words to be 'impact' and 'trust'. In his presentation, Mr. Pratley expressed concern over the likely impact of the proposed development on the town; agreed that there was a need for more housing in Cirencester, but not on the scale proposed; expressed concerns over issues relating to water supply and sewage disposal, employment, and the pressure that a development of such size would generate on the existing infrastructure, schools and services. He also contended that there was a lack of trust within the town in respect of the agencies involved in managing the process; the ability of the Council to hold the developers to account; and the ability of staff in the Planning Department to manage the project. He suggested that based on past experiences, the developers would devalue the promised enhancements and expressed the view that the consultation process was merely a 'tick-box' exercise, with the on-line exercise being too complicated. Mr. Pratley referred to the professional architects employed by the landowner and asked if the Council was 'passing the buck' as it hadn't been represented at any meetings. He concluded by expressing the view that this was an opportunity for the Council to manage the number of houses to be built in Cirencester over the next twenty years and to rebuild the public's trust in how it dealt with what would be a significant impact on the town.

The Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Forward Planning was invited to address the Council. The Deputy Leader thanked Mr. Pratley for the Petition, and for raising various issues. The Deputy Leader considered it beneficial for Members to have a debate on the issues raised and explained that, following such debate, he would be Proposing that the Petition be referred to the Cabinet for consideration as part of its deliberations on the Local Plan consultation draft in December.

The Deputy Leader did not accept that the consultation process was poor but, rather, considered it to be well-informed, highly-gearred and efficient. He explained that various experts in the planning 'field' had considered the process to be appropriate. The Deputy Leader stated that the Council would continue to publish consultation plans in order to ensure that everyone knew what was happening and when it would happen. The Deputy Leader stated that he was saddened by the Petitioner's comments in respect of trust. He reminded the Council that developers could seek to negotiate over applications and that the Council was required to submit its evidence to the Inspectorate. The Council's Forward Planning Team would draft a workable Local Plan and the Planning Committee and staff in the Planning Department would ensure it was implemented as applications came forward. The Deputy Leader concluded by stating that the Council would enter into negotiations to seek to secure the inclusion of appropriate infrastructure in respect of proposed developments.

A number of Members welcomed the Petition, commenting that it had provided the first opportunity for the Council to debate the issue. Those Members accepted that there was a need for additional housing, particularly affordable

housing for younger people, across the District and they agreed that Cirencester had to take a share of any provision. However, they considered the proposed development at Chesterton to be too big and that small-scale developments should be allowed across the District, particularly in those villages where an element of new development had been requested. Those Members also contended that the Council should seek the redevelopment of brownfield sites rather than greenfield or farm land, and that any development at this site should be for fewer dwellings with associated infrastructure improvements, including flood alleviation. Concern was expressed that the Council should seek to protect the existing vibrant community within the town.

A Member referred to the Kingshill Meadow development and expressed the view that it had been badly planned and that there were still a number of empty homes and shop units within that development. The Member referred to recent incidents of flooding in Cirencester and stated that neither Thames Water nor the Environment Agency had given any assurances that the issue of flooding would be addressed. The Member contended that the consultation process had not been good enough, as demonstrated by the people present at the Meeting. The Member considered that the Council had not listened to the views expressed and that this was an opportunity for the Council to make a statement, albeit rather belatedly. The Member did not agree that the Petition should be referred to the Cabinet for consideration.

Another Member expressed the view that the Council had a poor track record in respect of strategic planning. He reminded Members that they should promote the interests of the electorate and he implored the Leader and the Deputy Leader to be sensible and to re-visit the options for the development of this site. A Member stated that, since 2011, a number of Members had recommended a review of the Council's approach to housing need and for identifying sites in villages. The Member acknowledged that some villages were reluctant to put sites forward for consideration and contended that, despite a lack of affordable housing in the villages being one of the most frequent complaints, the Council still operated a policy of extreme restriction in respect of development in villages. The Member expressed support for some significant development in Cirencester but he questioned the need for a development which would increase the population by 40%. The Member concluded by expressing the view that the District would need to experience a period of rapid housing development in order to sustain its five-year supply of housing over a long period and he concluded by suggesting that the Council should consider if this proposal represented a sustainable development that would help to meet the needs of the District.

One of the Ward Members was present and was invited to address the Committee. The Ward Member stated that he would be representing the views of his constituents. The Ward Member referred to the application in Cowley which had been referred to earlier by the Deputy Leader and he referred to a previous application in Longborough which had come forward in an attempt to sustain the local primary school. The Ward Member contended that, of the fifty consultation items referred to earlier in the Meeting as part of a response to one of the formal Member questions, only ten related to 'public' consultations, one of which had been conducted by the Chesterton Community Group. The Ward Member further contended that, despite all the publicity in the local Press and that engendered by the Petition, some people were still not aware of the threat being posed to the town. The Ward Member agreed that Cirencester would have to accept a degree of new housing but concluded that the current proposal was too large.

A number of other Members referred to recent applications approved in respect of new developments in various other market towns. One Member stated that his Ward would have welcomed the level of consultation being afforded to the current proposal and pointed out that developments could only be dispersed across the District if suitable sites came forward. Another Member suggested that Cirencester Town Council should consider developing a Neighbourhood Plan which it could then use to assess all potential sites, even those not included in the SHLAA, and rank them in a priority order. The Member also referred to a small development in Wiltshire which, he contended, could receive some £1m in Section 106 Agreement contributions towards infrastructure improvements and he concluded by commenting on what the contribution might be in relation to Chesterton.

A Member commented that villages had the same sustainability issues as well as limited supplies of land and resources, and that the Council needed to look at key settlements to accommodate development. Another Member expressed the view that villages needed an element of housing and that development should be spread across the District. The Member suggested that the Government should seek to address the issue of empty houses and a lack of employment in the north of the country.

Other Members commented that Section 106 Agreement contributions would not solve the problems being experienced by Thames Water and that consideration should be given to the impact the proposed development would have on Cirencester, rather than meeting housing and/or financial needs; the Council should represent the interests of the entire District; there was a need to get the emerging Local Plan adopted as soon as feasibly possible; it was likely that in excess of 6,900 new houses would be required in order to address the impact of previous underbuilding nationally, and the Council needed to know the cost of the unsuccessful Judicial Review in Tetbury before deciding to seek another Judicial Review.

Mr. Pratley was invited to present his closing statement. He thanked the Council for the debate and stated that he had challenged the Earl Bathurst over the legacy he would leave the town if this land was built on. He expressed the view that the Council also had to decide on its future legacy and reiterated that people had been shocked by the size of development being proposed. He expressed disappointment that consideration of this issue was likely to be deferred to the Cabinet and he concluded by stating that the issue required a 'lively' debate.

The Deputy Leader thanked Mr. Pratley for his constructive contributions. The Deputy Leader stated that the Council did listen to comments put forward by residents but reminded Members that 40% of applicants on the Housing Waiting List had put Cirencester as a first preference. The Deputy Leader also reminded the Council that the District was enjoying its lowest rate of unemployment for ten years and he pointed out that there was currently little or no demand for employment sites due to the lack of an available workforce. The Deputy Leader agreed with the comments made in relation to infrastructure issues and explained that the Council could resist adopting a Local Plan if it wished to avoid having to determine difficult issues. However, the Deputy Leader was not advocating that as an option because it would leave the District susceptible to speculative development in areas the Council might not wish to see development and would result in a strategy being imposed. The Deputy Leader reiterated that it was right for the Petition to be referred to the Cabinet for consideration against a strong evidence base, and he concluded by thanking all those involved for the Petition.

RESOLVED that the Petition be noted, and be referred to the Cabinet for consideration as part of its deliberations on the Local Plan consultation draft.

Record of Voting - for 28, against 11, abstentions 2, absent 3.

(END)

Unconfirmed