

(4) PUBLIC QUESTIONS

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 10, a question has been submitted, and a response provided, as follows:-

- (1) From Dr D James of Cirencester to Councillor Nick Parsons, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Forward Planning

'With reference to the proposed application to build 2350 houses on the Chesterton Site in Cirencester -

In CDC's Evidence document 'Sustainability Appraisal of the Cotswold District Local Plan', Appendix I Points of the Compass Analysis on page 17 states: "Approximately 40% of the (Chesterton) area is covered by land classified as Grade 2 Agricultural Land" which equates to 48 hectares of "best and most versatile agricultural land". This is supported by evidence from yields and the range of crops provided by tenant farmers past and present. In this case, how is it sustainable to allow this Greenfield site to be lost to housing development, particularly when there is widespread government recognition that UK food policy is currently inadequate to meet the needs of a burgeoning UK population?'

Response from Councillor Nick Parsons

'The Agricultural Land Classification system (ALC) was introduced in England in 1966 by the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) in order to provide information on the quality of agricultural land to enable decisions to be made on future land uses within the planning system. The classification system is not based on the productivity of land for a particular crop but on the versatility of cropping options. The "best and most versatile" agricultural land (Grades 1, 2 and 3a) is capable of growing high value vegetable crops, such as potatoes. Land in lower grades, such as subgrade 3b and grade 4, may be capable of supporting consistent good yields of combinable cereal or oilseed crops but not the greater range of crops expected of land in the best and most versatile category.

The current ALC guidelines were updated by MAFF in 1988 and Natural England advises that "Information based on detailed ALC field surveys in accordance with current guidelines (MAFF, 1988) is the most definitive source".

The information of the ALC of the Chesterton site that the Council had at the time of allocating the Chesterton site was provided by Natural England. The designation was undertaken by MAFF prior to 1988 and the site has not been assessed by MAFF/Natural England since that time. Therefore, the ALC information that the Council holds for the Chesterton site can be considered to be general guidance only.

The planning application has been accompanied by a detailed ALC survey which has identified that the majority of the site is Grade 3b land (86.3%), with some Grade 3a land (7.4%). Whilst the Council is not questioning the findings of this survey, as part of the process of reviewing the Environmental Statement, and given the level of public interest, the Council will be obtaining an external opinion on the validation of the soil testing methodology.

Nevertheless, the presence of higher grade agricultural land on any development site does not automatically prohibit development and, in accordance with paragraph 112 of the NPPF, when considering any application that results in the loss of best and most versatile agricultural land the Council needs to balance the loss with the economic and other benefits of delivering housing.'

Note:

If the questioner is present at the Meeting, he will be entitled to ask one supplementary question arising directly out of either the answer given or his original question.

The Member to whom any supplementary question is addressed will try and answer any supplementary question at the Meeting; but if this is not possible, then the Member will answer as much as possible at the Meeting and then provide a full response within five working days. If, for any reason, a full response cannot be provided within those five days, then a holding response will be sent to the questioner, along with the reason for delay and a likely timescale for the full response.

(END)