

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Scrutiny Committee

held on Thursday, 20 August 2015 at 6.30 pm

at the The Ridgeway, The Beacon, Portway, Wantage, OX12 9BY



Open to the public, including the press

Present:

Members: Councillors Judy Roberts (Chair), Alice Badcock (Vice-Chairman), Ed Blagrove, Katie Finch, Debby Hallett, Vicky Jenkins, Monica Lovatt and Chris Palmer

Officers: Adrian Duffield, Anna Robinson and Ron Schrieber

Also present: Councillor Matt Barber, Leader of the Council and Cabinet member for finance, economic development and property

Number of members of the public: 10

Sc.1 Notification of substitutes and apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Ben Mabbett.

Sc.2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 March 2015 were agreed as a correct record and were signed by the Chairman as such.

Matters arising

Sc.214: The Chairman reported that the former Chairman had handed over to her his correspondence with the Chief Executive of Sovereign Housing Association. It was agreed that the Chief Executive be invited to the next meeting to report on the housing association's arrangements with the Council.

Sc.217: A member asked whether sample correspondence regarding the council tax reduction scheme had been circulated, as agreed at the last meeting. Officers agreed to check and, if this had not been done, to circulate the correspondence as soon as possible.

Sc.218: The Strategic Director reported that the draft Homelessness Strategy 2015-2020 had been sent out for consultation and the response had been extremely positive. The priority was to publish the approved Strategy as soon as possible and, accordingly, it would not now be going to Joint Scrutiny Committee in October.

Sc.3 Declarations of interest

None.

Sc.4 Urgent business and chairman's announcements

None

Sc.5 Statements, petitions and questions from the public relating to matters affecting the Scrutiny Committee

The Committee received three requests to address the meeting.

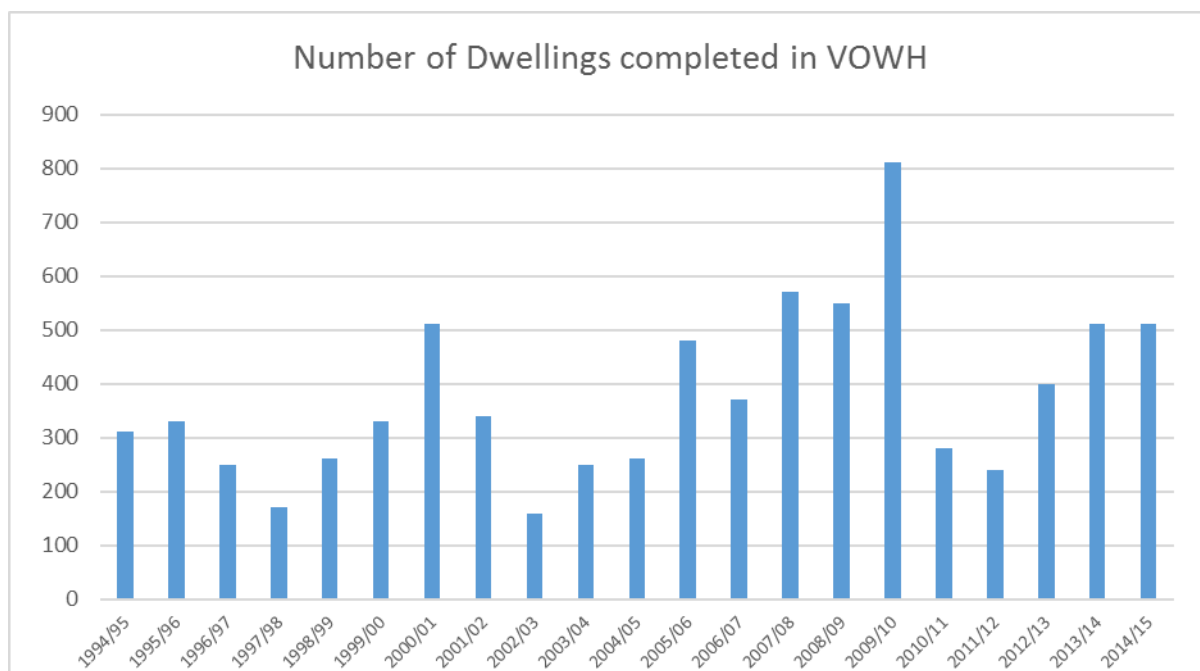
1 Julie Maberley made a statement on behalf of the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group as follows:

“We note that the District Council appears to be agreeing not only that Oxford City will have an unmet housing need but that the Vale has the capacity to take it.

We would remind the Scrutiny Committee that next month the Inspector will examine the need for housing of 20,560 new dwellings as set out in Local Plan Part 1, and is questioning if the figures are soundly based and supported by robust and credible evidence.

We dispute the SHMA figures and would ask that the SHMA be revisited in the light of new evidence. In particular:

1. The evidence provided by West Oxfordshire Council in their recent Housing Position Statement.
2. The evidence provided by government statistics which show that employment in the Vale of the White Horse has actually decreased between 2001 and 2015.
3. The evidence that population growth in the Vale since 2001 is only 0.6% per annum but almost entirely in the over 65 age group.
4. The evidence that the maximum number of dwellings completed in the Vale of the White Horse in any year since 1994 is 810 and the average over the last 20 years is 402 per year yet the SHMA requires an average of 1028 – more than 250% of the average over the last 20 years (without any addition from Oxford).



Even after the housing need assessed in the SHMA has been revisited, the Council has a duty to ensure that the need can be met in accordance with the objectives of the NPPF.

This means that any new developments to meet the housing need in the Vale must be sustainable with:

- increased traffic congestion on roads already admitted to be over 95% capacity,
- increased carbon emissions counter to the EU requirements,
- reductions in emergency services (evidenced by the articles in the Herald this week about reductions in police services and a 2½ wait for an emergency ambulance in Wantage)
- an existing and projected shortage of school places
- reductions in public transport and
- no increase in net employment to date.

You must also be able to provide evidence that this growth in housing can be achieved with:

- Sufficient construction workers and materials when similar targets are being imposed all around the country,
- Sufficient employment opportunities forthcoming to provide the demand,
- Sufficient key infrastructure (schools, medical facilities, leisure facilities, public transport etc.) provided in a timely manner to make the new dwellings attractive to buyers,
- Sufficient profits generated for developers to encourage them to continue building at this rate, and
- Incomes sufficient to make the dwellings affordable.

We do not believe that the Vale has the capacity to absorb the level of housing need included in Local Plan Part 1 and believe that your plan has already defined a number of homes required each year which exceeds anything which can be achieved in the District.

As the NPPF requires a presumption in favour of development wherever the 5 year land supply is not being achieved, the acceptance of these figures as the basis of the Local Plan means that the land supply will never be achieved.

We therefore believe that you should be questioning the ability of the Council to accept any additional housing need and not simply discussing where these additional dwellings will be placed.

In summary, the NPPF places a requirement on the Council to review the housing need if circumstances change – we believe the evidence exists to justify:

- a review of the figures in the SHMA and
- a review of the ability of the District to absorb this scale of development within the timescale.

This should be performed before any agreement to take the excess requirement from Oxford City is considered.”

2 Joyce Hutchinson made a statement on behalf of the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group in which she expressed the view that this area did not have the capacity to absorb the level of additional housing proposed for the following reasons:

- there was a need for more outdoor play space in Wantage;
- existing bus services from Wantage to Oxford were infrequent and inadequate;
- there had been little increase in employment since 2001;
- King Alfred secondary school would be full by 2017 and there was no prospect of a new secondary school being built in the near future;
- primary schools in the area were full;

- the A338 and A420 were already close to capacity and there were no improvements planned;
- Wantage had lost key infrastructure e.g. emergency services, medical facilities etc.

3 Colin Thomas made a statement on behalf of the Sunningwell Parishioners Against Damage to the Environment (SPADE) as follows:

“SPADE is an established campaigning group, which for over a decade, has responded to strategic planning processes, at local, district, and county level, with, and on behalf of the residents of Sunningwell Parish, and today, also on behalf of Sunningwell Parish Council.

- We believe in the **permanence** of the Green Belt
- We accept the need for housing developments and infrastructure, but believe that brown field sites should be used before green field, and certainly before long established and highly valued Green Belt
- We consider that local people should have a strong voice in establishing planning policy.

We reiterate our earlier address to Cabinet on Oxford’s unmet housing need, particularly,

- the need to co-locate housing with jobs, i.e. in East Oxford, and
- applauding the Vale’s demand that Oxford City revise its Plan to make a sound assessment of housing capacity.

Before addressing the Cabinet Paper there are 2 overarching points:-

1. Firstly, remember that in addition to the 1,510 houses in North Abingdon, Radley and Kennington in your own Local Plan, the Green Belt in North Abingdon also faces huge incursions from the County Council Local Transport Plan. These include the 4-way junction, 1,600 space Park and Ride, 100 space Lorry Park, Lorry driver facilities, Freight Transfer Station, and a strategic link road between the A34 and M40

2. Secondly, the Vale Plan, **despite being based on the disputed SHMA1 relies solely on the scale of development required to justify that “exceptional circumstances” exist allowing alteration to the Green Belt boundary.** The Inspector even before the examination has commenced, has asked the Vale to explain in detail their justification of “exceptional circumstances.” **It was unacceptable that the justification was omitted from the original Plan, never mind provided in sufficient time to be able to be considered in the Examination respondent’s written submissions.** We expect the justification (due tomorrow at the latest) will be published immediately so all parties have a chance to scrutinise it before the Examination Stage 1 hearings. **Failure to do so will demonstrate contempt for all those who are genuinely engaged in the Local Planning process.**

Turning to the Cabinet paper. Whilst Cllr Barber said that no decisions on locations for Oxford’s unmet need have been made, clearly the preliminary assessment of pros and cons in the report favours the Abingdon and Oxford fringe sub-area. SPADE considers the assessment’s methodology unsound, its content misleading and the development constraints unrecognised.

Most of the area is Green Belt. Cabinet appear to be relying on the Inspector agreeing that the “exceptional circumstances” threshold has been met to then justify that any or all of the further 3,000 houses could be built in the green belt. **If the Inspector rejects the “exceptional circumstances” argument to build the initial 1,510, never mind the further 3,000, the Vale’s position on meeting Oxford’s needs becomes untenable.**

Even if the test is met, development beyond the 1,510 houses in the North Abingdon area, as is implied by the Cabinet Paper, is unfeasible. The Vale Plan Sustainability Assessment² recognises, that the existing proposals produce a negative cumulative effect due to traffic growth on the A34, recognising the A34 is operating over capacity. Adding 3,000 houses in North Abingdon will exacerbate things to a point **which makes the A34 a permanent, as opposed to a part time car park,** and the housing unsustainable.

The Local Plan changes open countryside, protected by Green Belt status, to a major urban extension. Further development meeting Oxford's needs around Lodge Hill should be robustly opposed as it is unsustainable and creates coalescence of settlements which the Green Belt was designed to prevent. **It should not be used as a reverse-engineered cash cow to provide infrastructure funding for the Local Plan or the Transport Plan.**

Whilst Cabinet are apparently withdrawing support for the Green Belt, we trust that you will accept that they will fail to demonstrate the "exceptional circumstances" argument and urge them to adopt policies outlined in the NPPF and positively support the Green Belt.

Now is the time to protect Green Belt - not to make empty statements of apparent support whilst planning for its obliteration in North Abingdon."

Sc.6 Planning to address Oxford unmet housing need in Vale of White Horse

The Committee considered an approach, as set out in the head of planning's report to Cabinet on 7 August to address the Council's share of any unmet housing need arising from elsewhere in Oxfordshire. Although Cabinet had been minded to endorse the report's proposals it had invited the Scrutiny Committee's views following which the Leader (in the absence of the Cabinet member for planning policy) would be making an individual Cabinet member decision.

Accordingly the Leader and the head of planning attended to introduce the report and answer members' questions.

The Leader thanked the members of the public for their comments (Sc.5 above refers) and stated that the purpose of the report was to set out a high level approach to address Oxford City's unmet housing need, once defined and justified and to begin planning for the likelihood that some additional housing might need to be accommodated in the Vale of White Horse. Accordingly, it was sensible to begin planning now whilst recognising that the quantity of unmet housing need had yet to be quantified, based on evidence.

The head of planning reported that, following the recent Court of Appeal judgement, the reference to affordable housing provision in paragraph 15 (i) of the report no longer applied. However this would have no significant impact on the other figures in the report.

The Leader reported Cabinet's view that the most appropriate way to determine the correct level of unmet housing need was for Oxford City to review its local plan. Following the motion passed at the Council meeting on 16 July 2015, the Leader had written to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government asking him to intervene and compel Oxford City to review its local plan. To date there had been no response.

In response to questions regarding Oxford City, the Leader expressed the following views:

- Oxford City had allocated too much land for economic development and not enough for housing;
- there were other brownfield sites that could be released for housing within the City;
- Oxford City had identified capacity for 10,000 new homes for the period up to 2031 whereas Cherwell, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils had commissioned a study which indicated that Oxford had capacity for 16,000 homes over the same period.
- Oxford City had the same obligation as the other Oxfordshire districts to co-operate. However, without an examination of their new local plan it could not be compelled to take further action without the Secretary of State intervening. Although the Leader considered the City's local plan to be out of date, it would not expire until 2026.

The report proposed that in considering unmet housing need, the Council should also consider how options accord with the spatial strategy set out in the Vale Local Plan Part1 (LPP1). It
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suggested that the starting point should be the three sub-areas as defined in Core Policy 3 of LPP1:

- i. Abingdon-on-Thames and the Oxford Fringe Sub-Area
- ii. South East Vale Sub-Area
- iii. Western Vale Sub-Area

Members considered the preliminary assessment of these three areas set out in the report and suggested the following amendments:

Spatial Area 1 Abingdon-on-Thames and the Oxford Fringe Sub-Area

- Under “Cons” add reference to A34 at or over capacity as stated for Spatial Area 2.
- Under “Scale considerations” insert “some” between “to address” and “unmet need”

Spatial Area 3 Western Vale Sub-Area

- Under “Cons”, add Shrivenham and Watchfield to the settlements which already have significant growth allocated.

In response to other questions and comments, the Leader reported that:

- The best place for any additional housing in the Vale of White Horse was not necessarily in the areas closest to Oxford. Paragraph 17 of the report referred to key principles in the County Council’s consultant’s brief and the need to locate homes where there were strong existing or potential links with Oxford.
- It was not possible to say at this stage whether any of Oxford’s unmet housing need would have to be added to the Vale’s own housing requirement. In the Leader’s opinion, Oxford City’s unmet need would need to be addressed towards the end of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) period of 2011-2031.
- A new settlement such as a garden city might be an option if it were considered appropriate.
- The Cabinet was aware of concerns about perceived threats to the Green Belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. However, it was also aware of the impact of additional housing, on schools, transport and other infrastructure.
- It would be necessary to consider the impact of any additional unmet housing need on the Council’s five year housing land supply.
- Any review of the Green Belt would be subject to public consultation.
- He had written to the Secretary of State on 20 July seeking government intervention to compel Oxford City to review its local plan.

The Leader thanked the Committee for its constructive comments and suggestions and undertook to consider changes to the wording in the light of these, prior to making his decision.

The Committee thanked the Leader and head of planning for their contributions.

RESOLVED:

- a) to note the report; and
- b) to request the Leader to take the suggested amendments and views expressed by the Committee into account when making his decision.

Sc.7 Schedule for Scrutiny Committees 2015/16

The Committee reviewed its work programme and agreed that an updated Section 106 planning obligations monitoring report should be submitted to the Committee in the autumn.

The meeting closed at 8.25 pm

