



Leicester
City Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the
HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held: WEDNESDAY, 4 NOVEMBER 2020 at 4:00 pm

P R E S E N T:

Councillor Westley (Chair)
Councillor Nangreave (Vice Chair)

Councillor Aqbany

Councillor Pickering

In Attendance:

Councillor Clair – Deputy City Mayor Culture, Leisure and Sport
Councillor Cutkelvin – Assistant City Mayor Education and Housing
Councillor Pantling

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92. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Willmott.

93. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

94. DRAFT LEICESTER LOCAL PLAN (2020 - 2036) - PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Councillor Westley as Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the Draft Local Plan.

The Head of Planning gave a presentation, a copy of which had been circulated with the agenda papers. During the presentation, he drew particular attention to the following points:

- The Government had consulted on changes to the planning system in a White Paper. This consultation had been concluded and Leicester City Council had provided some comments on it. There was currently uncertainty about the extent of these changes and the time they would take, as such the Council were looking to continue with the local plan in order to provide more certainty and capture the work progressed to date.

- The plan had originally been scheduled to go to consultation in March 2020, however this had been delayed by Covid-19. The government had encouraged the Council to continue progressing plans. As such the nature of how the plan was being proposed to engage had been changed.
- The plan had been approved by Full Council in February 2020, however additional information had been added on the Housing Study and this could be commented on as part of the consultation.
- The Local Plan would form the rulebook of the Planning Committee.
- As the City had grown through the boundary of the City Council, Leicester City Council was working with partners in the neighbouring District and Borough Councils and Leicestershire County Council as it was recognised that they may need to help with the housing needs of the City.
- The Government had set the Council targets on housing need of 29,104 dwellings over 15 years with 1,712 houses per year over this period. The consultation sought to meet that demand, however only 21,000 potential dwellings had been identified and as such it was being investigated as to whether the plan was going as far as it could in the city and whether the neighbouring councils could potentially accommodate on the city's behalf.
- Views were being sought on five large strategic sites and it was being proposed that housing development be brought forward on 85 other sites.
- A significant aspect of the Plan would be development in the Central Development Area
- The Local Housing Needs Study 2020 had not informed the Plan, but had reinforced the targets set by the Government. The Government targets were subject to change and any changes would have to be considered in the next iteration of the plan.
- The study had advised on a level of Affordable Housing Need of 12,206 homes (718 per year). The current targets did not need to be changed to meet this as the Government figure included an 'affordability uplift' to deal with the affordable housing need. However, this information was able to inform the Council in adopting new Section 106 targets and how to respond to the Government's new agenda in terms of discounted starter-homes.
- There would be a significant role for private sector renting in the city.

- The study recognised the need for specialist homes for older people and accessible, adaptable and wheelchair-user homes.
- The study identified the need for 4,800 bed spaces in student accommodation.
- The government had asked the Council to consider what level of custom and self-build plots may be required as the plan progressed into the next stage. Specific sites which could address that part of the market would be looked into.
- Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO) represented a significant part of the housing supply. Smaller HMO did not need planning permission unless they are in an Article 4 direction area. The pressure around the issue of HMO was recognised and as such new evidence was being sought to review Article 4 and views on the policy on the HMO Plan were being sought.
- The plan looked at how best to protect the environment and Health and Wellbeing was being promoted.
- The importance of getting the correct mix of affordable housing, the right type of housing and space standards was recognised.
- The need to balance housing, employment and open space was recognised and ways to mitigate the pressure on public open space would be explored.
- There would be opportunities to develop new open space. The example was given of the former St Mary's allotments whereby the small amount allocated to housing would generate funding for enhancements to the remaining open space which was previously inaccessible.
- The process was half-way through. The initial consultations were being considered and views were being sought from as many people as could be engaged with through until December.
- Once the consultation was concluded, responses would be carefully considered, and the plan would be subject to another consultation in 2021. The final plan would be submitted to the Government who would conduct an examination in public to consider the plan.
- This was the first time the sites had been put out as formal recommendations, and it was stressed that this was a draft allocation at this stage.

The Commission scrutinised the Draft Local Plan, commenting as follows:

- What percentage of the plan would be social housing as opposed to affordable housing or home ownership?

Response from the Head of Planning:

The plan would determine potential sites for development but would not dictate the tenure or type of housing that would be on those sites. The nature of decisions on the individual sites and what housing may be brought forward where sites were owned by the Council was a matter for the Housing team and the Executive.

- Environmental groups had requested higher housing density in order to create more open space with 100 dwellings per hectare in the Central Development Area and 70 per hectare elsewhere. Additionally, would brownfield sites be developed before greenfield sites and was there any direction on creating housing in such a way as to discourage car use?

Response from the Head of Planning:

Housing density was an important issue and low-density housing was aimed for in suburban areas, around 30 dwellings per hectare rising to 50 per hectare in the Central Development Area. There would be sites where higher housing density was reached i.e. in the city centre. However, the nature of the market and the financial viability of the housing needed to be considered and it may be that the industry would not see 100 dwelling per hectare as viable to follow in suburban areas and as such the inspector may not approve such a plan. It was also recognised that high-density housing often entailed tall buildings which may be inappropriate in areas such as the Old Town.

It was in the interest of the Council to develop Brownfield sites where possible as they were seen as more sustainable and the policy of the government was that the Council aim to maximise Brownfield land as a priority. Landowners in the city centre had been approached to ascertain if they had sites they wanted to bring forward for development.

Discouraging car use was seen as desirable and as such walking and cycling infrastructure was being designed.

- Was Student Accommodation built to the same standards as residential accommodation? It was desirable to avoid having to retrofit such accommodation with features such as insulation if they then required to have their use changed, as it had been suggested that such accommodation could be useful to single people within the city.

Response from the Head of Planning:

All developments were required to comply with building regulations and the plan was keen to develop higher standards on energy efficiency for new buildings. However, new policy had meant that it was difficult to create local standards. It was seen as desirable to go further with the

energy policy in the plan, but it was recognised that the government may prevent this. Student accommodation was built to building regulations, but it was hoped to go further on space standards, however, it was uncertain as to whether national space standards could be extended to student provision.

- Are there any standards by which we can expect houses to generate some of their own energy?

Response from the Head of Planning:

Ways to make buildings as efficient as possible were being explored and the team were interested in views on the issue. It was hoped to go further along the same lines as other authorities had gone to achieve carbon neutrality, however it was thought that the Government may make this a centralised policy.

The viability of houses with stringent energy standards was uncertain and if developers did not think it was deliverable then Government inspectors may not consider it to be a viable policy.

- The Council was constrained by the local plan and what the Government was insisting on. Constituents had expressed the desire for social housing rather than affordable housing as it was not seen as affordable despite its name. As the population grows more people would be unable to afford their own home and would rely on local authorities to provide housing. It was important to take health into the equation and the need for green spaces was seen as important. It was good that Brownfield sites were being considered before Greenfield sites, but further to this an area needs facilities for health and to help the environment.
- How much land in the plan was owned by Leicester City Council? It has not yet been determined how much of the land would be private housing and how much would be social housing. Would the Council Housing Scrutiny and the Housing Lead have a role in determining this?

Response from the Head of Planning:

718 of the 1712 dwellings-per-year should be affordable housing. This showed that it was an unaffordable market and as such there was high demand for affordable and social housing. The Government would be very restrictive and if a big proportion of the housing was designated as social housing the Government may say it was an unviable market.

From a planning perspective it was not necessarily a relevant factor as to whether land was owned by the Council, however, Council sites could set a higher standard of development in terms of energy, affordability and/or social rent, so the Council could take advantage of such sites and provide a higher level of affordability if used as part of the plan.

The Government were looking to the market for delivery rather than to Councils, however it was believed that Housing and the Executive at Leicester City Council could deliver a higher standard of housing.

Response from Director of Housing:

Councillor Cutkelvin and the City Mayor had put forward £70million of funding for a new-build programme and these properties were now beginning to come back off the first phase of houses.

A number of sites allocated for housing were going through planning such as Saffron Velodrome and Lanesborough Road and Phase 2 of the plan would allow delivery of more energy efficient homes. These homes will go above and beyond on space standards and that the Council will lead the way from a climate perspective.

Going forward, sites seen as positive from a public perspective were being explored and they were keen to deliver as much affordable and social housing as possible. Sites would be reviewed as they became available and accessible. Once the outcome of the consultations on the Local Plan with Councillors and officers was seen, wider schemes to deliver more affordable and social housing could be explored.

- It was important not to lose green areas to housing particularly in Beaumont Leys Ward.

Response from Councillor Cutkelvin:

Local Ward Councillors would be consulted on developments embarked upon by the Council. An example was the Saffron Velodrome development which had a positive impact on the area and as such is was desirable for the project to be expedited.

Another area identified for development in the Saffron Ward was an area known as the 'Mud Dumps' which had become known for Anti-Social Behaviour. While some people were concerned about development for housing in the area, there was a broad agreement that a use needed to be found for the area and housing may be a solution. As such the Council were keen to use local intelligence to inform any decisions made.

- Highways had caused problems on new developments as road layouts had not been consulted on properly. Local Ward Councillors knew their areas best, however, if a site was objected to, then an alternative should be put forward.

Response from Councillor Cutkelvin:

It was accepted that some decisions would be popular with some groups of people but unpopular with others regarding both highways and housing and there was a need to balance the need to tackle the issue of overcrowding with the need for open space.

- What was the expectation of replacing old housing with new housing?

Response from the Head of Planning:

The main focus was on new sites, however, 'Windfall Sites' would be considered including small redevelopments, however, the potential impact on neighbouring properties would be significant. Older houses were a big challenge from an energy perspective as it was harder for the Council to make an impact on their energy standard. If they were redeveloped, they could be developed to a higher carbon standard. However, embodied carbon would be lost from not re-using old buildings.

Response from Councillor Clair:

As the process is gone through, there was an opportunity for elected members to show how they wished the plan to shape up over the next 15 years. If local ward councillors wished to comment it would be good for these comments to be put through consultation. Following submission there would be an opportunity to go through comments before the final proposal and endorsement. Local Ward Councillors were seen as key to guide Councillors and officers throughout the planning process, and local Councillors and residents were being worked with on how to achieve targets for social housing and how to make the Local Plan fit for purpose for the next 15 years.

- There was a contentious space in Eyres Monsell Ward, and it had been difficult to steer the public towards answering the consultation rather than resorting to petitions and involving the media.
- It was important for Councillors to engage with constituents as the plan would last for years once adopted.

Response from Councillor Cutkelvin:

It was recognised that it could be difficult for residents to engage with the consultation due to the high-level strategic nature of the plan. It was usually the case that people engaged once planning applications for housing were submitted, so having a consultation at a strategic level was to be encouraged.

- Lots of objections to the change in planning law had been received and it would be useful for Councillors to have a document that they could refer to in order to provide answers on the issue, which also clarified that these changes were coming from the Government rather than the Council.

Response from the Head of Planning:

The Government consultation had finished, and Leicester City Council had submitted a rebuttal of many proposals. Some of these points could be summarised and circulated.

- The City Mayor had circulated some useful questions and answers on the Government White Paper.

Response from Councillor Cutkelvin:

The response to the White Paper consultation had been brought to the Executive and was thought to be robust. The City Mayor had struggled to find positive aspects in the White Paper and had been critical of it. As such a briefing paper on the issue would be useful.

AGREED:

- 1) That the Director of Planning, Development and Transportation be asked to forward a briefing paper on the rebuttal of Leicester City Council to the Government White Paper to Councillors.
- 2) That the Draft Local Plan be accepted.

95. CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting closed at 5:08pm.