

Guildford Greenbelt Group

Press announcement

21 May 2014

Councillors change direction of local plan

In an astonishing and dramatic U-turn at the Scrutiny Committee last Thursday (15 May 2014), elected councillors challenged the Executive's direction on the Local Plan for the first time. The councillors voted for the housing numbers to be revised within the draft Local Plan, with massive consequences for the impact on the Green Belt and the future of Guildford.

A surprise vote was called, which was not on the agenda. The motion was not formally worded, but on an ad hoc basis was "to express concern over the housing number set out in the draft Local Plan and to ask the Head of Planning Services and the Lead Councillor for Planning to review the numbers before it comes back to the Executive". This motion was passed, with no dissenting votes, by the combined Scrutiny Committee.

The Scrutiny Committee meeting can be viewed on a webcast on the Guildford Borough Council website. http://www.guildford.public-tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/135899

CLlr Jennie Wicks opened the debate with brilliant and dramatic effect by saying "I think that the housing target here is too high, it will have a devastating effect on some parts of the borough. I am reprising... what a couple of our speakers referred to... the comments of Edge Analytics who said that the SHMA housing numbers result from the choice of data and the housing numbers used...Edge said that further scrutiny was needed. Will this be done – and how will we be informed of the outcome?... I hope we will be doing a reassessment as they recommended, and I hope that...the information will be made properly available to councillors...

She continued: "In estimating the housing target, it seems to me that little account has been taken of constraints particularly Green Belt. The current proposed distribution of sites just uses Green Belt as land available for development... The NPPF says that Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in Exceptional Circumstances ... and we have Ministerial statements that housing need of itself will not justify incursion into the Green Belt for houses or travellers' sites. Why haven't we referenced those Ministerial statements in our evidence?... Why have we chosen to renounce any inclusion of windfall sites?...Now we have the conversion of office space to residential which is in addition to the type of windfall that used to come forward, which the Reigate and Banstead Inspector recognised... And why nothing for bringing back empty homes into use?,, I have to comment with considerable sadness about the imbalance of the distribution of the proposed housing. It is proposed that there should be more than 6000 houses on our precious Green Belt between Burpham and the M25, a distance of less than 6 linear miles."

Cllr Bob McShee said “It is unsustainable and damaging to the Green Belt and our infrastructure.. It is far too much for Worplesdon to absorb...This committee has been asked to consider the draft Local Plan and as far as Worplesdon is concerned, it is unacceptable at this stage.”

Cllr Jennie Powell said: “Why have the sustainability indicators been ignored?” and asked a number of specific questions about the flood risk in West Horsley which had been disregarded.

Cllr Andrew French said: “This is not a wholly democratic process... If we really do have to build this out as planned in here it is going to do huge and irreparable damage to this borough. .. Around the NPPF... I recognise that we as a borough need to do a strategic review of the Green Belt. We have done that. However, I don’t think the Green Belt at the moment is being used as a constraint at all. What we seem to have done is taken the view that any site that has been identified in the SHLAA as developable can be developed regardless of whether it is in the Green Belt or not.

“If our housing number was double, would we therefore say that’s fine, we’ll develop twice the number? At what point do we apply constraints here?”

“There’s a great deal of pain elsewhere as well, we have to look at the constraints again... That to me is a political judgment, it is not a judgment for the planners to make, it is for us to make as a local authority. I now think we need to exercise that political judgment as to what approach we are going to take. We should not be attempting to send a Local Plan to the Planning Inspector gift-wrapped... we should be getting a Local Plan which is as challenging as possible. We need a plan which simply gets over the line with the minimum possible, not something that is gold-plated.”

Mrs Carol Humphrey, Head of Planning Services, spoke several times. She said: “We think we can accommodate the numbers that we are suggesting”...and “it is inevitable that the Green Belt will be realigned to allow for the accommodation of some growth”.

Cllr Pauline Searle said “As a councillor of an urban area... all of Guildford is important be it the town, urban area or Green Belt. This is Guildford and it is what we are all proud of...”

Cllr David Wright said: “What is robust, what is strong, what is defensible is really a matter of judgment... Such matters of judgment are partly technical and they are partly political. I think there is no councillor who has any appetite for large numbers of additional houses that will be indigestible and that will not in general be welcomed, despite what has been said about the relationship between housing and growth. There is nowhere in this plan a strong causal argument that shows that direct connection and whenever it is challenged it always boils down to anecdotal statements by businessmen. We know the economy of Guildford does well and 50% of the people who work in Guildford live outside, and vice versa. It is the judgments that members of the public will question...The possibility of building on large areas of Green Belt remains a very strong possibility for one basic reason

which is the numbers we are being asked to accommodate...The word "objective" in objectively assessed needs can be challenged because it is based on human judgments which are not objective and I think that the public would like a little more transparency about how the objective judgments ultimately were arrived at. I would like to see...the extent to which they were challenged. I would hope that process is not at an end and I would hope that we can still get the basic number down - because it is that basic number which minimises our ability to protect the character of Guildford which we all want to maintain. So I would put in a plea for that."

One councillor asked **Cllr Juneja** to comment on the duty to cooperate. She noted "I have spoken to parish councils, tried to go round all residents' associations... I've also spoken to the Lead Member for Woking, have tried to speak to Rushmoor and Waverley but obviously they are in different situations and sometimes come over later on in the day as have Woking... I have been to a Duty to Cooperate conference which we led ourselves, we led that and invited a number of different authorities, many still not willing to really come round the table at this stage... We also had an event with all leaders of all districts and boroughs and also had the senior politicians for Surrey County Council and we tried to move that forward in terms of looking at Duty to Cooperate not just for housing. But if indeed we don't accept other authorities' housing numbers then we should be certainly looking at infrastructure whether it is schools, roads, doctors' surgeries, or hospitals..."

Cllr Tony Philips said: "I like others am extremely concerned about the high housing numbers. Now, tonight we have had good questions, and reports and statements from members of the public, and Flo [Churchill] and others from the top table have chanted off chapter and verse. Unfortunately we haven't had sight of these responses, and I think we should have had sight of these responses to enable us to digest them properly and form our own opinions. I'd ask if we can have all the responses that we have been given.

"Having said all that, I, like Councillor French and others, am still not happy with the housing numbers, and I think that the report for the recommendation that goes back from this joint committee should be that we are still not happy with the housing numbers - and ask the Lead Member for Planning and others to have another look at this. That's what I'd like to propose."

It was therefore decided that it was necessary to have a vote on Cllr Tony Phillips' proposal, and Mr John Armstrong, Head of Democratic Services for the borough, proposed the following wording, and noted this proposal is fundamental to the plan:

"To express concern over the housing number set out in the draft Local Plan and to ask the Head of Planning Services and the Lead Councillor for Planning to review the numbers before it comes back to the Executive (presumably)".

There was a show of hands. No councillor on the joint Scrutiny Committee voted against the motion.

GGG chair Susan Parker said:

“People in Guildford are delighted with this result and GGG is grateful to the councillors who spoke so effectively last Thursday. It is good to see that the councillors have listened to the submissions made by GGG and by the combined residents’ groups.

We hope that the Executive Committee will now listen to councillors, apply the necessary constraints and use a realistic housing target that will benefit rather than harm Guildford.

But this vote, welcome as it is, is not in itself enough. We have seen tokenism before (for example, in the councillors’ vote for full public involvement in the scrutiny of the evidence base, which ended up as just a token representation).

We need a revision of the housing number. We need a radical consequential change to the draft Local Plan. The previous numbers were too high with disastrous consequences for everyone in the borough – now they must come down. It is now the Council’s responsibility to make the required changes in time. “

NOTES FOR EDITORS

Edge Analytics report on the GL Hearn draft SHMA:

See link:

[http://www.guildford.gov.uk/media/16934/Edge-Analytics-review-of-the-Guildford-SHMA-March-2014/pdf/Edge Analytics review of the Guildford SHMA \(March 2014\).pdf](http://www.guildford.gov.uk/media/16934/Edge-Analytics-review-of-the-Guildford-SHMA-March-2014/pdf/Edge%20Analytics%20review%20of%20the%20Guildford%20SHMA%20(March%202014).pdf)