

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

15 March 2016

Question from Cllr Ernie Clark

To Cllr Toby Sturgis, Cabinet member for Strategic Planning, Development Management, Strategic Housing, Operational Property and Waste

I am advised by a planning officer that 'At this present moment in time, Wiltshire Council is not able to demonstrate a five year housing land supply in the North and West Housing Market Area. The Housing Target for Wiltshire is only a minimum and will need to be met in order to demonstrate a five year housing land supply in the future.'

This failure of the Core Strategy so soon after its adoption, is causing speculative planning applications throughout the N&WHMA in general and in/around my Division in particular. Examples are applications for 210 houses in the Hilperton Gap, 30 houses in the grounds of Hilperton Grange and a forthcoming application for 250 houses on Ashton Road. All these applications are outside Settlement Boundaries and only stand any chance of success owing to the land supply problem.

What steps are being taken to increase staffing levels to address this serious issue as a matter of urgency? How has this situation been allowed to come about? Have any actions been taken against any officers in relation to this lamentable predicament? When will the Trowbridge DPD, which seems to be well behind schedule, be ready for public consultation?

Response:

The housing targets for Wiltshire, consistent with national policy, are provided at Housing Market Area level. It is against these that a five year land supply is assessed. The concerns regarding the current housing land supply situation in the North and West Wiltshire Housing Market Area (HMA) are understandable. This position is not unique to Wiltshire and a number of local authorities have found themselves in similar circumstances. This is not a failure of the Wiltshire Core Strategy which sets the policy context for all forms of built development.

Whilst HMAs, including those in Wiltshire, may have a healthy supply of housing land in the form of planning permissions and allocations, the requirement set by the National Planning Policy Framework is that this land needs to be available for development and only the housing that is deliverable over the 5 year timeframe to which the five year land supply assessment relates can be included. The Council is reliant on the development industry to bring forward their permitted and allocated sites in a timely way and this does not always happen, as is the circumstance at present in the North and West Wiltshire HMA, where the five year land supply position is marginal.

The NPPF makes it clear that where a Local Planning Authority cannot demonstrate a five-year housing land supply of deliverable sites, relevant policies for the supply of housing should not be considered up to date. This does not mean that in these circumstances all proposals for housing should be permitted, only that policies related to the supply of housing should be given less weight in decision making, particularly the Wiltshire Core Strategy (WCS) Core Policy 2 in relation to settlement boundaries. All other Policies of the WCS still apply and planning applications where adverse impacts would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits can, and should, still be refused. However, where applications are being considered for sites at settlements, but outside the defined settlement boundaries, there may be the opportunity to improve housing supply by favourably considering proposals where appropriate. This would depend on the judgements made as to where the planning balance lies and considerations may include limited impacts and benefits to local communities that arise from the proposal.

Therefore, whilst housing land supply is often a key consideration in decision making, there are other material considerations that must also be taken into account. This means that Wiltshire Council and Appeal Inspectors can still refuse to grant planning permission for new housing development where the impacts of those proposals are unacceptable.

Officers are working to address the current housing land supply situation in relation to the North and West HMA through; the progression of the Chippenham Site Allocations Plan, assessment of planning applications for the Strategic Sites in the Wiltshire Core Strategy and consideration of housing applications against policies in the Wiltshire Core Strategy. In response to the shortfall in housing supply, and given the above, Wiltshire Council has responded by approving acceptable proposals for housing in the North and West HMA including the (speculative) application at East Melksham for 450 homes. This will all contribute towards improving land supply by the end of the monitoring year (end of March 2016) and will be reported in the next published housing land supply statement. This housing land supply statement will take into account all planning permissions granted for additional housing since 1 April 2015 and up to date information from developers and Wiltshire Council officers on the deliverability of sites.

Elected members of Council set the budget, including the budget for Economic Development and Planning with advice from Chief Officers. This year elected members decided to reduce the budget for Planning by £250,000 per year out of total budget reductions of £25m. The current performance of the planning service is rated as "green" on all current performance measures set by the government which reflects well on the officers and management within that service. Economic Development and Planning has lost many experienced officers to the private sector since the recession ended and has recently recruited a number of new members of staff that will be tasked with working on progressing the Plan.

The timetable for the preparation of the Wiltshire Housing Site Allocations Plan, which will consider the allocation of sites at Trowbridge, has recently been revised and the draft Plan will be publically available in September for consideration by Cabinet, followed by Council. The Plan will, subject to approval, be published for consultation in October 2016.