

**Minutes of the Environment and Sustainability Committee
13 July 2021**

Present:

Councillor I.J. Beardsmore (Chairman)
Councillor O. Rybinski (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

J.T.F. Doran	K.M. Grant	R.J. Noble
T. Fidler	N. Islam	J.R. Sexton
N.J. Gething	T. Lagden	V. Siva
M. Gibson	V.J. Leighton	

Apologies: Councillors J. McIlroy and S.C. Mooney

In Attendance: Councillors C. Bateson, L. E. Nichols and R.W. Sider BEM

225 Disclosures of Interest

There were none.

226 Local Plan Strategy

The Chair introduced the subject for discussion and advised the Committee that whilst the priority was to strongly challenge the government's housing figures allocation for the borough, it was also necessary to plan an alternative strategy in tandem with this.

The report for consideration proposed a revised strategy for the new Local Plan to meet the borough's housing need by releasing a small amount of green belt, thus reducing the impact on Staines.

Cllr Sexton proposed and Cllr Siva seconded an alternative option for the Committee's consideration:

"The Committee notes:

Members believe that they would benefit from independent support and advice on the formulation of a strategic vision for the borough.

The Committee is asked to agree:

- a) *To undertake an exercise of member engagement focused on developing a shared understanding and/or their role in formulating the Local Plan.*

- b) To develop a shared vision for the borough that is endorsed by a majority of members.*
- c) To appoint a suitably qualified external advisor to facilitate members in formulating the vision.*
- d) To incorporate the vision into the Local Plan documentation by no later than the end of October 2021.*
- e) Once the vision has been agreed it will be used to review existing policies and inform future ones.”*

Ann Biggs, Strategic Planning Officer, was invited to respond to the proposal.

Ann advised the Committee that officers could support work on the vision to run concurrently alongside the proposed strategy, however she could not recommend it as an alternative approach. To complete the vision first and then incorporate that into the strategy at a later date would take several months, thus pushing the Local Development Scheme timetable further back. Whilst officers could support work on the vision, other factors had to be taken into consideration: the time to procure and appoint an external advisor; work on the feedback from the public consultation on the Staines Development Framework (SDF) would have to be paused and could not be considered until the vision had been completed or progressed by the Local Plan Task Group (LPTG). Ann also considered that the delay put the borough at risk from speculative developers; local plan policies and the SDF were required to be in place as a priority as a guide to where and how development takes place.

Ann then outlined some of the background information to her report, setting out the reason for the proposed strategy. The previous LPTG had spent considerable time reviewing the strategy and considering only brownfield sites but had been unable to reduce the deficit beyond an overall figure of 625, equating to a shortfall of 42 homes per year over a 15-year period. The appendix to the report included a list of potential indicative green belt sites which met set criteria and were considered the least bad option.

The proposed strategy had previously been informally agreed by the former Local Plan Task Group and formalisation was sought from the Committee to enable progress on the site detail and policies. If agreed, then depending on the outcome of the SDF, it may be possible to allow a reduction in heights in some areas of Staines and enable the development of more family homes and affordable housing.

The Chair advised that a recent planning appeal decision had allowed development on green belt where two of the main criteria for upholding the developer's appeal was poor housing delivery and no up-to-date Local Plan; both factors that applied to this authority and thought this of grave concern.

Some members were confident that a clear vision agreed by the majority of all members would be the best way forward and would not unduly delay the new Local Plan, whilst others felt running both options in tandem was the best approach to avoid any further delay.

It was proposed by Cllr Leighton and seconded by Cllr Noble that the Committee consider combining the two recommendations and running them in tandem.

Clarification was sought from officers regarding comments made in a number of earlier meetings that some councils have had control of their plan removed.

Ann Biggs advised that in plans submitted since the introduction of the standard method; there weren't many years to look at but 3 planning authorities who attempted to proceed under their standard methodology numbers were advised to withdraw or advised that they were not going to proceed. Others have been advancing plans that meet their planning need. Those not progressing, including Spelthorne, have received communications from government asking when they will come to fruition. Ann was not aware that any local authority had had their plan taken away, but three were in danger of doing so and had been told to produce a better plan. Oxford had been previously mentioned, however that was before the standard method and those mentioned here were a better parallel.

Some members believed that in creating a vision, it might be difficult to take on board all views and find general agreement in the time allowed, whilst others felt that it was imperative to do this first and the concerns raised about timescale and vulnerability of green belt amounted to scaremongering; there was a moral obligation to consult an external advisor and look at a vision to factor in all the issues to put up the best defence possible.

Members commented that the issue of release of green belt had generated a great deal of debate amongst residents and many members had received communications on the subject.

Heather Morgan, Head of Regeneration and Growth, acknowledged that members were looking to achieve the best possible outcome for residents and that officers were doing the same, but believed there needed to be a degree of realism and balance between what residents would want and what is achievable in the timescale. Heather pointed out that the vision could be at odds with the present situation resulting in a review of evidence and further pushback on dates. Officers believed that the strategy, as it stood at present, delivered in terms of housing, climate change, flood plain and would result in developments of good character across the borough. The concern was that if the plan was not sufficiently robust or the Planning Inspector did not believe it robust, then it would not be allowed to go to inquiry and there would be insufficient time to progress by the December 2023 deadline.

In response to a question asking if the Strategic Planning team needed further resource, Ann Biggs advised that she considered there was sufficient resource to deliver the new Local Plan as set out in the report considered at the Committee's meeting on 30 June but lacked the decision on strategy to move forward.

In support of the case for agreeing a vision before progressing the strategy the following comments were made:

- It was important to remember the borough was a home for residents and there was a need to ensure future quality of life and a legacy to be proud of.
- Green belt was sufficiently protected and there was no risk of predatory development
- Green belt should be preserved and re-greened where appropriate, it was vital in the fight against climate change, and the flood plain
- Not all brownfield sites had been maximised and the external advisor could examine housing density and provide sufficient housing from those sites.
- The original proposal pits Staines against green belt.
- The council should group together with other local authorities and challenge the government
- Why were the council using housing figures based on the 2014 census; they should work out their own figure and methodology and factor in Brexit also to work out the housing need.
- The green belt sites identified in the list for consideration were not evenly spread across the borough and some wards shouldered a greater share than others
- The process to date had not been inclusive and some members and residents felt they had not been given the opportunity to put forward their views
- A fresh view from an independent person could be useful

Views expressed in support of the strategy and running the two proposals in parallel included:

- As councillors they had to make difficult decisions on behalf of residents, which may include building on some green belt.
- The population was increasing, and the borough had to take a share,
- Everyone had been given an opportunity to put forward their views: The previous LPTG had included a member representing each ward and there had been a period of public consultation
- The Planning inspector will look at the law not the politics and there was a need to be realistic
- The previous LPTG had worked hard to move the plan forward and made significant progress and improvement to it
- There was insufficient time to agree a vision first and it was possible that may not be as straightforward as suggested
- Green belt wasn't the only way to protect against climate change
- There was still a great deal of work to be done in a short space of time, there had been sufficient opportunity to put forward views and counsel's advice had been sought. It was now necessary to work out the best compromise.

There was some confusion as to whether the vision would be a high-level strategy, or a more detailed study and Cllr Sexton was asked to clarify this. In response, Cllr Sexton repeated the proposal.

In response to a question about the method of calculating housing figures, Ann advised that the Strategic Planning team had carried out their own methods of calculation of housing figures and those fell roughly within the same range as the government's. Comprehensive exercises had been carried out of brownfield sites by those who knew the sites well and whilst if blanket density was applied, they might be able to accommodate a specific number, in some instances they would not be appropriate. The best option for Staines was through the SDF in consultation with the public.

Cllr Sexton advised that there was an external facilitator they had in mind, who she considered would be the best person for the job. However, Heather Morgan advised that it would be necessary for any appointment to be through the prescribed procurement process.

The Committee were advised that if the vision required a different approach to that already underway, for example to remove any green belt sites, then any alternative would need to deliver a sound plan that delivered on all elements. It was not possible to take parts out of the plan and drop others in because of the impact on other areas.

In response to a question asking why 18 months wasn't sufficient time to incorporate the vision, Ann explained that Regulation 19 consultation would need to start in February 2022, to slot in with the ensuing key timetabled dates. Assuming the vision was completed and agreed by October 2021, it would only allow between then and February 2022 (approximately 6 months) for the results of the vision to be taken into account and adjustments to the strategy evaluated and considered. It had taken years to reach the current stage.

Heather advised the Committee that the sites listed in the appendix to the report were indicative, and members were not being asked to decide yes or not to those sites but to the principle of releasing a small amount of green belt, the sites would then be considered by the LPTG and assessed for suitability. The final recommendation would then come back to this Committee for decision.

Ann advised that it was not an option to delay assessment of the green belt sites as that was the next stage in the process for the LPTG. If the sites were not included and slotted in at a later stage, then the work on viability assessments and transport modelling would not be sufficiently accurate. It was necessary to understand the full impact and worst-case scenario to complete the evidence bases.

The Chair said it needed a sound vision to deliver a sound plan.

A recorded vote was requested. The Committee were advised that the first vote would be on the combined motion and if that fell, they would then be asked to vote for the officer recommendation or Cllr Sexton's proposal on an either/or basis.

FOR (8)	Beardsmore, Doran, Gething, Gibson, Islam, Leighton, Noble, Rybinski
AGAINST (4)	Fidler, Lagden, Sexton, Siva
ABSTAIN (1)	Grant

The Committee **resolved**:

1. To agree the revised strategy for the new Local Plan to meet our housing need by releasing a small amount of Green Belt, reducing the impact on Staines by not including an additional allocation, including opportunities to reduce some building heights in Staines if this is the outcome of the Staines Development Framework consultation and allow for more family homes with gardens to be built.
2. That they would benefit from independent support and advice on the formulation of a strategic vision for the borough.
 - a) To undertake an exercise of member engagement focused on developing a shared understanding and/or their role in formulating the Local Plan.
 - b) To develop a shared vision for the borough that is endorsed by a majority of members.
 - c) To appoint a suitably qualified external advisor to facilitate members in formulating the vision.
 - d) To incorporate the vision into the Local Plan documentation by no later than the end of October 2021.
 - e) Once the vision has been agreed it will be used to review existing policies and inform future ones.
3. That 1 and 2 above would run in parallel to avoid any further delay to the formulation of the new Local Plan.