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- 1 -

Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel
15 December 2022

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL

* Reporting to Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL SPECIAL CABINET PLANNING AND PARKING PANEL held on Thursday 15 December 2022 at 7.30 pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, The Campus, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

PRESENT: Councillors A. Hellyer (Chairman)

S. Bonfante, G. Michaelides, L. Musk, D. Richardson,
P. Shah, C. Stanbury, K. Thorpe, S. Thusu, F.
Wachuku, S. Kasumu, D. Panter and P. Zukowskyj.

OFFICIALS Executive Director (Place) (C. Barnes)
PRESENT: Assistant Director (Planning) (C. Carter)
Planning & Policy Implementation Manager (M. Wilson)
Senior Democratic Services Officer (C. Francis)

26. SUBSTITUTIONS

The following substitutions of Committee Members had been made in accordance with Council Procedure Rules:

Councillor Samuel Kasumu for Councillor Stephen Boulton
Councillor Paul Zukowskyj for Councillor Russ Platt
Councillor Darrell Panter for Councillor Jane Quinton

27. APOLOGIES

Apologies of absence were received from Councillors S. Boulton, R. Platt and J. Quinton.

28. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 6 October 2022 were approved as a correct record.

29. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS BY MEMBERS

Councillors S. Thusu and P. Zukowskyj declared a non-pecuniary interest in items on the agenda as appropriate by virtue of being Members of Hertfordshire County Council.

30. LOCAL PLAN - INSPECTOR'S LETTER AND PROPOSED MODIFICATIONS TO THE PLAN

Report of the Assistant Director (Planning) on the inspector's letter and proposed modifications to the plan.

The Planning Policy and Implementation Manager provided a presentation detailing the history of the examination of the new Local Plan and the key considerations since the meeting of Council in July. This included a summary of the letters received from the Inspector and the proposed consultation on changes to the planning system which were released by the Secretary of State the previous week.

The following points were raised and discussed:

- The Chairman referred to the Secretary of State's comments and the proposed legislation. He noted that officers cannot comment on the political side of things. The UK's population is still growing, and it is continuing to grow at a fast pace. There is a deficit relative to the early nineties of about 2.4 million in the national housing supply. If the country does not build housing, this will cause economic problems, some of which we are seeing today. This is creating a significant pressure to increase building, which is why in 2019 all three parties came up with the same 300,000 figure. Contrary political pressure is of course the local pressure to reduce building to fight individual sites, which are often very unpopular in the localities, and this is coming from backbenchers who want the national numbers to stay where they are, but the local numbers to come down, which is not a very sustainable position. In the short term, not building houses in a certain site or certain area may go down well with the public, but in the long run, if you don't build houses nationally, then you end up with the economic problems we are currently experiencing. The Chair said he would be quite sceptical that the planning reforms are going to square the circle in a very short period of time. The technical element of the legislation is unlikely to do it just because of the sheer amount of housing that is required to plug this deficit. The legislative part of it is unlikely to come about just because of how long legislation takes to pass, and because this was not in the manifesto the House of Lords could just bat it away. It is within their gift to do that and if they do that, the House of Commons can technically force it, but only a year after this parliamentary session, so at its earliest sometime in 2024. So, for those reasons the Chairman said we need to hedge on the Secretary of State's comments.
- Members noted the Inspector's views on high harm. Members noted that we do not have the ability to ask for a second opinion or another inspector, but there is no certainty another inspector would take a different view. There was a worry that moving forward, particularly if there are new number targets, that all the sites excluded previously will come back. It was noted that members would be able to debate this in much greater depth in five days' time at the Special Council meeting called to take the decision.

Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel
15 December 2022

- Members raised concern over the consultation process as this has now been passed over to the Customer Services Projects Board. The next meeting is not until 9 February, so would like this to be highlighted to Cabinet. Officers confirmed it would be a borough wide consultation and not just residents who live at those sites.
- Officers advised that they would be facilitating the consultation on behalf of the Inspector, so this follows the Inspector's modifications. All planning consultations are in line with the Statement of Community Involvement document. It is like previous consultations which include having the documents available in hard copies as well as notices in the papers.
- Officers confirmed that the reference in the presentation that 'this will be concluded by April 2023' was on the Department for Levelling Up Homes and Communities' website and not within the Minister's letter.
- Members noted from the presentation that we will have an early opportunity to review the wider plan. Members asked if the Council would have an opportunity before five years to review this again. Officers said that the review would be in the context of the changes to the planning system and the direction of travel. We would be able to effect new policy regarding site selection before then if we wanted to. Hypothetically if nothing changed in planning reforms then the Council would be looking to do a review to pick up the residual amounts of the gap. There would be a call for sites and an evaluation of the best, most sustainable, and appropriate sites using the methodology we would put in place for site selection. Site selection would be a choice of the Council.
- Members noted that this lengthy process has taken up valuable time and resources, using money that the Council could have put to much better use. This was just progressing with what the inspector has asked us to do.
- Concerns were raised that we did receive a letter from the Inspector on 6 September and nothing has been done, then we received another letter on 18 November and nothing has been done. Now this is being rushed through immediately prior to Christmas and it appears that there has been no prior warning to the residents of Welwyn Hatfield. The explanation for this was that these meetings have been arranged as a matter of urgency to seek Council's approval to formally begin a public consultation on main modifications to the Local Plan. Councillor P. Shah asked if he could propose to defer this decision tonight as the Minister's letter makes it clear that he will relax the existing housing requirement in full, remove a 20% buffer for those councils with a history of under delivery and remove the requirement for a 5 year housing supply. The Chairman stated his concerns about whether legislation can be passed in a very tight period. If

Cabinet Planning and Parking Panel
15 December 2022

the Council did not undertake the consultation now, it would run out of time and could be forced into using the new method.

Following discussion, it was proposed by Councillor S. Thusu and seconded by Councillor D. Richardson to accept the officer recommendations and recommend to Cabinet and Council a main modifications consultation based on a housing supply of 13,392 dwellings with a ten year supply of 9,209 dwellings against a FOAHN of 15,200 dwellings as set out in Table 4; and, that the public consultation takes place on Main Modifications to the Local Plan at the earliest opportunity once the Inspector has confirmed the content of the Main Modifications required to make the Plan sound.

RESOLVED:

FOR (7): A. Hellyer, S. Kasumu, G. Michaelides, D. Richardson, C. Stanbury, S. Thusu, and F. Wachuku.

AGAINST (3): L. Musk, K. Thorpe, and P. Shah.

ABSENTIONS (3): S. Bonfante, D. Panter, and P. Zukowskyj.

Meeting ended at 8.45pm
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