

The Planning White Paper – the faults of the current system

There is much to support in the Planning White Paper. I have long advocated a map based approach where each area designates which places are to be green space or farms, which can be developed for housing and which have general commercial use. Speedier decisions, Local Plans only one third of the current length and a simpler approach to an Infrastructure levy or contribution on developers are all welcome.

The present system is complex, expensive and frustrating to developers and local communities alike. It often does not allow a local community to protect areas from housing development if they are not specially designated as Green belt or SSSIs. Whatever the Local Plan says, determined and well funded developers hire expensive lawyers and keep on with appeals and changed submissions until on national appeal they overturn the local Plan and get their way with a further planning permission. Developers have to allow for many years of battles, have to pay big fees to planning consultants and lawyers and enter a variable negotiation over developer contribution.

Local Councillors often are dragged from seeking to protect a piece of land from development which is not designated for development in their approved local plan, by the appeals process. They seek a deal with a determined developer on the advice of their planning officers. They are told if they do not do a deal the Council will lose out on a Section 106 Developer Contribution Agreement, as they will lose on appeal and one may not be awarded. They are also told they may land the Council with large planning and legal fees trying to defend their local plan, only to lose and have to explain why they wasted all that money.

The Councillors who give in then become very unpopular with the local community who sometimes suggest unreasonable collaboration with the developer, when in most cases it is the run of official advice and the likelihood of loss in the system that causes the about face. The local community wants the Council to defend green spaces and keep local communities apart from continuous urban sprawl.

The government wishes to hit high targets for future housebuilding. As the White Paper acknowledges, the problem is often poor build rates despite large numbers of outstanding planning permissions. Landowners and developers can game the current system by building slowly on land with approvals in order to persuade Planning Inspectors to allow more planning permissions where the local community wants to keep green space. The government should also as part of this policy exercise improve its control of our borders and set a sustainable figure for economic migrants as past Conservative governments did or promised to do, to ease some of the development pressures.

In future blogs I will look at more of the detail of the proposals in the White Paper in preparation for putting in my response to this consultation

document. I look forward to hearing from constituents in particular about how this might affect us in Wokingham and West Berkshire.