

4 years ago when I became a councillor pretty much the first thing on our agenda was the Local Plan. And it stayed on the agenda every year for the whole term of the Council, until finally it was pushed to the other side of the election. Can we do it differently this time?

The short answer to that is 'yes'. But we'll have to manage it within the limitations of national planning rules which have not changed, despite the false hopes for flexibility in targets raised by Michael Gove. Our housebuilding target is still being calculated by the same method as before, although of course for Horsham District it will be lower anyway because of Water Neutrality constraints.

I'm sure you'll have plenty of questions for later but I'd like to pick out 3 I hear all the time. Firstly, why is it we don't build on brownfield sites instead of greenfield? The simple answer is that under the government's freemarket system, with minimal state control, we can only pick from what developers put in front of us. In Horsham District they haven't promoted any brownfield sites, so we can't choose any.

Another issue that creates justifiable anger is: why do we keep building homes without essential services and infrastructure? For example, a school might be promised at the time of approval yet never gets built. That's because the final decision to go ahead usually rests with a government department, in this case the Department for Education. If they subsequently change their minds, and instead find ways to cram students into existing schools, there's absolutely nothing we, as in Horsham District Council, can do about it. We just take the flak.

And the third issue I strongly sympathise with is the constant over-riding of Neighbourhood Plans, which parishes have worked so hard to prepare. Once again this is a flaw hard-wired in the system. Neighbourhood Plans are designed to give shape to organic growth, but they can never fulfil the role of the old regional strategies which used to plan for larger settlements or even whole new towns. Today, this role is effectively served by the Local Plan.

But what makes contradiction inevitable is they cover substantially different time periods. The new Local Plan has a 2040 horizon while most of our Neighbourhood Plans have a circa 2030 horizon. No wonder the two sets of housing numbers don't match up.

So let's go back to January and the decision to postpone the Plan. It was argued at the time that delay would not expose us to speculative applications. This was clearly over-optimistic even at the time. 83 homes at Duckmoor, Billingshurst went through on Appeal that same month, and there's no doubt more will follow.

What's worse, those 83 approvals at Duckmoor probably won't be counted in our numbers until they reach reserved matters stage, which could be a year or more away. In other words, when we're forced to accept speculative applications, they not only contradict our spatial strategy, they also won't count against our target.

It's a lose-lose situation and the only way to stop it is to pass a new plan. Yes, it will contain developments people don't like, but if we continue to take no action we'll end up with them all anyway, plus the extra.

What I really want to get across this evening is that there's more to a Local Plan than just the numbers and the locations. What gets forgotten is the quality of the housing, which is what the people who get to live there will actually care about. I particularly want to highlight the vital issue of eco building standards.

If the plan had been passed in January, it would have asked developers to meet Future Homes standard, a new government requirement coming in shortly. We're looking to go beyond that, to achieve true net zero, which would put us on a par with the top few councils in the country for eco building standards.

Not only will this save us from the insanity of having to retro-fit the houses we're building today as soon as 2030, it will also slash energy bills for residents. A typical family could save over a £1000 a year at current prices. This benefits not just our affordable homes quota, but will also cut the cost of living for every single buyer or renter of the homes we build - and slash carbon emissions at the same time.

There's a lot more we're trying but the clock is ticking. We can't afford to go back to the start. But what I can say for certain is, whatever flaws it may still have, the Plan we bring back to you will be significantly better for the residents of Horsham District than the version which would have passed back in January.