

COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 12

QUESTIONS BY THE PUBLIC

Mr David Turver asked:

- 1) The Local Plan shows that the average build rate over the period will be 423dpa. The Government's consultation on changing the standard method of calculating housing need created a risk that Hart's housing target would rise. However, following the Government's retraction of the proposals, Hart's housing need has fallen to 286dpa, much lower than the Local Plan. The targets for Rushmoor and Surrey Heath have also fallen. How will this new, lower target and the reduced building due to Covid affect Hart's future compliance with the Housing Delivery Test?

Councillor Cockarill responded:

The Hart Local Plan 2032 was adopted in April 2020. The housing figure in our Local Plan comes from the numbers needed in Hart calculated in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) plus our requirement to meet some of the unmet need from our neighbours under the Duty to Cooperate. This is our adopted plan. More on this is picked up under my response to your Question 2.

The Housing Delivery Test (HDT) compares the last three years of housing delivery with homes required over that period. Under HDT rules we will be measured using the lower of either:

- a) the local plan requirement (423 homes per annum) or
- b) the Government's local housing need figure with Surrey Heath's unmet need added on (286+41 homes = 327 homes per annum).

The issue for Hart is that come the middle of the decade expected supply from current permissions reduces, and in the long run if the HDT is to be passed additional housing supply will be needed.

The implications of Covid on housebuilding is not yet fully clear. If some sites are delayed then that could help with the HDT in future years, shifting some expected completions from early years with strong surplus supply to later years with expected deficits.

- 2) Given the Government's White Paper on Planning for the Future suggested that Local Plans should be revisited within 18 months of the new regulations coming into force, when do you think it will be appropriate to commence an early review of the Local Plan to take advantage of the new, lower build rate target?

Councillor Cockarill responded:

It is too early to tell the full implications of the White Paper and associated timescales. There is a lot of speculation in the planning profession that there is likely to be some significant amendments to the content of the White Paper before it progresses further.

The Hart Local Plan 2032 was adopted on 30th April 2020, only 8 months ago.

Paragraph 33 of the National Planning Policy Framework states: "Policies in local plans and spatial development strategies should be reviewed to assess whether they need updating at least once every five years and should then be updated as necessary. Reviews should be completed no later than five years from the adoption date of a plan and should take into account changing circumstances affecting the area, or any relevant changes in national policy. Relevant strategic policies will need updating at least once every five years if their applicable local housing need figure has changed significantly; and they are likely to require earlier review if local housing need is expected to change significantly in the near future."

As referred to earlier Hart has a strong housing land supply position and no immediate concerns over the Housing Delivery Test (HDT).

One of the reasons Hart performs well against the HDT is that planning permission has been granted and construction has commenced for the key housing site allocated in the Hart Local Plan. As a result, any review of the Local Plan would not be able to reduce the housing supply figure.

Any review of a Local Plan would need to consider the length of the Plan-period. Best practice is that a plan should have at least 15 years life at the date on which it is adopted. If we were to start a review of the Local Plan now, even with the reduced housing numbers currently published, we would still need to look for additional housing sites to the later years in a new Plan-period.

We will keep progress on Planning White Paper under review, and in light of this and other factors, continue to review when it may be necessary to start work on a new Local Plan. At the current time we have a newly adopted Local Plan which is up to date.

- 3) What is the anticipated level of spend on SHGV over each of the next 2 financial years?

Councillor Cockarill responded:

The original a budget approved for Shapley Heath Garden Village (SHGV) was £500K over three years based upon the grant from MHCLG grant.

The budget for 2021/22 is £406k. We do not have an established budget for 2022/23.

- 4) Many of our local businesses have struggled during the pandemic and some have sadly had to close, leading to permanent change to our high streets.

What is the action plan and budget over the next 2 financial years to help Fleet and other urban centres recover and regenerate post-Covid?

Councillor Cockarill responded:

The impact on businesses is a tragic outcome from this pandemic, not just in Hart but everywhere.

The Council has received funding for discretionary schemes to support local businesses which is to be spent on business support and recovery. The expenditure must be fully spent by the 31st March 2022 and in total it is £1.974m. £500K of this funding has been reserved for recovery. We have worked hard to get business grants out as quickly.

We are working to promote Hart as a place to invest in, and we are talking to our main Town and Parish Councils about how we can work together to help their town and village centres. The towns we are looking to support include Fleet, Hartley Wintney, Hook, Odiham, and Yateley.

We send out newsletters to hundreds of businesses each week providing advice, updates about grants and other useful information. We will also be talking to businesses to hear directly from them how we may best be able to help.

Our Environmental Health team have been providing a range of food business to help them trade during the lockdown, especially moving from restaurants to take aways.

And we are trying to help our residents find new training and employment opportunities which in turn can help business recruit suitable people to help them in recovery.

Mr Turver asked a supplementary question (summary):

Is it time to increase the budget for Fleet and other town centres so that they can become more vibrant again?

Councillor Cockarill responded (summary)

There's a lot that can be done to help revitalise our town centres across the district. Some of that is direct support to businesses and some about how we use our town centres moving forward. We will continue to work with our local parishes and our towns..

- 5) The latest budget monitoring statement (s4.3) considered by Cabinet in early January, shows a forecast overspend of £972K in 2020/21. The draft budget (s.9.4) considered by O&S shows a deficit of £381K for 2021/22 and a further £1,081K deficit for 2022/23. How can you justify hiring full-time staff and continuing to spend vast sums on an unnecessary Garden Community when core services are at risk of being cut?

Councillor Cockarill responded:

The budget for 2020/2021 was approved by Full Council on the 27th February 2020 included the approval for the expenditure on the Garden Communities Project and this expenditure was then allocated into the 2020/2021 budget with Full Council approval.

Mr Turver asked a supplementary question (summary):

The question was really about the future. If you're looking at what appears to be significant budget deficits in the next two financial years the £406k could quite easily close the budget gap. So you haven't really justified why you're continuing to spend when you're facing such financial pressure.

Councillor Cockarill responded (summary):

The £406k budgeted for next year is money that should be coming from a grant from Homes England which we applied for at the end of last year. But clearly, if the financial situation in relation to grant funding from MHCLG changes significantly, there will be an opportunity to reassess the priority level of projects.

- 6) The last plan/status report was published as part of the additional capacity funding bid in September 2020. Could you please publish an up-to-date plan and status report and commit to publishing monthly updates?

Councillor Cockarill responded:

The reporting mechanism for the Garden Communities Project is via the Opportunities Board and their agendas and minutes come to Cabinet and Council. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic we have not been able to hold any Board meetings since last Spring however I am anticipating meeting with the Board in March.