

MINUTES
of the
CHELMSFORD POLICY BOARD
held on 14 March 2024 at 7:00pm

Present:

Councillor C. Adutwim (Chair)

Councillors J. Jeapes, B. Massey, M. O'Brien, G. Pooley, E. Sampson, T. Sherlock, A. Sosin, A. Thorpe-Apps, N. Walsh, R. Whitehead and S. Young

Also in attendance

Cllrs Armstrong, Fuller, Robinson and Scott

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr P Clark. No substitutions were made.

2. Declarations of Interest

Members were reminded that they must disclose any interests they knew they had in items of business on the meeting's agenda and that they must do so at this point on the agenda or as soon as they became aware of the interest. If the interest was a Disclosable Pecuniary Interest they were also obliged to notify the Monitoring Officer within 28 days of the meeting. Any declarations are recorded in the relevant minute below.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting on 2 November 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

4. Public Questions

Six public questions had been received in advance of the meeting, which all related to Item 5. The Chair informed those asking questions, that they would receive answers during the officer presentation for Item 5.

The first related to a site in Chatham Green. The Board heard that the site had been rejected for development in this and previous local plans, despite scoring higher in the Sustainable Accessibility Mapping Appraisal than other areas where housing had been allocated. The Board heard that the defined settlement boundary could easily be extended, there were ample facilities nearby and they asked that the site be reassessed before the next consultation stage.

The second question highlighted that the report had not addressed the submitted application for designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The third asked why Hammonds Farm had been proposed for development in preference to areas with existing infrastructure,

which Little Baddow and Sandon did not have. The fourth asked about a site being proposed in the Chelmer Valley floodplain and access issues with it and the negative impact a development at Hammonds Farm would have. The fifth question asked that as development had been delivered ahead of schedule, was the extra capacity actually needed and the final question asked if it was strategically risky to focus 70-80% of the required additional development in a single area with inadequate infrastructure and only one land promoter.

Questions were also raised from Councillors, who were not members of the Policy Board, which covered concerns about the landscape in the Hammonds Farm area that would be affected, the importance of the agricultural land in the area, including the vineyards that relied on the land available in the area. They also raised concerns about the small amount of analysis that had taken place, regarding developing to the East of the A12 and queried what the long term solutions would be for junctions 17-19 on the A12. The Board also heard concerns about the flooding risk at Hammonds Farm, the lack of general infrastructure nearby and the impact that extra houses would have on the already overused local road network.

5. Chelmsford Local Plan – Preferred Options Consultation Documents

The Board considered a report presenting the Chelmsford Local Plan Preferred Options Consultation Document and the Preferred Options Integrated Impact Assessment and their approval was sought to publish them for a six-week public consultation period, starting in May 2024. The Board were provided with a presentation from officers which set out the importance of the document and emphasised that no final decisions had been made at this stage, rather that the Board were being asked to approve the document for consultation, so that views could be sought from the public and stakeholders. The Board heard that Local Plan reviews had to be carried out every five years and that the Council were sticking to their initial commitment in 2022 to conduct the review. It was noted that the review would help ensure the plan met the Council's new ambitions and aspirations, including those on addressing the Climate and Ecological Emergency, the housing crisis and providing high level jobs. It was also noted that the review would ensure the plan remains consistent with national policies and requirements, extend the plan period to meet development requirements until 2041 and address the monitoring framework.

The Board were informed that the process was currently at the second stage of public consultation and that a further stage would follow before the submission of the revised plan by June 2025. The housing development needs were highlighted and the importance of having a buffer was noted. It was noted that even with the buffer it had been difficult to meet the targeted supply number of houses since 2001 even with a supply buffer included, but that performance had been improving in recent years. The Board were also informed of the requirement to cater for the development needs of Travellers and it was noted that further pitches and plots were required for both Gypsies and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople.

The Board were advised of the nine updated Strategic Priorities which focused on priorities for Climate, Growth and Place, along with the new vision for the Plan, which was 'Guiding Chelmsford's growth towards a greener, fairer and more connected community'. The Board were also informed of new Strategic and Development Management Policies and were taken through the three growth areas. These included Growth Area 1 which includes proposed new development sites in Chelmsford City Centre, Growth Area 2 which includes existing adopted development sites and proposed new and development sites in North Chelmsford and Growth Area 3 which includes existing adopted development sites and proposed new development sites, including East Chelmsford Garden Community (known as Hammonds Farm). The Board also noted that at the Hammonds Farm site, along with the 3,000 new homes to 2041 and

1500 further homes beyond 2041, 43,000 sqm of new employment space is proposed and two Gypsy and Traveller Sites each with 10 pitches.

The Board were informed that there would be a comprehensive consultation process taking place, that exceeded the requirements set by the Government, including pop up displays, site notices and exhibitions along with information for Parish Tier Councils. The four recommendations were also detailed to the Board which would in summary approve the Preferred Options Consultation Document and the Preferred Options Integrated Impact Assessment for public consultation, with delegated authority for minor amendments before the public consultation.

In response to the questions raised by members of the public and Councillors not on the Policy Board, Officers noted that;

- The Council were aware of the approach by a working group to designate the area of land referred to as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, but Officers had been advised by Natural England that they were not currently considering future sites and in any event there is not a formal application process to submit areas. Officers noted that Natural England are a statutory consultee for the preferred options consultation.
- Hammonds Farm had been selected as a site at this stage due to it representing a good opportunity for a sustainable growth area, to be delivered through a comprehensive masterplan and alongside a range of proposed infrastructure. It would provide new schools, employment, open spaces and areas for sport. It was also noted that alternatives had been considered and they were detailed in the preferred options plan, including further expansion to the North East of Chelmsford being discounted due to the promoted sites not being deliverable under the current plan due to land mediation works and permitted mineral extractions.
- A significant portion of the Hammonds Farm development would form open space and a new Country park, with precise boundaries to be defined at the masterplanning stage.
- In terms of traffic issues with the Hammonds Farm development, there would be extensive traffic modelling carried out at later stages and the necessary transport mitigations would be planned and put in place to lessen the impacts on surrounding areas.
- Hammonds Farm made up 13% of the new homes planned under the preferred options plan, which officers did not feel was an overly large proportion, especially as it would be spread across all of the plan period and would allow for substantial new infrastructure. It was also noted that officers felt a single promoter, was actually a benefit as it would help to facilitate a comprehensive approach, rather than a piecemeal one due to different commercial interests.
- Further modelling had been carried out at Chatham Green and it was felt that development there would have too much impact on the road network, including traffic being reassigned to other local routes through Broomfield and Melbourne, along with a cross boundary impact on the A131 to Braintree. It was also noted that the site referred to in public question 1 was not within the defined settlement boundary and was therefore considered isolated from the main settlement of Chatham Green and it had been excluded to avoid giving pressure to develop other areas of adjoining land. It was also noted that bus stops were not a criteria for determining whether to include/exclude land in a defined settlement boundary and the site had been fully assessed through the SHELAA. Officers noted that development at Chatham Green had been rejected for its relative isolation from existing services and facilities which would lead to a higher reliance on cars, landscape sensitivity issues, and capacity concerns for waste water.
- The land at Hammonds Farm that had been referred to as having opportunities for horticultural and ecological uses which rely on poorer agricultural land Grade 4 and

below are located in areas which are not proposed to be built on as these are located along the river corridor.

- Further junction modelling would take place to detail what interventions were required to accommodate the additional development.
- Any housing at the Hammonds Farm site would be within flood zone 1, with the lowest flood risk.

Some members of the Board raised concerns about the large size of the document and the timescale with which it had been provided before the meeting and suggestions were made that for large documents such as this, then perhaps draft versions should be circulated to Cllrs instead. In response it was stated that the timescales had been in line with what the Board and other Committees work to and legal deadlines had been met, but it was acknowledged that it had been a large document to consider within the timescale and the option of drafts for Cllrs would be considered in the future.

Views were expressed by a member of the Board that the plan appeared to have been written by developers for developers and that as a result neighbourhood plans by Parish Tier areas would be superseded and would need to be re prepared. They also felt that developers would just squeeze housing into certain areas and felt that the plan was not ready for consultation as it needed more information on transport. They also emphasised their view that they had not been given sufficient time to read the document.

In response it was reemphasised that the Board were simply being asked to approve the document for consultation and that no final decisions were being made at this stage and that all members of the public and ward Councillors, would be able to respond formally to the consultation and raise any concerns. Officers also stated that the plan had been prepared by officers and not developers. They stated that, of course, they needed to know where developers were proposing developments as the Council was not a housing developer and that officers did not share the view expressed, that the plan was not ready for consultation. Officers highlighted Appendix 1 of the document, which showed what had been done in response to the previous consultation and reemphasised that the Board were being asked to approve the document for consultation, to allow feedback from stakeholders and the public. The Board also heard that the Council was duty bound to produce a plan, to make sure that development was carried out in a sustainable way as it had been for the last few decades, due to the Council having successful local plans and that it had to ensure good jobs and housing for residents in the future.

In response to other points raised, officers stated that;

- There had been plenty of examples in the past, where views expressed through the consultation process had changed the detail in the plan before its final approval and it was possible this would happen again.
- Making provision for employment was quite different to housing, as employers could choose where to locate, but that by providing potential sites, it would help to avoid areas of housing being built where everyone needed to go elsewhere to work and that the proposed sites would be of mixed employment uses.
- The consultation process will be open to various methods of response and unlike some Councils, there was not a prescribed single method of response being proposed.
- The strategic priorities of the plan referred to the importance of agricultural land and that it sought to minimise impact to the higher quality agricultural land.
- They were happy to amend the first recommendation to detail that rather than just being 'in accordance with the requirements of the Town Planning Act' it could be reworded to say 'above and beyond' the requirements.

- They were always looking for new ways to engage in all areas including the non-parished areas where there was not always as clear a route as via the Parish Tier Council.

Members of the Board, expressed their views that it was important for the document to go out to consultation, so that the crucial views of the public could be heard and considered. They also thanked officers, for producing the comprehensive document and highlighted that the flow of sustainable housing across the City's area was of increasing importance due to the housing crisis taking place. They also referred to the previous examples of changes being made as a result of the consultations and highlighted the importance of that process in producing a sustainable and effective Local Plan. Views were also expressed, that if other Councillors had concerns then they could always raise them directly with officers, who had always been responsive to views and comments from Councillors in the past. Some views were also expressed, that it was unfortunate that not all Councillors had been involved in the preparation of the document, but that they would now have the opportunity to do so with officers, in the weeks leading up to the start of the consultation and then during the actual consultation period itself.

The Leader of the Council also addressed the Board and thanked officers for producing the vital documents, to help achieve a successful and sustainable Local Plan through the review stages. They also expressed sympathy that the documents had not been available to Board members with extra notice compared to the usual five clear working days, but referred to the tight deadlines that were being worked to, especially with the upcoming pre-election period. They also detailed that the review had to be concluded by June 2025. They stated that the vast majority of the proposed plan was what had already been agreed by the previous administration in 2018, but that it included key changes to priorities, as had been set out by officers, which emphasised the areas which needed greater importance going forward, including affordable housing and measures to tackle climate change. They also echoed views shared by members of the Board, that it was important to remember that in the past, various changes had resulted from the public consultation stages. They also stated their view that larger sites were preferable to multiple smaller ones, as the larger ones attracted the vital infrastructure that was required for areas to be sustainable, including schools and improved transport links. They also stated that it was important to not just reject developments in certain areas and to instead propose alternatives as it was vital that additional housing was provided within Chelmsford. They informed the Board, that they were keen to see the consultation responses at a meeting later in the year.

RESOLVED that;

1. The Board approves the publication of the Chelmsford Local Plan Preferred Options Consultation Document and the Preferred Options Integrated Impact Assessment attached at Appendices 2 and 3 of this report for public consultation in accordance with and over and beyond the requirements of The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012.
2. The Board notes the contents of the Issues and Options 'You Said, We Did' Feedback Report attached at Appendix 1 and approves it for publication.
3. Authority be delegated to the Director of Sustainable Communities in consultation with the Cabinet Member for a Growing Chelmsford to: (i) make any necessary minor amendments to the Chelmsford Local Plan Preferred Options Consultation Document, the Preferred Options Integrated Impact Assessment and the Issues and Options 'You Said, We Did' Feedback Report before publication; and (ii) prepare all necessary

documentation to support the planned programme of public consultation including publishing the 2023 – 2024 Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHELAA).

4. The Board endorses the proposed approach to the Local Plan Preferred Options consultation arrangements set out in Appendix 4.

(7.15pm to 9.08pm)

6. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 9.08pm

Chair