

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 7 December 2017

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	P Stuart (Chair)	
	Councillors	T Jones B Kenny C Muspratt T Smith T Usher W Ward G Green (in place of T Pilgrim)	A Sykes B Berry A Hodson C Carubia Wood (In place of S Foulkes) K Hodson (in place of I Lewis)
<u>In attendance:</u>	Councillors	P Gilchrist G Davies	
<u>Apologies</u>	Councillors	S Foulkes I Lewis T Pilgrim	

38 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Foulkes, Councillor Lewis and Councillor Pilgrim.

39 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST / PARTY WHIP

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any item(s) on this agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

Members were reminded that they should also declare whether they were subject to a party whip in connection with any item(s) to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement.

No such declarations were made.

WIRRAL LOCAL PLAN - LETTER FROM SECRETARY OF STATE

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and outlined the procedure to be adopted in respect of the matter under consideration, reading out the requisition notice for the benefit of those members of the public in attendance.

The Assistant Director for Environmental Services introduced his report that had been prepared in response to Members' enquiry into considering a letter from the Secretary of State seeking further information on plan-making in Wirral because of the Council's failure to adopt a 2004 Act Local Plan. The report also provided information on the timetable and target dates in providing the long term vision, objectives and spatial strategy for the borough and the framework for future Development Plans.

Members raised a number of issues. Why are we behind on our targets and reasons for not keeping to timescales stated? Why no information has been sent to The Secretary of State and his Office and have other Authorities got their plans in place?

What work has been done to meet the National Housing Policy? Any update on the Local Development Schemes status. Why unlike neighbouring authorities have we not got our plans in place and where are we in regards with political decision making process.

The Assistant Director explained that there is a Local Development Scheme in two parts which has been published and shows real time updates on progress.

The Assistant Director is to raise the question with the Secretary of State as to why this has not been referred to in the letter.

The letter refers to the Neighbourhood Development Plan. The Council has plans in two areas Devonshire Park and Hoylake and 3 further areas are in the pipe line. (Birkenhead North & Tranmere, Leasowe & Beechwood)

The Assistant Director explained that meeting housing need was related to land allocation. The current analysis shows that Wirral does not have enough land to meet allocation. Work is being undertaken to establish the number of housing units to build and where they will be located. The Government has consulted on the methodology, but the consultation outcome is not known yet. The Green Belt Review Methodology Consultation closed 6 December 2017. A report is expected next June/July to establish housing number's and land allocation and will set out a 15 year supply broken down into 5 year supply.

Members questioned why the last 4 strategy timescales were not met as it was due to be completed in September 2017

The Assistant Director explained that plan making is a very slow as process. The main issue is a delay in housing needs assessment. The political decision making process also takes time. The process is set out in the timetable. The majority of the plan was already written in 2012. The critical issues are housing needs and allocations. There is an identified need for approximately 803 additional houses per year over the next 3 years. The past few years an average 500 units have been built per year.

A Member asked if the plan could be sent to Secretary of State for comment as it is.

The Assistant Director responded that if that were to happen it would be sent back as not sound.

We need to identify where we are going to build, the residential allocated land, employment need, and Brownfield sites and agree permissions to maximise density. To meet assessed need we may need to include Green Belt land.

Members requested to see what targets we have missed from the core strategy timetable. They questioned to what extent delays are due to political interventions and administration.

The Assistant Director agreed that previously dates on the timetable had not been met but he was not sure how many times this had happened, as the timetable had been revised on numerous occasions.

Members asked could the Assistant Director please list the changes. It was questioned how he would know what the political reasons for the delays were. He was requested to add the reasons why the timetable had been changed, moved or postponed. Members noted that up to 2015, the Local Plan was on track but that from July 2015 target dates started to be missed. It was also commented regarding housing needs that there are 6,000 empty properties and 13,000 with planning permission.

The Assistant Director responded that a detailed piece of work could be done which would set out the process that had been followed setting out the facts of the journey. The chronology would provide a full history from 2004.

Some Members questioned whether the delay in meeting our target build was due to a wish to save the Green Belt.

Members of the Committee wanted to raise with the Leader of the Council the ongoing political interference to officers doing their work.

A member questioned the tone of the letter from the Secretary of State regarding the information being sent and questioned whether we had been sending enough information through to his office.

The Assistant Director stated that the letter was sent to Wirral out of the blue, only half an hour before the Minister stood up in Parliament letting us know that Wirral would be named in his speech. It came as a surprise since we had been sharing all the information with them.

A Member asked since the letter had been received on 16 November 2017 who has been in contact with them to get the queries answered?

The Assistant Director stated that he is seeking clarification on the contents of the letter. A Senior Civil Servant has been appointed as main contact unfortunately this information was initially sent to the wrong email address so it hadn't reached him until yesterday and he would contact as soon as possible.

A member asked what the implications of intervention are.

The Assistant Director stated that he couldn't really comment. There was a wide range the powers of intervention could take ranging between accepting the specific circumstances made by the Authority to sending in Civil Servants to actually write the plan for Wirral. Some of the matters to be considered are however political decisions which are outside the control of the officers.

He confirmed that discussions with Central Government were taking place on a regular basis and that there had been sharing real time information. The DCLG officials know what progresses we have made to the Neighbourhood Plan, and are fully aware that we haven't met some of the timescales.

Members asked was the same letter sent to other Local Authorities.

The Assistant Director confirmed that a letter had been sent to 13 other authorities.

A Member stated that this was a non-political issue as all parties during the time had been in administration and in charge. They questioned how other authorities had been able to comply with the timescales.

The Assistant Director responded that Officers develop local plans and the Administration approves them. Officers on the technical side can keep to timescales, but he could not comment regarding the making of political decisions.

Members questioned why scrutiny is not involved in the decision making process and asked for this Committee to be involved in the process.

The Assistant Director for Environmental Services informed Members that the Leader had until the end of January 2018 to reply to the Secretary of State. Members asked that the Leader outlines any exceptional circumstances for failure to produce a Wirral Specific Plan; to draw to the attention of the Secretary of State what had been done and what we are doing. The Leader will respond to Secretary of State.

RESOLVED: (unanimously) - That

- 1) That the report is noted and Committee expressed its concern at the length of time that this process has taken.**
- 2) That the Assistant Director for Environmental Services reports to future scrutiny committee detailing timetable to date and reasons for slippage.**
- 3) That a Core Strategy Local Plan Update becomes a standing item of the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee to allow effective scrutiny of the Council's progress towards adopting a Local Plan.**