

COUNCIL

Monday, 19 August 2024

Present: The Civic Mayor (Councillor Cherry Povall, JP) in
the Chair
Deputy Civic Mayor (Councillor Brian Kenny)

Councillors	KJ Williams	J Grier	J McManus
	C Baldwin	B Hall	S Mountney
	G Bennett	K Hodson	K Murphy
	S Bennett	P Jobson	A Onwuemene
	M Booth	G Jenkinson	R Pitt
	A Brame	J Johnson	S Powell-Wilde
	H Cameron	T Jones	H Raymond
	P Cleary	M Jordan	L Rennie
	C Cooke	S Kelly	M Redfern
	G Cooper	T Laing	K Stuart
	A Davies	E Lamb	P Stuart
	GJ Davies	I Lewis	M Sullivan
	A Gardner	L Luxon-Kewley	E Tomeny
	P Gilchrist	P Martin	J Walsh
	H Gorman	C McDonald	V Wilson
	N Graham	G McManus	G Wood
	JE Green		

1 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Civic Mayor welcomed everyone to the meeting and those watching the webcast. The Civic Mayor then asked Members to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any matters to be determined at this meeting and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of such interest.

Councillor Vida Wilson declared a personal interest as a member of the Shaughall Massie Conservation Society.

Councillor Naomi Graham declared a personal interest by virtue of her husband's employment.

Councillor Julie McManus declared a personal interest as a Member of Bidston Conservation Society.

2 CIVIC MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Civic Mayor welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ainsworth, Basnett, Carubia, Bird, Cox, G Davies, Foulkes, Grey, A Hodson, Molyneux, T Murphy, Robinson, Mark Skillicorn, Stewart-Laing and Janette Williamson.

The Civic Mayor then asked Members and the public to observe a minutes silence in memory of Clarence (Bill) Wells, former Mayor of Wirral in 1979 – 1980.

3 **THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON THE REVISED NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK**

The Civic Mayor advised Members that the purpose of the Extraordinary Council meeting was to consider a requisition notice signed by six Members. As outlined within the notice, the Extraordinary Council Meeting had been convened to discuss the Council's response to the consultation on the revised National Planning Policy Framework.

The Civic Mayor noted that Council had received four motions in respect of the issue, and it was her intention to utilise Standing Order 15.15 to hold a joint debate on the motions.

Before the Motions were formally moved, the Civic Mayor informed Members that the Labour Group had submitted an amendment to the Liberal Democrat Group's motion. Councillor Stuart Kelly confirmed he was happy to accept the amendment moved by the Labour Group as a friendly amendment, as follows:

Council notes the challenges Government is aiming to respond to including a national housing shortage, high affordability ratios (which on Wirral equate to over 6x the medium salary), and high numbers of people on local waiting lists for housing. However, Council believes the proposed standard method of calculation is flawed and has produced national targets which undermine local regeneration priorities

The Civic Mayor then invited the following Councillors to formally move and second their Motions.

Councillor Green moved and Councillor Rennie seconded their motion submitted in accordance with Standing Order 13.

Councillor Stuart moved and Councillor Davies seconded their motion as amended submitted in accordance with Standing Order 13.

Councillor Cleary moved and Councillor Jenkinson seconded their motion submitted in accordance with Standing Order 13.

Councillor Kelly and Gilchrist seconded their motion submitted in accordance with Standing Order 13.

The Civic Mayor then invited speeches from proposers and seconders of the motions as well as Members who wished to speak on the matter. Following a debate and the proposers of the motions having replied, the motions were put to the votes.

In Respect of the Liberal Democrat Motion as amended it was –

Resolved (51:0) – That:

Council notes the statement made to the House of Commons by The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government concerning the proposed revisions to the NPPF and in particular changes to the standard method to calculate local housing need.

Council notes the challenges Government is aiming to respond to including a national housing shortage, high affordability ratios (which on Wirral equate to over 6x the medium salary), and high numbers of people on local waiting lists for housing. However Council believes the proposed standard method of calculation has produced national targets which undermine local regeneration priorities.

Council is clear that a well-researched and authoritative response is needed to the consultation announced covering the suggested changes to the National Planning Policy Framework and revised formulae.

Council therefore requests that the Chief Planning Officer produces a response to the consultation taking into account the significant progress that Wirral's draft local plan has made and the important stage that the Council has reached in discussions with the inspectorate on housing delivery and a stepped housing trajectory.

Council recognises the trailblazing significance of the brownfield proposals set out in the draft submission of the Local Plan as published and tested by the submissions made to the enquiry hearings and the full acceptance of the housing numbers set out at the inquiry, and above all, the recognition that there was no need to make inroads into the Green Belt, Urban Green Spaces, and agricultural land.

Council remains of the view that the right balance has been secured and achieved in the draft Local Plan and the aim of securing development on brownfield sites, along with the prospect of the regeneration and renewal that Council is determined to secure for Wirral.

In respect of the Green Group Motion it was –

Resolved (31:20) – That:

Council notes the government consultation published on 30 July 2024 on proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system including the proposed changes to the methodology for calculating new housing targets. Indicative figures imply an annual target for Wirral of 1,755 new homes, 1,027 or 141% higher than the corresponding figure in the Council's emerging local plan.

Council agrees that such numbers, if confirmed, threaten to fundamentally change Wirral by:

undermining the unanimously agreed brownfield only policy for new housing and diverting resources away from the regeneration of Wirral's left bank

increasing urban sprawl with inevitable implications for carbon emissions and biodiversity loss

posing a fundamental threat to Wirral's green belt and the special character of many communities across Wirral

Council also notes that the proposed reforms

imply a preference for brownfield land development but do not indicate additional support for brownfield land reclamation and development to help meet the vast increase in housing numbers

do not prioritise the existence of over a quarter of a million long term empty properties in England or suggest giving local authorities additional powers to bring such properties back into use

do not address the carbon implications of increased urban sprawl and how this will impact on binding national targets for net zero emissions

and endorses the recent comments made by Claire Holland, housing spokesperson for the Local Government Association; "While national government can provide useful guidance, it is local councils and communities who know their areas best, so changes to national planning policy should be suitably flexible to allow authorities to make judgement decisions on managing competing demands for uses in their local areas."¹

Council further notes the letter from the Deputy Prime Minister to all local authority leaders on 30 July 2024 and particularly the comments regarding local plans currently at examination:

"where there is a significant gap between the plan and the new local housing need figure, we will expect authorities to begin a plan immediately in the new system"

and the significant implications this has for the future of Wirral's Local Plan.

Council reaffirms its commitment to the Birkenhead 2040 Framework and its ambition to fundamentally change the Left Bank of Wirral so that it becomes a place that is more attractive to investment from the private and public sector and therefore addresses market failure in the provision of new housing which significantly contributes to the stark inequalities that exist in Wirral.

*Accordingly, Council instructs the Chief Planning Officer when preparing a response to the Government consultation to explicitly address:
Wirral's unique position given its potential to deliver large scale brownfield only housing and associated regenerative placemaking
the negative knock-on effects that releasing green belt land would have on achieving successful regeneration and additional housing supply in East Wirral and the borough's ability to achieve net zero targets
the current situation regarding empty properties in Wirral and the corresponding potential to meet future housing need in the borough.*

In respect of the Labour Motion it was –

Resolved (51:00) – That:

Council notes, with concern, the recent Government announcement regarding the National Planning Policy Framework consultation and the potential implications this could pose to Wirral's greenbelt areas of the proposed increased housebuilding targets for Wirral.

Council recognises the pressing need for new homes and understands the challenges of the UK's housing crisis for all local authorities, including Wirral. However, Council believes that protecting our Greenbelt and its regeneration plans should be a priority, ensuring that any new developments are sustainable and do not harm Wirral's Greenbelt.

Council requests the Council Leader to write to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government and the Minister of State for Housing, Planning, and Building Safety. This letter will form part of the Council's response to the Government's consultation, explaining that Wirral Council remains steadfast in its commitment to the unanimous cross-party support for its emerging Brownfield-only local plan. The Council's emerging local plan proposal encompasses the Government's national housebuilding ambitions – prioritising Brownfield land with a plan led by local leaders and residents.

Whilst recognising the need for more housebuilding nationally, Wirral's Draft Local Plan reaffirms the Council's commitment to protecting the Greenbelt from development by facilitating sustainable housing solutions that do not require housebuilding on Wirral's Greenbelt. It encourages innovative housing solutions, such as modular homes and repurposing vacant buildings, to meet housing demands without compromising the natural environment.

Council urges the Government to stand with communities across the Wirral and support Wirral's Brownfield only Draft Local Plan, which has once-in-a-lifetime regeneration for brownfield areas like Seacombe, Liscard, Birkenhead and New Ferry whilst protecting the Greenbelt for everyone who visits, lives and works in Wirral.

Council also requests the Leader of the Council to share any responses with all elected Members.

In respect of the Conservative Motion it was –

Resolved (31:20) – That:

On 29 July, Council noted that: ‘Having undertaken the work required to reach this stage of the Local Plan process and to comply with the 2004 Act, Council does not believe that any land designated as Green Belt or Local Green Space in Wirral is required for development.’

At that meeting, Council resolved to instruct the Chief Executive to respond accordingly to any correspondence received including the consultation on changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which was used to prepare our Local Plan in consultation with Group Leaders, and to reassure residents of the Council’s commitment to the Green Belt.

Less than 24 hours later, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government announced proposals to fundamentally change the National Planning Policy Framework and, specifically, the formula used to calculate now-mandatory housing targets.

Council is extremely concerned that the proposed formula, if enacted, would require an increase from 728 dwellings a year, as specified in Wirral’s long-delayed draft Local Plan, to 1,755 dwellings a year. Over the course of a 20-year period Local Plan, this would require Wirral to build 35,100 additional houses and flats, up from 14,560 as agreed by Council on 21 March 2022.

Council believes that such levels of development cannot be delivered on brownfield land alone and is concerned that substantial areas of the Borough’s Green Belt would be required to be released for development if such a massive target were to be delivered.

Council requests the Leader of the Council to write to Wirral’s four Members of Parliament seeking their support for Wirral’s current draft Local Plan and urging them to reject the proposed formula. Council also requests the Leader of the Council shares their responses with all elected Members.

Council instructs the Chief Planning Officer to prepare a response to all 106 questions in the Ministry’s consultation, based on the evidence developed for Wirral’s current draft Local Plan, to be then shared with Group Leaders, prior to submission, by no later than 24 September 2024, and for a copy of that submission to be made available to residents via the Council’s website.

