

Ms. Claire Wood following Matter 6 (v)  
28.1.21

Inspector

Thank you again for the hearing session yesterday on Agenda Item 6. Whilst I may not have necessarily understood it all, it was genuinely interesting to see the process at work and have the opportunity to be a part of it.

As I said in my note to Louise, having reflected on the discussions at the hearing yesterday; the newly presented evidence from WFDC on the need for social housing in Blakedown and the fact that its last-minute insertion into the process has not provided opportunity for appropriate consultation, I have taken the liberty of preparing a written statement for you which I hope you will consider admissible as evidence for Agenda Item 8 under the circumstances we find ourselves in.

Let me start by saying that I believe in the principle of affordable housing and indeed was a supporter of two recent developments in Blakedown - one in Gladstone Place, which was a mixed development of market-rate and affordable properties; and a more recent smaller development of 3 bungalows for shared ownership with a housing association.

However, I have a number of concerns both about the validity of the need and the feasibility of the provision of 70 affordable homes in the village.

Firstly, it is yet again not in line with our Neighbourhood Plan, a plan that WFDC were consulted on extensively and approved.

Secondly, there is extremely limited opportunity for employment in the village and not a great deal more in the immediate surrounding area given our rural setting and the deprivation of nearby Kidderminster.

Thirdly, the primary school is at capacity in terms of pupil numbers and currently there is no plan for expansion. (The school was only expanded to a full class/year group in 2015.)

Fourthly, the development in Gladstone Place in the village actually had the effect of increasing average property prices overall thereby negating any of the good done by the introduction of the affordable housing in the development. (Blakedown sits in the catchment area for Haybridge High School, an outstanding Ofsted rated secondary school which adds a premium to property prices across the area.)

Finally, and perhaps most concerning of all I am very concerned by the last-minute nature of this proposed change in the plan and the assertion that it is acceptable to remove land from the Green Belt 'just in case'. For a local authority who so closely manages the tree population in Blakedown that I require full planning permission even just to trim a tree back, I find it at best contradictory and at worst laziness that this land should be released 'just in case' it should be needed. Surely the need for the release of the land, for whatever purpose car parks, housing, affordable housing or frankly a circus - who knows what reason WFDC will dream up next - if not needed now or in the immediate future, should be debated at the point in time when and if the need should arise?

As I said yesterday, this last-minute change has been typical of the approach that WFDC have taken to this planning exercise all along. Their consultation exercise has been to tick a box, at no point have they actually been interested in any other view or opinions. They hid the plan consultation meetings away in the middle of the day when the majority of villagers were at work or school pick-up; we were forced out of the council chamber into an ante room with intermittent sound during the final council discussion on the plan and they have been retro-fitting the evidence to back up their ever-changing policies throughout.

If I was feeling charitable, I would suggest that the introduction this week of the need for the 70 affordable houses is because it would be the path of least resistance for the local authority, rather than it

being the right answer to the question, as it would require them to do no further work in finding an alternative sight for the affordable housing.

If I was feeling less charitable, I would question why WFDC appear to be so determined to release this field from Green Belt for any purpose at all? It does make me wonder what are they going to gain from this and what is the motivation? (I have just completed my annual financial ethics training so perhaps that is making me cynical!)

Regardless of motivations, WFDC display a sloppy approach to planning and should be held accountable. Their constituents frankly deserve better.

Thank you again for your time.

Kind regards

Claire Wood