

Local Plan Sub-Committee – 16th July 2020

Statement / Questions by Councillor James Abbott

Madam Chairman and Members of the Local Plan Committee

The report on Next Steps for Section 1 of the Local Plan is to be welcomed. The Leader of the Council asked at Cabinet on 13th July if I would support the Modified Section 1 with the inclusion of the remaining Garden Community East of Colchester. The answer is Yes. The G&I Group, as the main opposition group at BDC, has reservations about the scale of all of the Garden Communities and their impacts. But the detailed planning and final scale of the East of Colchester site will now be largely for the authorities and residents at Colchester and Tendring to determine.

We support the Inspector's Option 1 to withdraw the 2 Garden Communities at West of Braintree and West Tey. West Tey in particular, with over 20,000 houses proposed, was a New Town in scale, spanning up to 7 km of what is currently largely countryside.

We support the proposed Modifications subject to public consultation and any necessary adjustments to secure a Sound and sustainable Plan.

The alternative, as the report sets out, is to start again, with more years of delay, higher costs and more uncertainty.

2 years ago I urged the administration to take a different path when the Inspector was first unable to find Section 1 Sound.

Last year we raised concerns about the additional evidence, including that the Rapid Transit System was not realistic. The Inspector in his recent letter, stated that:

“the RTS routes 3 and 4 have not been shown to be deliverable and are at odds with the Plan aspirations for integrated and sustainable transport networks”.

That is effectively what we said - repeatedly last year at BDC meetings, not to cause trouble, but because that's what the evidence said. But we were not listened to.

Over 6 years, NEGC has spent nearly £7 million on the Garden Communities project and BDC has spent approximately £1.25 million on Section 1 excluding internal staff costs.

Despite that time and cost, as things stand not a single home will be built in Braintree District from the Section 1 Garden Communities.

Whilst joint working has been a good thing, Section 1 has largely been a failure and even now the administration claims its approach protects the district from speculative development. In reality many communities have seen significant speculative unplanned development due in part to the delays caused by Section 1.

Question - Will the Leadership of the Council recognise and explain to residents the failure of the Section 1 Plan and accept that lessons need to be learned ?

The report identifies that 2710 homes are removed from Braintree District numbers as a result of the proposed Modifications.

But the Section 2 total, due to cumulative consents and homes built during the Section 1 delays now stands at 15,049.

That is 729 homes above the required number in the Plan period 2013 to 2033 (albeit accepting the various adjustments that may be needed).

Progress now depends on all 3 North Essex Authorities agreeing the same way forward.

If they do, there will be a 6 week consultation and due to Covid-19 restrictions, a full range of consultation may not be possible.

Question - Can virtual events be held to support the consultation, such as on Zoom - to give presentations and answer questions from residents ?

Final question - When we get to Section 2, can it be ensured that the process takes into account the views of local communities as far as is possible, and in so doing avoids the conflict that Section 1 has caused ?