

OXFORD CORE STRATEGY
Inspector's Note of Exploratory Meeting
2pm, 20th January 2009
Town Hall, Oxford

Present: The Inspector; representatives of the City Council, GOSE, County Council and Highways Agency together with about 30 people representing local interests.

- 1 This meeting was convened following an earlier exchange of correspondence between myself and the Council, which had expressed my fundamental concerns about the soundness of the Core Strategy. These concerns were mainly based on the degree of deferment of decisions to subsequent plans.
- 2 At the meeting wide-ranging discussion centred upon a number of topics set out in the agenda, including
 - Whether the policies as drafted added value to national/regional guidance
 - Whether the approach adopted provided a sense of what was being sought in the main areas of change
 - Whether the policies provided an appropriate level of guidance to subsequent plans or whether difficult decisions were being left to those later plans
 - Whether the plan set out a clear, holistic approach to the main topics, such as retailing and employment
 - Whether the plan was sufficiently clear on the deliverability of the strategy and the adequacy of the supporting contingency measures
 - Whether the plan provided an adequate basis for measuring its success.
- 3 The Council indicated that the consultation stage documents gave extensive consideration to the issues. In addition, they had a very substantial evidence base and had also prepared and published a number of background papers, which when read alongside the plan provided much of the explanation and detailed basis of the strategy. These sources were in the public domain. The Council, in its wish to be brief, had taken the broad outcomes from this work, without incorporating the reasoning, conclusions and more detailed guidance into the plan itself. I explained that I strongly supported the plan being concise, but stressed that a Core Strategy should be able to stand on its own. To achieve this and provide the necessary framework for the subsequent DPDs and SPDs, more detailed explanation and specific guidance needed to be imported into the plan; in effect "some flesh on the bones" was required.
- 4 On the question of the way forward, I indicated the options as being firstly, proceeding directly to the hearing sessions; secondly, suspending the hearings to allow the Council to consider changes to the document to reflect the concerns I had raised; or thirdly, the plan being withdrawn. I indicated in respect of the first option, that although the conclusion was not certain at this stage, without changes to the plan, I would find it difficult to find the plan sound for the reasons discussed at the meeting.
- 5 The Council indicated that they were in a position to make changes to the plan to meet my concerns, that these would not alter the basis of the

strategy and that they were in a position to do this quickly. The Government Office was supportive of this course of action. It was recognised that if this process took upwards of 6 months, then the proper course of action would be to withdraw the plan. It was also recognised that the question of further consultation and possible updating of the Sustainability Appraisal would depend on the degree of changes made and the extent to which they introduced new material and altered the strategy.

6 The Inspector indicated that the compliance of the Sustainability Appraisal with the legal requirements was outside the remit of the examination. He also stressed that the changes discussed did not necessarily make the plan sound but, rather, might bring the plan to the stage where its soundness could be tested by way of the hearing sessions.

7 It was agreed that

- The provisional programme of a Pre Hearings Meeting on 16th February and a programme of hearings for late March/early April would be postponed.
- The Council would draw up a set of additions to the plan by Monday 16th February.
- During this process they would keep close liaison with the Government Office and other bodies as necessary over the changes as they emerged.
- Once these changes had been drawn up, a decision could be made as to the need for, and extent of, any further consultations/updates to the Sustainability Appraisal.
- At that stage, a programme for the PEM and the hearing sessions would be drawn up.

The meeting closed at 4.45pm

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Fenton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'D' and 'F'.

David Fenton
Inspector