

In June 2013, members of the Vale Community submitted questions about the Vale of White Horse District Council's Local Plan Part One.

The leader of the council, Cllr Matthew Barber answered these questions in a video interview exclusively for the Vale Community.

Q. The consultation on the draft of the Local Plan is now complete, what is the next step?

A. Well having received a great number of responses to the Local Plan Part One consultation which we ran earlier this year, we are in the process of working through all those responses and will be using that information which has been given to us by local residents to help form the second stage consultation that will be published later in the year. There are a number of areas where we will be looking to change the draft policy to accommodate the views that people have put forward, whether if be about specific towns or villages or about the overall strategy for the local plan. The public will then have a further chance to comment on the local plan at the next consultation stage later in the year.

Q. The quality of life in the Vale of White Horse has already suffered a substantial decline over recent years as the population has been allowed to increase unnecessarily, so what's the point of living here if the Vale of White Horse District Council intends to further prejudice quality of life by permitting further development and population growth.

A. Firstly I don't expect that the quality of life has fallen in the Vale, I think we are very lucky to live in such a wonderful part of the country and the question is quite right, we need to preserve our quality of life when building new developments, both for those who already live in existing settlements and also for those moving into new dwellings, that has to be part of our overall local plan policy, but I wouldn't expect that quality of life has fallen at the moment, I think we have to put in place the plans to ensure that it doesn't fall in the future.

Q. In South Oxfordshire District Council's Local Plan, a lot of housing growth is directed in Didcot and surrounding villages have raised concerns, in the Vale are you seeking a greater proportion of your housing growth to go to villages rather than focussing on small towns.

A. I think that our spatial strategy as it is known is quite clear, that we are looking to put the major settlements at existing towns where they have the facilities to deal with them and building on those facilities to increase the roads infrastructure, schools and the like, but inevitably some of that housing development will filter down to some of the larger village settlements. The local plan consultation we went through earlier in this year was quite clear in categorising villages into a variety of sizes, we have received many comments on which villages should be in which category and obviously we will review those as part of the review of the consultation responses, but as far as the

strategy is concerned the housing will go to the large urban settlements and then trickle down to smaller settlements across the district.

Q. Why are you planning to build on Grade A land at Crab Hill in Wantage.

A. I think we have to recognise that there isn't a surplus of brown field sites across the district, that is land that has been previously developed and therefore in order to meet the demand we have for new housing sites, we have to look at green field sites across the whole district.

Q. Do you anticipate the housing growth plans in the Vale will alter from the previous regional figures and if so why.

A. I think that everybody should now be aware that the figures used in the first draft local plan which we consulted on, were based on the regional spatial strategy which set the housing target for councils across the whole of the south east region. As I think that most people will be aware those figures are now defunct and we have to replace them with our own local assessment conducted across the whole of Oxfordshire. That work known as the SHMA the Strategic Housing Market Assessment is work that is taking place over the summer and will form the next part of the Local Plan, setting out what housing numbers we need to achieve. Now I think it's too early to say whether those figures will remain as they are now or go up or down from the existing figure, but the key thing which I think should reassure everybody is that they will at least be evidence based so that everybody can understand how we've arrived at those figures using the government formulae that we have to use, but it will be clear and open and transparent for people to see how we arrived at the final number.

Q. Does the duty to cooperate mean that the Vale is legally bound to accept families in housing need from other areas?

A. No it doesn't. I think there are two parts to this question. The duty to cooperate means we have to work with neighbouring authorities both inside and outside Oxfordshire in putting together our Local Plan and assisting them in doing the same. With regard to people in housing need there are very few circumstances at the moment where we have to house people from outside the district. Those are primarily witness protection schemes etc. very small in number and very rare in the number of times we have them. At the moment we have a duty to house people within the district or with a significant link to the district. We've improved our rules to ensure that all new affordable housing, a proportion of that is given to people with an immediate connection to that particular parish.

Q. I would like to know how the Local Plan will protect villages in the Vale from development. All too often applications are recommended for approval even though they do not accord with the development plan. What is the point therefore of a Local Plan.

- A. I think that this is the difference between the situation we find ourselves in at the moment and the situation which we hope to get to. At the moment the questioner is quite right, the existing Local Plan provides very limited protection for our communities given the fact that precedence has to be given to national planning policy framework. However, the Local Plan which is being consulted on at the moment once fully in force, which we hope to be early next year, will give significant protection to communities across the district as people would expect and the comments we have received about the policies being consulted on earlier this year, will feed in to the final document which will be our new Local Plan.
- Q. If the Vale of White Horse District Council is left with no alternative but to meet the present abhorrent development targets, why is it not insisting that they be achieved with high density apartments and studios common in mainland Europe for example, thus limiting the take of valuable agricultural land? Could it be that the council is more interested in keeping the developers happy rather than supplying affordable homes efficiently with a minimum of environmental impact?
- A. I don't believe that the way of dealing with the problems we are faced with in planning terms is to build the type of boxes that nobody wants to live in. Clearly there is a need for affordable homes and there is a target within our Local Plan to achieve genuinely affordable housing within developments. That said we need to preserve the quality of life in the district and ensure that not only that quality of life is preserved for people who live here now, but also there is a decent quality of life for people who perhaps are wanting to find new housing in the district.
- Q. This is now a seriously overcrowded island with the worst overcrowding in the South East, but there are still plenty of empty dwellings spread across the UK to accommodate natural population growth. Why is local government seeking toacerbate the present scandalous overcrowding in the South East of England, by pandering to central government's complete lack of regional development initiatives?
- A. I think we can all argue with the size of the housing target that the Vale has been set, that's one of the reasons for completing the strategic housing market assessment to come up with our own local figures for Oxfordshire. But equally I think we need to recognise that certainly a large proportion of this housing is going to be for local people. We have growing communities ourselves, we have families who have lived in the Vale for generations with children and grandchildren struggling to be able to afford their own property in the areas where they live. Although nationally there may well be empty properties elsewhere across the country, I don't think it's a realistic or desirable option to tell families in the Vale that people need to move far away from their jobs and families in order to find affordable housing.

This interview took place on Wednesday 26 June 2013. All of the questions put to Cllr Barber were provided by members of the Vale Community.