

MINUTES

OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF A MEETING OF NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL HELD AT THE GUILDHALL, NORTHAMPTON, ON TUESDAY 8 SEPTEMBER 2009 AT SIX THIRTY O'CLOCK IN THE EVENING

PRESENT: HIS WORSHIP THE MAYOR Councillor Hill (in the Chair).

COUNCILLORS: Caswell, S. Chaudhury, I. Choudary, Church, Clarke, Collins, J. Conroy, R. Conroy, Crake, Davies, Duncan, Edwards, Garlick, Glynane, Golby, Hoare, Hollis, C. Lill, J. Lill, Malpas, B. Markham, Mason, Matthews, Palethorpe, Perkins, Reeve, Scott, Simpson, Taylor, P. D. Varnsberry, P. M. Varnsberry, Wilson, Woods and Yates

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Church, Davies, Garlick, B Markham and Woods declared a personal interest in both Items 6 – Overview and Scrutiny Response to the Consultation on the West Northamptonshire Emergent Joint Core Strategy and 7 – Council Response to the Consultation on the Emergent Joint Core Strategy, as Members of the West Northamptonshire Joint Strategic Planning Committee.

Councillor Edwards declared a personal interest in both items 6 and 7 as a Member of the County Council's South West Northampton Planning Committee.

2. MINUTES.

The minutes of the meeting of Council held on 13 July 2009 were signed by the Mayor.

3. APOLOGIES.

Apologies were received from Councillors Beardsworth, Capstick, De Cruz, Flavell, Hadland, Hawkins, M Hoare, Lane, Larratt, I Markham, Meredith and Mildren.

4. MAYOR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS.

None.

5. PUBLIC COMMENTS AND PETITIONS

Mr Suter stated that he was the Chair of the Whitehills and Spring Park Association. He commented that democracy was a cornerstone of Britain and as a free and liberal country people were able to freely elect politicians. These rights were not enjoyed across the world. He stated that these rights came under threat when non-directly elected Members were able to make decisions, in this case in the form of a quango known as the WNDC. Democracies were characterised by having a system

of checks and balances but this quango eroded that position. He referred to an open day held by residents prior to the last local elections at which candidates had indicated that the Council was going to fight against the WNDC and take back its planning powers. Councillors had been elected on the basis of these statements but now the Council had appeared to take the opposite tack. There was now an opportunity for the Council to fight for Northampton. The public did not want the Emergent Joint Core Strategy.

Mr Britcher commented that it was difficult for the public to really get to grips with the issue; the Overview and Scrutiny report before Council was twenty eight pages long alone. He commented that it was not clear when the closing date for comments was. The consultation document was a broad brush tick box approach. There were many issues involved but one that was not dealt with was that if the wider Northampton area was covered by one authority, a Joint Planning Unit would not be needed and the planners would be directly responsible to that authority and thus the public. Mr Britcher referred to settlements such as Bourneville and pit villages, which had grown up around the work that was available, or along railway lines such as at Llandudno Junction, Effingham Junction and Bedlington Station. Mr Britcher referred to Grange Park, which was built close to the M1 but did not particularly benefit the town or provide for lower grade workers. He queried where all the jobs to complement the proposed housing would come from: He understood that it had been assumed that they would work in other places, for example in London. In this respect there were already problems with the existing rail service. Mr Britcher referred to existing schemes for rail developments, such as the Bedford/Olney/Northampton line, the Harborough Link along the Brampton Valley and Roade Junction station to serve as a parkway for Towcester. He queried the traces of the spur line westwards from the Castle/Brackmills line as a potential for development. Mr Britcher commented that large developments near Moulton and Whitehills would cause more transport problems further into the town; for example, could the Cock Hotel Junction cope with this? He felt that such schemes were badly designed and he referred to the proposals for Buckton Fields, which he believed had problems with damp and suggested that housing needed to follow the contours of the land as typically, pit villages did. He also commented that one area's solution could become another's problem and referred to the draining of the Shropshire marshes, which had worsened Gloucester City's flooding problems. Mr Britcher believed that the overall approach should be to build smaller settlements along the existing infrastructure.

Mr Kingston commented that there was a need for a plan to correct the longstanding failings of the Northampton planners over the last five to ten years. The plan was important so that the Borough Council and the WNDC not to be led by developer influence and that such a plan should deal with the development of brown-field sites before green-field. He commented that the proposals for Section 106 Agreements and roof taxes were not working; there must be other ways of funding infrastructure. It was important that infrastructure was not put in place after development had taken place and referred to the current issues at St Crispin and Upton, where developers had moved on as times had got harder. This reduced the living standards of those local communities. Mr Kingston believed that the Emergent Joint Core Strategy represented more unthinking planning. The Northampton Residents Alliance was

against the proposed development; existing buildings and brown-field sites should be used first and green spaces should be preserved.

6. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON THE WEST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE EMERGENT JOINT CORE STRATEGY

Councillor Simpson submitted a report that set out the conclusions of the meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees to consider the Emergent Joint Core Strategy. Councillor Davies seconded the adoption of the report. Councillor Simpson commented that within the timescales allowed, Overview and Scrutiny had not had the opportunity to do a comprehensive review and he highlighted concerns that had been raised as follows:

- That in terms of consultation, the approach had been inadequate and carried out at the wrong time of year. It had been noted that the JPU website was not user friendly and that the exhibitions had usually been held at the wrong times of day for the public.
- In terms of the Vision and Options this was largely agreed, although some aspects appeared vague. Overview and Scrutiny did broadly agree with Option B, ie that development should be focused on a small number of large development areas as the preferred option.
- Impact on Northampton – Overview and Scrutiny felt that the housing targets were questionable and undeliverable and that the Government's growth figures should be challenged. Brown field sites should be developed before green-field; the need for a plan to develop the town was agreed and also for infrastructure to be in place at the beginning of the process. As part of the plan, regeneration of the town centre was vital and the links to it and, in particular, public transport was fundamental. Council needed to ensure that it fulfilled its responsibilities regarding flood risk. In terms of locations for growth Overview and Scrutiny felt that it could not comment, as there was insufficient detail in terms of the infrastructure required at the present time.
- In terms of the delivery of the plan there needed to be a clearer relationship with the Central Area Action Plan and the process should work from the bottom up rather than the top down. There needed to be a clearer definition of the employment areas and more clarity about regeneration being undertaken with existing communities.

Councillor Simpson thanked the Scrutiny Officer for her assistance in producing the report and commented that it was essential that further work on the Joint Core Strategy should be subject to greater scrutiny and public involvement.

Councillor Davies commented that it was important that all Councillors were involved, as he believed that some felt that the process was happening too quickly and that they had not had a proper chance to debate this matter fully. Councillor Davies thanked those members of the public who had contributed to the Overview and Scrutiny meetings.

Councillor Clarke commented that Councillors did not have to accept the Emergent

Joint Core Strategy. They could vote according to their conscience and in accordance with the views of the members of the public that they represented. He asked for some clarity as to what was proposed to happen to the recommendations made by Overview and Scrutiny.

Councillor Church, in responding to the Overview and Scrutiny report, proposed that it should be noted and forwarded to the Joint Planning Unit as a valuable contribution to the consultation exercise. He commented that Overview and Scrutiny had made important points and it was accepted that their involvement had been at relatively short notice and that they had not been able to go into detail. He stated that it was necessary for there to be a Joint Core Strategy; if there was not developers would be able to seek planning permissions on any site and it would be very difficult for the Council or the WNDC to refuse them, as there would be no plan in place to measure those applications against. He stated that the Joint Core Strategy not only set out where growth should be but, as importantly, where it should not be. If there was no plan then developers could develop those latter sites as well. He believed that elected members would also be abrogating their responsibilities. He was pleased that Overview and Scrutiny accepted the vision, that there should be growth, even if there were differences as to how much this should be. Councillor Church supported the comments of Overview and Scrutiny and Mr Suter in respect of the importance of adequate infrastructure to support development. He also accepted the comments about brown field site development ahead of green field and the importance of the regeneration of the town centre.

Councillor Yates expressed his disappointment that Overview and Scrutiny had been forced to undertake this work during the summer break.

Councillor B Hoare commented on his past experience that it was much easier to influence what would be the guiding plan rather than to subsequently try and argue against applications that were being measured against it. He commented that currently the Council was in a weak position with the existing Northampton Local Plan being some twelve years old and from which there were only a few saved policies.

Councillor Palethorpe commented that this consultation was in fact the beginning of a process and he thanked the public for their attendance and contributions. He believed that this was the single biggest issue to affect Northampton for many years. He commented that a further public consultation would start in November and he hoped that all Councillors would get involved through the Overview and Scrutiny process. It was important for all interests to have a voice in this process. It was important that the opportunity was taken to protect the type of Northampton that people wanted.

Councillor Glynane suggested that a copy of the Overview and Scrutiny report should be made available to the County Council, who were scheduled to have a discussion on this matter as well.

Councillor Simpson welcomed the comments that had been made and confirmed that this report represented the start of an Overview and Scrutiny process;

consultation must be much better. Overview and Scrutiny would want clear and robust comments back from the JPU to its recommendations.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and forwarded to the West Northamptonshire Strategic Planning Committee for consideration.

7. COUNCIL RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON THE EMERGENT JOINT CORE STRATEGY

Councillors Wood moved and Councillor Palethorpe seconded:

“This Council notes that:

1. The Government identified Northampton as a major growth area within the Milton Keynes South Midlands sub-region.
2. The East Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy agreed to an extra 43,000 homes in Northampton by 2026.
3. The Northampton Local Plan produced in 1997 is out of date, with limited reserve policies.

This Council believes that:

1. Northampton needs a sound spatial plan to deliver the housing, quality jobs and infrastructure for the future and to protect the town from developer-led growth.
2. Priority should be given to the regeneration of the town centre to become a destination of choice for working, shopping and relaxing.
3. Previous expansions of Northampton have failed to enhance its character and reflect its unique and longstanding heritage.
4. Given the number of homes built in Northampton between 2001 and 2009, the current and foreseeable economic difficulties and the uncertainties of future public funding for infrastructure, the Government’s growth targets are unlikely to be met within the plan period.

This Council resolves to:

1. Challenge and seek a reduction in the Government’s annual growth targets through a fresh regional approach that is infrastructure-led, rather than allocating land for development, without any certainty of new public services.
2. Seek public exhibition space to inform residents of these and other growth plans in a clear, jargon-free way.

3. Provide more opportunities for the public to debate and contribute to future growth plans for our town.
4. Establish a sound spatial plan to secure Northampton's regeneration and deliver the jobs, homes and public services needed for the next twenty years and beyond."

Councillor Woods commented that he largely agreed with the statement made by Mr Suter, however he could not support Mr Britcher's contention that development should take place on existing lines of communication, as this form of ribbon development in the 1930s had led to the subsequent Planning Acts that people were now familiar with. Councillor Woods commented that he agreed that this debate was overdue. The population and housing allocation figures had been imposed on West Northamptonshire by Government and regional bodies. He agreed that Northampton must decide its own future rather than London and Nottingham doing this. He referred to recent BBC press reports that the population in Great Britain was now in excess of 61 million. He commented that the United Kingdom should remain a welcoming place and migrants had benefited the country both economically and culturally. Recent press reports also indicated that there was a flow of migrants returning to their native countries due to the recession. He noted that the mid-2008 population estimate for Northampton was 202,800 and had included 1,600 births, 800 deaths and 800 migrants. This followed a consistent trend over the last thirty years. If this trend was continued the population of Northampton by 2026 would be 230,000. Therefore, there would still be a demand for new housing and jobs although the current recession meant that access to finance had been temporarily removed. He commented that without the Government and the regional growth projections Northampton needed 8,000 homes now. The Government wanted Northampton to expand to nearly 300,000 population; he agreed that the town should take some growth but should not be fixated by targets. Northampton needed to be an attractive place that people wanted to come to. He commented that many residents of the town had moved to it by choice. Everyone needed to be aware of the challenges, particularly in terms of infrastructure and that the town must have a clear view of what it wanted, for example, regeneration of the town centre, improved transportation links, more schools, sports facilities, etc, etc. He noted that it was important that infrastructure was in place first before housing development took place. He commented that no growth was not an option but the town must get what it wanted.

Councillor Palethorpe in seconding the motion, observed that Overview and Scrutiny and many members of the public accepted that some growth was necessary. The argument was about the scale of what was being proposed and a feeling that it was being done to the town rather than with it. Councillor Palethorpe observed that the recession would not last forever and it was important that there was a robust plan in place. He noted that in a recession companies obviously contracted to meet the new situation but it was important that a robust plan would stop high density, cheap built developments; the town must get the sort of development it wanted. Councillor Palethorpe commented that the figures for growth were not realistic and that the Council should argue for lower allocations. The discussions should also be about infrastructure requirements, which were not only about transportation issues but

also included health provision, schools and flood risk. He referred to the £200m investment that was required in Northampton East, which was a parallel strand to the Government's growth agenda. The growth projections affected areas immediately adjoining the Borough. It was important that quality jobs came to the town and the regeneration of the town centre must include attracting blue chip companies as well. He shared the frustrations but so far the WNDC had been unable to bring in blue chip jobs and companies to the town. He hoped the public would join the Council in arriving at an acceptable Joint Core Strategy.

Councillor Davies commented that the annual growth targets should be challenged as being unrealistic in the current recession. He commented that the targets must be deliverable and that he agreed that the comments previously made in respect of infrastructure were vital to the plan's eventual success. He noted that developer funding could not meet all the infrastructure needs and that Government funding towards this would be necessary. It was important for congestion in the town centre to be reduced and there was a need for improved public transport. He noted that the Strategy would cover West Northamptonshire but that it needed to ensure that other districts' growth did not take place on the edges of the Borough. The current consultation represented the first step in the process to develop a plan to stop development by appeal. The vision of the town should not be forgotten and the town needed to be confident of this in negotiating support from the Government.

Councillor Clarke commented that he believed that the motion represented the Council's capitulation to Government. The actual purpose of this Council meeting was to give the Council's response to the Emergent Joint Core Strategy. He commented that he had consistently voted against the establishment of the WNDC and JPU. He believed that Councillors from South Northamptonshire and Daventry should not influence decision making in Northampton or vice versa. He noted that the infrastructure benefits to South Northants and Daventry appeared to be more detailed than so far indicated for Northampton. He also noted that one part of the document appeared to suggest that Northampton made a contribution towards the Flore/Weedon bypass and he referred to other infrastructure needs that were detailed within it, in respect of improvements to the A5 and A45 and improvements at Daventry in terms of a cemetery, schools and a library.

Councillor J Lill expressed concern that all the development growth appeared to be focused on Northampton South East and she noted that Wootton and Hardingstone villages were already enveloped by development. She also noted that the Grange Park development, which was actually within South Northamptonshire district area, had not included enough school places and therefore pressure had been placed on the schools within that part of Northampton to the detriment of local children who had had to travel to schools across the town.

Councillor B Hoare commented that the motion before Council was in three parts; how we got here; prospects for the future and what to do about it. He commented that it was important to challenge and seek a reduction in the growth figures and housing projections. He noted that the Government in 2005 had established West Northamptonshire as a growth area. A regional planning policy from the same date had set out that growth that Northampton would absorb. He commented that

residents of Northampton did not accept the growth figures and the Council's Cabinet had already considered a report and indicated to the Regional Assembly that the growth figures were not realistic. He noted that the current projection was for the rate of growth to increase expedientially over the next few years.

Councillor Church commented that he agreed with Councillor Clarke in respect of his comments that the creation of the WNDC was not appropriate. However, he could not agree with him in respect of the JPU without which the Council would have no say at all about development on the fringes of Northampton or on growth or in respect of infrastructure needs. He noted that the Emergent Joint Core Strategy would set out the criteria and triggers for new secondary school provision, etc. He noted the improvements to the Flore/Weedon bypass were necessary for growth to take place in Daventry but there were serious infrastructure needs in Northampton, which included public transport and town centre links as well as roads. The Emergent Joint Core Strategy made it clear that investment in the town centre was vital. Councillor Church commented that Northampton was not being treated differently to other parts of West Northamptonshire. He commented that any growth must be accompanied by the appropriate infrastructure.

Councillor B Markham commented that he was a member of the West Northamptonshire Joint Strategic Planning Committee and was aware of letters from members of the public objecting to the Emergent Joint Core Strategy. He noted that people objected to the proposals in respect of the north of the town, west of the town and the south east of the town. All these proposed areas of growth were actually outside the Borough boundaries. He noted that land banks already existed between Overstone and Moulton, Preston Deanery and Collingtree; plans for development of some areas were long standing. He commented that the developments at Grange Park and that proposed for Buckton Fields were examples of what would happen if no Joint Core Strategy were in place.

Councillor Collins commented that he took issue with the enforced targets, which he regarded as a form of social vandalism. He hoped that if the motion were passed that the challenge to the figures would not fall on deaf ears.

Councillor Perkins commented that Council had debated the expansion of the town and the creation of WNDC in 2003. He had spoken against this at that time and he believed that the focus was ignoring the real problem. There was the need to provide homes for future generations and that there were issues to meet the needs of households in terms of jobs, single person households and migration. He commented that the real problem was about population growth and that other countries were experiencing similar problems. Ultimately this would lead to conflicts between countries as resources became scarcer. It was important for countries to have in place proper population growth policies.

Councillor Matthews commented that over the last two hundred years Northampton had grown from a population of 5,000 to the current 200,000. He believed that the town was now filled to capacity and that infrastructure was now operating at over capacity. He did not oppose expansion per se but felt that it needed to be in the right place.

Councillor P D Varnsberry concurred the previous comments that residents are generally accepted the need for growth but not the scale that was proposed. He also concurred the comments about the significant infrastructure deficit and that what might be able to be delivered may not match the need. He quoted the current situation with St Crispin's as an example of what could happen, as the developer had completed the green-field development but had now walked away from the brown field element. He suggested that the Government should give consideration to tax breaks to developers for brown-field development. He commented that if the motion was agreed by Council then the Council must be robust with Government in its discussions.

Councillor C Lill stated that he accepted the need for some development but was concerned about the identity of villages that would be lost if they became subsumed into a larger urban area.

Councillor Yates commented that he was opposed to development by other local authorities on the fringes of Northampton such as Buckton Fields and Grange Park, however the motion before Council was about renegotiating the figures with Government and without a Joint Core Strategy there would be no vehicle to carry out those negotiations. He commented that the town needed to expand its boundaries to stop development on the fringes, with the town then having to deal with the infrastructure problems that that posed. He concurred that the Overview and Scrutiny report should be forwarded to Northamptonshire County Council.

Councillor Simpson commented that he believed that there was some misunderstanding of what was trying to be achieved. He had campaigned against the proposed developments at Buckton Fields, Overstone and Moulton and Dallington Heath. It was vital that the Council challenged the growth projection.

Councillor Woods commented that the debate had been wide ranging and interesting and the minutes of this meeting would be part of what would be forwarded as the Council's response to the consultation. He referred to comments that had been made about current villages being subsumed into a greater Northampton and indicated that this had already happened in the past to villages such as Duston and Kingsthorpe. Northampton had grown and clearly would continue to do so. He concurred that the real issue was to reverse population growth across the planet and he noted the Prime Minister's statement that the United Kingdom needed to provide 6 million new homes to meet projected needs. He also commented that it was reasonable for people outside of Northampton to have an opinion in what happened in it, as it was the county town and that decisions could not be restricted to what were artificial administrative boundaries. He commented that the motion represented the first step to tackle the failures of planning policy over many years and he noted that the East Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy ignored Northampton completely. A discussion needed to take place as to where the resources were to come from to meet the infrastructure deficit in Northampton. The motion gave authority to challenge the Government and to look for resources to meet natural growth.

Upon a vote the motion was carried.

RESOLVED: This Council notes that:

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3. Provide more opportunities for the public to debate and contribute to future growth plans for our town.
4. Establish a sound spatial plan to secure Northampton's regeneration and deliver the jobs, homes and public services needed for the next twenty years and beyond.

8. MATTERS OF URGENCY WHICH BY REASON OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES THE MAYOR IS OF THE OPINION SHOULD BE CONSIDERED.

None.

The meeting concluded at 20.10 hours