

Shaping the future – how the spatial distribution of development has evolved

One of the important duties of the Council that is expected by the Government and local residents is to plan to meet the development needs of its diverse community in a sustainable manner. The Council has an adopted up to date Core Strategy that helps to achieve this aim.

The preparation of the Core Strategy started in 2009. In 2009, the Council spent a lot of time engaging with local residents and key stakeholders to understand and agree the issues that the community would like to be addressed and the challenges for addressing them. This exercise culminated in the publication of an Issues and Options document that was the subject of extensive consultation with the community between 27 October 2009 and 7 December 2009. There was broad consensus about the need for the Council to make provision for:

- Housing to meet the diverse needs of the community, in particular, Affordable Housing;
- High quality jobs; in particular, support for small and medium sized enterprise formation by encouraging a range of types and sizes of premises,
- Improved retail offer;
- Leisure and community facilities;
- Infrastructure and services to support development;
- Improved transport and accessibility;
- Measures to address and adapt to climate change and protect the environment and heritage assets.

There was a specific emphasis for the Council to provide direct investment to address pockets of deprivation that exists in neighbourhoods such as Sheerwater and the neighbouring Priority Areas of Maybury and the Lakeview Estate area of Goldsworth Park.

In parallel to this exercise, a significant amount of time was spent engaging with the community to understand the strengths and opportunities that exists to be mobilised to help address the identified issues. The prevailing weaknesses and threats were also identified to take into account. .

From 2009 to 2011, much time was spent gathering information, including carrying out numerous locally based studies to get much understanding on the scale and nature of the need that the community has identified. This included:

- Strategic Housing Market Assessment – to establish the scale and nature of housing need;
- Employment land review and employment topic paper – to determine the nature and scale of employment needs;
- Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment – to assess the capacity of the urban area to accommodate identified growth;
- Retail study – to assess the scale of retail growth that would be needed to support the economy

The studies revealed a need for about 594 dwellings per year, 28,000 sq.m of office floorspace, 20,000 sq.m of warehouse floorspace and 93,600 sq.m of retail floorspace

between 2010 and 2027. The study also demonstrated that given the constraints of the borough and the capacity of the urban area to accommodate growth, only 292 dwellings per year out of the total of 594 can be delivered. This proposition was submitted to the Secretary of State for Examination, and was accepted.

The above provided a useful basis and skeleton for the preparation of the Woking Core Strategy, which sets out the overall strategy for addressing the above issues in a sustainable manner and resolving some of the inherent conflicting implications for addressing the issues. For example, the policies for meeting housing and employment needs have significant transport and infrastructure implications that needs addressing too.

Right from the beginning, the Council understood that any strategy to address the issues will need a clear vision that gives an idea of how the borough would look and feel when everything has been achieved and the basis for measuring performance. A question was put out for discussion, which is – what would the community wish the Borough to look and feel like by 2027 when all the issues they have identified are delivered? Residents Forum, Developers Forum, Statutory Consultees, key stakeholders, Members and various sections of the Council were extensively engaged to develop and shape the vision. The vision that eventually commanded broad consensus was:

‘Woking will be a Borough of high environmental quality and standards where people choose to live, work and visit, an exemplar in the achievement of sustainable growth;

Woking will be a regional focus of economic prosperity centred on a vibrant, enhanced town centre that provides a good range of quality shops, jobs, cultural facilities, services and infrastructure to cater for the Borough’s needs, surrounded by distinct communities anchored by attractive district and local centres providing convenient access to everyday shops, services and local community facilities.

Woking will be a sustainable community where the benefits of growth and prosperity are shared throughout the Borough without pockets of deprivation.

New development in the Borough will be well designed to respect the character of the area. New housing development will help to meet the needs of all sections of the community.

A green Borough where people will have easy access to good quality green spaces and infrastructure for recreation and leisure.

The Borough will have a balanced and sustainable multi-modal transport system that links homes, jobs and key services and by doing so improve the overall health and well-being of all residents’

The twenty five policies of the Core Strategy were developed to enable the delivery of the vision, and they all have direct links to an aspect of the vision.

Given the quantum and nature and type of development that had been identified and needed, and the vision that was agreed, an important key issue that the Council had to work with the community to grapple with is where the quantum of development should be broadly located. Three options for the spatial distribution of the development were discussed with the

community, including Members, key stakeholders and the Resident Forum. The options were:

- Directing most new development to previously developed land in the town, district and local centres (particularly the own Centre) with minimum encroachment into the Green Belt as possible;
- Intensifying densities in the less dense areas of the Borough such as Hook Heath and Horsell;
- Significant extension into the Green Belt.

There was almost a unanimous agreement to focus most of the new development on previously development land in well designed, high density development that could include tall buildings within the Town Centre. A Town Centre specific policy was developed as a result. Of the quantum of development set out above, the following were identified to be provided at the Town Centre: 2,180 new homes, 27,000 sq.m of office floorspace and 75,300 sq.m of retail floorspace.

As demonstrated above, the policies of the Core Strategy had evolved between 2009 and 2012 when it was adopted with community involvement central to its preparation. The general thrust of what it seeks to achieve had broad community support. Formal consultation exercises included issues and options consultation between October and December 2009, Draft Core Strategy consultation between November 2010 and January 2011 and consultation on the Publication Document between July and September 2011. The Core Strategy was submitted for Examination in December 2011 with Examination Hearings between March and April 2012. It adopted in October 2012 and reviewed in October 2018. The Secretary of State agreed for the Council to make provision for the delivery of at least 292 dwellings per year against the housing need of 594 dwellings per year due to the identified constraints of the Borough. The separate attachment are Tables of how the community had been involved in the preparation of the various Local Development Documents.

The Council has since embarked upon the delivery of the Core Strategy and its vision. Some of the actions that have been achieved so far to enable the delivery of the Core Strategy include:

Infrastructure delivery - The Council has published an Infrastructure Delivery Plan setting out the nature, type and scale of infrastructure that would be needed to support the delivery of the Core Strategy, how it would be provided, by whom and at what cost. The delivery of the infrastructure is on-going, and much will also be delivered as site specific infrastructure when development proposals comes forward. This will be secured as part of development and/or developer contributions to enable provision. The following have been delivered or are being delivered.

- Significant investment to improve the environment of the Town Centre to make it an attractive place for businesses to locate and for people to live, work and visit. This include the landscaping of the Town Centre such as the public realm improvement at Victoria Square and Commercial Way to facilitate easy pedestrian access. This work is on-going, and the effects have been tangible and visible;

- Significant investment, about £25M to enhance sustainable transport measures such as walking and cycling and bus/rail interchange at the Town Centre;
- Partnership work with South Western Trains and Network Rail to provide a cycle Hub at Woking Station
- Investment in Green Infrastructure such as Heather Farm to connect people to Green Infrastructure and promote well-being. Work is on-going to bring forward the extended SANG land at Horsell Common and Brookwood Farm
- Improvements at the frontage of Wolsey Place and Peacocks to enhance the retail offer and create a vibrant customer experience, including market walk;
- Significant investment to expand the network of CHP infrastructure to help minimise the impact of development on climate change;
- The Government has awarded the Council £95M to replace Victoria Arch and improve the carriageway within the vicinity of the Arch. This significant infrastructure improvement will unlock the delivery of additional 3,300 dwellings at the Town Centre. 13 sites have been identified to accommodate the additional homes. Work on delivering the project has started. The project will also provide a good foundation for the delivery of significant rail infrastructure such as the Woking Flyover;
- In partnership with Surrey Heath and Runnymede Borough Councils, Runnymede BC has been awarded about £50M to improve traffic bottleneck along the A320 corridor.
- Highways England has accepted the proposed mitigation at the A245/Seven Hills Road Junction and has incorporated the proposals into their M25 J10/A3 scheme. The scheme has been accepted by the Planning Inspectorate for formal Examination and is subject to a Development Consent Order;

Preparation of Local Development Documents

The Council has embarked upon the preparation of a number of local development documents to enable the sustainable delivery of the Core Strategy. This includes:

- **Development Management Policies DPD.** This DPD was adopted in 2016 and provides detailed policies to enable day to day planning applications to be determined. It ensures that day to day planning applications are to acceptable standards as envisaged by the strategic policies of the Core Strategy;
- **Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD)** – A number of SPDs have been adopted to provide details guidance for the purposes of managing development across the Borough. This include Design SPD, Car and Cycle Parking Standards SPD, Climate Change SPD, Affordable Housing SPD, Infrastructure Delivery Plan. The Design SPD provides clear guidance for ensuring that tall buildings achieves high quality design and acceptable standards.
- **Site Allocations DPD** – the preparation of the Site Allocations DPD is near completion. It is going through Examination. The Examination Hearings were completed in December 2019. The schedule of Main Modifications was published for consultation between 18 September and 14 December 2020. The Site Allocations DPD identifies specific deliverable sites to enable the delivery of the quantum of development identified in the Core Strategy. The commitment to focus high density development on previously land in the Town Centre has been followed through in the DPD. About 44 different sites have been identified in the main centres, most of them in the Town Centre to meet development needs. This has ensured that a minimum

amount of land would be released from the Green Belt to meet housing need between 2020 and 2027. Overall, less than 2% of Green Belt land is proposed to be released to meet development needs. However, it should be noted that the less dense development at the Town Centre would be, the more Green Belt land that would be needed to meet the identified development needs. Based on all the available evidence, the following Green Belt sites have been identified as the most sustainable to meet the number, nature and type of homes needed between 2022 and 2027 without undermining the overall purposes and integrity of the Green Belt.:

- Land at West Hall (West Byfleet)
- Land at Broadoaks (West Byfleet)
- Land at Egley Road (Mayford)
- Land at Brookwood Lye Road (Brookwood)

Each allocation includes a set of key requirements to make sure that development impacts are appropriately assessed and any necessary measures of mitigation including site specific infrastructure are introduced to address potential adverse impacts.

Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) - The Government has awarded the Council £95M to replace Victoria Arch and improve the transport network within its vicinity. This significant infrastructure improvement will unlock the delivery of additional 3,300 dwellings at the Town Centre. 13 sites have been identified to accommodate the additional homes. The HIF award will be part of the Big Conversation.

Built Development (housing, retail, commercial, social and community facilities and other town centre uses) – The above provides a good basis for the built development to be brought forward. It is likely that the development would comprise of varying heights of tall buildings. The Victoria Square development is a model of a tall building to demonstrate what could be achieved at the Town Centre.

At this stage it would be very difficult to speculate with precision how development on the various sites would look like across the Town Centre. The Town Centre Masterplan that the Council is preparing will provide guidance on this.

Woking is a compact urban area tightly surrounded by the Green Belt. The Council is acutely aware that when the community agreed to focus most new development at the Town Centre, it did so with the understanding that it will be of high quality design. In this regard, the Council is investing significant amount of money and effort to achieve this goal. It has published a Design SPD and a Character Study to ensure development achieves high quality design, set up a Design Panel of experts to scrutinise development proposals when they come forward for determination, invested in VU-City to enhance understanding on how development would look in its context and is investing in design training of Officers. Every bit of action that the Council is taking is intending to deliver the vision that the community has already agreed. The Council is not complaisant, it will continue to monitor its actions, and review underlying evidence to make sure that new information is constantly fed into the delivery of the vision. That underlying evidence includes a conversation with the community about their views on how the Town Centre should look and feel by 2030. The Town Centre Masterplan will provide an opportunity to understand what the community wish for the area.