

Transcript of Oral Statement

Speaker: Clive Betts, MP for Sheffield South East

Subject: Local Plan Examination, Sheffield

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Introduction and Context

Inspectors, first of all, can I thank you for allowing me to come this morning. I appreciate I couldn't fit in with the initial timetable and it was very helpful that you allowed me this extra dispensation to come and make a statement on behalf of my constituents, who, a lot of them, are pretty angry and exercised about the process they've been put through with this local plan and the outcomes of it.

Let me say, first of all, I'm in favour of having a sound local plan. I'm in favour of building on brownfield first, but I accept now that we have to find other sites to hit the housing numbers. So I'm not coming here to argue that we don't need to build the homes and those homes, some of them, have to be built on greenfield and Green Belt sites. I accept that as an overall requirement.

To put in context, I've been an elected representative of the city for 49 years. So I've seen quite a lot in planning terms. I remember the last UDP, which I'm maybe one of the few people in the room who actually do, when we went through it in the 1990s. So I don't see planning as a technicality, it actually helps shape the environment and society in which we live, and it's something that should be done with the public, not to the public. That's a fundamental requirement as far as I'm concerned.

The Role of a Local Plan

I understand why my constituents are angry, as well as being disappointed at what they have been presented with in terms of the local plan. I'll explain why in a bit more detail later.

I've also been chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee (under various names) for 14 years in Parliament. I've had a lot of inquiries into the planning system to try and improve it, making sure it delivers in the way that our country and our society wants. And that's absolutely key.

As part of the planning system, the plan-led system which we should have, local plans are absolutely an integral and core part of that. And they shouldn't be framed in such a way that it says, "oh, those matters will be dealt with when the planning application comes in". It should set

the scene by which future planning applications are dealt with in a constructive and realistic way, and I'm concerned that in some respects this plan as presented fails in that regard.

Historical Context and Infrastructure Deficits

I also want to put it in the context that Sheffield is a very divided city. Life expectancy changes by ten years if you go on a bus route across the city. That's to do with the history of the city. The steel barons historically built their houses in the west of the city and let the muck from the steelworks go down to the east of the city where the poorer communities lived.

It also goes back to the Copping Plan, when parts of Derbyshire were brought into Sheffield in the 1960s, and therefore that effectively indicated that a lot of the city's new development housing would take place in the South East of the city. That's accepted.

I'd argue that the plan was carried out in terms of housing numbers but not in terms of the infrastructure required to go with those numbers and that's been an ongoing failure over many, many years.

But as I say, to come back to my experience, and I go back to the UDP in the 1990s, there were a lot of disagreements then, and I think one site at Bridle Stile which has suddenly reappeared again as a possible housing scheme. A lot of engagement from the local population.

The planners engaged, they came to meetings, they talked to residents, they discussed alternatives. With a major scheme to build on the whole of that area we compromised with bits of development of Bridle Stile Gardens, New School Road and Rose Hill with a new school, a new Mosborough Primary School around the edge of the development of the heart of Bridle Stile. That wonderful environmental area, which people in the local community enjoy, was preserved. That was part of an ongoing debate and discussion and an outcome that reflected proper planning and engagement.

Procedural Failures and Lack of Engagement

So my first point is about process and I've made some comments about process. People are very, very angry about the way this has been handled. There's been very little proper engagement with the public on this matter. There's not been a single leaflet put out by the council. Not a single letter advising the public about what was going to happen.

It's been unequal in its approach because if you haven't got a computer and don't go online, how would you have known about this local plan? How would you have known about it? Unless some of the action groups who've done an absolutely brilliant job, S12 here today, S13, in mobilising and explaining to their communities what was happening. The council did none of that. What the council did was to arrange some drop-in sessions. But unless you had been online and saw those sessions advertised on the council's website, you wouldn't have known about them.

I'm really disappointed the council planning officers have refused to come to public meetings. I held one S13 and I've been to meetings S12 and on every occasion the council planning officers have refused to come. I just find that unacceptable compared to what I've seen in the past.

I was then very disappointed that initially the whole process began by refusing to call for new sites. That effectively meant that developers were determining the agenda for the local plan. If developers haven't put in proposals before for a particular site, then the site wasn't going to be considered. Sorry, that's not a way to plan for the city's future for the next 15 years. It is not acceptable.

Public meetings are important because people can come and hear what their neighbours are saying. Get questions answered in a way that explains to people and gives them information. Drop-ins are helpful as part of the process, but they're not the sole process, but the council relied on them as the sole process.

Indeed, council planning officers have been refusing to answer questions. We held a very big meeting of over 200 people in the S13 area. Councillor Tom Hunt, the leader of the council, came, but he's not a technical expert. He tried to answer questions, but there was no planning officer there.

So after the meeting we sent in a number of questions. I think I've already put in my previous submission. The answer we got back was "we really haven't got time to deal with these, sorry".

Of course, we can still put in our comments. But it's helpful when you're coming to a view about something to at least get answers to technical questions in advance. That simply wasn't available from the council. So I don't think the process has been sound. I don't think the plan has been properly prepared in any way. Even as late as this week, I understand last week, documents have still been uploaded by the council to explain and justify what they're proposing. That's not acceptable. How do the public respond to documents that have just been uploaded?

I just don't think it's fair. It's not reasonable. As one resident said to me the other day, I think during the S12 meeting, this is planning backwards: the council decided what they were going to do, and the process then has not been one about listening to people and taking views; it's been about telling the public what's going to happen and justifying it and being defensive and reacting to people. It's not been a process of engagement; it's been a process of explaining and telling people what is going to happen. And I'm very, very disappointed about the way it's been done.

Site Specifics: Finchwell/Handsworth Hall Farm

I won't go into all the details about the three major sites in my constituency because I've already put quite a lot in writing to you, and I don't want to take up your time repeating them. But just to be clear of one or two absolutely fundamental issues.

I'm not against development in my constituency - we've had thousands of homes developed in

the South East in the last few years. In principle, I can go along with the development of the Finchwell/Handsworth Hall Farm site. I know that's not the view of all my constituents, but in the end, sometimes as a politician, you have to take a view that there is something for the wider good that needs to be done.

But, I'll make it absolutely clear, that site cannot go ahead without the tram-train. In terms of the Golden Rules that the Planning Minister, Matt Pennycook, has laid down, then the tram-train is fundamental to enable that development to properly proceed.

I was absolutely shocked the other day when the planning officer came and said that the only update on the tram-train was that the Restoring Railways Fund had cancelled it. I'm sorry - the Mayor has put in a bid for funding for that. At the same time that the council officer was here telling you that nothing was happening with this scheme, the senior transport officer at the Mayoral Combined Authority was writing an article in the paper, giving an interview in the Star, explaining the proposals to expand the tram network - including the tram-train through to Barrow Hill - which will serve the Finchwell/Handsworth Hall Farm site. There is no joined-up thinking.

The council officers have been involved in developing this project. It's absolutely key to unlock the housing and employment potential, not only of this site, but other sites as well, out into North East Derbyshire. I am very disappointed that that should be the case.

There is £1.5 billion that the Mayor has from the Transport City Region Fund. Some of that is still unallocated, and there is an argument that some of that should be used as part of the feasibility study to get this tram-train project moving. It's a very sensible project: the railway line is there, the infrastructure is there and the trams that can run on it can actually be hybrid/electric - you don't need to put overhead wires in at that point for running them.

So, very clearly - and the officers from the council refused to agree to this - but that site cannot go ahead without the tram-train. One heavy rail station for a train once an hour somewhere at Waverley is not going to provide the required infrastructure for that site.

And right the way through is a general point: there's no recognition from the council that the release of Green Belt requires those sites meet the Golden Rules, and that there's a guarantee that all the necessary infrastructure will be put in place. And that means the tram-train here, it means health and education infrastructure. And I know S12 will probably talk in detail about the capacity of schools, the over capacity, the high numbers of children in schools, in primary schools in particular, in both S12 and S13.

It's no good saying, "well we'll deal with that when we get round to individual site applications". There has to be, as part of the local plan, a recognition and a way forward to ensure that the education and health requirements are responded to. They should be responded to anyway as part of a local plan, but the Golden Rules absolutely require that to be done, otherwise I don't think this plan can possibly be sound.

Site Specifics: Beaver Hill

In terms of the Beaver Hill site, it shouldn't be built on. There are so many problems with that site. Even after the plan was produced, the council were, I think, agreeing, because they've got problems with the land at the north end of the site near Bramley, that wasn't going to be an access way/point.

I've already put in some detailed comments about the problem with the access off Beaver Hill Road; there's a culvert run through there and you can't build within a certain distance of the culvert. There's flooding on Beaver Hill Road. None of those issues appear to have been taken into account by the council. And again, it's, "we'll go ahead with this and we'll try and justify what we've done afterwards".

Site Specifics: White Lane and Traffic Issues

Going on to the White Lane site, I began by thinking there could be some development on the site. I'm still open-minded, I know S12 will oppose it absolutely. What I have said is that I am completely unconvinced that the council has thought through issues to do with traffic and access to the site. The access is very limited. It's down a narrow country lane. There are major problems in that area, both on White Lane, with the traffic, and going through to Bowman Drive, which has been a rat-run for many years. Those issues are simply not recognised, they're not there. It's, "oh, we'll deal with it when we get around to the individual planning application".

And can I just challenge that as an idea fundamentally? So all this development is happening in the South East over the years. Every time you get an individual application for a site and for development, much of which in itself is welcome - we want people to have homes to live in, we want jobs to be created - but the answer was always, "oh, well, that site doesn't generate enough additional traffic in itself to justify any significant infrastructure development, that will be dealt with as part of the local plan". We're now told, "oh, these sites are part of the local plan. Any traffic problems we'll deal with when the individual planning application comes in". It's a complete contradiction.

I was promised in about 2018 by a previous chief planner that the whole issue of traffic in the South East of Sheffield will be dealt with as an infrastructure issue as part of the local plan. Not merely do I not see any proposals, I don't see any proper monitoring, any proper traffic assessment, or anything that would indicate the council has seriously considered this fundamental problem. It's massive: traffic grinds to a halt around Crystal Peaks, White Lane and other areas. We've been repeatedly promised it will be dealt with. We had very similar conversations at the last inquiries into the first iteration of the local plan. Again, nothing seems to have moved.

It doesn't seem to be grasped as an issue. Local plans should be setting the scene for development of the future. And they should be setting the scenes in terms of the necessary infrastructure. And that simply has not been done. You can't push all these things onto one side and say, "oh, it will be dealt with when the individual applications come in".

Issues of Bias and Inequality

I lead on to my third major point, about the overall unfairness and bias - I use the word strongly - bias in this local plan. Putting all the developments on the greenfield sites, firstly all with one small exception, in the north of Sheffield, and particularly in the South East, and exempting the richer, more affluent, green open spaces of the west of Sheffield from development. That's not acceptable. It really is not. It's unfair. It's unequal. And it's unbalanced. And my constituents, I think, are rightly very angry about that situation.

When it comes down to sites that are proposed for development in my constituency, the answers have been, "oh, well, yeah, it's a bit of an access problem on the White Lane site, but it'll be dealt with when the applications come in". You got to Totley [and they say] "oh, you can't develop there because it's a difficult access" or "there's no bus route, sorry". How can you exempt sites from development in the west of Sheffield because there's no bus route? Well, it's accepted now that the Mayoral Combined Authority will have the powers to franchise and determine the history of this in the future. So that shouldn't be an obstacle to development in the west of Sheffield.

I don't know why the planners are so averse to developing [in the west of Sheffield]. I'll tell you what's been said to me, and I don't know whether it's true or not, but I've said to me by private-sector planners and by planners in the academic world, they feel that the planners in the council have refused to take on development in the west of Sheffield because they were concerned about the fact that interest groups there, residents' groups, would be better resourced, more knowledgeable, and would pose a greater challenge to them, and therefore they backed away from that challenge and took on the poorer parts of the city, the S12 and S13s.

Well, they've been disappointed in that response, because those communities have done brilliantly in organising themselves, with no help at all, from a standing start with no particular knowledge of planning, to come and put forward arguments on behalf of their community.

But you can't have a plan going forward for the next 15 years which is so biased that it puts the majority of the Green Belt sites that are up for development now in the poorest, most deprived parts of the city, and exempts the most affluent parts of the city. That's not fair.

People say to me: Covid, what was brilliant was we could actually go out and get some relief from the pressures of being locked in our homes by going out and walking in those green open spaces. That's important, just as important, it's more important in deprived communities than it is in the affluent communities. But why then take away disproportionately the green open spaces from those communities and exempt development in the richer, more affluent parts of the city? It is fundamentally unfair and unjust and people are very, very, very angry about it. And feel the council simply hasn't taken that point on board. They've opted for what, apparently, was a relatively easy way out.

Alternative Sites and Closing Arguments

If I can just make a couple more brief points. I've mentioned the Bridle Stile site, which has come out of the blue, and I want to lay down an opposition to that, as I did back in the UDP days.

But I also just refer to the Eckington Way site for Travellers, that we discussed at the last hearings of the local plan. Except that the planners have now raised it again, to say, "oh, we didn't look again at alternative sites because they were in the Green Belt, and we don't believe in development in the Green Belt". What we're here to do today is to discuss the development of the Green Belt. Circumstances have changed since we last looked, and the planners have refused to look at other sites to the development that has been proposed for the Travellers' site at Eckington Way.

There are alternative sites that may be in the Green Belt. Given that we're now talking about building on the Green Belt, that should not be a reason for simply saying "we'll carry on with Eckington Way, we don't have to justify what we've done", because we've got all the traffic issues, they still haven't been addressed - no acceptance that they even exist - they can go out there every day of the week and see them.

So what I'm trying to say, Inspectors, to you, is that this plan is unfair, it's biased, it's unequal, it doesn't take account of the overall development needs across the city because people in the western city, particularly young people, need homes as well and no homes are going to be built for them in that area. The whole consultation process has been inadequate and flawed and it hasn't really existed. People have been told what to do, they haven't been engaged with, this plan has been done to people and not with people. It doesn't in any way properly reflect the Golden Rules that the Planning Minister is requiring.

But of course you've got to build homes. I've set out a number of sites which could be built on as alternatives - two-and-a-half thousand homes. Most of them were considered by the Council and dismissed for reasons that I think are wrong because not having a bus service is not a reason for dismissing a site.

Since they initially looked at sites, there's also the site at Collegiate Crescent, which Hallam University are proposing because they want to change [its use] and that site's available in a residential area. Why are we not looking to build on that? Again, it seems it wasn't part of the initial proposal so the planners won't consider it.

Ryecroft Farm is a council-owned farm. Why are we not going to build on that? Well, the good people of Dore, very affluent people, with lots of influence no doubt, will oppose it. But there's no reason why that site couldn't be built on and Green Belt lost there, and saved in the deprived parts of the city.

And also Infield Lane allotments in my constituency - I've put that forward. I'm not frightened to put forward development where it's right. Those allotments now are not used, there's been a lot of criminality [there], they're effectively shut down. That site is right for development and that could be included. The Council has refused to accept it. I just don't know why, because it's an

obvious site that I think will be welcomed by local residents - getting houses on there rather than the criminal activity they've had to put up with for many years.

That, I think, is a summary of my position. As I say, I've already put in detail to you in writing these issues. But I just hope in the end that you can listen in a way that the planners of the Council simply haven't.