

NEWS RELEASE



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

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NEW HOMES MUST BE BUILT IN BOROUGH TO MEET GOVERNMENT REQUIREMENTS

Building a major new community and other smaller housing developments in Wokingham borough is the most effective way to meet the Government's requirements as well as local need, Wokingham Borough Council has announced.

The authority, which is consulting on a possible revised growth strategy for its Local Plan, is responding to comments on social media and at recent public engagement events that too many homes are being proposed - and that it should put forward a lower number, or even none.

While it understands that housing is an emotive issue, this isn't an option because – as with all local authorities that have planning powers – its annual allocation of 768 dwellings is determined by a mathematical formula as part of the Government's ambition to build 300,000 houses nationally per year by the middle of the decade.

All councils must take a proportional share of this and can only argue for a reduction if there are exceptional reasons. Only a small part of the borough lies in the Green Belt and none is in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty so it can't claim there isn't enough room.

Last year, the council successfully argued against a shake-up of the planning system which would have seen its assessed requirement skyrocket to at least 1,600 homes per year. However, top planning barristers have advised the council that arguing for a further reduction would not be successful.

If the council refuses to plan for the full figure, the Government can just step in and take over its planning powers, meaning the council would have no say in the process at all and far more land would be up for grabs. This means the wrong homes could be built in the wrong places and without infrastructure like roads, schools and green spaces.

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However, by proposing to allocate many of these new homes to a major new community, a garden village of 4,500 homes on land south of the M4 between Shinfield, Arborfield and Sindlesham, the council can ensure they come with the services and amenities they need – and that developers pay.

If it were to spread them more widely, as happened in the past, many would end up in unpopular locations like back gardens and would bring no added benefits to their communities.

The council's suggested revised growth strategy, published in November last year, also includes about 800 additional homes in its existing South Wokingham major development and smaller allocations elsewhere. The consultation also proposes almost 80 new areas as Local Green Space, including parks and open spaces, giving them a similar level of protection to Green Belt land.

Two other sites were considered for the garden village and while none was perfect, the advantages of the land south of the M4 – known as Hall Farm / Loddon Valley outweighed the drawbacks by the greatest amount.

It is highly accessible, with good access to jobs thanks to the nearby Thames Valley Science and Innovation Park, and offers scope for new cycling and walking routes plus green space in parts of the Loddon Valley that haven't been open to the public before. Millions of pounds would also be invested in schools, community centres and other key amenities.

No homes would be built in areas with an increased flood risk and they would include measures to prevent any increased flood risk further downstream.

Building on land at Grazeley, which was previously proposed for a garden town of about 15,000 homes, is no longer possible after the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Burghfield expanded its emergency planning zone to include that area, and there isn't enough brownfield (previously developed) land to meet the Government's requirements.

A leaflet explaining this in more detail is being posted to every address in the borough and may also be read on the council's Engage Wokingham Borough platform at engage.wokingham.gov.uk, where residents can take a survey until 5pm on 24 January and read evidence supporting the proposals.

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Everyone is strongly encouraged to take part to ensure the final version of the new plan, which will cover the period to 2038, reflects residents' needs as closely as realistically possible.

Cllr Wayne Smith, executive member for planning and enforcement, said: "We appreciate that some residents aren't happy with what is being proposed but we face some very difficult choices and are doing our utmost to make the best of a situation which, frankly, we have very little control over.

"Refusing to plan for the full number of new homes would be a terrible mistake, and one that would leave most of the borough wide open to speculative development. Whatever people may feel, not having a valid Local Plan is by far the biggest danger here.

"On the other hand, by accepting what we can't change, we can channel development in a constructive direction and make sure it builds thriving, well-equipped and connected communities.

"This has been the great success of our existing Local Plan, which has provided thousands of high-quality new homes at four new communities in Shinfield Parish, the former Arborfield Garrison and North and South Wokingham along with almost £1 billion in developer-funded infrastructure.

"We know there's no perfect solution but we have considered our options in great detail, taking advice from independent experts, and are confident that we can mitigate the downsides of building at Hall Farm / Loddon Valley while delivering many more benefits in the process.

"Given that these homes have to be built, I would invite anyone who opposes our suggested strategy to come up with a better alternative that complies with national planning law.

"I'd also point out that new homes will be available for residents' children and grandchildren, including affordable housing and homes for key workers, allowing them to continue living and working in the area where they grew up.

"Finally, I repeat my plea for as many people as possible to respond to our consultation as it will help us to understand your concerns in greater detail. We're facing many pressures but we promise we'll do whatever we can to incorporate your feedback into the finished plan."

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To find out more and have their say, residents should visit engage.wokingham.gov.uk.

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Further information:

1. More from Cllr Wayne Smith at wayne.smith@wokingham.gov.uk