

NEWS RELEASE



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

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RESIDENTS THANKED FOR PLAYING THEIR PART IN SHAPING BOROUGH'S FUTURE

Hundreds of Wokingham borough's residents have had their say on a vision for new housing, roads, schools, leisure facilities and other vital amenities, as well as protecting important green spaces, over the next decade and a half.

Wokingham Borough Council is thanking everyone who responded to a recent survey on a revised growth strategy as part of its Local Plan Update consultation, which launched on 22 November and ended at 5pm on Monday, 24 January.

This was extended by three weeks in total, including a fortnight to allow for Christmas, to ensure everyone had a chance to take part - well beyond the minimum six-week period in which local authorities must seek residents' views when updating their planning policies.

During this time, the council campaigned vigorously to raise awareness of the process and help people understand exactly what was being put forward, as well as urging them to complete the survey.

Keeping everyone informed – and encouraging feedback

To launch the consultation, two postcards were sent to every home in the borough accompanied by three public announcements: one on 4 November before it was put to the council's decision-making executive, another just after it was confirmed on 12 November and a third on the opening day.

These appeared on the council's news website and the winter edition of its Borough News magazine, which is sent to every household, as well as posts to thousands of followers on various social media platforms, articles in its Wokingham Borough Connect e-mail newsletters and releases to local press.

Six public engagement events were held, two in person with Covid-19 safety measures and four online with a video recording made available afterwards. These were further promoted on social media while an eight-page leaflet clearly summarising the proposal was available at the in-person events and online.

After becoming aware of some residents' concerns at the scale and suggested locations for housing, the council sent a four-page leaflet to every home explaining the need to build homes to meet Government requirements and why it believed its suggested approach was the best available option.

It also produced a series of videos explaining the subject further, featuring executive member for housing Cllr Wayne Smith and the council's leader John Halsall, and made these available through its Engage Wokingham Borough engagement page alongside more detailed supporting evidence.

The council further increased awareness through its Building Communities the Wokingham Borough Way campaign, which explored the benefits of strategic development by highlighting key infrastructure projects delivered through the existing Local Plan and case studies of residents who enjoyed living in the borough's major new communities.

All this was promoted through dozens of social media posts and newsletter articles, which continued to urge residents to respond before the closing date and were accompanied by further stories on the council's news site which were shared with local media.

A proposal for future growth – and what happens next

The Local Plan Update will cover the period to 2038 and outline how to manage development to meet local need as well as the requirements of the Government, which wants 300,000 new homes to be built nationally per year and says every council must take its share.

Feedback is now being processed and the council will review and amend its proposal to reflect any suggestions which offer a better alternative and are in line with national planning rules. Where suggestions can't be implemented, it will respond explaining this.

The proposed strategy outlined how 768 new homes a year could be provided across the borough, a figure imposed by a Government formula, with high-quality infrastructure to match – the latter funded by contributions from housing developers – and an affordable element of between 35 and 50 per cent.

To maximise the benefit to the community, the proposal included a new garden village of about 4,500 homes on land at Hall Farm/Loddon Valley, to the south of the M4 between Shinfield, Arborfield and Sindlesham, with at least 2,200 homes to be completed over the plan period.

This approach of allocating most new homes to a major new community allows infrastructure, funded by developers as a condition of planning consent, to be provided alongside. Additionally, almost 80 open areas were proposed for enhanced protection as Local Green Spaces.

The Hall Farm/Loddon Valley site was chosen following an independent assessment which found it was the best of three possible large-scale options. The alternatives were considered less sustainable and deliverable for a variety of reasons outlined in a report which is publicly available.

The council's proposal for a major new settlement follows the successful approach of its current Local Plan, which runs to 2026 and is set to deliver £1 billion in developer-funded community infrastructure alongside 13,000 new homes – including more than £84 million in the past two financial years alone. Residents have also expressed a preference for this approach in previous consultations.

A revised version of the Local Plan Update incorporating people's feedback will go before the full council, most likely in late summer, followed by a further six-week consultation before it is submitted to a planning inspector for formal examination. This is expected to take place next year.

'Thank you for helping us to meet your needs'

Cllr Wayne Smith, executive member for planning and enforcement, said: "We're pleased to have received such an excellent response and are extremely grateful to everybody who took the time to learn more about our proposed vision for the future of Wokingham borough and share their thoughts with us.

"We know this is a deeply emotive issue and that no site for housing will ever be perfect. However, we must meet the Government's requirements or we could lose our planning powers, leaving us vulnerable to an infinitely more damaging degree of unchecked, speculative development.

"By planning for the required number strategically, we can enable residents' children and grandchildren to continue living and working where they grew up while also building well-served communities, not just scattered pockets of new housing.

“We face numerous pressures and constraints, and drafted our proposal based on the best available evidence, but we’ll still do all we can to incorporate people’s suggestions where this is reasonable and national planning rules allow it.

“We wanted as many people as possible to tell us their views, which is why we went above and beyond the call of duty in giving everyone a chance to have their say and ensuring they knew what we were suggesting.

“We can’t give people everything they want, as much as we’d love to, but it’s vital that the finished plan reflects residents’ needs - and those of future generations - as closely as possible.

“Just as we’ve always done, we promise to let residents know as soon as we’ve finished reviewing comments and are ready to take this process forward.”

The council’s leader John Halsall has also written to Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, urging reform of the planning system to share housing more fairly among local authorities.

For more information on this and other aspects of the Local Plan Update, visit the council’s Engage Wokingham Borough platform at engage.wokingham.gov.uk or its news page at news.wokingham.gov.uk.

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Further information:

1. More from Cllr Wayne Smith, executive member for planning and enforcement, at wayne.smith@wokingham.gov.uk or the WBC communications, engagement and marketing team at cem@wokingham.gov.uk