

**To: City Executive Board**

**Date: 11 May 2017**

**Report of: Scrutiny Committee**

**Title of Report: South Oxford Science Village planning application**

## **Summary and Recommendations**

**Purpose of report:** To present the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee on the South Oxford Science Village planning application

**Scrutiny Lead Member:** Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of Scrutiny

**Executive lead member:** Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Board Member for Planning and Regulatory Services

**Recommendation** of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:

**That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendation set out in the body of this report.**

## **Background**

1. The Scrutiny Committee considered the South Oxford Science Village planning application report at a meeting on 2 May 2017. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Alex Hollingsworth, Board Member for Planning and Regulatory Services, and Patsy Dell, Head of Planning, Sustainable Development and Regulatory Services, for attending the meeting to present the report and answer questions.

## **Findings and recommendations**

2. The Board Member provided some background to the decision and highlighted the progress that had been made in working constructively with neighbouring district councils on the issue of Oxford's unmet housing need. The Council's preferred approach was to agree sites and numbers with the districts and for these to be taken forward through their local plan-making processes. The Head of Planning, Sustainable Development and Regulatory Services said that even though agreements were now in place with some of the districts, it appeared

likely that no new homes would be built specifically to meet Oxford's unmet housing need before 2020/21.

3. In response to a question the Head of Service said that the Council was looking to develop South Oxford Science Village through a three-way partnership arrangement with Thames Water and Magdalen College. The site was being promoted as a mixed use development and all costs would be split three ways between the three land-owning partners, including the costs of hiring planning consultants to act on their behalf. The Council's budget allocation of £560k had also contributed to a lot of detailed technical work on archaeology, drainage, biodiversity, etc. which had taken the partnership up to the point of submitting a major planning application. A further budgetary provision of £220k was being requested to cover additional technical studies and a planning application, as well as a potential call in inquiry or appeal.
4. A question was asked about whether this approach would have been necessary if there had been a single planning authority in place across Oxfordshire. The urban extension site would have needed to be promoted through a plan making process under any scenario and significant costs are involved in that process as well as those to be incurred in securing any necessary planning permission. As the land was outside the city boundary the Council was not the planning authority but the added costs arising from this factor alone (e.g. additional QC fees) were relatively small given the overall cost of promoting strategic sites.
5. The Committee noted that the responsible planning authority, South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC), had voiced support for an alternative site at Chalgrove Airfield, which was being proactively pursued. The Committee heard that there was a national policy of developing surplus land owned by the Ministry of Defence. However, the Council's view was that the location of that particular site was too remote to be considered a suitable location to meet Oxford's unmet need, being some twelve miles from the city. The County Council had produced a robust document setting out the infrastructure challenges at Chalgrove Airfield. The site's location meant that the associated infrastructure costs would be very high and good public transport links were unlikely to be viable, so a significant increase in car journeys would be expected. The expected lead-in time it would take to complete a major development at the Chalgrove site also made it unsuitable in terms meeting Oxford's unmet housing need.
6. The Council's view was that an urban extension on land south of Grenoble Road would be more sustainable as it would be connected with existing bus routes, cycle infrastructure and potentially the Cowley branch line. The increase in car journey numbers could therefore be expected to be significantly lower than for an equivalent development at Chalgrove.
7. The Board Member said that in his personal view it seemed likely that the South Oxford Science Village planning application would be refused by the relevant SODC planning committee, even if planning officers advised to the contrary. It was difficult to quantify the risk to the Council of pursuing an application but the Council believed that an urban extension at this location was a major priority and that it had a robust case to put forward in a planning appeal or call-in inquiry,

should the application be refused. The Head of Service said that the proposal was deliverable, given that the landowning partners including the Council were working together to promote housing delivery to meet its needs but there were no guarantees on the outcome. Sites at Wick Farm and Elsfield to the North East of the city were also in contention for development, as well as Chalgrove. If development went ahead at multiple sites then there would be a need for the city and district councils to work closely with the County Council on how the sites fit together strategically.

8. The Committee also received assurances on the following points:
  - Transport improvements in the Eastern Arc of the city were already in the Oxford Transport Strategy and the LTP4 but would be picked up in the additional transport work being picked up as part of the local plan.
  - Changes to the Green Belt were commonplace in district councils' local plans (e.g. SODC were proposing changes to the Green Belt at Berinsfield), although there were difference of opinion about how the relevant legislation and guidelines should be interpreted.
  - The landowner would have scope to exceed SODC's planning policies in regards to social housing, although costs would be a limiting factor.
  - The strength of the economic case for development in the greenbelt had previously been accepted by planning inspectors as an exceptional circumstance.
  - Part of the site was within the 'odour footprint' of the sewage works but this was not unusual and could be mitigated through site planning.
  - Similarly the presence of electricity pylons could also be mitigated through site planning.
  
9. The Committee voiced strong support for the decision and agreed not to add to the recommendations in the officer report, other than to say that progress should be made as quickly as possible.

***Recommendation 1 – That the City Council, in partnership with Thames Water and Magdalen College, seeks to submit a planning application for South Oxford Science Village as soon as possible.***

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**List of background papers: None**

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