

Question put to Cabinet by Mr Roy Darke in relation to Adoption of Oxford Local Plan 2036 and response given by Cllr Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning & Housing Delivery.

Q.

Given the Council's commitment to dealing with the climate crisis, including setting up a Citizen's Assembly last year to ask for local opinion, why is the Council still allowing a policy in Local Plan 2036 (SP 28) to build in the flood plain at Park Farm, New Marston when the field was under water for much of last winter?

A.

The site in question has been the subject of careful consideration throughout the process of developing the Local Plan, and was subject to detailed examination by the Inspectors. The site allocation, in conjunction with all the other policies in the Local Plan, was found sound.

Turning to the detailed points raised in the statement, it is understood that some areas of Park Farm are in the flood zone, and that is why detailed evidence on flood risk was prepared and consulted upon and put in front of the Inspectors. A sequential flood risk test justified allocation of the site, alongside the Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) level 2. The SFRA includes consideration of potential climate change impacts. The SFRA level 2 concluded that for this site safe access and egress was possible as routes in and out keep dry. It also concluded that there may need to be significant mitigation and that a detailed Flood Risk Assessment would be needed to demonstrate any proposed development would be safe and would not worsen flood risk elsewhere. The areas of highest flood risk within the site could not be built on.

The presence of standing water does not of itself make a site undevelopable. Modelling and available technology to understand flood risk have advanced significantly. It is certainly the case that a great deal of work will be needed from any developer of this site to demonstrate that it is safe from flood risk and that flood risk is not worsened elsewhere, as is required by other Local Plan policies. Developers will also need to liaise with Thames Water as early as possible with regards to assessing the impacts of development on the sewerage system.

The farm is used for horse grazing and initial biodiversity work has shown that there is unlikely to be significant biodiversity value within the site itself. The policy requires that development proposals demonstrate that there would be no adverse impact on the integrity of the nearby SSSI. Developers will be required to provide an assessment of groundwater and surface water flows, and provide details of sustainable drainage scheme with an appropriate management plan. Whoever holds the lease on the land would be subject to the requirements for management of SSSIs, and a new management arrangement would need to be developed if the current lease ends.

The impact on the wider Green Belt is limited because of the relatively small size of the site and because development would not encroach closer to the river. Careful design is required by policy to minimise the impact on the remaining Green Belt. The arguments for allowing exceptional circumstances for releasing sites from the Green Belt were discussed exhaustively during the Local Plan hearings, and have been accepted by the planning Inspectors.

Viability of the policies of the Plan has been tested as a whole. Assumptions made in the viability report were that build costs would be high in Oxford because most sites are complex; allowances were made in the build cost assumptions for issues such as contaminated land and flood risk as well as the high standards of design and carbon efficiency that will be required. Like most sites there is not yet a detailed scheme for development of this site, so detailed viability is not known. That is not a reason not to allocate the site.

The site allocation policy, alongside generic policies of the Plan, ensures that at planning applications stage the applicant will need to demonstrate that the proposed development would not cause harm to the SSSI, that the development would be safe in terms of flood risk and that flood risk would not be worsened elsewhere.