

**Local Plan update – copy of oral report to the Planning and Highways Committee
On 6th May 2025 by Councillor Simon Pike, Committee Chairman**

On 24th April, West Berkshire Council published the report of the Planning Inspector on his examination of the West Berkshire Local Plan update, together with a schedule of proposed Main Modifications. He concluded that with the recommended main modifications the West Berkshire Local Plan Review satisfies the legal requirements for production of a Local Plan, and is sound.

West Berkshire Council will hold a meeting on 9th June to consider the adoption of the Local Plan with these main modifications. It can decide either to adopt the Local Plan or to reject it; it cannot make any substantive amendments. If it rejects the Local Plan, then it must then start again to develop a new Local Plan. However, the Secretary of State has the power to intervene.

The Inspector's report confirms his recommendation that the size of the North East Thatcham development is increased from 1500 houses to 2500 houses. This is obviously very disappointing but not a surprise.

The main reason given by the inspector is that:

“The evidence indicates that the allocation has capacity for up to approximately 2,500 homes along with the physical, social and green infrastructure proposed in policy SP17. Restricting the scale of development to 1,500 homes would not therefore make efficient use of land and optimal use of the potential of the site as expected by national policy.”

The period of the Local Plan has been extended from 2039 to 2041, which also resulted in a shortfall in housing completions in the final two years.

The Inspector also received evidence from the site promoter, the North East Thatcham Partnership, that:

“there is a reasonable prospect that a development including around 2,500 homes would be viable, whereas there are significant doubts that a development comprising around 1,500 homes could deliver all of the proposed physical, social and green infrastructure proposed in policy SP17” (that is the policy in the Local Plan for North East Thatcham).

Under the relevant legislation (section 113 of the Planning and Compulsory Act 2004), the judgement of the Inspector on planning matters can only be challenged if the “the document is not within the appropriate power”, “a procedural requirement

has not been complied with” or the decision of the Inspector is demonstrably irrational. None of these appear to be the case for this decision.

In summary, the reduction of the number of houses from 2500 houses to 1500 houses by the previous Administration was doomed to failure from the outset.

However, the Town Council has achieved some important benefits for the town and its residents through its participation in the development and examination of the draft Local Plan:

- We have ensured that the Council and other stakeholders will be consulted during the development of the masterplan for the site, and that West Berkshire Councillors will approve this as a Supplementary Planning document
- the site promoter wanted this to be agreed through a Planning Performance Agreement, which is a private agreement between the developer and Council Officers.
- We have ensured that the primary healthcare provision on the site will be viable, and facilitated the option for the Burdwood Surgery to relocate to NE Thatcham should it so wish.
- We have ensured that there will be proper provision of secondary education, and that Kennet and Trinity schools will be involved in defining it.
- We have also ensured that the site will make provision for early years and SEND needs.
- At our request, the Inspector has added wording to provide assurance that the promised infrastructure will be delivered.
- The northern half of the site will be reserved as a Country Park. We have persuaded the Inspector to make some technical changes to the documentation that will give protection to the country park from development in future local plans.

It is worth noting that the NE Thatcham site is not predicted to exceed 1500 houses until 2039.

The Inspector also recommended that four new sites are added to the Local Plan, two of which are in Cold Ash parish on the northern edge of Thatcham. We will no doubt discuss one of these further under agenda item 7.

Finally, in the last round of consultation, we proposed a change to the settlement boundary for Thatcham that would facilitate the redevelopment of the redundant

Newbury Leisure Park on Lower Way. The Inspector did not agree to this change, but the comments in his report will be helpful in making this happen.

I said earlier that the Inspector's decision on NE Thatcham appears to be sound from the perspective of planning policy. The North East Thatcham site is within the setting of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, which means that in law any decision that might affect it "shall have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing its natural beauty". However, the Inspector appears to have only considered the impact of the development from the perspective of planning policy, and not considered this more stringent legal requirement. I am also aware of a number of procedural irregularities. However, I do not know how if these would be considered to be material or, if they required some aspects of the Examination to be repeated, if they would lead to a different outcome.