

Sandleford: How it Went Wrong in 2009

This explains how the scoring system for strategic sites was changed by West Berkshire Council: who suggested the change, by whom and when it was agreed, and what the effect of the change was on WBC's decision to recommend Sandleford Park.

- 1) In Summer 2008, the Councillors on West Berkshire Council's Planning Task Group (PTG) agreed a scoring system for assessing the "sustainability" of potential strategic sites, using numeric weighted scores.
- 2) After a six-week public consultation, this system was formally approved for use by PTG on 19th October 2008. At least 11 sites were scored over coming months by the Council Planners: the results were published in April 2009 as part of the "Options for the Future" informal consultation on the Core Strategy that summer.
- 3) On 27th February 2009, planners told PTG that "Topic Papers" would form part of the Sustainability Appraisal. One of these papers was entitled "Strategic Sites", however PTG Councillors were not shown a copy of it, even though they asked (according to the minutes) "*to see a comprehensive summary of each paper to provide a scrutiny process*".
- 4) At the last PTG meeting (1st April) before the "Options" draft Core Strategy was approved by Council's Executive for consultation, Councillors said "scoring should be shown for all sites". **It wasn't**. Although the Sustainability Appraisal (SA) did include the list of potential sites, with scores, the Executive were never shown that - nor were the PTG, until after the Consultation. The SA was not even mentioned to Executive, let alone Topic Papers.
- 5) At the last meeting of PTG before the "Options" draft went out for consultation, the lead planning officer for the Core Strategy said, "*the SA and Topic Papers were intended for developers*". This was understood to mean that Councillors (let alone their constituents) need not concern themselves with them.
- 6) During the Summer 2009 consultation, Sandleford was merely a reserve site - only to "*come forward if needed*".
- 7) During the 2009 consultation, it was reported to PTG (on 28th August) that "*several new sites*" had been put forward and "*need to be assessed in the same way as the original 15 strategic sites*" - implying that the original scoring system still applied.
- 8) At the next (25th Sept) PTG meeting, planners said "*the SA will be published at the submission stage*" and "*some policies, including strategic sites, are still to be firmed up*". **It wasn't** - and that policy wasn't brought back to PTG.
- 9) In their report to PTG at this meeting, planners said most responses to the SA "*related to the methodology used for assessing the potential strategic sites and the scores given to those sites*".
- 10) For the 30th October PTG, a revised Core Strategy - **but not a revised SA** - was presented to Councillors. It had Sandleford as the second strategic site - but with no supporting SA, Councillors could not judge why this was so. And with the District total new homes reduced by 500 now (SE Plan), the need for a second site was reduced.
- 11) In the 15th December PTG report, planners told Councillors "*the assessment of strategic sites which was carried out as part of the process of site selection does not need to be revised through the SA*".
- 12) So the formally "approved for submission" Core Strategy was published in Feb 2010 with no supporting SA and no reasoning behind the officer decision to change the scoring system.
- 13) Only in July 2010, *after* the revised strategic site assessment was published - after the formal consultation on the Core Strategy - did officers explicitly state to Members, "*this approach [i.e. appraisal of sites by weighted scoring] could not be taken in a consistent way ... **therefore the most appropriate way this can be considered is by officer interpretation...***"