

## **Stockport Council Liberal Democrat Group response to GMSF consultation**

Attempting to get agreement on a comprehensive plan for new homes development across the Greater Manchester conurbation was always going to be a challenging task. Ten individual districts, each with their own proud identity and different priorities including the regional capital – Manchester – were never going to find it easy to agree.

The Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (GMSF) was therefore always going to be an ambitious project which required an almost unprecedented degree of co-operation across council boundaries. All the individual authorities concerned recognised the need for effective plans to create new homes but there were differing degrees of enthusiasm for the masterplan right from the very start.

In Stockport, the Liberal Democrats, as the official opposition on the Council, made clear our position from the publication of the first draft plan. Whilst accepting the need for more homes, we have always argued that this is not the same thing as a licence to concrete over the countryside. We need the right homes in the right places.

Protection of the green belt has been a long-standing and well-established priority for residents across Stockport. It is one of the key reasons why our borough is such an attractive place to live and many people are determined to see it kept that way.

Liberal Democrats have consistently argued that the GMSF was fundamentally flawed from the outset, as one of the first key decisions was a “call for sites”. This was basically an invitation for developers and landowners to offer up sites for potential development - and not surprisingly many chose to promptly respond. In fact, although Stockport is only one of ten boroughs in the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, it has fully 20% of all identified sites across the conurbation. Hardly a surprise, given the attractiveness to developers of building on green belt sites in preference to other locations. In the circumstances, we have significant concerns about the loss of green space, impact on roads and traffic and the lack of wider supporting infrastructure such as schools.

These concerns and the targeting by developers of our green spaces are what led the Liberal Democrat group to try to withdraw SMBC from the GMSF process on two separate occasions. Instead, we argued, more focus should be placed on the development of our own Local Plan as we believe local self-determination is of critical importance.

That said, it would be churlish not to recognise that considerable progress has been made since the publication of the first draft plan and that has been amply demonstrated in the revised proposals that are now the subject of this consultation. Although concerns remain, many have been addressed and it has been encouraging to see moves towards a greater contribution on development of brownfield sites and a more positive and enthusiastic approach to residential development in Stockport town centre. We believe that both are important changes of emphasis and are to be welcomed.

We also acknowledge that the total number of new homes “required” under the plan has reduced significantly with a consequential reduction in the impact on our green belt. However, we note that the position could have been much better if the Government had taken into account the latest ONS projections which, despite pausing the whole process for these new figures to be considered, they have ultimately chosen to ignore. More recently, the housing

minister has suggested that, in any case, the targets are “not mandatory” and that “there’s lots of variables to be taken into account”. We agree.

The most recently published draft proposals, as we have said, are significantly better than the original plans but – not surprisingly – a number of concerns remain. In particular, one of our major concerns throughout this process has been the adequacy of the present transport infrastructure and its ability to continue to function properly in view of the huge amount of additional traffic likely to be generated.

There has been much talk of seeking guarantees and assurances from both the Combined Authority and TFGM before commitments to new house building are given, but as we have seen before with Metrolink, such assurances are not always fulfilled.

Other infrastructure concerns also need to be addressed such as whether there will be sufficient school provision in the targeted development areas. Will there be enough places available for all children to be accommodated in a nearby local school?

On the health front, there are questions about the coverage of medical centres and the ability of any new residents to be able to access community health facilities and the wider NHS.

With regard to the delivery of affordable housing, which must be a key priority, the high land values in Stockport mean developers regularly claim including affordable housing in their schemes is not viable. Action must be taken to prevent developers and land owners from simply profiteering from newly designated housing areas.

At present, we are far from satisfied that the revised plans, an improvement though they are on the original proposals, adequately answer these pressing matters and we believe further work is needed before we would be in a position to offer our support.

Our detailed analysis of the current plans has highlighted a number of locational issues.

Despite the revisions to the original plan, Heald Green would seem to be especially hard hit, with more new homes proposed here than anywhere else. If the proposals were to go ahead they would represent a considerable challenge to the established community in the amount of remaining green space. We also have concerns from safety and noise pollution perspectives about the proximity of these proposed sites to Manchester Airport and question whether this would make them deliverable sites.

In Cheadle constituency, we believe strongly in the need for a new commuter rail station in Cheadle village and are pleased to see this in the plans. Longer term we would also wish to see a tram-train Metrolink service with an additional stop at Gatley North. The case for a new station at Cheadle is well established and surveys have repeatedly shown that this would have a positive impact on the local community.

The significant housing and retail developments planned by Cheshire East Council on our border at Handforth will have a huge impact on the A34 and across the constituency.

In Hazel Grove constituency, we are pleased to see no major developments are planned for Hazel Grove itself but note that the proposals in surrounding wards will have an impact on district centre and other amenities, including schools and transport links. A train station at High Lane, tram-train to Hazel Grove and the completion of the A555 relief road need to be delivered before new house building commences.

We have strong concerns about the impact building on Tangshutt Fields (Hyde Bank Meadows) would have on the local community. The loss of green space and recreational space would have a negative impact on the people of Romiley. The existing transport infrastructure, in particular but not exclusively the road network, does not cope with the number of people currently living in the area, especially at peak times. A single point of entry to the site along Cherry Tree Lane and Gotherage Lane is clearly nowhere near sufficient for an additional 250 homes. We would also highlight the clear impact on already stretched school places, access to health services and local utilities.

The proposals in Romiley and High Lane, whilst putting pressure on those places themselves, are also likely to cause significant additional traffic through Marple, putting the amenities there under similarly increased pressure unless significant improvements are made, again ahead of building any new houses. Any development adjacent to the A6 will cause more congestion and compound existing air quality problems.

In Offerton, we believe that the proposed housing development on the former High School site is likely to lead to significantly increased congestion and unsustainable traffic levels on The Fairway and Marple Road. There are also no clear mitigation measures proposed, leaving Offerton residents concerned about the potential impact upon our roads, schools and other community infrastructure and assets.

In Bredbury and Woodley, the building of 250 homes in greenbelt at the end of Gravel Bank Road will seriously add to the congestion on Hyde Road (leading to Stockport Road). There is only one exit from the estate at the junction of Gravel Bank and Hyde Road. This road is the main route from Hyde to Stockport and is already seriously congested, especially due to the uneven timing of the traffic lights at the junction of Stockport Road and Bents Lane, which penalise traffic from the direction of Hyde.

This will be exacerbated by the proposal to build a further 440 homes just metres over the Stockport boundary into Tameside, which will also feed traffic into Hyde Road. This will result in gridlock at peak times. Many children from Tameside already attend schools in the Bredbury and Woodley area and children from an extra 690 homes in close proximity will vastly overcrowd the present school provision. Also there will need to be provision for GP services etc. as outlined in the document. Over 100 local residents, some from Tameside attended a public meeting on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March and were vociferous in their rejection of these proposals due, in most part, to the identifiable lack of infrastructure, but also to the use of greenbelt.

For the expansion of the Bredbury Gateway industrial site, this cannot be delivered unless significant improvements are made to the nearby roads including an increase in the height of surrounding bridges.

A further concern relates to the duration of the plan. By having a 19-year plan we are being forced to identify so much land for housing we are being asked to release green belt. This is despite uncertainty about population growth estimates and the impact of issues such as Brexit over such a long term.

Once green belt is released, this will be the land which developers wish to use first as it tends to be the most attractive and most profitable. It is not clear that there is any way for councils to stop this and impose a “brownfield first” approach to development.

It is within the power of the GM Mayor to vary the duration of the plan. A reduction of just 2 years would reduce the amount of housing land required and, in Stockport, this would mean no green belt land would need to be released. This would force developers to build on brownfield sites first and protect Stockport’s green belt.

In overall terms, while accepting that this latest version of the GMSF proposals is a considerable improvement on the initial plan, we do not believe it goes far enough in addressing the concerns of local residents. Specifically, we would want to see:-

- (A) more mitigation measures against impact on the Green Belt and proactive initiatives to help protect this precious asset.
- (B) more detailed and specific measures to improve and expand our existing transport infrastructure which will otherwise struggle to cope.
- (C) a review of the adequacy of school provision and access to NHS services in the area where new development is being proposed.
- (D) a renewed focus on Brownfield sites and development in Stockport town centre as a key priority in any revised proposals.
- (E) A reduction in the duration of the plan to remove the need to release green belt land.

We look forward to these issues, and all others already raised by local residents themselves, being fully taken into account and we expect to see all these matters addressed in the third and final draft of the GMSF plan.