



Local Plan withdrawn by Shropshire Council Why, and What's Next for Albrighton?

Most of you will have heard the news earlier this month that the draft Local Plan has been withdrawn, as requested by the Government's Planning Inspectors. A Local Plan is crucial to the County's planning policy as it identifies where new homes and commercial premises should be built in the long term. The withdrawal is not good news for the County, but it does not mean that our campaign is over - far from it. Boningale Homes proposals are still the wrong scale, in the wrong location and wrong for our village. The planners and Shropshire Council still retain the power to prevent speculative and inappropriate developments. AVAG continues to fight to ensure that Albrighton is not swamped by houses built by greedy developers, and you can help.

What Happened with the Local Plan?

In our last article, we mentioned that the Government Inspectors had told Shropshire Council that the much-delayed draft Local Plan was 'unsound', and the Hearings (the process which examines the viability of the Plan's content) were abruptly halted. Shropshire Council was then given a month to produce a remedial proposal to fix the Local Plan and address the key failing (in the Inspectors' opinion) that too few sites, and some inappropriate ones, had been identified to satisfy the 'unmet need' of the Black Country. This is directly relevant to Bridgnorth, Shifnal, Albrighton and Boningale, for obvious geographical reasons.

Shropshire's remedial proposal, which outlined what the Council would do to fix the Local Plan, was rejected by the Government Inspectors (in a letter dated February 17th, but only made public on March 6th), because they did not believe that the Council could address its shortcomings in the six months allocated, given the scale of the task of identifying and thoroughly assessing new sites.

A four page letter outlined why: 'In conclusion, considering the fundamental nature of the additional work, the timetable provided, the omissions from the work programme, and the time taken to undertake work previously, we are not confident that the additional work now proposed could be completed within six months. The combination of these factors leaves us unable to apply our discretion in this case to allow the examination to continue'.

Shropshire Council's Cabinet member for Planning, Chris Schofield reacted to this 'desperately disappointing news', and expressed the council's frustration, questioning why the Inspectors, having asked for a remedial plan to be undertaken in the next six months, then said that it would be impossible in the period they had set! We agree that this seems like Shropshire had been set up to fail.

The leader of Shropshire Council, Lezley Picton had announced the previous day (March 5th) that she would not be standing for re-election at the upcoming Local Elections on May 1st. She cited her main reason as being her disagreement with the Government's ambitions to create larger councils and devolved Mayoral strategic authorities, with a potential merger of the councils of Staffordshire, Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin. Her key point was that this would be to the detriment of local decision-making. This is something we are keeping an eye on as well.

For a more in-depth analysis go to the Shropshire Star's website and check our own updated site.

What Next for the Local Plan?

The dangers of not having an emerging Local Plan have been outlined a number of times by AVAG in previous articles and on our website.

The last Local Plan 'SamDev', only takes us to 2026 - so we are precariously close to its expiry date. Without a Plan and with insufficient five-year land supply, existing and upcoming planning decisions will be looked at individually rather than being compared to an agreed house-building policy (Local Plan).

Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner, who is also Minister for Housing, has said repeatedly that the way for local communities to retain a say in planning decisions for their area is to have a Local Plan in place. The implication, therefore, is that without one, we will lose influence and control. However, the fate of Boningale Homes' proposals will still be decided on its site-specific merits. A bad site is still a bad site, irrespective of the Local Plan withdrawal. In any case, the Council now needs to start a new Local Plan urgently.

Councillor Schofield has outlined how they will proceed; "We will now turn our attention to preparing a Plan for the period 2025-45. This will need to respond to the Government's recent significant uplift in housing need for the county, as well as providing a framework for sustainable economic growth and managing the county's environmental assets. This process will begin later this year, and the council will work with communities in establishing positive and sustainable growth strategies for their areas." More on this below.

The Fight Continues against Boningale Homes

Boningale Homes' planning application remains opportunistic and speculative, and they have still not provided all the information required. As we know, it is in the wrong place, and of the wrong scale. Thanks to hard work and relentless campaigning over the last year, everyone knows that there is huge public opposition to this application, with many reasons why it is unworkable and should be refused.

We don't yet have a date as to when the recommendation report will be completed by Shropshire Council's Planning Officer, Lynn Parker, and put to the Council Planning Committee to decide. It could happen in March, April, May or any time later than that.

Shropshire Planning have to weigh up the balance between the 'merits' of Boningale Homes' proposals - including the consultees who have accepted the proposals - against the 1,120 objections, consultees who have rejected it, our 3,724 strong petition, and all the reasons we put in our official AVAG objection concerning ecology, schools, food security, transport, mental health, health service infrastructure, and the unarguable fact that the development is in completely the wrong place to link with the M54 corridor. They will need to assess all this alongside Shropshire's preferred planning policies including the soon-to-expire 'SamDev'. We are hopeful that the withdrawal of the draft Local Plan won't have changed Lynn Parker's view from before Christmas, that she was 'minded' to recommend that the committee should refuse the application.

Our Neighbourhood Plan Needs Updating Too

Albrighton's Neighbourhood Plan Light (<http://bit.ly/3F9155M>) still desperately needs to be reviewed and updated to defend ourselves from speculative developments. This is critical, as it will be assessed as a 'material consideration' in future planning decisions. AVAG has urged our Parish Councillors to commence this as soon as is possible; but we are yet to hear any concrete plans. Please speak to your Councillors about this.

Green Belt

It was announced on the 28th of February that Shropshire Council has been awarded £70,000 by the Government to undertake a Green Belt Review. The principle of NOT building on our Green Belt remains critical to our campaign. It provides a buffer zone between Wolverhampton and the rural areas of Shropshire

and South Staffordshire and it remains a much valued protection for green spaces. The Government are on record that 'brownfield' and 'Grey Belt' sites should take preference over high-quality Green Belt. AVAG and everyone fighting to save our area from overdevelopment need to continue to stress this principle and remind decision makers of these commitments.

Get Ready for the Next Local Plan 'Call For Sites'

As part of the process of devising a new Local Plan, Shropshire council will have to 'Call for Sites' later this year. This is where landowners across the county put forward their sites to be considered for house-building in the next Local Plan.

Communities like Albrighton will then have the opportunity to review and give feedback on these sites and make informed and practical suggestions.

Obviously this is an opportunity for landowners like George Thompson to bang their drums again for inappropriate proposals like Albrighton South; a development that many parishioners have dubbed "Thompson Town"!

However, AVAG is confident that many of the new sites, if not all, will be more suitable than Boningale Homes' proposals for Albrighton South. This will be a real opportunity to find the right, sustainable sites for development across Shropshire - and fight for Brownfield First not Green Belt destruction in Albrighton. AVAG will follow this closely and keep you updated as things progress.

Another likelihood is that the Government will reform the Local Plan process. Details are not yet clear, but we hope that any reforms will be an improvement to speed up the Local Plan process from the abortive mess we have just witnessed.

Conclusion

We continue to have a situation where many pieces of the jigsaw are up in the air, and only time will tell where they will land. AVAG, with your help, will continue to fight for what is right. Our recent publicity campaign yielded exceptional coverage in local and business media.

For much more detail and new activity, keep an eye on our website 'albrightongreenbelt.co.uk' and AVAG Facebook Group.

Stand by for action when the call comes! The Fight Continues To Save Our Green Belt...