

In our December article, thanks to the forbearance and kindness of the editor, AVAG was allowed to squeeze in a Stop Press update. This stated that the Shropshire Council Planning Officer Lynn Parker could confirm that 'the recommendation will be for the REFUSAL [of Boningale Homes planning application for 800 houses in Albrighton South - Ref: 24/02108/OUT] and that the aim remains for the application to be determined at the Southern Planning Committee of 17th December'. This date has now moved on to February next year. The reasons are complex, but these can be unravelled thanks to AVAG's planning sub-committee and Nigel Lumby, Albrighton's Parish Council's Planning Officer who also serves as a councillor on Shropshire Council's Planning Committee.

We would like to emphasise that as an organisation, AVAG is not against housebuilding per se. We understand the national and local need for it, and we support the housing proposed and approved in the draft Local Plan, which totals almost 800 new homes for Albrighton. What we object to is outrageous overdevelopment such as BH are proposing, and we take issue with building on Green Belt land.

Although in general, planning decisions across the County can be decided by the Planning Officer alone, an application as large and as contested as the Albrighton one was deemed more suitable to be determined by the elected councillors on the Planning Committee. In these cases the Planning Officer (Parker) makes a recommendation, which can be accepted or rejected. The Committee have been known to reject the Planning Officer's recommendation if they have good grounds to do so. This is an essential element to safeguard the influence of local democracy, but recent comments by Housing Secretary Angela Rayner suggested that Planning Officers may be able in future to approve development proposals without a formal sign-off from the Council committee 'as long as they comply with locally agreed plans [a Local Plan] and national regulations on standards'. This puts particular emphasis on the need for Local Plans to be in place, which Shropshire Council does not yet have. However the current situation is that nothing has changed yet and so the present planning rules apply.

Parker's indication that she will give a recommendation to refuse is therefore advisory only, but would be based on policy, planning law, the strength or weakness of the application itself and its merits in terms of previous decisions. Reasons for a refusal by the Committee can be argued against in an appeal by the applicant, in this case Boningale Homes. BH have a massive amount riding on this speculative Green Belt grab so they are guaranteed to appeal if the decision goes against them. AVAG has been saying since last Spring that this was their plan. Boningale Homes are already preparing for bad news by trying to open a legal dialogue with Parker concerning an appeal and are attempting to put pressure on the Council by raising the prospect of how expensive it will be to defend the council's decision in an appeal process which would take several weeks. Alongside these veiled threats BH are also trying to appear reasonable by offering extra information to overcome Council objections in the meantime. These are the charm/scare tactics of George Thompson's Boningale Homes company and their agents (Marrons Planning) laid bare.

Then the timing changed. On the 6th December Parker confirmed that 'I have now extended the consideration time up to 3rd March 2025 with the intention for Members to consider the application at the February 25th Southern Planning Committee'. This statement was issued in response to Boningale Homes' fishing exercise by email as to what the Planning Officer would recommend to the Committee. All this correspondence is available publically to read on the Council's Planning Portal.

This delay is disappointing to everyone who wanted a quick decision, but the ostensibly fair reasons given by Lynn Parker are based on the complications caused by other significant planning factors, namely Government reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework, and the delay in agreeing the Shropshire Local Plan, which is still only in draft form and makes the village vulnerable to avaricious developers. Her decision is to delay the planning committee meeting to wait and see the outcome regarding the NPPF, and the Government Planning Inspectors comments on Local Plan. The idea is that the Council should then be better equipped to build a more robust defence against speculative developments like this one.

Let's take these issues in order. As many of you will know the new Labour Government have undertaken to reform the National Planning Policy Framework in order to fast track the building of 1.5 million 'safe and decent' new homes and 150 infrastructure projects (gigafactories, solar farms, port terminals, electricity cables, roads and railway lines) in this Parliamentary term, given the UK's slow economic growth, and the lack of new homes and 'social and affordable housing'. Nimbyism, which is characterised by communities saying no to any development for spurious reasons, unreasonable and exaggerated ecological objections, in addition to planning 'red tape', are cited by the Government as just some of the reasons that infrastructure projects and home building has declined in recent years despite increasing demand. There was a period of

public consultation, to which developers, the public and other interested parties contributed, and we are now waiting for a (hopefully improved Bill) to come before the House of Commons, Committees, and House of Lords before being brought into law. It is these issues and the proposal that Planning Officers may be able to by-pass councillors on Planning Committees who represent local opinion that is so concerning.

As regards the Local Plan, Boningale Homes are hoping that the absence of an agreed Local Plan provides the loophole they need to succeed and they appear somewhat desperate. When questioned on Laura Kuensberg's programme on December 8th, Rayner told Councils to "get your plans in order". Regarding the preservation of the Green Belt she said: "Because we haven't had these compulsory plans locally [meaning 'Local Plans'], we've seen speculative development where Green Belt land has been developed on...we've told Councils they've got to have those plans....If developers follow the national framework, which protects the environment and looks at other elements, then they shouldn't be stuck in the system for years." Boningale Homes are desperate to get the Local Plan inspectors to tell Shropshire Council that they need to provide more homes than the Local Plan currently, coupled with all BH's bells and whistles – supermarket, care-home and school - thereby give BH the apparent justification to claim 'very special circumstances' to build on our Green Belt. However the Government's fast track approval process would only apply to proposals already agreed in a Local Plan. Boningale Homes will seek to argue that the draft plan is unlawful and out of date so that in its absence only NPPF rules apply and that County and Local democratic processes should be by-passed in view of unmet housing need.

What next?

We are waiting on four things, (some of which may have happened before you read this):

- 1) The Government's new bill on the National Planning Policy Framework, which will provide new guidance to Local councils regarding planning criteria and housing policy on which to base their decisions;
- 2) The Government Inspectors' comments on our Local Plan and its validity, and
- 3) Shropshire Council committee decision on Feb 25th regarding the planning application seen through the lens of 1 and 2.
- 4) AVAG urges the Albrighton Parish Council to reconsider starting work soon on updating the village's Neighbourhood Plan, regardless of the upcoming boundary changes.

Please keep in touch with our campaign via our website <https://albrightongreenbelt.co.uk/> and our Facebook Group Albrighton Village Action Group. Please remember to make a donation to our fighting fund. We are going to need it! Especially if BH take this to Planning Appeal. Thank you.