



# Cllr Patrick Keating

Standing up for Blagdon and Churchill Ward



## Response to the North Somerset Local Plan Consultation: Challenges

### Summary:

The rejection of the previous administration's deeply flawed Joint Spatial Plan provides North Somerset with an excellent opportunity to develop a local plan that provides development that is fit for purpose, reflects the needs and wishes of local residents and supports efforts to tackle the climate emergency and respond to changes in the way people live, work and play in an increasingly digital and fluid society.

In my view, the new local plan should prioritise dealing with the following challenges:

- Putting action on the climate change at the heart of any new development
- Providing housing that is affordable and accessible for local residents and is close to employment, infrastructure and transport links
- Ensuring the protection of our green spaces, unique landscapes and rural communities
- Linking development with transport planning to support active travel, reduce the need for car journeys and avoid placing further stress on our road network

### Introduction

We need new homes in North Somerset. The need to accommodate a growing population who are attracted to the opportunities, landscapes and lifestyle of our district – and meet increasingly stringent government targets – means that we will need to support an increased level of house building across the area.

As the NSC consultation document acknowledges, and as we saw in the debate over the previous JSP, this will lead to challenging conversations and decisions about where we should build and how to ensure that developers deliver the right kinds of housing.

But, with a new more transparent cross party administration in North Somerset, I believe we have an opportunity to develop a local plan that will truly take account of resident's concerns, while giving us a tool to ensure that developers deliver the right kind of housing for our area: affordable, well designed, efficient and carbon neutral – and most importantly, located in the right place.

With central Government proposing to rip up the existing planning rules and take control away from local authorities, it is even more urgent that we have a robust, well grounded local

plan. This will enable us to push back against government efforts to unfairly increase our housing target or push unsustainable development against resident's wishes.

In the section below, I set out my views on the questions posed in the consultation document. I am responding from the point of view of councillor for a rural ward, with a number of villages, each with their own unique perspective. But as we enter into a debate on the future of the local plan, I also recognise that as councillors we are developing a plan that has to suit the whole of our district in all of its diversity. The plan can only be truly robust and representative if a broad and diverse group of residents respond to the consultation. This can't just be a discussion between councillors, officers, developers and the vocal organised lobby groups – we need to hear the views of ordinary residents in both the towns, villages and places in between.

### Question Responses:

#### **QUESTION 1: What are your hopes and fears about having new development near where you live?**

**Hopes:** Our villages cannot remain static. Rising house prices, limited housing stock and lack of economic opportunities result in young people having to leave the villages to start lives in families elsewhere. New development, if done sensitively and if it provides truly affordable housing of good quality and of the right size and type, will enable a broader range of people to live in the villages, with the knock of effect of supporting our local businesses, pubs, schools and other services.

**Fears:** But many residents rightly fear that development, if not properly controlled will destroy the special unique character of the villages. The previous administration's proposal to build a so called "garden village" of over 2,500 houses near Churchill is a prime example of the wrong kind of development. This development would have fundamentally changed the character of the area, spoiled the natural environment and created a traffic nightmare as thousands of people commuted to jobs elsewhere.

#### **QUESTION 2: What changes over the next 15 years do you think will affect how we need to plan for residents, businesses and communities?**

Our society is changing at an unprecedented pace. A growing – and aging - population, digitalisation, the impact of Brexit and changes to working patterns in the aftermath of the Covid-19 epidemic will all need to be reflected in our local plan.

The local plan should specifically take in to account:

- **Changes in mobility, such as:**
  - o A reduction in personal car ownership as electrification drives up costs and an increase in sharing reduced the need to own a car outright.
  - o An increase in working from home as increased digitalisation supports more remote working in the wake of the Covid-19 epidemic.

- Pressures on public transport as the likely recession leads to further cuts to provision – or increased cost of rail travel makes this more unaffordable to commuters.
- The need to promote active travel, such as cycling and walking, to both support action on climate change and improving physical health.
- **Changes in work and employment:**
  - The impact of both the post-Covid recession and Brexit will have to be seen, but it is likely that North Somerset will need to be able to deal with the impact of an increase in the number of people unemployed, as well as people having to travel further afield to find work.
  - The nature of agricultural and agri-food work is likely to change as post-Brexit farming and trade policies impact the business models of local dairies, farmers and food producers.

**QUESTION 3: Are you concerned that climate change may impact you or your family, business or local community in the future? And if so in what way?**

Climate change is likely to have a significant impact on our community in the future in the following ways:

- Rising water levels will make development impossible in large stretches of North Somerset, limiting the number of areas suitable for housebuilding.
- Increasingly unpredictable weather will place further pressure on the transport infrastructure, particularly road and rail. This must be taken account of in any transport strategy.
- Climate change will impact the local farming community as:
  - Floods and inclement weather impact crops and livestock
  - Regulation and consumer demand changes the types of products produced – i.e. moving away from cattle and dairy
  - Changes in climate limit the types of crops that can be grown

**QUESTION 4: How should we plan for how you and your family will work in the future, or the future needs of your business?**

**QUESTION 5: What sort of types and sizes of houses do you think will be needed for your community in the future?**

The villages will require well designed, high quality houses that fit in well with the existing feel and character of our communities. There is currently a significant lack of smaller (one to

two bed) properties for affordable purchase or rent, which is preventing young people from remaining in our communities.

We currently see developers focussing on delivering large, expensive houses. While these may be good for the developer's profits, they do nothing to provide the sorts of homes residents need. Indeed, we see many of the larger homes in the new developments going unsold.

Large, soulless estates of identikit houses with little green space are exactly the wrong type of development for the villages.

**QUESTION 6: What do you think makes a good community?**

A good community needs both tangible and intangible assets, and this is particularly true of rural communities. On the intangible side, villages have a unique sense of identity that arises from being part of a small, familiar community.

But a village community also requires strong tangible elements. A good school, access to a medical practice, shared sports and recreation areas and green spaces and reliable transport infrastructure all help to ensure that villages are happy, healthy and self-sustaining.

**QUESTION 7: Do you agree with these? Are there any others which are important to you?**

I agree with all of these considerations. From my point of view as representative of the villages, the most important considerations should be:

- Limiting development on greenfield
- Developing where schools, jobs, transport links and services are available
- Safeguarding sensitive areas and our ecology
- Ensuring development compliments or enhances the character of the villages

**QUESTION 8: We have come to value our local footpaths and green space more since Covid-19. How can we ensure that future residents benefit from access to green spaces?**

This is a particularly important question for residents of the villages, as much of the green space is located in our areas, while development in the villages threatens to put much of this green space at risk.

In my view, there are two areas to consider, how to ensure development does not negatively impact our green space, and how to ensure access to green spaces can be provided in a responsible and sensitive way.

**Development:**

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- Development on or near the AONB – and other areas of ecological importance such as Blagdon Lake - should be avoided where possible in order to protect this unique landscape.
- Where development does take place, there must be an obligation on developers to maintain or improve footpaths, rights of way, bridleways etc to support continued access to the countryside
- Developers should be asked to contribute to the construction of safe cycle routes, to allow people to access the countryside without relying on cars and to promote active travel
- There should be strict requirements on developers to ensure that new builds provide access to a good amount of greenspace, and that developments don't simply cram in as many houses and parking spaces as possible, with no thought given to parks, lawns, trees and other green amenities.

### Access:

- With the recent loosening of the Covid19 lockdown restrictions, we have seen a huge increase in people looking to enjoy our green spaces. While this is positive in the main, the increased visitor numbers has put pressure on the villages and AONB.
- The new local plan should consider how our road and transport network is set up to support and manage increased visitor numbers. Improvements to public transport and active travel could help to reduce the impact of poor parking on villages such as Blagdon.

### QUESTION 9: Should we be thinking about adjusting the Green Belt boundary if necessary?

We should certainly consider the need to adjust the Green Belt boundary. The current approach of prohibiting development close to Bristol simply creates new environmental problems as people are forced to commute longer distances to reach jobs and services in the cities. The current green belt does not prevent sprawl – it simply pushes it further out into the countryside. A review of the Green Belt to permit development closer to Bristol would resolve a number of issues around transport, access to employment and pressure on the North Somerset road network – particularly around the A38.

An adjustment to the Green Belt to better protect areas close to the AONB, such as Blagdon, Churchill, Burrington and Langford would certainly be welcome. This would provide a longer term level of assurance that green field sites would receive protection for speculative applications from developers.

**QUESTION 10: The previous sections set out the six challenges that we feel the Local Plan should address (shown below). Are there any other challenges you feel we need to address through the Local Plan?**

In my view, these 6 challenges are the right ones to be focussing on.

**QUESTION 11: In light of the world we now live in is this vision still appropriate for the future?**

Yes, this vision is still appropriate

**QUESTION 12: Do these reflect your aims, those of your family, community or business?**

The aims set out are worthy and correct. But I would suggest that there should be an additional, overarching aim, which is that the local plan should be developed in an open, transparent and democratic way, so that it is supported and welcomed by the majority of residents.

**QUESTION 13: Have we identified the right priorities and are there any missing, which do you think are the most important and why?**

Priorities 1, 2 and 3 are the most important priorities to ensure sustainable development and are closely interlinked. By ensuring that development takes place in the right place, we can ensure that green spaces are protected, the environmental impact of increased traffic is limited and by being close to jobs and services, people can benefit from active travel opportunities.

Selecting the right locations will also help to ensure that housing is placed where people want to live, while protecting the character of unique villages.

### **Conclusions:**

The Challenges document is heading in the right direction. By going back to the fundamental questions and disposing of the flawed ideas in the old JSP, we have an opportunity to deliver

a new local plan that delivers the right houses in the right places, while ensuring that our vital green spaces and unique villages receive the protection they deserve.

As they consider the next steps, our planning officers, and we as elected councillors, must ensure that the practical proposals that are brought to the table deliver on the priorities set out in this document, in particular ensuring that any new development is:

- Environmentally sustainable and makes a positive impact to tackling the climate emergency
- Is in the right place, and close to jobs, schools, transport links and other services
- Enhances and protects the character of our villages

Given the challenging nature of the decisions ahead, it is vital that all planning decisions are transparent and based on the consent of our residents. The new plans by Central Government to reduce local control over planning may make this difficult, but with a strong plan that has the backing of residents, we will be well placed to push back.