

Full Council 18 April 2024

Agenda item 8

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Question 1

The following question has been received from Linda Borne, Newent, Glos.

Though over 70% of all land in England is classified as "Agricultural Land" not all agricultural land is created equal.

The very small proportion of our land classified by Natural England as "Best and Most Versatile" is a critical resource for fighting climate change and building a sustainable future.

Government guidelines for LPA's on the management of this resource can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-land-assess-proposals-for-development/guide-to-assessing-development-proposals-on-agricultural-land>

This land is important because it is constantly able to produce the highest yield of crops, the widest variety of crops and has the greatest potential to continue to be productive through climate change.

BMV land is generally level or gently sloping land on rich but well drained soils. Often found close to historic market towns, it is as much a part of their heritage as the market square.

The likely and actual locations of this land are recorded by Natural England/Defra here:

<https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/category/5208993007403008>

FoDDC is custodian to only a small area of this vital natural resource: mainly surrounding the town of Newent. Its existence seems to have been largely overlooked by previous administrations.

How will the council recognise the significance and value of this land in emerging strategic and development plans?

Response from Cllr Sid Phelps, Cabinet Member for Planning Policy and Local Plan

The previous FoDDC administration rejected the idea of a New Settlement and so the Council's current agreed Strategy (Oct 2023) looks to expand existing towns and larger settlements, including Newent, which is earmarked for significant expansion (up to around 600 extra homes – LP71).

A 'Sustainability Assessment' (SA) is undertaken for each and every draft Local Plan policy and potential land allocation. The agricultural land classification is just one of the considerations that need to be taken into account as part of the SA. Other considerations include: Ecology, natural constraints such as topography and landscape sensitivities, the character of the area, connectivity, flood risk, economic viability, and "sterile" land, for example Public Forest Estate etc.

The Council does recognise that some proposed strategic allocations include areas of Grade 1 to 3 land (excellent - good soil quality), but when other factors are taken into consideration, we believe the proposed allocations are the least harmful and most sustainable of the possible options.

I trust you and others will make their views known when formal Consultation on the draft Local Plan document commences in June.

Thank you for your question.

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Question 2

The following question has been received from Mr, Jeff Steers, Newent, Glos.

During a period of heavy rains earlier this month raw sewage bubbled up through manhole covers in Newent and ran through the street for several days. Severn Trent have now been trying to remedy this for the last 10 days with traffic lights a large tanker and diggers. The infrastructure was simply unable to cope with the combined flow and weight of rainwater and effluent.

In a response to a recent planning application Severn Trent have stated that their facilities in Newent will be unable to cope with the impacts of more new houses being built until planned upgrades at their facilities have been completed which will likely be 2030 or later.

How will this knowledge impact on policies relating to Newent in the emerging local plan?

Response from Cllr Sid Phelps, Cabinet Member for Planning Policy and Local Plan

For some time, I have been aware of the inadequate sewerage (and possibly treatment) capacity at Newent. As such, I wrote to the CEO of Severn Trent Water (STW) in October 2023. Disappointingly, I didn't receive a reply. However, since then, STW – in their response to the consultation on the major planning application of 375 dwellings in SE Newent - have said:

"I can advise that we have concerns within the area of this development due to the extra foul flow that may create or exacerbate flooding.

Due to this we object to the planning application.

Unfortunately we are unable at this time to confirm when improvement works may be undertaken and this may not be until 2030..."

Whilst the acknowledgment of inadequate capacity is to be welcomed, less reassuring is the commitment to meet the shortfall. The Water Industry Act (WIA) 1991 requires water undertakings to meet demand but unfortunately does not prescribe timescales. STW indicate this is unlikely to happen before the end of this decade and we have not received information on what their plans are for investment here under the Asset Management Period 7.

Nevertheless, the draft Local Plan can take account of Severn Trent's planned upgrades (expected in 2030) and can continue to include a strategic allocation for the development of housing in Newent, with the expectation that it will be delivered in the latter part of the Local Plan period to coincide with the planned upgrades. The allocation will, therefore, still contribute to the FODDC's overall land supply, although it may be stymied until STW meet their obligations under the WIA and provide accordingly.

Thank you for your question.

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Question 3

The question has been received from Mr. Mark James, Newent, Glos.

The current Forest of Dean Local Plan (2012 - 2026) sets out the following strategy for Newent:

"The strategy is to support the town and to increase its range of employment, to widen its service base. At the same time limited new housing will be promoted, in order to provide for local needs without encouraging increased commuting"

What happened? Despite the policy set out, Newent has gained over 1000 new homes during the current plan period - a faster rate of development, relative to the town's size than any of the other Forest towns. At the same time the planned investment in employment and facilities has failed to materialise.

Newent residents could be forgiven for feeling neglected and betrayed by previous F.O.D.D.C. administrations.

Does the new Green administration have plans to get things back on track for Newent, and ensure our future as a sustainable working agricultural market town?

Response from Cllr Sid Phelps, Cabinet Member for Planning Policy and Local Plan

Thank-you for your question. I am sorry that some Newent residents feel neglected and betrayed by the previous administration.

With regards this current administration, after a comprehensive debate at Full Council in October 2023, a Strategy for the development of the new Local Plan was agreed (votes: For, 34; Abstentions, 1; Against, 1).

As part of the agreed strategy and forthcoming draft Local Plan, a strategic allocation is proposed to bring forward a mixed development opportunity for Newent. Newent is therefore currently one of the main centres that the bulk of the housing allocation is assigned to (alongside Beachley barracks and Lydney town.)

There is an argument that increasing housing numbers in Newent could help it become more sustainable; so long as the corresponding social infrastructure (e.g. schools, doctor surgeries etc.) and physical infrastructure (e.g. sewerage & sewage treatment) also takes place, serving both the existing town and the new development. It is also envisaged that new pedestrian and cycle connections throughout and from the development to the town centre and beyond will be created, improving accessibility and active travel opportunities. Opportunities will also exist for previously undeveloped land to be used for recreation, Green Infrastructure, landscaping and biodiversity improvements.

The draft Local Plan will be go out for formal consultation (aka "Regulation 18 consultation") with Forest of Dean district residents in June & July with a planned presentation and drop-in event planned for Newent w/b 8th July. We very much welcome and encourage residents to attend and share their views.

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Thank you for your question.