

UDC Cabinet

30 March 2017 Item 10

By signing the Memorandum of Understanding UDC is in effect endorsing and supporting the figure for housing need. Of course the government plans to introduce a standard method for calculating need but for the moment we have to work with the figures we have.

Throughout the Local Plan process we have been repeatedly assured that the conclusions would be evidence-based. But it is here that the problems start. The evidence offered to support the figures has, at best, been sketchy and, at worst, non-existent.

A colleague, Ken McDonald, and I have been asking the same questions for the last 18 months but no answers have been forthcoming. It seems that no-one within the council understands how the figures have been arrived at.

Some of our concerns related to job growth figures at the airport, the market signals uplift percentage, the high rate of growth for Uttlesford and most importantly the complete lack of audit trail within the reports. There was no transparency.

But recently many of our concerns have been echoed by paid advisors.

A consultant from the Planning Advisory Service has stated that “the method of apportionment between the authorities is not clear” and that he could find “no explanation”. But to understand apportionment it is first necessary to understand how the totals were calculated. He went on to comment that the most significant gap was the lack of evidence on the increased housing need identified in the latest DCLG household projections. A further narrative was essential to explain the final strategy.

Uttlesford’s own QC has stressed that work needed to be strengthened so that it was more explicit as to how the figures were derived.

And the Inspector from the Planning Inspectorate stressed the need for the figures to be defensible when robustly challenged at Examination. He made the point that the Spatial Options Study “didn’t show its workings, not that the conclusions were necessarily right or wrong, but the process wasn’t clear”. You simply couldn’t tell.

It now appears that many of these concerns are possibly being addressed. UDC has acknowledged uncertainty regarding the scale of housing and has asked consultants “to produce a clear explanation for the scale of housing apportionment with a clear and logical explanation of the calculations showing workings”. Meanwhile the four SHMA districts have commissioned AECOM to do a technical update to their report explaining the workings and processes.

So there is work still to be done. But by signing this Memorandum you are effectively endorsing the current figures. I would submit that it is only when all the outstanding questions have been answered that you can be satisfied with such a document.

Michael Young