

Fiona Wilkinson on Behalf of Little Chesterford Parish Council

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I have several questions about the fundamental update that the council is undertaking on the Sustainability Appraisal (the SA) as a result of the AECOM report and legal advice, and also how this relates to other agenda items.

An old programming maxim is GIGO – garbage in, garbage out. If you have bad evidence, you will get bad decisions. The AECOM report has pages and pages of flaws in the evidence that they have uncovered. More generally, they have said that UDC has heavily relied on evidence from promoters. This is not the first or only time that this observation has been made – for example, one of the statutory responders to Regulation 19 said that “ the site selection process seems to be somewhat retrofitting the evidence to justify a decision that has already been taken”. Will the evidence base be reviewed as part of this fundamental update of the SA to ensure it is robust and can be seen to be impartial and objective?

The AECOM report is also very critical of the way that this evidence is then combined and used to make decisions, and so one would expect that changes to this process to be part of the fundamental update. If what’s going into the decision making process has been changed, and the process itself has been changed, I find it very surprising that UDC considers that the probability of a different decision being reached is low. They also say that the probability of being unable to achieve all this by a deadline that just a couple of weeks away is very low. How then can we be confident that this fundamental update is truly objective and robust and does not repeat past mistakes?

Also on today’s agenda, Section 5.7 of the Statement of Community Involvement says that the SA must be published for comment at the same time as the Local Plan. However it appears that consultation on the revised SA will be done separately after the Local Plan is submitted. Can the Council please state how they will ensure that consultation will be timely, open and transparent?

My final question is about applying the lessons from the SA review. It would appear that it will be promoters who will be doing the work to prepare DPDs, and also to pay for the evidence that goes into them. Can the council update this process to ensure that DPDs will not be found to “rely heavily on what was being proposed by the promoters” like the SA has been?

Thank you for considering these questions about how an objectively assessed and transparent local plan can be achieved. I look forward to your responses.