

SCRUTINY COMMISSION – 1 SEPTEMBER 2010

**REQUEST FROM MR. BAILEY CC FOR AN ITEM
ON THE SCRUTINY COMMISSION AGENDA**

HALL FARM, BLABY

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is to respond to a request made by Mr. Bailey for a report to be submitted to the Scrutiny Commission on the proposed sale of land owned by the County Council at Hall Farm Blaby. Mr Bailey requested that the report should address:
 - the possible conflict between the interests of the Council as the landowner and its responsibilities to the local community, and also that the proposal could see the loss of a much loved and valued local green space.
 - the process by which the decision would be made to dispose of the site for housing and what member involvement will take place.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The County Council owns approximately 57 acres of land off Hospital Lane, Blaby. In 2001, Cabinet considered a report on the County Farms Estate Management Strategy and it was decided that the land off Hospital Lane should be retained in order to realise any latent development potential; the farmstead having been sold off some years ago.

Hall Farm Blaby – Background and Current Position

3. As part of the ongoing management of the County Councils property portfolio, part of the land was submitted to the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) of Blaby District Council and has been indirectly promoted at each consultation stage of the local development framework.
4. The Spatial Policies within Blaby District Council's Draft Core Strategy contain the following statements:-

Policy 1 - Locating new development

“Outside the Principal Urban Area (PUA), development will be focussed on Blaby (the Districts only settlement with a town centre and those settlements identified in the hierarchy in Policy 5 which contain a good range of services.....”

Policy 5 – Settlement hierarchy

Blaby was identified as having a housing requirement of 375 dwellings for the period 2006-2026 with paragraph 7.5.6.stating “Blaby has the District’s only town centre which will be the focus for future retail growth. The town has a wide range of services and facilities including schools, shops, employment, and has a good functional relationship with Leicester (including frequent and direct public transport services). Whilst Blaby is a key settlement within the District and should be the focus for future development, the SHLAA indicates that there are only limited opportunities for large scale growth without compromising the green wedge and flood plain to the north, west and south of the settlement. New Growth is expected to be delivered on Greenfield sites, with limited development as part of town centre redevelopments.”

This effectively identified the Hall Farm site as the likely location for new housing.

5. In addition, Blaby District Council had identified that there was a shortfall in the five year supply of housing land within their District. It was considered therefore that the County Councils land could be suitable for development. In order to protect the County Councils interests, preliminary investigations and consultations with the local planning authority were to be undertaken with a view to submitting a planning application.
6. The property was declared surplus at the meeting of the Corporate Property Steering Group on 25 March 2010, planning consultants were appointed and work proceeded in the preparation of a master plan for the site and the preparatory work in addition to addressing all the relevant policy issues included traffic, landscape and ecological assessments together with topographical and ground condition surveys.
7. As part of the ongoing promotion of the site consultations took place both internally with services departments and the policy team and with Blaby District’s planning policy and development control teams to ensure that any scheme maximised potential benefits to the community, achieved wider County Council policy aspirations and delivered a viable development opportunity; the consultations being used to inform the master planning process. These consultations, together with those with the Local Member, took place within the framework set out in the protocol agreed by the Corporate Property

Steering Group which identified the need to engage with appropriate levels of the political structures at each stage of the site promotion process.

8. The master plan was presented to a public meeting on 9 June 2010 and attracted a lot of public interest. Most of the people who attended were very much against the development proposal and approximately 400 people filled in comments forms at the consultation, the vast majority of which were against the proposal.

Current Position on Regional Spatial Strategies and LDFs

9. There has been considerable pressure for housing growth around Leicestershire. Until the change of central government, this was largely driven by the Regional Spatial Strategy which set out the level of housing growth required in each sub region. The policies in the Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) developed or under development by Districts have set out how and where the required housing can be delivered.
10. The position is now more uncertain as the Spatial Strategy has been removed without, as yet, a clear replacement system within which local planning will take place. Guidance and possibly new legislation is awaited.
11. The removal of the planning framework may lead to reduced overall levels of housing provision and reconsideration of some of the SUE proposals. There will, however, be a continuing need to meet housing needs assessed by local planning authorities taking account of available evidence, including the Strategic Housing Market Area Assessment (SHMAA) completed in 2009. Pressure will also continue from developers for new housing on land both inside and outside the proposed SUEs.
12. The removal of the agreed housing numbers within the RSS has given local planning authorities the responsibility of determining the numbers of new homes required to meet their housing needs. But it has not removed the need for them to make this determination to provide the local basis for planning decisions. The figures they adopt will need to be based on robust evidence, as they may be subject to challenge through the planning appeals process.
13. It is likely that new sub-regional arrangements will be needed to provide the strategic policy context previously provided by the RSS (and before that the Structure Plan). Regardless of the arrangements in place it will be important that the County Council's input to sub-regional and district-level planning activity is co-ordinated to ensure that the various interests of the Council and its services are properly represented.

Considerations for the County Council

14. The County Council has a number of different interests which it needs to consider. These include: the priorities and requirements of the Sustainable Community Strategy and Local Area Agreement; the land use planning position, including the Local Development Framework; the financial considerations with regard to its property portfolio and the statutory obligation to obtain the best consideration which is reasonably achievable on disposal of property. These various interests require to be balanced in any proposals.
15. The Leicestershire Sustainable Community Strategy, agreed by all partners in the Leicestershire Together partnership, has a priority outcome for increased housing provision to meet household growth, as well as increasing affordable housing. It also has an outcome that new developments are built to higher design and environmental standards and better supported by services and infrastructure. The proposals for Hall Farm meet these requirements.
16. The land use planning considerations have been dealt with in the section above. The County Council has a responsibility to act in accordance with guidance and the current planning policies of the Blaby District Council as the planning authority. The Hall Farm development meets the requirements of Blaby's draft LDF Core Strategy, which included protection of the green wedge and flood plain around Blaby (referred to in paragraph 4 above), as well as current guidance on meeting local housing need. Blaby DC has agreed to review the assessment of housing required following recent guidance from the government about housing requirements after the demise of the RSS targets.
17. The financial requirements are to ensure that the return on the property portfolio is maximised to contribute to the Council's overall financial position. The sale of surplus property, such as Hall Farm, provides capital receipts which contribute to the funding included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Hall Farm – Next Stages

18. There is continuing uncertainty caused by the demise of Regional Spatial Strategies and the current lack of clarity around the planning system within which local planning decisions are to be taken. Officers also need to consider the feedback from the initial round of consultation meetings. As a result, further work on the master plan for Hall Farm has been suspended.

19. At such time as Blaby District Council has reviewed its future housing needs and targets, the position in relation to the Hall Farm site will be reported to the Cabinet for further consideration.
20. Any decision with regard to the future of the site will involve consultation with local Members in line with established procedures. However, Members should be aware that in the event that development of the site does not proceed a significant potential capital receipt would be lost impacting on the County Council's Capital Programme in future years. It should be noted that during this period there will be a substantial reduction in capital funding from the government and the Capital Programme will be heavily dependent on capital receipts.

Background Papers

None.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

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Equal Opportunities Implications

None.

Environmental Impact

The preliminary investigations required to inform the master planning process have identified areas of potential environmental impact. The future detailed design of the site would provide solutions to mitigate the effects of the scheme.