

Thank you chair.

The best argument in favour of this application is that 40% of this housing will be affordable. But beware. Birmingham council affordable housing target 35% - recently found itself defending the last 3.4% - just 12 dwellings – in one major development.

The new viability loophole offers developers copious wriggle room I'm afraid.

There are many more good reasons to refuse this application.

Three of the strongest planning grounds are first of all the loss of agricultural land as pointed out by Hugh Lufton in his short but very expert paper.

Then there's the transport impact on congested and narrow local roads and I

declare an interest since my son Sami is one of the many Leckhampton schoolchildren who cross them every day. Add to that the bizarre plan to block off Kidnapper's Lane and Farm lane for new and existing residents and encourage rat-running through the brand new estate and you have a recipe for traffic chaos.

Then there's the loss of one of the finest views of the Costwold escarpment from within urban Cheltenham. Planning inspectors Mary Travers in 2003 and David Asher in 2005 both rejected development in Leckhampton, Asher saying that development here would "materially harm the rural character and appearance of the area, and the important contribution that this makes to the landscape within the site and when seen from the AONB."

This Cheltenham local plan explicitly supports the Inspectors' conclusions and protects Leckhampton for its "recreational, landscape,

wildlife and archaeological interest”. Two specific policies apply:

Policy CO1 rules out development where it would harm “the character, distinctiveness, quality and amenity value of the landscape”. CP3 contains an impressive list of sustainability criteria which anticipated those in the NPPF and include biodiversity, landscape character and the views into and out of the AONB.

And in case you’re doubting whether this is still valid, Mike Redman confirmed to me recently that it is. He cited this back garden development in Charlton Kings turned down on appeal last September by a planning inspector quoting the local plan. Undermine it at your peril.

When parliament approved the National Planning Policy Framework in March 2012, we were quite clear we intended to empower local people. The very first core planning principle in the NPPF, paragraph 17, is that

planning should be “genuinely plan-led, empowering local people to shape their surroundings, with succinct local and neighbourhood plans”. Paragraph 155 gives particular weight to neighbourhood plans.

There isn't a yet a Neighbourhood Plan for Leckhampton but there is a concept plan drafted by the body designated in the NPPF, the parish council, which covers the history of 'open' or common meadows and fields in the area, the rich local ecology, agricultural value and more. It seeks protection for the site of this application.

There's obviously another emerging policy – the JCS – which contradicts this but is still a year from completion and out to further consultation right now. NPPF paragraph 216 says councillors *may* take account of emerging policy, giving weight to its degree of preparation but also to the extent to which there are significant unresolved objections.

Boy, are there significant unresolved objections to this part of the JCS. Cheltenham borough council itself has twice qualified its support for the JCS even while voting for it to proceed to the next stage by questioning the inclusion of Leckhampton – most recently in April. Steve Jordan has argued in the steering group for Leckhampton to be removed from the plan which could still happen in whole or in part with even a slight adjustment in the total JCS numbers.

Passing this application against the wishes of local people and the current democratically determined local plan would go against everything parliament intended when we approved the National Planning Policy Framework.

But on 8 April full council also voted to evaluate possible Local Green Space status specifically for Leckhampton and NW Cheltenham which the council recognised as “green areas of particular local significance”.

I'm rather proud of Local Green Space status.

LGS went from my draft into this LibDem policy paper, then into our manifesto, the coalition agreement and finally the NPPF. It sought to close the loophole whereby you could protect green spaces because they contained great crested newts but not because they were important to local people. It called for a new designation "comparable to Site of Special Scientific Interest" or SSSI. It wasn't designed for extensive tracts of land like Green Belt but for smaller areas like Starvehall Farm or Leckhampton. At 56 hectares, incidentally, the whole of the Leckhampton green land is almost exactly the same size as the nearest SSSI at Crickley Hill. We're too late for most of Starvehall Farm because LGS status cannot be given once planning permission is granted but we're not too late for Leckhampton or Swindon Village, unless we start undermining that process before it's even begun.

And let's be clear: LGS status is not for the leftovers after developers have had their pick. It is a protection against development and I have it confirmed in writing by the planning minister that LGS status allows planners to reduce the housing numbers required in plans like the JCS without undermining them if they make a very good case.

I would be quite upset if the Local Green Space policy I drafted and championed and which this council recognised when it voted for Steve Jordan's motion, and which is supported in the kind of emerging Neighbourhood Plan both coalition parties wanted, was pre-empted in Cheltenham of all places.

Please refuse this application.