

# Green light for controversial Wiveliscombe housing scheme

By SUE MITCHINSON

**AN outline application to build 94 homes and light industrial units in Wiveliscombe was conditionally approved this week – despite objections that 200 homes have already been allocated for the town and it goes against the Local Plan and national policy.**

The development will be on just over 16 acres at Sandys Moor, largely on farmland owned by Somerset County Council, CMS Developments Ltd and Wessex Water Services Ltd.

Part of the site is currently designated for employment on the Local Plan.

Objectors at Taunton Deane Borough Council's last-ever planning committee on Wednesday said, among other things, that:

- Wiveliscombe's relevant plans were up to date and the town had already breached its target of up to 200 new homes

- The development would allow a 50 per cent increase in the town's housing allocation numbers outside of the development plan process

- A statement by Somerset County Council that proceeds of the sale would be 'reinvested into financially supporting the delivery of services' was not a planning consideration and should not be a factor in deciding the application

- Sandys Moor should be retained for business use only and not used for housing, which was contrary to the Local Plan

- It was not correct to say residential development would kick start employment generation; there were already new business developments on site and more would be following, and the claim that business-use applications have not been made was untrue

- Extra housing would add to pressures on Wiveliscombe's infrastructure, including schools and doctors' surgery, and increase parking difficulties in the town centre

- The proposal lacked safe footpaths and crossing points to the town

Objectors at the meeting included Cllr Dave Mansell, Taunton Deane Borough Councillor for Wiveliscombe and West Deane and a Wiveliscombe town councillor, Pauline Homeshaw, chairman of Wiveliscombe Civic and Historical Society, and representatives from the town council and others.

Mrs Homeshaw told the Free Press after the meeting: "I am completely disappointed at the planning committee's decision. It

undermines everything the National Planning Policy Framework, and the council's own Development Plan, was set up to do.

"To have rushed through such an important decision after the planning committee had been meeting for five hours on a long agenda, and decide it within 25 minutes, is an insult to Wiveliscombe."

In her address to the committee, she said Wiveliscombe was probably the only town to welcome additional development in Taunton Deane Borough Council's Core Strategy and Site Allocations Plan.

This led to a policy of allowing up to, not more than, 200 new additional homes for the town. Wiveliscombe had already reached this through housing development allocations and other small scale developments, she said.

National planning policy operates a planned system, Taunton Deane's planning policies are up to date, and "on this basis alone, additional housing proposals should be refused, as they have been elsewhere in the Deane, including Wiveliscombe".

She said statements in the proposal that residential development would in effect kick-start employment generation "were incorrect and cannot be used as justification for allowing a 50 per cent increase in the town's housing allocation numbers outside of the development plan process ... since Sandys Moor has already had a range of new employment uses located or in the pipeline."

She also said the site was allocated for employment to help industries from Ford Road to relocate and enable any further housing development for the town to be sited on the Ford Road employment area.

"Loss of Sandys Moor to residential would be premature, inhibit future forward planning of Ford Road, and is contrary to a plan led system which is up to date."

Cllr Mansell told the meeting that Sandys Moor should be retained for business use only and not used for housing, which was contrary to the Local Plan.

"There are recent new business developments on site and more will be following, so the claim that business-use applications have not been made, is not true," he said.

Planning permission has currently been given at Sandys Moor for a new enterprise centre which is due to be built soon, to EPS Saws, who plan to move into the old abattoir, the relocation of a Taunton company, and to Brendon Powerwashers, who are currently building new units to expand.

Cllr Mansell also said extra housing on the site would add to pressures on Wiveliscombe's infrastructure, including schools and doctors' surgery, and would increase parking difficulties in the town centre.

He highlighted that the proposal lacked safe footpaths and crossing points to the town.

A former planner who spoke at the committee said that rarely, in over 30 years' experience, had he seen "such smoke and mirrors ... in an attempt to get a planning application approved."

He said members had not been informed of the true picture and highlighted the omission of several important factors in the report, including that:

- Employment development had taken place at Sandys Moor and more was in an advanced stage

- Residential use was not an acceptable alternative use in employment areas, under the relevant site allocations policy

- Taunton Deane had many examples of inspectors refusing residential uses on non-allocated sites as it could prejudice development of allocated sites, which could well happen in Wiveliscombe

He also said it was stated in the proposal that the housing development would enable access and services to the boundary of the employment land - but if employment use was located at the northern entrance of the site, where the housing was proposed, access and services were already in place.

"We thus come to the crux of the application. Somerset County Council's Cabinet Member Decision Report dated 15 January 2018, which clearly states proceeds of sale are to be 'reinvested into financially supporting the delivery of services', that is, to meet a budgetary shortfall," he said.

"This is definitely not a planning consideration and must not be considered a factor in determining this application, directly or indirectly ... [it] would totally undermine the legitimacy of the planning system and could lead to a challenge."

Tim Burton, assistant director planning and environment for the borough council, told the committee he agreed that the proposal did not comply with policy, but this was a pragmatic application offering to deliver employment use.

The committee meeting lasted over five hours, although the application was the last item on the agenda, and Cllr Danny Wedderkopp told the meeting it had been too long and it was too late to focus, and therefore couldn't do the subject justice.

The application was approved by seven votes to one after a brief discussion.

The report to the committee recommended conditional approval subject to a legal agreement securing the development of industrial buildings and servicing of employment land; a travel plan; children's play provision; and affordable housing.

