

'Yes' to Manydown

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HAMPSHIRE County Council leaders have confirmed their backing for the 200-acre Manydown site west of Basingstoke to be earmarked as a major development area.

After a debate on major development areas, the county Cabinet voted unanimously in favour of the recommendation: "That support be conveyed to Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council for the West of Basingstoke - Manydown - major development area as representing the most appropriate location to meet the strategic development needs of Basingstoke post 2011 and the continuing role of the county council in bringing forward the land and developing communities for the future."

Before the vote was taken, Popley Labour councillor Mrs Jane Frankum, who is also a county councillor for Basingstoke, addressed the Cabinet and particularly its Conservative members.

"I am very confused on this," she told Cabinet members. "I take it that we as a county are working in partnership with Basingstoke and Deane that Manydown would be a place that we would like to have houses in and we would not want outside developers to come in and positively cram them in. We want a place of excellence and I feel this is something we aspire to.

"What I can't understand is that some of your colleagues in Basingstoke are standing up and fighting tooth and nail against this. Clearly they don't understand what we have planned to do. There is an absolutely vehement campaign going on against Manydown. And I am very, very concerned exactly what is going to happen from here."

Among those who have voiced concerns about Manydown are Hatch Warren Conservative councillor Phil Heath, a county councillor and member of the county Cabinet who was not present at this week's meeting.

In response to Cllr Frankum's comments, county council leader Ken Thornber replied: "If the Cabinet supports the recommendation then, so far as the Cabinet is concerned, that is the Cabinet in its entirety - and then members are collectively responsible for it. One of the burdens of the privileged position I hold is that from time to time I cross swords with my colleagues at local level.

"What is clear is that Basingstoke and Deane and the county council have a strategy that was agreed many years ago whereby we could develop a particular area in ways which would enable the local population to have the necessary facilities as well as homes.

"It is always open to any politician to object to anything. But the concept of collective responsibility for a Cabinet decision does apply. We will do our best to persuade the people of Basingstoke and Deane that we have little room to manoeuvre in this."

Cllr Frankum said that the council is concerned to see this site reach its potential for housing for the people of Basingstoke and Hampshire but the message that was being put around was that it had been bought not for housing but for a country park.

Cllr Thornber said: "It was always my understanding that this was bought for residential development. If people are a little confused as to the reasons for the purchase, let us be very clear - it was always for development."

The leader explained that at around the same time there was a piece of land at Hackwood Park, Basingstoke, that was available for purchase as a possible country park - but the local authority had not been able to buy that.

Cllr Thornber warned that if a district council voted out a major development area and thereby did not meet the housing quota for their area, the Government could act directly to reinstate the MDA if that was the only way to reach to target number of houses. He said the total number that had been set for Hampshire up to 2011 was 86,000.

Cabinet member for education Cllr Don Allen who lives in Baughurst, said: "Basingstoke and Deane does have a real problem in terms of housing costs and a problem in terms of many public service workers needing houses.

"The benefits of MDAs as opposed to numbers of small developments are clear.

"The major factor in that decision to buy the Manydown site was that it was clearly seen as a area of potential future

development. I have no question in my mind that we should be supporting the inclusion of Manydown in the next development plan for Basingstoke."

As well as supporting a possible Manydown development, the Cabinet gave its backing to a MDA north of Popley to provide 4,000 houses up to 2011.

County director of environment Alison Quant told the Cabinet: "I have been to north Basingstoke and Manydown. I think it is very impressive what can be done if the local authorities are engaged in the process early enough and in the right way. You do get much better communities and better places for people to live in."

Last week, the county council agreed to pay its half of the cost of acquiring the Manydown land. It was bought in 1995 for £10million - twice the agricultural value - and the county asked Basingstoke to pay for its share until it had the resources. Since then, it has paid interest on its share of the cost.

Also last week, the county voted to put up £5million in advance of the development of North Popley and Manydown so that roads could be laid before any residential building started.

Basingstoke council's Cabinet is set to approve the extension of the Local Plan to 2016, from its present projected time of 1996 to 2011, at its meeting in September. This move follows indications from the Government that plans should have a life of at least 10 years from the time they are adopted.