

Below is the response to the stated grounds for the call-in of the decision of the Executive on the next steps for the LRIE regeneration project from Cllr Ross Mackinnon, representing the LRIE Project Board.

- **Significant concern regarding the Council's project management expertise and capacity to undertake this development**

West Berkshire Council has the required project management expertise to undertake this project through its dedicated project management methodology and its Corporate Programme Office (CPO), which was established in part in response to OSMC recommendations. The CPO compiles and monitors the Corporate Programme of projects being undertaken by the council and the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission has sight of this when they request it. Programme and project management also form part of the council's management and leadership development programme to ensure that these skills are in place across the organisation.

A dedicated project manager has been in place for this specific project for some time and appropriate project management methodology has been carried out and reported to both the CPO and the LRIE Project Board at regular intervals. Given the increased profile of the forthcoming stages in the development, it is now the council's intention to make budgetary provision for additional project management and administration resource to accelerate progress on the project. This will be reflected in the 2021/22 Budget. Additional budget has also been requested as part of this paper to provide an ongoing level of support to the project.

Furthermore, the council as landowner intends to enlist planning specialists with appropriate experience in preparing planning applications for similar types of site to prepare an eventual outline application for LRIE. This will ensure that the application is prepared appropriately and that the development has the best possible chance of success.

- **A lack of confidence in the management structure of the development which fails to place a "Chinese wall" between the Council as landowner and its planning authority**

The London Road Industrial Estate Project Board is chaired by the Executive Director for Resources and is attended by the Executive Member with responsibility for Finance, Property and Economic Development. Formal decisions relating to the site will be taken by the Executive. Any planning applications that follow will be decided by the Western Area Planning Committee. Both decision making bodies operate independently and decisions are made transparently and in public.

It is not unusual for local authority regeneration and major development teams to sit within a Development and Planning Service. Legal advice has confirmed that this is acceptable.

Furthermore, the Executive has full confidence in both the professional integrity of the council's Development and Planning Service which performs an effective quasi-judicial function and in the case officer to progress the council's application on its merits, as would be the case with any other application. The case officer will make a recommendation to the Planning Committee which, in accordance with the Constitution, has responsibility for determining any major planning application submitted by the council as landowner. It is also worth noting that the answer to the first of the concerns outlined has relevance to this point as external planning consultants will be appointed to advise the council as a Landowner and to independently prepare any planning applications.

- **The question of whether a phased approach is the most appropriate rather than waiting for a full environmental assessment of the whole site to be undertaken**

A development brief for this site was sought and was approved by the Executive in November 2020. The work was undertaken by an external consultant, Avison Young, who, following an assessment which included high level environmental analysis, suggested two possible options for the site, one of which was a multi-phased development. On the basis of this assessment, our conclusion is that a multi-phased development is most appropriate given the complexities regarding land ownership and tenancies on the site. Following such an approach will allow sufficient time to negotiate with existing tenants, to minimise disruption on the site and surrounding area and to manage the potential cost of the development.

As part of the consultancy work mentioned above and the preparation of the outline planning application, the requisite technical work for the next stage of the process, including an in depth assessment of the environmental implications of the proposed development, will be undertaken for the entire site. This is in line with the due diligence process any landowner would undertake when proposing a redevelopment of this scale.

- **A lack of clarity of the market for both office space and flats as the longer-term ramifications of the pandemic are not yet understood**

Through the preparation of the planning application, the onus will be on the council as landowner to demonstrate that the proposed development complies with policies in the Local Plan and is of the appropriate type and scale in the context of Newbury and the wider district, not just in the immediate future but in the 10-20 year timeframe over which the development will be delivered.

It is clear that the pandemic will have a significant impact on the district's economy and that it is not yet possible to calculate exactly what this will be. What is also clear from evidence provided by local property industry professionals and from the evidence compiled for the Local Plan Review, however, is that the office stock available in Newbury Town Centre is dated and is not fit for purpose for businesses looking to move to new office accommodation. Given the council's commitment to promoting West Berkshire as a great place to do business, it is vital that this issue is addressed.

It is also the case that independent economic analysis from the Institute for Fiscal Studies recognises the relative resilience of the local economy in West Berkshire and that some degree of confidence in the district's emergence from the pandemic in a strong position can be had. Ensuring that the district has the best possible infrastructure and facilities will improve still further its chances of successful economic recovery and the LRIE development represents a strong investment and vote of confidence in the economic future of West Berkshire, its residents and businesses. The benefit of completing this development on a phased approach is that it allows the council greater time to be more flexible in response to any future changes to the market for various uses as these arise over the coming years.

It remains the intention of this administration to proceed with an ambitious development on this site, which will offer an attractive new gateway into the town and will make much better use of an important strategic town centre site which has been in need of investment for some time.