

Ripon City Plan - New Housing at Ripon's Choir School

So now we know. Harrogate Borough Council's Planning Committee has approved 117 new homes at the former Choir School site at Whitcliffe Lane. The immediate reaction on social media was along the lines of "if Harrogate Borough Council are ignoring the Ripon City Plan now, what chance is there that they'll take it seriously once it's approved?" In lots of ways this frustration is quite understandable, so let's set the matter straight.

The challenge for Harrogate Borough Council is that there aren't currently enough sites across the district with planning permission for the new homes required by government policy. In other words, there isn't a 5-year housing land supply, and it is therefore difficult for the Council to confidently defend refusals of planning applications.

As the City Plan Team, we believe that the report on the application could and should have done better in explaining what the City Plan said about the Choir School site. In response to our consultations, you told us that you value the environment in Ripon, and that building on the whole site (including the playing fields) would have an impact upon views into Ripon from the countryside and especially the World Heritage Site. You supported our approach which suggested that some new housing could be built there, along with converting the school building.

Reportedly, the increase in the number of dwellings from 98 to 117 at the Choir School site was due to Harrogate's requirement for more of the new homes to be smaller houses. We understand that this better meets the district's housing needs, but it is disappointing that the apparent saving in land from the smaller houses hasn't been used to provide proper landscaping and woodland within the site. This would have enhanced the quality of the development and protected those much-valued countryside views into the city.

The Planning Committee report says that "*... a neighbourhood plan cannot promote less growth than the Local Plan ...*" but, within the new emerging Local Plan there isn't a specific Ripon housing growth target, just one for the district as a whole, and this hasn't helped us to develop our approach.

We know that you are prepared to accept more housing in Ripon, and our proposals suggest up to 1,500 new homes on "brownfield" land, with much of this being provided by the Barracks. We believe that this is sufficient growth providing that we have the infrastructure to serve a bigger population.

However, without a housing target we haven't been able to allocate sites for housing, let alone propose how they should be designed. This would have been essential if we needed to allocate greenfield sites and to mitigate their impact on our countryside edge. As it is, the emerging Local Plan is proposing simply to extend the city's edges.

In the end, it will be an independent examiner who will review the City Plan and determine whether our approach is satisfactory. A current consultation by the government about housing proposes a simple formula to calculate a housing target for Neighbourhood Plans. If this were adopted, the City Plan would meet this target.

So, there will be new homes at the choir school site and the families who come to live there will be able to enjoy the many good aspects of living in our city. We will argue that the City Plan, even at

this stage in its preparation, carries weight in the planning process and it deserved and should have had more accurate consideration.

Ultimately, if we are to have planning policies that are truly locally distinctive for Ripon and shape the future of our city, then we all need to remember to vote for them when we come to the referendum.