

WITH an estimated 200 angry residents crammed into a sweltering Desborough Suite at the town hall on Monday for the extraordinary council meeting about the Borough Local Plan (BLP), things were always going to get a bit lively.

The weekend had seen increasingly acrimonious exchanges on social media between councillors supporting the BLP and opponents who say it isn't fit for purpose and want it put on hold to allow meaningful consultation.

Bearing in mind this is Maidenhead, the opponents in question could hardly be labelled rabble-rousers. Respectable and well informed, they were members of parish councils, residents associations and neighbourhood planning groups.

Many of these are traditional 'conservative' voters. And their frustration at having their concerns over the BLP ignored by the council was palpable.

But what followed was a masterclass in how to alienate your electorate. True to type, the ruling group lived up to its reputation for ignoring criticism and bulldozing opposition.

The debate, if it can be described as such, saw a string of Tory councillors pour petrol on



Martin Trepte Putting out the fire... with gasoline

the flames by insisting there had been full consultation and warning of dire consequences if the BLP was voted down.

Opposition councillors, joined by a clutch of Tory rebels, highlighted the holes in both the BLP itself and the ruling group's myopic position. But rational argument and eloquence was met with polemic and arrogance.

And it wasn't just councillors opposed to the BLP in the firing line. A dismayed public found themselves insulted, branded 'a minority' and dismissed as 'them'. Colourful scenes followed, with slow handclaps for councillors who insisted on droning on and on, and jeers for those who childishly threw their toys out of their prams.

The evening, though, belonged to Cllr Claire Stretton. After a succinct and withering critique of the BLP she declared - despite the best efforts of the mayor to drown her out - that she could no longer work under the current leadership and would continue to serve her residents as an

independent. To cheers from the public she picked up her papers and sat with the opposition.

Contrast that courageous stand with the voting that followed in which 33 Tories fell into line. Cllr Stretton had already blown the whistle on claims it was a 'free vote', saying the leader had made it quite clear in an earlier Tory group meeting exactly how members were expected to vote.

And 'vote' is the key word here. As the public filed out there were dark mutterings of long memories and payback at the local elections in 2019.

The BLP has been steamrollered through to its next stage - though opponents say it is so poor it will be rejected when it eventually goes before a planning inspector.

But in winning at all costs, the council has ridden roughshod over the electorate, showing a fundamental disconnect with the very people who put them in power. Fertile ground for planting the seeds of its own destruction.

This is not democracy, this is not due process

EVEN though I am on holiday I felt I had to write to express how appalled I am at the personal attacks, grandstanding, finger-pointing and shouting that took place at the BLP meeting on Monday.

As I have said before, these actions should have no place in a democratic debate among elected members, and the failure of the Conservative hierarchy to stamp out this attitude cannot be ignored.

The fact that an elected member completely ignored an instruction to sit down from the chairman of the meeting, when running over his allotted time, just shows the arrogance and the contempt they have for democratic process.

Due process and listening to the residents is what drives democracy and should not be pushed aside for expediency or to further a particular point of view.

Monday was, in my view, exactly that... an incomplete, and possibly unsound, BLP was voted through on the basis of 'it's not perfect but it will do and if we don't submit then it will be much worse'.

I have asked for the evidence behind 'it will be much worse' but it had not been forthcoming. I have not even seen a list of the changes made since the last 'consultation' ... and the lack of time to consider the evidence from publication of the amended BLP was farcical.

This is not democracy, this is not due process, we are not listening to our very engaged electorate.

This is not the way Local Government should behave, it cannot continue.

Cllr LYNNE JONES
Old Windsor Residents Association
Leader of the Opposition

22/6/17

What is so wrong with 'delay and consult'?

RESIDENTS could not ask questions at the 'extraordinary' meeting on Monday about the Borough Local Plan, even though this debate will shape the town for the next 20 years. The 1,600-strong petitioners were also denied the opportunity to make a short speech. Apparently the more 'extraordinary' the meeting the less the public is allowed to actually say anything. Banning questions, of course, simply had the effect of forcing people to shout out their disgust and do slow handclaps.

Congratulations to Cllr Claire Stretton (Boyn Hill) for showing enormous courage and leadership, by resigning to become an 'independent conservative'.

Cllr Dudley immediately stood up and objected that 'there is no such thing as an Independent Conservative!' but the evidence was all around him.

Cllrs Majeed, Walters, Julian Sharpe, Derek Sharp, Brimacombe and Hollingsworth are indeed independently minded and were rightly not persuaded by a local plan that lacks detail of where roads, schools and hospitals will be built.

Opposition councillors Werner, Beer, and newly elected Wisdom da Costa straightforwardly explained the intellectual holes in the plan too.

None of them were persuaded by the argument that the best way to protect greenbelt is to build almost exclusively on greenbelt over the next 20 years (86 per cent of the land in the plan). These experienced Conservative councillors put the sensible concerns of residents they represent far above mere party politics.

Numerous councillors objected to the email pressure from individual residents and groups like Braywick Action Group, Rushington, Fisheries, Oakley Green and Fifield residents' associations. But this is surely the residents' right - to lobby with a force equal to the damage being proposed?

In fact 27 local groups have now made one simple and fair request in open letters - delay and consult. Delay and consult. What is so wrong with that? It was sensible, democratic, and would have led to a better plan for the benefit of all of us.

22/6/17

ANDREW HILL
Rutland Gate
Maidenhead

Homes have to be built in the right place

ATTENDING the meeting in the Desborough Suite of the Town Hall, on Monday, I heard a number of councillors state that if we do not support the Borough Local Plan to build 14,200 homes over the next 20 years then we are denying our children and grandchildren the opportunity to have a home in the Royal Borough.

It seemed these councillors had been rehearsing their speeches.

The meeting was attended by approximately 200 members of the public but because this was an extraordinary meeting the public were not allowed to speak. This was not democratic because the statements made by many of these councillors were not correct and could not be challenged.

A large number of the public who attended represented parish councils and neighbourhood planning groups who care passionately about future generations and the type of area they will live in.

Although the building of 14,200 homes in the borough is a huge expansion it can be accommodated if the new homes are located correctly. This can be achieved if the council consults with the various planning groups which have considerable knowledge in this area.

For example the council is planning to build 2,000 homes and three schools on Maidenhead Golf Course which is greenbelt land bordering the town centre. This is the size of a large village and will add thousands of cars which will greatly increase congestion and pollution.

A far better solution is to build a satellite village within the Royal Borough and to install a smart transport system into Maidenhead and the railway station. This suggestion was put to a lead planning officer of the council earlier this year and he commented it was a good idea. Furthermore, some development on the golf course would also be acceptable if it left large green open spaces to be enjoyed by the residents but does not cover it with concrete.

GEORGE MIDGLEY
Chairman, Braywick Action Group for
Maidenhead's Green Belt
Walker Road

22/6/17