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POINTS OF VIEW

RECENTLY, Hart District Council announced the preliminary results of its Local Plan Examination.

The good news is that the Inspector found Policy SS3 (supporting the Winchfield New Town) to be unsound.

However, he said the plan can be made sound by removing Policy SS3 and taking some of the overspill from Surrey Heath.

But the detail of the Inspector's findings were quite damning and councillors and officers should take responsibility for the time and money they have wasted.

The council's characterisation of the report as "a couple of issues in relation to the Local Plan" understate the ferocity of the Inspector's criticisms by quite some margin.

His criticisms of Policy SS3 and

the area of search for the new settlement are deep and comprehensive.

He lays out concerns about infrastructure, saying the plans lack substance. He also points out there's a large tract of land in the middle of the Area of Search that is not, and will not be available.

But he reserves his most scathing attack for the Sustainability Appraisal (SA). Even though there were concerns raised about the legal compliance of the document, these don't matter because the document itself was so bad.

Far from being a "couple of issues", these criticisms explode a cruise missile right at the heart of the council's flagship policy.

Substantially all of these points were made by We Heart Hart and Winchfield Parish Council during the

consultation process. So all the issues were known to Hart District Council before submitting the plan for examination, yet they chose to press on with the doomed policy.

In effect, the council has been caught red-handed trying to gerrymander the SA in what looks to us like a clear case of policy-based evidence making.

It is true that the Inspector has left open the door for the new town to return in future. But this is conditional upon the new town being considered properly alongside all other options for long-term growth beyond 2032.

In addition to the hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of pounds already spent, we should also note that in the same council meeting, they agreed to spend £785,990 on the new settlement in the next

financial year. Residents might reflect on the other important services that might be delivered with this money, like free parking in Fleet to boost retail footfall.

In summary, we have a council that has botched its flagship policy, had it found unsound but is proposing to squander even more of our hard-earned council tax on the same failed policy.

So what are the next steps?

The first, and most obvious point, is that we need to get the Local Plan over the line as soon as possible.

This means that the council should abandon Policy SS3 immediately and agree to take Surrey Heath's unmet need. They should reply to the Inspector forthwith, agreeing to his demands and get on with changing the plan to make it sound.

This is necessary to protect Pale Lane and Owens Farm, in Hook, and any other planning appeals that might come along.

But before there is any further review of the plan to identify and evaluate properly the options for long-term growth beyond the plan period, a root and branch reform is required.

In short, the Inspector's report is damning and heads must roll.

It is only after getting rid of Hart's dysfunctional cabinet and the failed planning team that we can start to plan properly for the future with fresh ideas.

This should include a proper assessment of the regeneration of our urban centres as a much more palatable option than unnecessarily concreting over more of our precious green fields.