

Public Meeting 19th January 2022

Thornbury
Residents
Against
Poorly
Planned
Development

The JSP:
How not to plan

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Slide 1: Intro

As we approach a critical phase of the new Local Plan, the Spatial Development Strategy, we look at why the last one went so disastrously wrong with the benefit of the inside story revealed by a Freedom of Information request (which reminds me I need to add one more acronym to Leslie's list - FOI).

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The JSP – How did it end? Was it foreseen?

- The JSP: Took five years to produce, including 3 sets of public consultation, and at an undisclosed cost
- 2019: Inspectors called a halt to the Examination in Public:
 - *“could not foresee themselves being satisfied that it was sound”*
 - Not a strategy – just a list
 - RTPI Commentary *“There is particular criticism of the nature and process of identification of the 12 ‘Strategic Development Locations’ (SDLs)”*
 - Nothing left for the Local Authorities to decide
- SG Planners knew there was a problem...
 - TRAPP'D Freedom of Information request successful – after years of appeal
 - Tells the inside story of a bad plan, doomed to failure

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Slide 2: The JSP: How did it end? Was it foreseen?

The JSP was five years in the making and a gigantic waste of time and public money. Inspectors halted the process midway through the Examination phase, declaring that it would be pointless to continue.

In essence, the problem was that the plan had no strategy; it was just a list of large development locations that the Councils found politically expedient to target. Some commentators referred to it as planning with a bingo dabber! The Royal Town Planning Institute was equally damning in their interpretation of the Inspectors' comments saying that *“There is particular criticism of the nature and process of identification of the 12 ‘Strategic Development Locations [SDLs]”*.

The next question is: were warnings ignored? We could see from the outset that the allocation of houses to South Glos was way too large, and we had been trying to find out for years how this came about, with attempts at an FOI request repeatedly refused and then appealed until finally the Information Commissioner ruled in our favour and forced the Council to comply.

We were then taken by surprise to learn the truth about what the South Glos Planners thought of the plan, and I will share some of that with you tonight.

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What did SG officials think of the sites selected by WECA?

Summer 2016: Officers believed the allocation to SG was unsound and could lead to unsustainable growth in SG:

- Head of Strategic Planning: *Unclear how the emerging locations support the delivery of a clear spatial vision. Also unclear how 15 'places' in SGC has led to 8 locations being identified, but in NS the 12 initial places led to only 3 locations on the final plan*
- Strategic Planning Policy and Specialist Advice Manager: *If SGC continues to take a share based on its previous share, this risks becoming a self-fulfilling cycle: SGC gets bigger and bigger, others grow at a more sustainable pace and don't catch up*

Oct 2016: Plan approved unchanged at SG Policy and Resources Committee

The JSP would have led to SG planning too many houses (again)

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Slide 3: What did SG officials think of the sites selected by WECA?

By the summer of 2016 Council e-mails and briefings show that internal WECA discussions on the allocation of housing to the four Local Authorities were coming to a head, and there was deep concern by South Glos officials from the top down that not only was the proposed allocation unfair, but that the proposed selection of major development sites may not represent an optimal solution and could cause the plan to be rejected by Inspectors.

In June 2016 we see an e-mail from the Head of Strategic Planning and Housing sent to WECA on the instruction of SGC's Chief Exec, no less, stating that *"it is not clear how the emerging locations combine to support the delivery of a clear spatial vision for the next 20 years. It is also not clear to members how an initial search of 15 'places' in SGC has led to 8 locations being identified, but in North Somerset the 12 initial places has led to only 3 locations being proposed on the final plan"*. He elaborated that the plan had to make sense for individual authorities, not just for the region as a whole, stating that *"it does still need to make sense (and be seen as 'fair') when looked at on an individual UA basis"*.

Then in August 2016 the Strategic Planning Policy and Specialist Advice Manager pointed out the unfairness that SG was being asked to plan for 30% of the region's total housing when its need was only 25%. He undermines his own argument later given to Members and external bodies that the share given to South Glos is justified by being close to the recent historical average by rightly complaining that *"If SGC continues to take a share based on its previous share, this risks becoming a self-fulfilling cycle: SGC gets bigger and bigger, others grow at a more sustainable pace and don't catch up"*.

Even though senior officials were united in their concerns about the unfairness of the allocation and the risk this posed at the Examination stage, the plan was approved by South Glos Council at the Policy and Resources Committee on 5th October 2016, with nothing recorded about the concerns of Officers. The question is by whom and for what reason were Officers concerns suppressed, and was it a breach of code of conduct to withhold this information from the committee which approved this plan?

The answer is 'watch this space', as this question is the subject of a further ongoing FOI request.

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What about the over-reliance on big sites – was this problem foreseen?

- Steve Evans (Dir. Environment & Communities – ret'd): 3rd July 2015 “*Already struggling to deliver on housing targets: future package...needs to be less dependent on big sites*”
- JSP outcome: SGC “big sites” (greenfield Strategic Development Locations) = 59% of unapproved housing

Overplanning of housing and reliance on large sites is a deadly combination that would have led to failure of the five-year housing supply test

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Slide 4: What about the over-reliance on big sites – was this problem foreseen?

What about the over-reliance on big sites – was this problem foreseen? The short answer is an emphatic YES.

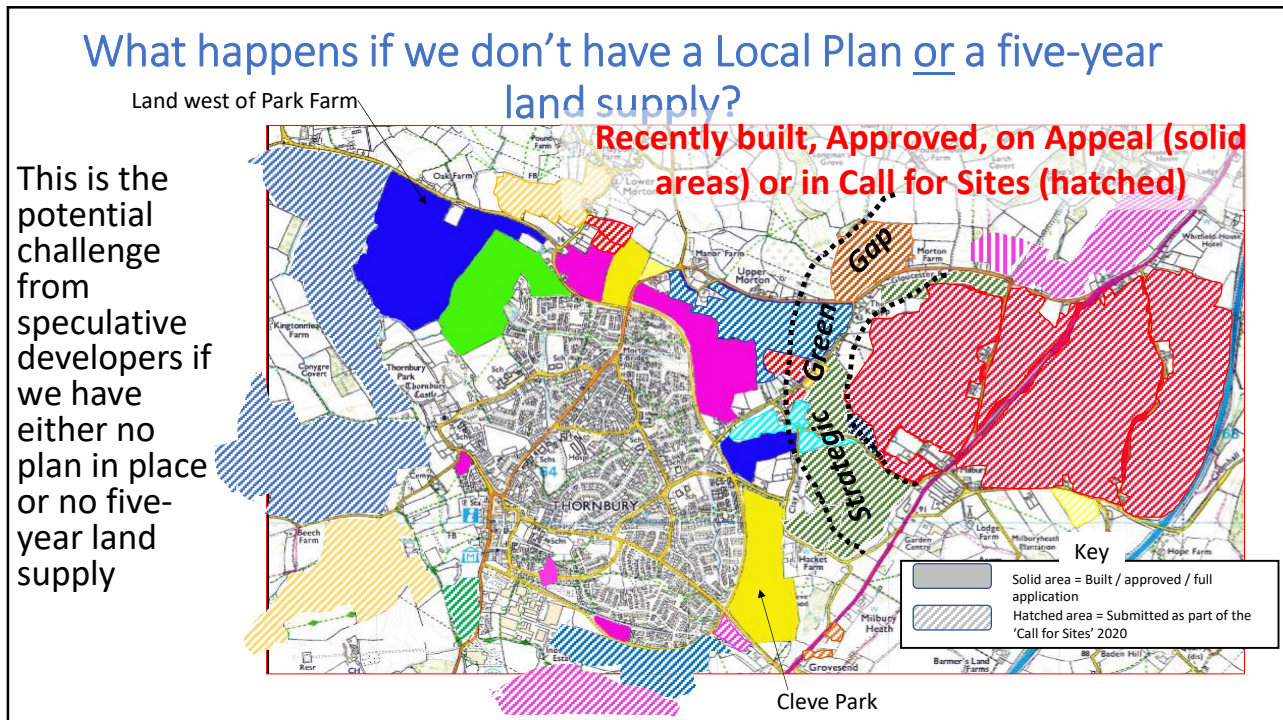
In July 2015 the Director, Environment & Communities, Steve Evans (now retired), was setting the expectations to his team for the new plan. He said the Council was “*already struggling to deliver on annual housing targets: future package of sites needs to be more balanced and less dependent on big sites*”. In other words, South Glos was failing on its five-year land supply test because that test was based on a plan that was over-reliant on big sites which are notorious for overly optimistic estimates of delivery rates.

Unfortunately, this warning went unheeded and the JSP in South Glos went on to propose a whopping 59% of its unapproved housing from large Strategic Development Locations or SDLs!

So, by the Autumn of 2016 – South Glos had approved a plan which Officers said would unfairly overcommit the Authority to a target of too many houses, based on a recklessly high proportion of big sites. This is a lethal combination that would have led to a long-term failure on the five-year land supply test.

Let us turn now to what that would have meant for Thornbury.

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Slide 5: What happens if we don't have a Local Plan or a five-year Land Supply?

The map shows in solid colours sites either recently built, in progress, approved or on appeal. The hatched areas show all those sites for which landowners have submitted applications as part of the 'Call for Sites'. A word of caution about this; a submission in the Call for Sites is an indication of landowner's willingness for their plot to be considered – it does not mean that it will be accepted or supported by the Council.

That said, let me draw your attention to some specific sites. At the bottom right in yellow we have Cleve Park. This is the one we lost on appeal because, at that time, South Glos was unable to demonstrate a five-year land supply which, in turn, was because the previous plan was overly reliant on big sites that failed to deliver as expected.

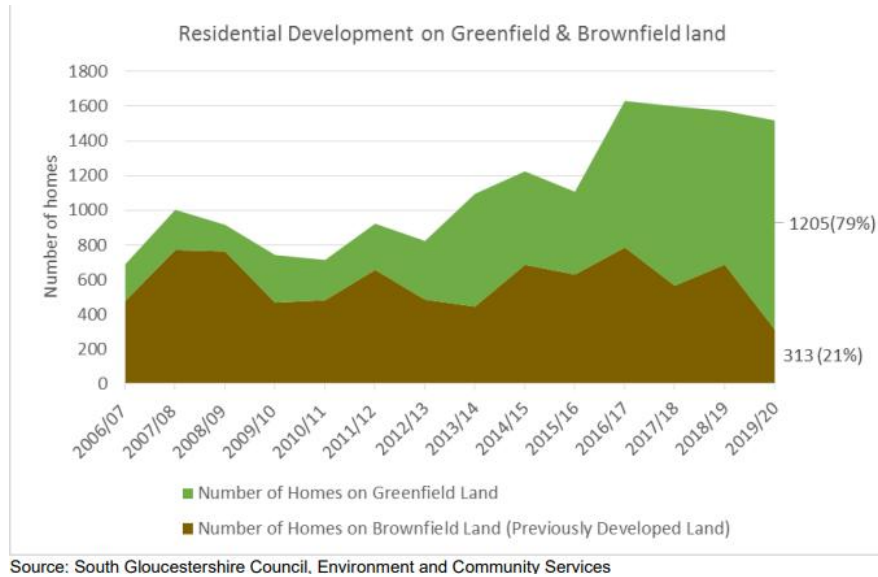
At the top in blue, we have 'land west of Park Farm'. You may also be aware that this includes land that the former Council Leader, Cllr Riddle, has declared a financial interest in. This site will now go to appeal on 29th March, at which Savills will try to disprove the Council's calculation of the five-year supply by pointing out the poor track record of the big sites in delivering their housing target. Furthermore, they claim that the debacle of the JSP means that the old Core Strategy is now "out of date" so that its restrictions on building locations can be ignored.

Had the JSP been approved, not only would Buckover have been given the green light, but we would almost certainly be facing the prospect of being unable to demonstrate a 5-year land supply, so that the protection from the much-vaunted strategic green gap to the west of Buckover would have disappeared, and potentially all of the land adjoining Buckover would have been allowed.

The lesson here is that we do need a plan in place, but we also need it to be robust – which means not over-promising the totals or being overly reliant on big sites – and of course it's no good if the cure is just as bad as the illness.

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Are we over-reliant on greenfield development?



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Slide 6: Are we overly reliant on greenfield development?

This chart, taken from the Council's latest AMR, shows a sickening recent trend away from brownfield development towards greenfield, but the key question is whether the plan attempted to do anything about it.

To answer this question for the JSP we looked at the process for arriving at what the JSP referred to as "Urban Living" using information from our FOI.

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Was Urban Living taken seriously in the JSP?

The official JSP position:

- *“Ensure all opportunities to maximise brownfield land before new greenfield development locations are required”*

The reality in South Glos:

- *Urban Living was **balancing assumption** to maintain commitment to negotiated overall target*
 - Urban Living flexed between 1,000 and 3,900 in successive drafts in response to varying estimates for Strategic Sites
 - E.g. Cabinet briefing June '17: *“SGC targets for...Urban Living have been revised to add several hundred whilst strategic sites at Yate/Sodbury and Buckover have been reduced by a few hundred each”*

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Slide 7: Was Urban Living taken seriously in the JSP?

The official line in the JSP is to *“ensure that all opportunities to maximise brownfield land before new greenfield development locations are required”*.

The truth, however, is that these were just words for the benefit of the Inspectors, and the reality, in South Glos at least, was that Urban Living was treated as a balancing figure to maintain the commitment to the overall total.

In the final version of the JSP Urban Living was set at 2,900 units. However, we now know that in successive drafts this figure swung wildly between 1,000 and 3,900 units to counteract changing estimates for the combined total of the major sites. A good example is found in Cabinet briefing papers of 14th June 2017 which state that *“SGC targets for Urban Living have been revised to add several hundred whilst strategic sites at Yate/Sodbury and Buckover have been reduced by a few hundred each”*.

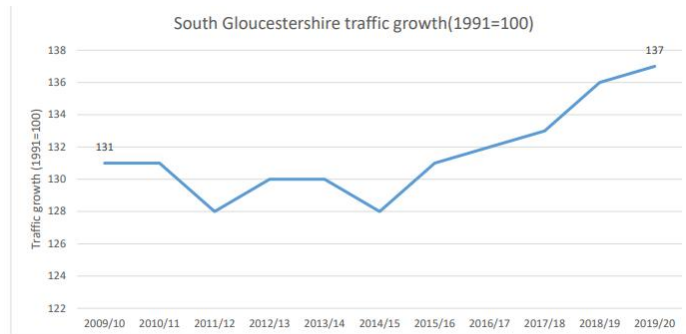
In the new plan, we believe that it will be vital to **genuinely** put brownfield development first in an innovative and ambitious manner. We think South Glos should expressly set an ambitious target in the New Local Plan to change the direction of the greenfield / brownfield mix.

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Did the JSP attempt to tackle the growth in car usage?

CO2 Impact

- Traffic CO2 continues to grow exponentially in SG
- In 2005 it accounted for 19.8% of CO2 but by 2018 this had **grown to 34%**
- The JSP did not attempt to tackle the quantum of car usage – **it did the opposite:**
 - Promoting car-based greenfield satellites
 - Justified by planned road investment at pinch points



Source: South Gloucestershire Council, Environment and Community Services (2019/20 data is provisional)

If this trend is not addressed South Glos will be guaranteed to fail its obligation on carbon neutrality

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Slide 8: Did the JSP attempt to tackle the growth in private car usage?

Turning now to private car usage, the chart on the right shows a steady growth in car usage from 2014.

In parallel we see gradual improvements in carbon emissions from both household and industrial sources, resulting in an exponential growth of the *proportion* of CO2 from private car usage. In 2005 it accounted for less than a fifth of the total emissions but in just 13 years it had grown to more than a third of the total.

The crucial question is, did the JSP attempt to tackle this problem? The answer is 'no'; it did the opposite, by promoting car based greenfield satellite development such as Thornbury, Buckover and Charfield, which it then tried to justify by promising fantasy money to tackle road pinch points.

By failing to address the problem of private car growth, the Council will fail miserably to meet its obligation for carbon neutrality.

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What else did the FOI tell us about Buckover and Thornbury?

- July 2016: Internal presentation by Cllr Riddle outlines the disadvantages of each potentially SDL:
 - Re Thornbury:
 - *Key congestion issue at A38 / M5 Junction 14*
 - *Perpetuates further piecemeal easterly expansion, further distorting the settlement*
 - Re Buckover:
 - *Car based development, reliant on A38*

- Final WECA 'master' spreadsheet list of SDLs comments on Buckover that it is "*unclear whether this is a form of Thornbury expansion or a freestanding settlement. Should consider Buckover alongside Thornbury as part of local expansion*"

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Slide 9: What else did the FOI tell us about Buckover and Thornbury?

That takes us to the question about what else the FOI told us about the Council's concerns over development options for Buckover and Thornbury, in which it shouldn't surprise us that the transport issue features strongly.

In July 2016 Cllr Riddle made an internal presentation about the pros and cons for each potential development location. In relation to Thornbury, he noted key congestion areas on the A38 and Junction 14 of the M5, and that as a Strategic Development Location it "*perpetuates further easterly expansion, further distorting the settlement*". Those with a cynical disposition might observe that he doesn't mention the northerly expansion!

Regarding Buckover the prominent downside noted is that it is a "*car-based development, reliant on the A38*".

We can also reveal that WECA's 'master' spreadsheet which includes comments on all the potential development sites within the region states of Buckover that it is "*unclear whether this is a form of Thornbury expansion or a freestanding settlement. Should consider Buckover alongside Thornbury as part of local expansion*".

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What else has changed since the JSP was produced?

1. Govt. formula for housing need now includes extra 35% for inner city development
2. North Somerset dropped out & propose no contribution to Bristol's unmet need
3. Legal commitment to carbon neutrality by 2030
4. Thornbury has already had its 500 houses proposed in the JSP approved as speculative developments

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Slide 10: What else has changed since the JSP was produced?

Before we come to recommendations for the next version of the plan, the SDS, we need to remind ourselves about some important things that have changed since the JSP was produced.

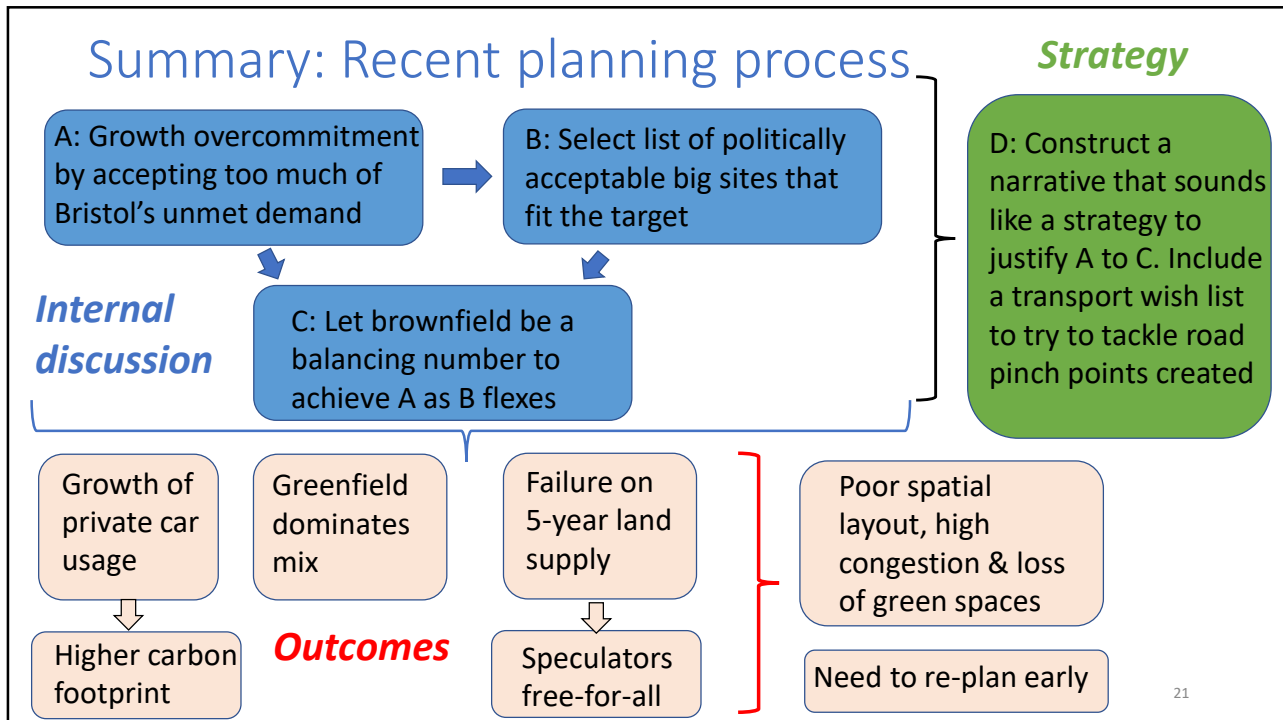
You know about the first two changes already from Leslie's presentation.

The additional point I want to make about this is that the separation of North Somerset provides a clear test case for what life looks like outside of WECA. North Somerset will operate under the same "duty to cooperate" requirement as South Glos. Let us be clear on this point; the Leader of South Glos Council has a veto over any WECA proposals and thereby has a means to demand no more housing target allocated to our Authority than he thinks fair. Ultimately, South Glos could choose to walk away from WECA if the alternative would be to export an unjustified amount of Bristol's unmet need.

The third major change is the response to Climate Change which includes a legal commitment to carbon neutrality for all the region's Local Authorities by 2030. In our view the new Local Plan should expressly measure the transport carbon footprint of each significant development location in a manner that can be properly tested during the Examination in Public.

Finally, we would point out that the entire 500 houses proposed to be imposed on Thornbury during the JSP – and don't forget this was supposed to take us up to 2036 – have now **already** been approved as speculative developments.

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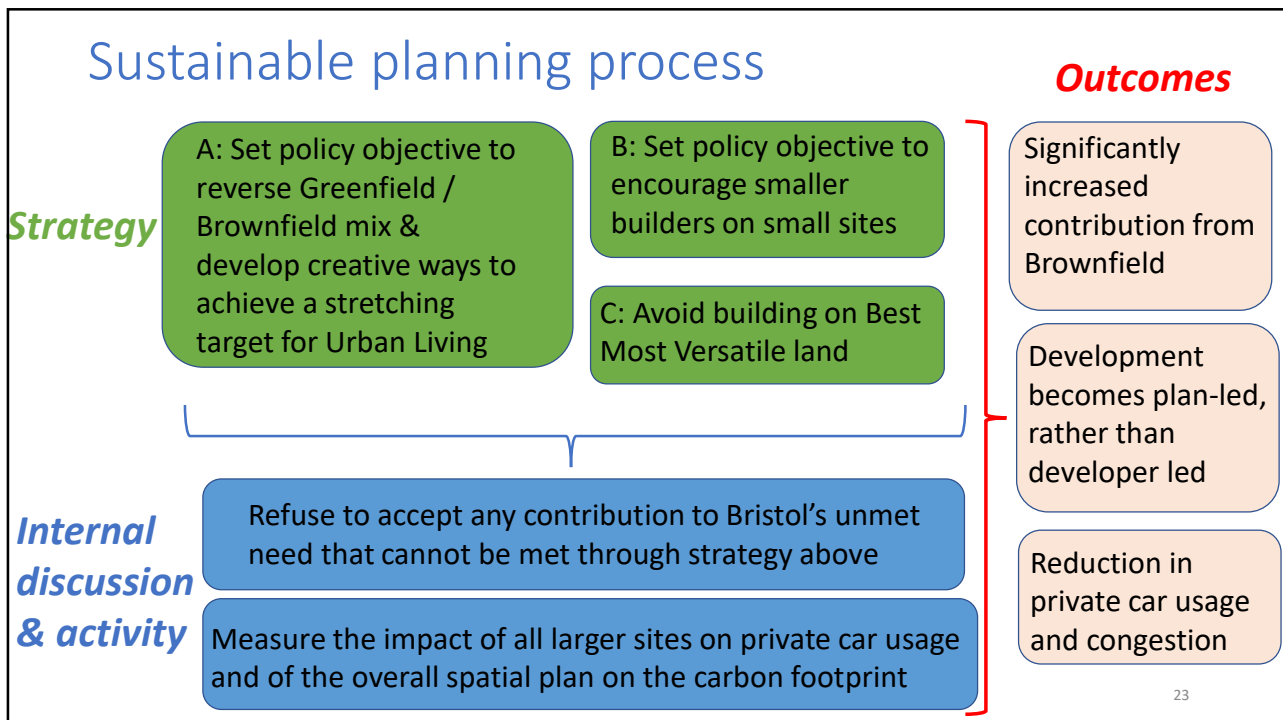
Slide 11: Summary: Recent Planning model

Let me draw this together by summarising how the recent planning process has operated in South Glos. It starts with the bits in blue that you and I don't normally see, unless we have been successful in our Freedom of Information appeals. They are the internal debates and negotiations on how many houses are targeted – i.e. how much of Bristol's unmet need are we prepared to accept – linked to the question of which locations are politically acceptable as Strategic Development Locations to largely satisfy this target. As we have seen in our FOI, these questions were decided on our behalf by WECA officials in the JSP. Then comes an afterthought to say that Urban Living is a balancing number to maintain the overall target as the quantum from SDLs flexes.

The next stage of the process I have loosely called 'strategy', but in reality is the construction of a narrative to justify the conclusions already reached, including a fantasy wish list of funding to mitigate the road transport pinch points created by the SDLs. This is the visible bit of the process and is a huge exercise involving consultant's studies and thousands of pages of charts, tables and arguments, produced at an undisclosed cost, none of which has any decision-making value. You don't have to take my word for it that the plan had no strategy, you can read about it in the Inspector's conclusions, or the RTP1's summary of the debacle.

The outcomes shown in red should then come as no surprise. An accelerated growth in private car usage leading to an increased carbon footprint, with greenfield development dominating the mix, followed later by an inevitable failure to demonstrate a five-year land supply caused by the deadly combination of an over-ambitious target facilitated by big developments, allowing a speculators free-for-all. The upshot is the disappearance of our green spaces to car-based settlements that distort the shape of our towns, with no pre-planned infrastructure and growing congestion. This in turn leads to the decision to re-start the process all over again before the plan is a quarter of the way through its intended shelf life.

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Slide 12: Sustainable planning process

What, then, would a sustainable process look like?

It would start from a strategy built around two key principles; first to fulfil a policy objective to reverse the trend that has seen greenfield development dominate the mix by thinking about creative ways to achieve a stretching target for urban living. Second, to set policy objectives to encourage smaller builders on smaller sites that will broaden the base of developers and thereby spread the delivery risk. These two foundation policies could be supported by secondary good practice objectives, such as avoiding building on farmland officially designated as Best Most Versatile land.

To use our own senior planner's phrase, we must then break the cycle whereby South Glos grows bigger and bigger whilst others grow more sustainably and never catch up. This means never again allowing South Glos to be WECA's useful idiot; refusing to accept any contribution to Bristol's unmet need that cannot be satisfied by the above strategy. Leslie's presentation showed that South Glos's need can comfortably be met through a combination of urban living and small developments – this is what we should be aiming to do.

Finally, even though we don't think it will be necessary to resort to the failed model of pursuing large-scale developments, we would urge the Council to insist that if it *should* propose big sites it must explicitly measure the impact of any such proposals on private car usage in a manner that can be rigorously tested, and also of the overall spatial transport impact on the target for carbon neutrality by 2030.

We believe that pursuing this model will lead to a sustainable development process that meets the Government's planning objective of putting brownfield development first whilst making a serious attempt to tackle the problem of growth of private car use. Such a sustainable process would give a high degree of certainty of being able to maintain a five-year land supply, and thereby make development plan led, supported by appropriate infrastructure.

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What happens next?

- Draft SDS is planned to be published Spring 2022
- Will be followed by a 12 week consultation period
- Before being submitted to Examination in Public

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Slide 13: What happens next?

We understand that the Spatial Development Strategy will be published in draft form for consultation in the Spring, which means that right now we are in the equivalent of the Summer of 2016 for the JSP when all the key decisions were being cemented.

Once the draft is published it will not change, no matter what feedback comes from the consultation, unless the Inspectors force a change.

NOW is therefore the last moment that we have as residents to try to influence the Council Leadership to produce a better spatial strategy; one that meets the need for housing in South Glos in a manner that safeguards as much of our precious greenfield land as possible, not a developer led plan that panders to the planner's craving for mega development and an easy solution to the problem of how to cater for massive unmet need for the inner city homes.

Following publication there will be a statutory 12-week consultation period. For the authors of the SDS the consultation is a necessary hurdle to jump; they are not interested in your views or mine. However, data must be gathered about the nature of comments, and all comments are potentially available to the Inspectors during the Examination in Public, so if there is anything in the draft SDS that you do not agree with then please get involved and make your voice heard.

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