

Education funding for Oxford North



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A conflict between City and County councils is brewing, over education funding for the Oxford North development. This emerged yesterday (8 December), in an answer given by the Leader of Oxfordshire County Council (Cllr Ian Hudspeth) to a question put by local County Councillor Paul Buckley, at a meeting of the County Council.

Oxford North (ON) is a huge development including 480 homes planned for the Wolvercote ward on the northern edge of the city. At the Planning Committee last year when planning permission was granted subject to agreements being reached, it was known that about £2.8m would be required to provide the necessary school places. The County Council made clear then that they would object to the development going ahead unless this funding was secured. This remains their position, but the City Council “has resolved otherwise” said Cllr Hudspeth.

It seems Oxford City Council has been persuaded that the Oxford North development would not be ‘viable’ (i.e. yield sufficient profit to satisfy the developer TWO) if the payments normally made by a developer to support educational provision for a development of this size were required as a planning condition in this case. The County Council understands that planning permission will be granted shortly by the City, despite its opposition and in the absence of any guaranteed funding of school places.

The County and City Councillors for Wolvercote (Cllrs Paul Buckley, Liz Wade and Steve Goddard) are objecting strongly. Cllr Paul Buckley said “If the City Council go ahead and grant planning permission without first securing funding for school places, it will amount to irresponsible and indeed reckless behaviour by the City Council”.

Local schools, especially Wolvercote Primary School, could be left with inadequate space to accommodate the extra pupils, and the County Council could be unable to fulfil its duty to ensure sufficient school places.

A particular concern of the councillors is that City Council officers have suggested the problem could be solved by taking money away from a different pot of funding, intended to fund community projects in the ward, to mitigate the consequences for locals of a large new development such as this. From next May, the Wolvercote Neighbourhood Forum (WNF) is expecting to oversee this funding pot, in consultation with other residents. The school funding required is so large that, if it were all taken from this funding pot, WNF would be left with essentially nothing for community projects.

Cllr Liz Wade said, “Our residents will have to bear the brunt of the Oxford North development – thousands of new jobs and commuters, nearly 500 new households, increased traffic and car parking in our ward. It would be outrageous if the WNF funds were raided to solve the viability problem”.

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Christopher Hardman, Chair of Wolvercote Neighbourhood Forum, subsequently added: “This is the first we have heard of it. No-one from the City Council has even had the courtesy to mention to WNF a proposal that could mean that virtually all our funding for community projects in the ward would be lost, to satisfy ‘viability’ of the ON development. We shall be objecting in the strongest terms”.