

WHITCHURCH NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

VISION SESSION MONDAY 25 NOVEMBER 2019

DRAFT REPORT OF SESSION & ACTION PLAN

1. Introduction & Purpose

Whitchurch Parish Council (WPC) has formed a Steering Group (SG) of councillors and members of the local community to prepare its first Whitchurch Neighbourhood Plan (WNP). A session was held with the SG on 25 November 2019 to review the project context and to discuss its potential scope and focus. The session was facilitated by Neil Homer, of ONeill Homer (OH), the independent planning consultancy appointed by WPC to help the SG complete the project.

The purpose of this paper is to summarise the discussion at the session and to set out a series of recommendations to the SG for how the project should progress, having reflected on that discussion. Once the paper is agreed by the SG it will form the brief for the next stage of the project, once the WNP area is designated, and will later be published as part of the evidence base.

2. Policy Context

- AVDC's current housing supply is above 5 years, but this is regularly challenged by speculative housing applications aiming to prove that this is no longer the case
- Its emerging Local Plan (VALP) is at examination and AVDC has recently published the Main Modifications (MM) it proposes to make to the plan to address the issues raised during the examination so that it can be adopted before the new Bucks Council (BC) replaces AVDC in April 2020
- The MM to Policy D2 of VALP shows that the village housing requirement of 82 homes will be met by 60 homes that are built/committed and 22 homes allocated at Newman Close and therefore the indicative housing target is effectively zero
- Neighbourhood Plan policies once made will carry the same weight as VALP policies
- The new BC has to have a new Local Plan in place by 2024 so will need to start work on it before the end of 2020 – it seems inevitable in such a large and diverse county that it will need to encourage neighbourhood planning to handle non-strategic policy so it can stick to a smaller number of strategic policies (i.e. unlike VALP which includes small site allocations)
- There are other strategic initiatives that may influence how that new plan takes shape in this part of the county, e.g. the Oxford Cambridge Corridor and expressway

3. Key Points Discussed

- It was observed that the village population, which declined between 1961 and 2001 but which has since returned to its earlier size of approx. 900, is aging as indicated by the lower % of pupils from the village attending its primary school (estimated now about half; the school serves surrounding smaller villages with no schools)

- It was agreed that this was primarily a result of the increasing unaffordability of most of the housing stock (approx. 450 homes) and the lack of availability of scarce, lower cost, smaller homes, which tend to be purchased by local downsizers, and so there is very little churn in the housing stock
- The Bushmead Road scheme (on site) will deliver a mix of new homes, as will the Newman Close scheme, itself an addition to the original Rural Exception Site scheme – these proposals have not been popular
- More controversial have been proposals south of Oving Road, where a 10 home scheme was approved on appeal in 2018 but on a site ('Barrattstown') where earlier applications for larger schemes had been refused or withdrawn – it was noted that the consented scheme allows for a future access through the site to the remaining land to its south; an application for 7 homes on land to the immediate west of that site has yet to be determined
- It was agreed that traffic through the village had grown significantly in recent years on the north-south A413 between Buckingham/Winslow and Aylesbury especially but also on the east-west Oving Road and Bushmead Road (as a 'rat run from the A41 at Waddesdon towards Leighton Buzzard and MK) – there was a traffic survey undertaken in 2017 to support the proposal for a new zebra crossing on High Street – the commuting pattern of villagers is not yet known but data can be collected in due course
- It was noted that AVDC has a S106 pot of approx. £100k collected from recent schemes but is restricting its use to leisure-related schemes and not traffic management measures (as it will only have secured S106 contributions for that purpose and no other – the WNP can change this with its policies)
- It was agreed that the village continues to benefit from a critical mass of local shops (petrol station, farm shop) and services (school, health centre, hairdressers etc) – the White Swan P.H. has been registered as an Asset of Community Value by AVDC – with some businesses (car repairs, business units etc) and many home-based businesses, although some have been lost in recent years as per national trends
- It was agreed that, traffic apart, the village had retained its special historic character and retained the quality of its surrounding landscape quality (an 'Area of Attractive Landscape' on all sides)
- Three different but plausible scenarios of the future (to 2050) were examined to identify the most likely consequences: Little Change; On Trend Change; and Ox-MK-Cam Effect
- Little Change (assumes minor infill within established boundary only) – retains essential character; population stays level or potentially declines; little effect on viability of remaining services but greater reliance of primary school on surrounding area to maintain pupil numbers; older, affluent demographic with low churn in housing stock; surgery remains well-located in wider area so not likely to be lost; significant traffic growth through village anyway given growth plans at Aylesbury, Winslow and Buckingham, with further decline in quality of life for those living on High Street/Oving Road
- On Trend Change (assumes 30% housing stock increase over 30 years – approx. 150 homes (5 per year) - using one or more greenfield sites) – village character will change but not necessarily problematic (as with past growth eras like Ashgrove Gardens) if well-located; population increase with more younger people/families if

emphasis on smaller, lower cost family homes; possible small allocation of land for community-led housing scheme (e.g. proper affordable, self-build); more ability for established locals to downsize; % of village children using school increases as catchment area decreases (with potential issues for other villages with no schools); surgery has capacity to manage this level of growth; potential increase in demand for larger/new village convenience shop; use of S106/S278 financial contributions from developments to finance package of traffic management measures on High Street/Oving Road to mitigate external traffic growth effects; potential increase in demand for more business units (like Manor Farm)

- Ox-MK-Cam Effect (assumes 60% housing stock increase over 30 years – approx. 300 homes (10 per year) - using one or more greenfield sites) – village character will change more significantly; more difficult to absorb development around edges without changing appearance and heritage; population increase with more younger people/families if emphasis on smaller, lower cost family homes; likely larger allocation of land for community-led housing scheme (e.g. proper affordable, self-build); more ability for established locals to downsize; % of village children using school increases as catchment area decreases (with likely issues for other villages with no schools) and possible need for school to increase to 1.5FE (i.e. 45 pupil intake); surgery still has capacity to manage this level of growth; likely demand for larger/new village convenience shop(s); use of S106/S278 financial contributions from developments to finance wider package of traffic management measures on High Street/Oving Road and investment in improved public transport services to mitigate external traffic growth effects; likely increase in demand for more business units (like Manor Farm); likely need to upgrade/replace village hall with larger multi-functional space
- It was noted that this exercise is not intended to either predict which scenario will happen, or to judge which scenario is ‘best’, but rather to enable the WNP to plan for these eventualities and to understand the points at which future actions may need to change
- We noted the SG desire to designate a WNP boundary that includes small areas of neighbouring Hardwick and Oving parishes to reflect their strong functional relationship with the main village and to enable those living in the areas to be able to vote on the WNP in due course; we also noted that if just the WPC area is designated, the WNP examiner has the right to require the extension of the voting franchise to other voters outside the Parish
- We observed that the designation process may therefore take some time to conclude, as AVDC is obliged to consult on the proposed boundary and WPC may itself want to seek the informal views of its parish council neighbours before it submits its designation application to AVDC

4. Reflections

- The village sustains a mix of public and local services expected of a ‘large village’
- Its scale of growth over the last 20 years has been less than many other large and medium villages in AVDC area
- It is possible that the scape of its environmental constraints (heritage, landscape) may continue to dissuade new BC to seek ‘on trend’ growth over next 30 years,

hence it is one of the three scenarios, but it is increasingly unlikely and entirely dependent on BC maintaining the full weight of the restrictive planning policies it would need to serve this purpose – the consented Oving Road scheme is a signal that further, small increments are likely either with or without an up to date Local Plan (though a made NP can make a difference)

- The community survey has shown general likes and dislikes, with no surprises, but was not intended to inform a debate about planning for these scenarios
- The last HELAA of 2017 indicated that relatively little land had been made available by landowners, perhaps a reflection on perceived constraints
- Plan-led housing growth may create the first opportunity for many years to invest in managing traffic within the village which appears to be the single most important problem to tackle, especially as this will become worse with planned growth to the north and south of the village to 2050 – it seems unlikely that public funding will be available for this purpose, though BC has argued that its unitary status will enable it to better co-ordinate planning and transport functions
- Such growth (of the first or second scenarios, or somewhere in between), if properly planned for and controlled by the WNP, can also address the demographic trends and create opportunities for community-led schemes to meet local needs
- For the local community to see growth as a good thing, in the light of recent experiences with unplanned development, the WNP would have to set out a compelling vision and interlinked range of deliverable, planning policies (site allocations and development management types) – essentially, the benefits must be clear, desired and as guaranteed as the planning system can deliver
- The landscape character, heritage assets, topography and legacy of the pattern of past development mean that there are likely to be relatively few feasible spatial options to deliver sustainable growth
- However, it is not yet possible to agree or assess those options as the SG first needs to be clear about a) the precise nature of the constraints and b) its ideal specification for what positive changes it anticipates the community would want growth to bring about – once it knows this, the spatial options can be defined before being agreed as options with the key stakeholders – land interests, BC etc – before being put to the community to gauge its opinions and tested via a Sustainability Appraisal (SA/SEA)
- Once a preferred spatial option is agreed by the SG then the plan period can be agreed and available development sites selected (i.e. those that form part of the preferred spatial option) and the WNP policies can be drafted for inclusion in its formal draft version, ensuring that they are integrated and complementary as necessary to ensure they are properly applied when planning applications are considered after the WNP is made
- It is possible that land in the vicinity of those areas that WPC wishes to include in the WNP boundary may form part of one or more of the spatial options; in which case, it seems best to seek a WNP area designation that includes those areas, even though this may add at least three months to the process.

5. Taking Things Forward

In overall terms this indicates that the WNP itself needs to be taken forward in three ways: designating the WNP area; resolving the spatial options issue; but also developing policy ideas for the plan that are not contingent on that issue.

Area Designation

This is the highest priority, as WPC cannot apply for grant funding or the free technical support packages via Locality until AVDC/BC has approved the designated area. Nor can it proceed in any meaningful way with the project beyond this point. As noted above, there appear to be sufficient advantages to designating a larger area than the Parish, but this must be with the support of the neighbouring councils. AVDC/BC is unlikely to approve the designation proposal without it.

Evidence Gathering & Analysis

There seem to be some key evidence needs, some of which have been gathered before by the project but may now need updating if they are more than a couple of years old:

- Traffic data to inform the specification of a package of traffic management measures etc and to inform the assessment of spatial options (notably in the form of commuting patterns from within the village)
- Updated survey of land availability – a refresh of the ‘call for sites’ but tightly focused and being confined to written correspondence to avoid meetings at this stage (see below)
- Interest in/demand for older persons housing/downsizing within the community
- Mapping of existing green infrastructure assets, including footpaths etc
- Appraisal of Conservation Area and its setting to map constraints
- Appraisal of landscape character to map key features, views etc (using AVDC evidence base via LUC 2016 and 2008 AVDC reports)

Once this evidence has been gathered, it should be possible to generate a small number of distinct but plausible spatial options for assembling all the above. They will then be ready to assess in three ways: firstly with the relevant land interests (to ascertain land availability) and other delivery partners (to assess risks and rewards) and then with the community (to gauge preferences) and through the SA/SEA (to compare their sustainability credentials).

Deliverability

The SG will need to liaise (not yet negotiate) with the relevant land interests of each option to ascertain that their land will be made available in principle for the proposed use and nature of the land. Until it is ready to do so, it must politely decline requests from land interests for meetings to discuss the project.

Community Engagement

For this type of conversation with the community to be worth having, the breadth and quality of their engagement has to be exemplary. The SG, using its previous successful engagement experience, should plan out a strategy for online and offline activities to be capable of reaching every segment of the local population, including businesses (see later).

The content should focus on encouraging and enabling people to understand the spatial options, what is driving them, what are their key features and what their advantages and disadvantages may be. It should go no further in 'leading' opinion and simply seek views that can be easily collated and reported. Crucially, the exercise must be seen as a genuine engagement activity with no certainty of outcome and should offer no sense that one option is a 'done deal' and this being a token consultation gesture.

Sustainability Appraisal

In due course, AVDC/BC will need to screen for the need of the WNP to undertake the SA/SEA of the spatial options and then of the proposed policies. If any growth is to be planned for, an SA/SEA will be necessary. The process will both inform policy making and ensure that sufficient mitigation measures are in place in the WNP to ensure it will contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.

To carry out the screening, AVDC/BC will need to understand the proposed scope of the WNP (i.e. what types of policies, but not the policies themselves). Once the principle has been agreed, the SG can advise that it expects the WNP will be making site allocations for housing and other uses of a scale that is commensurate with past trends.

The SG can apply to Locality to secure a free technical support package to carry out the necessary work. This can be explained further in due course.

Decision Making

Once this analysis is complete, the SG will need to come to a view on which spatial option should be pursued and how the WNP should plan for that chosen option. The SG can then agree a scope of work to prepare the policies in the conventional manner for inclusion in the Draft WNP.

This is likely to include working with the chosen land interests and other stakeholders to ensure the technical evidence base will be ready to support the WNP – the expectation is that those interests will be primarily responsible for providing the evidence, not the SG.

But, whilst those tests are being carried out, the SG can be progressing policy ideas that are not entirely dependent on which spatial option is chosen. At present, these appear to comprise the following, but others may emerge in due course:

- Local business/shop uses (for protection from unnecessary loss)

- green infrastructure planning (including identifying candidate Local Green Spaces – see NPPF §100)
- design guidance (including identifying local heritage assets)
- mix of housing types and tenure (including older persons)
- landscape character (identifying local gaps and key views)

6. Organisation

It is recommended that the SG agrees a core group of its members (no more than 4) that can represent it at meetings with AVDC/BC, land interests and other stakeholders. The group will report back to the SG the outcome of any meetings and agree with the SG any positions it needs to take at future meetings.

It is also recommended that SG oversees the mapping of existing green infrastructure assets using existing data sources with a view to defining a network of those assets and identifying opportunities to improve the quality and connectivity of that network. The SG should also commission a simple Conservation Area appraisal report and review the landscape character evidence to create design guidance for the potential site-specific policies. In both cases, OH is able to offer a simple service to provide the technical work for oversight and approval by the SG.

Finally, the SG should itself, or via a task team, ensure it has a Communications Plan that will include the engagement activities described above and will also cover the remaining statutory and non-statutory engagement activities of the WNP through to its referendum. The Plan should be used to manage all online and offline means of communicating the project to the outside world during its various stages, not just the main activity events. At the end of the project, the Plan will form the basis of the Consultation Statement, which WPC is obliged to submit alongside the final WNP for examination.

7. Timetable

Once the SG has approved this paper, it is recommended that it focuses on securing the area designation. Hopefully, it ought to be in a position to begin the project in March/April 2020, with evidence gathering and spatial option development and testing completed before the summer break in late July.

After that, it should look to publish the formal draft MWP (aka 'Pre Submission' or 'Regulation 14' plan) in November/December for the statutory six week consultation period to enable it to complete the project for submission to BC in early 2021. On that basis, its examination and referendum are likely to take place in summer 2021.

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