

REPORT OF WYCOMBE DISTRICT COUNCIL'S IMPROVEMENT AND REVIEW COMMISSION – LOCAL PLAN – SAUNDERTON AREA ACTION PLAN – TASK & FINISH GROUP

Summary of the Key Findings of the Review

- The principle to follow is to empower the local community to have a pro-active role in shaping their surroundings through their Neighbourhood Plan to give them succinct local and neighbourhood planning and sustainable infrastructure.

Recommendations to Improvement & Review Commission – 11 November 2015

RECOMMENDATION 1

The principle of established national planning policy of protecting the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Green Belt must be upheld to safeguard the very purpose of the AONB.

Reasons for this recommendation

To protect the outstanding quality of the environment it serves.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That the Saunderton Local Area Action Plan be abandoned in favour of the Neighbourhood Plan and additional resources made available to support the Parish Council to facilitate its production and delivery in the relevant timeframe of the emerging Local Plan.

Reasons for this recommendation

To allow the local community to have a pro-active role in shaping their surroundings with succinct local and neighbourhood planning in line with Section 155 in 'Plan-Making, Local Plans' of the NPPF; "Early and meaningful engagement and collaboration with neighbourhoods, local organisations and businesses is essential. A wide section of the community should be proactively engaged, so that Local Plans, as far as possible, reflect a collective vision and a set of agreed priorities for the sustainable development of the area, including those contained in any neighbourhood plans that have been made."

RECOMMENDATION 3

Upper tier authorities be encouraged to have a duty to guarantee that provision be made for additional infrastructure so as to address any increase in population within the Parish of Bledlow-cum-Saunderton.

Reasons for this recommendation

In order to address concerns this would apply to local, regional and national authorities e.g. road, rail and flooding.

RECOMMENDATION 4

That there be a local plan policy to incorporate supported living with individual dwellings and communal amenities to count towards housing numbers.

Reasons for this recommendation

To meet the needs of the existing ageing population.

RECOMMENDATION 5

That mixed use developments be actively encouraged within the Parish of Bledlow-cum-Saunderton.

Reasons for this recommendation

This would encourage sustainability as residential and light industrial development would advantage the area.

RECOMMENDATION 6

No street lighting to be permitted on new developments in Saunderton and the wider Parish, in line with AONB policy.

Reasons for this recommendation

In line with Paragraph 116 of the National Planning Policy Framework that any development would have a detrimental effect on the environment and landscape as it would significantly change the character of Saunderton.

Detailed Report

1. Background

- 1.1. At the Improvement and Review Commission meeting on 22 June 2015, during consideration of the on-going work of the Local Plan Task and Finish Group, a change was agreed to the terms of reference so that a Task and Finish Group could test the case for a Saunderton Area Action Plan, including public engagement.
- 1.2. The Task and Finish Group were asked to gather information and look at weighing up whether or not the Council should explore the option of adding new homes and putting in local infrastructure and community facilities to support possible growth in Saunderton village.
- 1.3. With a national and local housing shortage, the Council will need to build more houses each year than in the past. In order to meet new housing targets the Council will need to look at housing options which it would not have previously looked at. It has to balance building new homes with ensuring the right infrastructure is in place to serve current and new residents. However, there are times when smaller developments (such as the current proposed developments at West's Yard and the Molins site) are not enough to trigger new infrastructure facilities e.g. schools or changes to transport and roads. Planning for larger growth and considering the options of a larger development could mean the village gets new facilities which could serve the people living there.

Organisations Contacted

- 1.4. The following organisations were contacted on behalf of the Chairman of the Task and Finish Group by email invitation in August 2015 for assistance with this review: Bledlow-cum-Saunderton Parish Council, Bradenham Parish Council, the Molins Action Group (MAG), Cllr Carl Etholen (local Ward Councillor).
- 1.5. The following organisations and groups were also contacted by email invitation and mailshot and invited to attend the public meeting as part of this review: over 300 local households, the Chiltern Society, the Chilterns Conservation Board, Chiltern Railways, the National Trust, Saunderton Rail Users Group.

Scope of this Review

- 1.6. The Task and Finish Group, at its meeting on 13 August 2015, agreed the scope of this review as follows:

Three specific scenarios would be considered by the Group in relation to the Saunderton Area Action Plan which is located within the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) these were –

1. Does the AONB ‘trump’ development
2. Does the need for housing ‘trump’ the AONB
3. Could there be some development, but take very careful consideration of possible new facilities and the impact on the AONB.

It was understood that, as a Council, there was a longstanding general approach that there would be no large development within the AONB and that it was the Task & Finish Group’s remit to question that in relation to Saunderton.

How this Review was undertaken

- 1.7. The Task and Finish Group decided that, given the nature of this review, it should be undertaken through a series of meetings and specified that they wished to meet with the two local Parish Councils, Bledlow-cum-Saunderton and Bradenham Parish Councils, as well as a local action group, the Molins Action Group (MAG), and to arrange a public listening event and invite Saunderton residents to air their views. The Group also decided that bodies such as the Chilterns AONB Board and Chiltern Railways should be invited to the public listening event to put forward their views. Following the public listening event on 7 October 2015, the Vice Chairman of the Task and Finish Group decided that due to high demand a second listening event would be held on 14 October 2015.

The review consisted of:

- Meeting with Parish Councils (7 September 2015)
- Meeting with MAG (28 September 2015)
- Meeting with Chiltern Railways (7 October 2015)
- Public Listening Event (7 October 2015)
- Public Listening Event (14 October 2015)
- Meeting with Planning (22 October 2015)
- Written representations (deadline 19 October 2015)

Presentations were given from the Planning team at the beginning of each meeting introducing the key considerations with regards to shaping the future of Saunderton. Once the presentations had taken place, the Planning officer left each meeting to abstain from a Question and Answer situation due to the meetings / events being purely listening events only.

2. Presentation by Planning Officer – Introducing the Issues in relation to Shaping the Future of Saunderton

- 2.1 The Planning Officer informed the meeting that work on the Saunderton Area Action Plan (AAP) was currently on hold while the Task and Finish Group reviewed the idea of the AAP and associated major development at Saunderton. It was mentioned that with a national and a local housing shortage, the Council would need to build more houses each year than in the past to meet housing targets. It was highlighted that exceptional circumstances would need to be demonstrated to justify major development in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and to take land out of the Green Belt to accommodate large scale development.

The main issues highlighted in relation to the development of Saunderton were:

- The Council had received a planning application for over 200 homes on the old Molins site, although the development site was isolated from the rest of the village with poor footpath and highway links to the village. An option might be to explore making this part of a larger development which could connect the Molins site to the rest of the village providing new community facilities such as a school, local shop, and improve use of the local railway station. It was this option that the Area Action Plan (which the Council agreed to commence work in March 2015), if it continued, would explore further. This could involve in the region of 500-1,000 homes but the scale and extent had not been defined because no significant technical work had been undertaken. This was now on hold pending the Task and Finish Group's considerations.
- The Council had approved an application for the West's Yard site for 42 homes including flats and houses with some affordable homes.
- The developer for the Molins site had agreed an extension on the determination time of the application. However, the developer had now submitted an appeal against non-determination and had requested a public inquiry, the date of which was yet to be decided. This now meant that the decision had been taken out of the District Council's hands and reference to the development could not be considered.
- Any application must deal with the AONB and must be of a very high standard of building and landscape design.
- The following key points which were highlighted within the presentation were –
 - Connectivity issues
 - Sustainability
 - Potential for Phase 2
 - Counter-intuitive; could more development be more sustainable?

- The Neighbourhood Plan allows the Parish Council to prepare a consultation on the Neighbourhood Area, the consultation of which had closed on 13 October 2015, <http://www.wycombe.gov.uk/council-services/planning-and-buildings/planning-policy/neighbourhood-planning.aspx>. The Plan had to conform with strategic planning policies of the District Council and National Policy. However, this was not the right 'mechanism' to bring forward a 'larger Saunderton' and if the decision was to proceed with a 'larger Saunderton' via the Local Plan, this would take precedence over the Neighbourhood Plan.

It was noted that development of any site would need to be sustainable.

Two key questions were then put forward by the Planning officer –

1. Could a more sustainable form of development be achieved at Saunderton by planning for a higher level of development?
2. If so, did this provide the exceptional circumstances for taking land out of the Green Belt and allowing major development in the AONB?

3. Public Listening Event – 7 October 2015

- 3.1. A public listening event was held on Wednesday 7 October 2015 starting at 7pm at The Clare Foundation in Saunderton. The primary focus of this event was to hear from residents of Saunderton on their thoughts of the Local Area Action Plan. Residents were invited to register their attendance in advance of the meeting.
- 3.2. The Task and Finish Group's public listening event, chaired by the Vice Chairman of the Group, saw an excellent turnout following significant advance publicity by sending flyers with each mailshot invitation to residents, article in the local press, an article placed on the WDC website and news bulletins on Mix96 radio station. Approximately 87 people were in attendance, including Councillor Carl Etholen, the local Ward Member for Bledlow and Bradenham. In addition to the residents and Ward Member, the following organisations were also in attendance to put their views to the Group; Chilterns AONB Board, National Trust, Chiltern Railways and the Chiltern Society.
- 3.3. Of those people in attendance a range of views were shared in relation to the impact of the proposed Local Area Action Plan for Saunderton.

Six themes were identified, based on the feedback given at the public event –

- Environment
 - AONB had national protection equivalent to a National Park status and Green Belt land was also protected from development.
 - Currently there was a lack of light pollution at night.
 - The impact of the proposals would have a significant detrimental effect on the character of Saunderton.
- Development
 - The issue of very special circumstances to warrant departure from current AONB and Green Belt policy had not been demonstrated.
 - More appropriate use of brownfield site, for example, a care village rather than large-scale housing.

- Some form of appropriate development through the neighbourhood plan process was supported by some residents who spoke at the meeting
- Flooding
 - The Saunderton area was regularly affected by flooding.
 - This would be a major problem if further development was allowed.
- Railway Station
 - No additional trains stopping at Saunderton.
 - People would continue to drive to the station, not walk.
 - Inadequate car parking at the station.
- Traffic
 - More cars on already congested roads.
 - Adverse safety impact on country lanes, such as speeding and making it unsafe for dog walkers.
 - A wider impact than just Saunderton, for example, West Wycombe.
- Local Facilities
 - Current lack of local facilities.
 - Developments did not provide facilities upfront.

Theme 1 – Environment

- 3.4. The AONB has national status equivalent to National Parks and should therefore be protected from development, as this could set a precedent across the country should development be approved. The Green Belt exists to prevent urban sprawl and Saunderton was part of the Green Belt. Currently there was very little light pollution and concern was raised that should a large development be built in the village, then street lighting would be part of the scheme and therefore light pollution would increase significantly. Concern that the character of the village would be changed significantly was also raised.

Theme 2 – Development

- 3.5. Residents believed there was a more appropriate use of the Molins brownfield site in Saunderton; rather than large-scale housing being built they believed something like a care village would be more appropriate. Residents also raised the issue of whether there were any “exceptional circumstances” (NPPF) to warrant a departure from the current AONB and Green Belt policy and believed there were none. Residents and MAG supported the view that a more appropriate way of developing Saunderton would be through a Neighbourhood Plan rather than a Local Area Action Plan.

Theme 3 – Flooding

- 3.6. Experiences shared by those at the meeting were that underneath the railway bridges in Saunderton flooding occurred every time it rained, which was an historic issue, and were of the view that this would be exacerbated by any further development of the area.

Theme 4 – Railway Station

- 3.7. There were no plans from Chiltern Railways for additional trains to stop at Saunderton railway station where currently there was only one train per hour. There were very limited (47) parking spaces at the station, and should more development take place in Saunderton, this would add to the already significant problem with commuters parking in surrounding roads.

Theme 5 – Traffic

- 3.8. Residents' experiences were that the roads through Saunderton, particularly the main A4010 were already congested and additional development would only add to the problems. Safety concerns on narrow country lanes was also raised; issues such as speeding would make it unsafe for walkers using the road either for access or walking dogs. It was also generally agreed that there would be a wider impact on other areas such as West Wycombe, Bledlow Ridge and Princes Risborough.

Theme 6 – Local Facilities

- 3.9. Currently there was a lack of local facilities, such as a shop, surgery, school etc. although there was a public house. It was noted from the presentation by the Planning Officer that the proposed development, while adding to numbers in the village, would not reach the target for providing local facilities. The 'tipping point' to build a new school would be 700 houses.
- 3.10. At the conclusion of the event, the Chairman finished by asking for a show of hands from those in the room to one question of which there were three options; the results of which were –
- No Development – no-one supported no development as an option (no hands raised);
 - Appropriate development within developable and previously development land? The vast majority showed hands in favour – not just housing, but mixed and including employment; or
 - Full scale as per planning – no hands raised.

4. Public Listening Event – 14 October 2015

- 4.1 A second public listening event was held on Wednesday 14 October 2015 starting at 7pm at The Clare Foundation in Saunderton. The primary focus of this event was, as with the 7 October 2015 public meeting, to hear from residents of Saunderton on their thoughts of the Local Area Action Plan. Residents were invited to register their attendance in advance of the meeting.
- 4.2 The Task and Finish Group's public listening event, chaired by the Vice Chairman of the Group, saw another excellent turnout following significant advance publicity by sending flyers with each mailshot invitation, article in the local press, an article placed on the WDC website and news bulletins on Mix96 radio station. Approximately 75 people were in attendance, including Councillor Carl Etholen, the local Ward Member for Bledlow and Bradenham. In addition to the residents the following organisations were also in attendance to put their views to the Group;

Chilterns AONB Board, the Chairman and Clerk from Bradenham Parish Council, Saunderton Rail Users Group and the Chiltern Society.

- 4.3 Of those people in attendance a range of views were shared in relation to the impact of the proposed Local Area Action Plan for Saunderton.

As with the first meeting, six themes were identified, based on the feedback given at the public event –

1. Environment

- AONB had national protection equivalent to a National Park status and Green Belt land was also protected from development.
- Currently there was a lack of light pollution at night.
- The impact of the proposals would have a significant detrimental effect on the character of Saunderton.

2. Development

- The issue of very special circumstances to warrant departure from current AONB and Green Belt policy had not been demonstrated.
- More appropriate use of brownfield site, for example, a care village rather than large-scale housing.
- Some form of appropriate development through the neighbourhood plan process was supported by some residents who spoke at the meeting

3. Flooding

- This would be a major problem if further development was allowed.

4. Railway Station

- No additional trains stopping at Saunderton.
- People would continue to drive to the station, not walk.
- Inadequate car parking at the station.

5. Traffic

- More cars on already congested roads.
- Adverse safety impact on country lanes, such as speeding and making it unsafe for dog walkers.
- A wider impact than just Saunderton, for example, West Wycombe and Chinnor Road, Bledlow Ridge.

6. Local Facilities and Employment Opportunities

- Current lack of local facilities.
- Developments did not provide facilities upfront.
- There were limited opportunities to increase local employment.

Theme 1 – Environment

- 4.4. The AONB has national status equivalent to National Parks and should therefore be protected from development, as this could set a precedent across the country should development be approved. The Green Belt exists to prevent urban sprawl and Saunderton was part of the Green Belt. Currently there was very little light pollution and concern was raised that should a large development be built in the village, then street lighting would be part of the scheme and therefore light pollution would

increase significantly. Concern that the character of the village would be changed significantly was also raised.

Theme 2 – Development

- 4.5. Residents believed there was a more appropriate use of the Molins brownfield site in Saunderton; rather than large-scale housing being built they believed something like a care village would be more appropriate. Residents also raised the issue of whether there were any “exceptional circumstances” (NPPF) to warrant a departure from the current AONB and Green Belt policy and believed there were none. Residents and MAG supported the view that a more appropriate way of developing Saunderton would be through a Neighbourhood Plan rather than a Local Area Action Plan.

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Theme 6 – Local Facilities

- 4.1. Currently there was a lack of local facilities, such as a shop, surgery, school etc. although there was a public house. It was noted from the presentation by the Planning Officer that the proposed development, while adding to numbers in the village, would not reach the target for providing local facilities. There was also concern in relation to local employment opportunities which were limited. The ‘tipping point’ to build a new school would be 700 houses.
- 4.9. At the conclusion of the event, and as was asked at the previous meeting, the Chairman finished by asking for a show of hands from those in the room to one question of which there were three options; the results of which were –

- No Development – in the region of a dozen people supported no development as an option.
- Appropriate development within developable and previously development land? The majority showed hands in favour – not just housing, but mixed and including employment; or
- Full scale as per planning – no hands raised.

5. Written Evidence from residents and organisations

5.1 Residents and organisations were invited to send in written submissions to a dedicated email address by noon on Monday 19 October 2015 for consideration by the Task and Finish Group at their final meeting which was held on Thursday 22 October 2015 at 6.30pm. Following the deadline, 28 written submissions were received which included support for a Neighbourhood Plan, overall opposition for the proposed Local Area Action Plan, concerns in relation to traffic movements; roads and rail infrastructure, the AONB and Green Belt must be protected, development meant Saunderton would become a 'dormitory town' and the loss of two employment sites.

6 Summary of the key Findings of the Review

- The Saunderton Area Action Plan could have a significant detrimental impact on the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Green Belt which residents did not support. The overall consensus was that the area could be enhanced through a residents-led Neighbourhood Plan.

The Task and Finish Group had assessed the written submissions, including the themes that emerged from the public listening events. These are set out above, together with the recommendations that emerged, which are repeated below for ease of reference.

7 Recommendations to Improvement & Review Commission – 11 November 2015

RECOMMENDATION 1

The principle of established national planning policy of protecting the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Green Belt must be upheld to safeguard the very purpose of the AONB.

Reasons for this recommendation

To protect the outstanding quality of the environment it serves.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That the Saunderton Local Area Action Plan be abandoned in favour of the Neighbourhood Plan and additional resources made available to support the Parish Council to facilitate its production and delivery in the relevant timeframe of the emerging Local Plan.

Reasons for this recommendation

To allow the local community to have a pro-active role in shaping their surroundings with succinct local and neighbourhood planning in line with Section 155 in 'Plan-Making, Local

Plans' of the NPPF; "Early and meaningful engagement and collaboration with neighbourhoods, local organisations and businesses is essential. A wide section of the community should be proactively engaged, so that Local Plans, as far as possible, reflect a collective vision and a set of agreed priorities for the sustainable development of the area, including those contained in any neighbourhood plans that have been made."

RECOMMENDATION 3

Upper tier authorities be encouraged to have a duty to guarantee that provision be made for additional infrastructure so as to address any increase in population within the Parish of Bledlow-cum-Saunderton.

Reasons for this recommendation

In order to address concerns this would apply to local, regional and national authorities e.g. road, rail and flooding.

RECOMMENDATION 4

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Reasons for this recommendation

To meet the needs of the existing ageing population.

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Reasons for this recommendation:

This would encourage sustainability as residential and light industrial development would advantage the area.

RECOMMENDATION 6

No street lighting to be permitted on new developments in Saunderton and the wider Parish, in line with AONB policy.

Reasons for this recommendation:

In line with Paragraph 116 of the National Planning Policy Framework that any development would have a detrimental effect on the environment and landscape as it would significantly change the character of Saunderton

Concluding Remarks

On balance, the Task and Finish Group found there was no local support for the proposed Area Action Plan and that a Neighbourhood Plan was preferable to consider the possible delivery of sustainable development within the Parish of Bledlow-cum-Saunderton.

The Task and Finish Group wished to place on record its appreciation to the public who attended the public listening events and all the organisations for their co-operation and active participation and willingness to help in conducting this review.

Once approved by the Improvement and Review Commission, this report and recommendations will be presented to Cabinet for consideration.