



Fairford Town Council

Mr Andrew Ashcroft
Independent Examiner
Fairford Neighbourhood Plan
C/o Cotswold District Council
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21 September 2017

Dear Mr Ashcroft,

Fairford Neighbourhood Plan: Examination Hearing Additional Questions

Fairford Town Council has reviewed the response issued on 19th September by the District Council to your request to provide further information relating to how the SHELAA methodology addressed landscape assessment.

Our comments on CDC's responses to the two questions you posed is set out below, noting that the questions derived from your wish to explore how Policy FNP16 of the Neighbourhood Plan – the allocation of land at Leafield Road for housing and education uses – would contribute towards the achievement of the social and the environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Question 1 (A summary of the methodology employed in making the landscape assessment that informed the SHELAA, including confirmation of whether the site was assessed with and/or without potential mitigation.)

The SHELAA methodology is noted and it is observed that it does not differ from its previous iterations or from that commonly used by local planning authorities. We note that the land in question had not been examined by the District Council (White Consultants) and its assessment relies upon the views of the officers. We note the evidence base used by them to arrive at their view and we are mindful of PPG §3-004, which states, "town councils may use the (SHLAA) methodology to assess sites but any assessment should be proportionate ... councils may also refer to existing site assessments prepared by the local planning authority as a starting point when identifying sites to allocate within a neighbourhood plan." (our emphasis).

However, we also note that both the SHELAA and its landscape character assessment evidence base are only two of many factors that must be considered in the selection of development sites for allocation in a development plan. Their importance is not denied, but decisions must also be informed by other information, which is usually best blended in the Sustainability Appraisal (SA), and it is "for the development plan itself to determine which of those sites are the most suitable to meet ... needs." (PPG §3-003).

The SA mechanism allows for a broader view to be taken on the three dimensions of sustainable development, and the different evidence within each of those three dimensions. In this specific regard, the SA enables landscape sensitivity to be considered alongside other important environmental information, e.g. biodiversity and flood risk.

The SA prepared in support of the emerging Local Plan (AECOM, January 2017) would therefore normally be the first document to be referenced in addressing the questions you posed of the participants at the Public Hearing. We consider the SA report is conspicuous by its absence in the District Council's Hearing Statement, in its responses at the Hearing and in this new response.

The District Council's SA report goes further than any other document that the Town Council is aware of (and has paid full regard to in its own evidence base) in providing the answer to your questions. Its Appendix II ('Points of the Compass Appraisal') is comprehensive in its appraisal of eight general areas around the town (see pp22-24). Although it had the opportunity to identify an 'Historic Environment and Landscape' constraint in relation to area FAIR4, within which the Leaffield Road site lies, it did not. We consider that it did not because, as the Gleasons LVIA has concluded, there are no harmful landscape effects of a development scheme that cannot be avoided or satisfactorily mitigated in its layout and landscaping, which are in any event, requirements of Policy FNP16.

Furthermore, and most crucial of all, as highlighted by the Town Council in a number of documents, the appraisal concludes that area FAIR4 was "the least constrained" of all eight areas when considering the relative sustainability merits of different options for growing the town. In its failure to acknowledge, let alone address, its own SA report, we believe the District Council has failed in its duty to be reasonable in its consideration of this policy.

Question 2 (A view on how the assessment undertaken for the SHELAA compares (as evidence) to the LVIA undertaken on behalf of the promoter)

We agree that the most relevant part of that evidence base that the District Council has cited remains the 2014 update of the 'Study of Land Surrounding Key Settlements in Cotswold District'. It identifies specific landscape character issues around Fairford. We note that the report sees the main landscape sensitivities relating to land to the north (not north-east), west and south of the town but we acknowledge that it also identified that development to the (north) east would constitute expansion into the countryside, which is self-evident.

We note too that the report identified the "abrupt and visually harsh edge between modern housing development and the landscape ... to the north east", as a result of past planning decisions that did

not require the provision of any significant landscape buffers on that edge. The requirements of criterion 3 of Policy FNP16 are clear in ensuring both the housing and education schemes "incorporate measures to mitigate the visual effects ... on (their) western, northern and eastern site boundaries". In our view, the schemes will enable an enhancement, not a diminution, of the existing edge between the town and countryside in this location.

We have already noted the PPG emphasis on using a 'proportionate' evidence base to aid decision making, and so we are fortunate to be able to cite a properly conducted LVIA in support of Policy FNP16. This level of detail is not a requirement of the 'basic conditions' and the District Council should not expect such evidence to support an allocation in a neighbourhood plan, especially where its own evidence has not drawn attention to any specific landscape sensitivity that would justify such an approach. It therefore neither necessary nor desirable for the District Council to take any more time in order to provide a further view on the LVIA.

In its review, we have noted nothing that fundamentally questions the validity of the LVIA in its methodology, appraisal or conclusions. We also note the District Council's acceptance that this is a matter of 'professional judgement'. We agree and we see no reason to challenge the professional integrity of the LVIA authors.

Conclusion

The Town Council considers the District Council's response has shed no further light on this matter and its formal position on whether or not Policy FNP16 meets the basic conditions remains ambiguous. We note some 'concerns' about process and appraisal, which we believe we have addressed in full, but we note no clear objection to the policy being part of the Neighbourhood Plan.

As experience with many other neighbourhood plans shows, the fact that a SHELAA document concludes at a moment in time that land is unsuitable for housing development, does not, as a matter of principle, prevent a qualifying body from coming to a different view.

Here, the Town Council has clearly demonstrated that Policy FNP16 will have no significant environmental effects and will contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in Fairford. The policy therefore meets the basic conditions and we continue to commend it to you.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Harrison

Fairford Town Council

