

FTC Statement for Neighbourhood Plan Examination Hearing

Introduction

Fairford Town Council ("FTC") is grateful to the Independent Examiner for this opportunity to summarise our response on these particular matters and also to respond to some other issues that were raised in the Regulation 16 and revised SA consultations, which we have done under the same headings.

Our Neighbourhood Plan seeks to map out a genuinely sustainable future for Fairford for the remainder of the Plan period, addressing in particular the need and best location for housing, the vitality and viability of the town as a 'District Centre', local employment (and hence dependency on out-commuting), 'community' needs, and specific environmental/infrastructure issues of the locality. Moreover, based on local understanding of these issues and how they impact, it seeks to do this in a way which maximises opportunities not only to avoid increasing, but also to remedy, problems that have grown up over recent years as the result of development being driven largely by speculative planning applications which have not adequately addressed the cumulative effects on the town.

Matters

1. The SA/SEA process

FTC response to Examiner's questions:

- 1.1 We consider that the revised SA (incorporating SEA) meets the requirements of the SEA Directive because:
 - 1.12 A scoping consultation on the criteria for an SA (incorporating SEA) was initiated when it became apparent that the Neighbourhood Plan would be proposing development sites.
 - 1.13 This enabled the relevant sustainability factors to be taken into account in formulating the proposals (i.e. 'built in'), avoiding waste of resources on alternatives that would have turned out to be 'unreasonable' or, worse, developing a Plan without taking these things into account and then having to re-work this.
 - 1.14 Comments raised on this in response to the Regulation 14 and Regulation 16 consultations were mainly 'procedural' (e.g. Gladman) or disagreements on the impacts or how effectively they could be mitigated, based on the local community's practical experience with these matters.
 - 1.15 We believe that the findings of the SA are suitably (and proportionately) supported by the information provided by the relevant land interests and the other Plan evidence.

- 1.16 The effects of the Plan as a whole and reasonable alternatives are clearly addressed (in sections 9 and 10).
- 1.17 **Some respondents interpreted CDC's statements on non-strategic housing allocations policy to conclude that the FNP was proposing a substantial increase in housing compared with the emerging Local Plan, with consequential impacts on neighbouring communities. This is not the case and, indeed, other policies in the Plan, such as those supporting more local employment and locating housing where it is least likely to increase flood risk to areas downstream, are expressly designed to reduce such impacts.**
- 1.2 We believe it has assessed reasonable alternatives in an appropriate fashion, as explained in the revised SA, i.e.:
- 1.21 FTC selected relevant criteria from within the framework of the Local Plan SA, and consulted on these at the Scoping stage. No adverse comments were received on this aspect.
- 1.22 Once the minimum housing requirement for Fairford was established (through the Local Plan process), it became apparent that an important priority (for Fairford residents) was to look for locations which would not exacerbate existing issues (e.g. traffic constraints) but indeed would provide opportunities to address these, e.g. though the provision of land for additional off-road parking. **It is crucial that this approach is understood.**
- 1.23 These criteria enabled assessment to be done on a largely factual basis.
- 1.24 The original SA configured the policies for housing sites into broad locationally-based options. The 'reasonable alternatives' were based on sites that had been proposed either by developers or by the LPA in the emerging Local Plan.
- 1.25 It was clear from consultations that the community would not consider options that proposed substantially more housing than the emerging Local Plan as 'reasonable'. On this basis, it was agreed in discussion with CDC that it was appropriate to focus on the pros and cons of individual sites.
- 1.26 As stated above, the effects of the Plan as a whole and reasonable alternatives are addressed.
- 1.3 As CDC have not commented further on the revised SA, we assume they are happy with this.

2. The proposed Leaffield Road housing site (FNP16)

FTC response:

2.1 The Leaffield Road site would contribute to the social and environmental dimensions for the following reasons:

- 2.11 The primary reason for allocating this site for housing and education uses is that the land interest has agreed to release land in return for the housing allocation. As the demand for school places here is likely to continue to grow with the expansion of Fairford, it is vital that provision is made now to manage the transport and traffic effects. Congestion and hazard to pedestrians in Leaffield Road around school starting/finishing times are well-recognised local issues. The site is ideally placed to enable practical short and long-term transport solutions to be delivered, as well as to keep open the option of locating new school buildings if necessary in the future.
- 2.12 The site is well-suited to housing development. It makes sense to locate new housing close to the schools, where people can have easy access to the facilities at other times. As regards the environmental dimension, the site is outside the designations of Fairford Park and Special Landscape Area (the main focus of which is the Coln river valley), and makes no contribution to the significance of the setting. It also provides the opportunity for public open space on land which is currently agricultural with no public access.
- 2.13 Some landscape impact is unavoidable. However, this is essentially doing no more than moving the existing 'urban' boundary northward. The site is already well screened from housing to the south by trees (a small wood) and overgrown hedges along Lovers Walk. Maintenance of other hedges and further tree planting around the site is also a key requirement of the policy.
- 2.14 The PROW to the north is separated by a reasonable distance from the site boundary as well as a hedge on its south side.
- 2.15 The AONB is some distance to the north (beyond the Parish boundary).
- 2.16 Landscape impact and agricultural land quality are addressed by Gleasons Reg 16 response.
- 2.17 This site is relatively distant from the nearest Key Wildlife Sites and does not suffer from a high water table which would create problems for the attenuation of surface water run-off.

2.2 The significance of the sixth criterion of the policy (the potential for a link between Leaffield Road and Hatherop Road) and the associated paragraph 5.58:

- 2.21 While acknowledging that further expansion of Fairford (within this plan period) is not necessary, it is recognised that future development plans may need to plan for growth beyond the plan period.
- 2.22 The ‘Compass points’ analysis in the Local Plan SA ranked this area highest of the eight areas assessed for their overall sustainability as locations for future development. In addition, given that a significant amount of traffic to the schools comes from the east, where local employment sites also are, it is sensible to retain for future consideration the option of an improved access route from this side of the town rather than prejudice it in the layout of this scheme.

2.3 FTC response to points raised by Gladman:

- 2.31 It is acknowledged by FTC and CDC that Policy FNP16 of the Neighbourhood Plan is intended to replace the two housing site allocations proposed in Policy S5 of the Draft Local Plan. However, it is agreed that in all other respects the policies of the two plans are complementary. This matter has been identified by the Local Plan Inspector as one that requires special attention in his examination of the soundness of that plan, and FTC and CDC are preparing a Statement of Common Ground for that purpose. However, FTC remains clear that the NPPF and PPG (most notably §41-044) allow for neighbourhood plans to make alternative site allocations to those proposed in a Local Plan, and discourage local planning authorities from duplicating the non-strategic policies of a Neighbourhood Plan.
- 2.32 Consistency in the assessment of the alternative sites is addressed under part 2 of Matter 1 above.
- 2.33 The evidence base of the Neighbourhood Plan in these respects – most notably the Site Assessments Report and Landscape & Local Green Space Study (L&LGSS) – is credible, accurate, timely and proportionate in its scope and detail.

3. The proposed Fairford-Horcott Local Gap (FNP11)

Examiner's QQ:

- Does the policy have regard to national policy in general terms and to paragraph ID:50-001-20160519 of Planning Practice Guidance ('How should local authorities support sustainable rural communities') in particular?
- To what extent is its designation supported by appropriate evidence?

FTC response:

- 3.1 FTC believes that the concept of a local gap has regard to national policy, most notably the relevant core principles in §17 of the NPPF. The fifth bullet point in particular highlights the need to 'take account of the different roles and character of different areas ... (and) ... recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and supporting thriving rural communities within it'.
- 3.2 §50-001 states that 'blanket policies restricting housing development in some settlements and preventing other settlements from expanding should be avoided unless their use can be supported by robust evidence'. Other policies of the Neighbourhood Plan make positive provision for housing, employment and community uses that collectively exceed the proposals of Policy S5 the Draft Local Plan. The proposed Local Gap is not so extensive as to prevent future development of the town. We have already noted in relation to Policy FNP16, that that side of the town has the potential to accommodate growth beyond the plan period in what is objectively regarded as the most sustainable location.
- 3.3 Plainly the policy seeks to address more than housing proposals, contributing to the wider sustainability of the town. As the restrictions proposed are more rigorous than those that apply more generally in the countryside, the Town Council has been careful in assembling robust evidence for its justification.
- 3.4 Much evidence has been provided in the L&LGSS (section 3) but the more comprehensive 'Character and Design Assessment for Fairford and Horcott' should also be considered. Sections 2, 'Milton End', and 6, 'Horcott', are of particular relevance.
- 3.5 In preparing the studies, FTC has followed the neighbourhood planning guidance published by Locality. Both studies have been validated by a professional planning consultant as credible and robust but proportionate for this purpose. In relation to the Land off Horcott Road, the contents of both reports match the evidence provided by CDC's own expert historic landscape witness in the recent planning appeal.

4. The proposed Area of Special Landscape Value (FNP12)

Examiner's QQ:

- Does the policy have regard to national policy and is it in general conformity with the strategic policies in the development plan?
- To what extent is its designation supported by robust evidence?

FTC response:

- 4.1 As with Policy FNP11, FTC believes that the concept of defining an Area of Special Landscape Value ("ASLV") has regard to national policy, most notably the fifth bullet point in §17 of the NPPF.
- 4.2 The development provisions of the Neighbourhood Plan (which exceed those of Policy S5 of the Draft Local Plan) do not require the land in the proposed ASLV for development in the plan period. The vast majority of this has significant constraints – flood risk (and role in protecting downstream areas from this), biodiversity – that would prevent conventional housing schemes. As already noted, there are other, more sustainable, directions in which the town can grow. Hence, the policy has full regard to PPG §50-001.
- 4.3 In respect of its general conformity with strategic development plan policy, FTC believes the policy complements Policy 19(b) of the Local Plan, interpreting what this means for Fairford. Whilst the concept of an ASLV is not explicit in the Local Plan, the identification of such place-specific policies is consistent with the aim of Policy 18.
- 4.4 Cygnet appear to have considered policy FNP12 in isolation and to have misunderstood its intent and scope by claiming that it does not conform to the CWPDP. The Neighbourhood Plan, which has strong support from the Cotswold Water Park Trust, should be read as a whole. Its policies FNP9, FNP21 and FNP22 meet the CWPDP objectives for development of tourism and increased visitor facilities, protecting and enhancing biodiversity and strengthening the landscape character.
- 4.5 FTC is unclear what Cygnet's real concern is. It is our assumption that the existing consents still stand (with their conditions and approved reserved matters) and are not affected by this policy.
- 4.6 The Town Council is constantly aware of policies UT.1, UT.2 and the CWPDP and gave these due consideration in formulating the Plan.
- 4.7 The policy has had regard to the equivalent provisions of the emerging Local Plan beyond just its Policy S5 on Fairford, notably policies EN1 (Natural and Historic Environment) and EN2-EN4 (Landscape). It provides a refinement of these policies at a local level.

- 4.7 The proposed ASLV is supported by carefully assembled, credible evidence in the L&LGSS and is consistent with the Cotswold Water Park Development Plan (CWPDP).
- 4.8 It is special to the local community because of its character, combined with easy accessibility on foot, as noted in the Inspector's report for the Lake 104/103 appeal in 2008, quoted in paragraph 4.3.7 of the L&LGSS. Our questionnaire results showed 85% consider protecting the River Coln and Fairford/Horcott lakes very important, and public consultations all stressed the importance of the riverside walks.
- 4.9 Policy FNP12 does not seek to prevent all development; it simply confines its support to those types of land uses and development that are suited to a countryside location (in line with adopted Policy 19), so that the essential open character of the area is not harmed.