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CPRE Oxfordshire response to West Oxfordshire Local Plan - Additional Technical Evidence Consultation, December 2017

1. West Oxfordshire Local Plan Allocations Landscape and Heritage Advice

Overview

While the Landscape and Heritage study includes much useful material, it has fundamental flaws both in methodology and assessment in terms of statutory and policy requirements. As a result, the study has under-estimated both the sensitivity of the areas concerned and the statutory and policy tests that apply to judging the harm that would arise through the interaction and cumulative nature of the effects and whether they could be adequately avoided and reduced. The study does not assess whether suggested adjustments to the allocations or proposals would be effective.

The study fails to provide adequate justification for any of the allocations when considered against the policy, regulatory and case law tests that apply. The allocations, even if modified as proposed, would still result in significant harm to the AONB and the heritage assets concerned and no overarching need for them has been demonstrated.

Specific comments

a) Methodological problems

The study too readily accepts potential for mitigation by design without first having considered avoiding impacts (ie it pre-supposes some harm is inevitable rather than considering whether it is avoidable). This is NOT fully independent and fails to address key NPPF para 116 tests, heritage case law and policy tests.

Consideration of probable winter conditions is very limited and does not represent a fully precautionary approach.

It fails to consider tranquillity/dark skies issues (ie night time visibility of lights from surrounding area).

It fails to apply systematically the full range of setting assessment criteria recommended by Historic England guidance.

It fails to highlight that the overlap of statutory AONB and Conservation Area (CA) and World Heritage Site (WHS) designations and their setting are mutually reinforcing and make each of the sites significantly more sensitive than if such overlaps did not occur. This overlap is nowhere explored or highlighted in terms of which landscape character consideration fits with CA and other heritage issues and characteristics. This fundamentally undermines any consideration of impact interactions as required by SEA.

It fails to ask directly the key question of whether new development would in principle 'preserve or enhance' the natural beauty/ landscape character of the AONB or the character or appearance of the Conservation Areas (eg by reversing past harm) rather than causing additional harm.

It fails to consider whether the overall result of development *including proposed mitigation* would either 'preserve or enhance' the natural beauty/ landscape character of the AONB or the character or appearance of the Conservation Areas (eg by reversing past harm) rather than causing additional harm.

b) Site specific assessments

This fails to address the question of when the modern development took place relative to the CA designation and the fact that further new development cumulatively adds to any harm already done.

There is inconsistency in the recognition that CAs were designated to include rural open farmland as part of the setting of the town as it was at time of designation, although this is clearer for Shipton-under-Wychwood than the other sites. It fails to identify surviving ridge-and-furrow and its relationship to floodplain drier terrace topography within the site as exemplifying this.

It sees previous modern development as having detracted from CAs and AONB, but sees this as diminishing the significance of further harm rather than adding to previous harm. In other words, '*it is already degraded, so making it a bit worse won't matter*'!

The suggested modifications and mitigation measures are not related specifically to the impacts/sources of harm identified in the assessment, and therefore fails to identify whether such harm would as a result be avoided or by how much it would be diminished. This means that the residual harm is not assessed, and the AONB and Heritage policy tests in NPPF cannot be properly considered.

c) Cumulative and in-combination effects

The report fails to examine landscape/visual/heritage/tranquillity impact interactions (as required for SEA Regulations) and the cumulative effects of adding to previous harm.

The cumulative effects fail to consider the effect of further diminishing the rural setting of the settlements concerned, the logic being that adding to development already recognised as not having enhanced the area no longer matters, rather than exacerbating the problem.

It fails to consider the environmental effects of alternative ways of distributing housing outside or across the AONB to absorb the need for development in a less harmful way.

In this context, CPRE Oxfordshire would like to draw your attention to a recent national CPRE report that highlights development pressures in AONBS across the country and the cumulative cost to our most precious landscapes. The *Beauty Betrayed* report identifies the Cotswolds AONB as the most under pressure, with 62 housing schemes coming forward between 2011-2016.¹

2. Sustainability Appraisal (SA) Further Addendum Report (Appendix F added 27.11.2017)

The need for the Heritage and Landscape study to be done at all directly reflects CPRE's and the Rollright Trust's original criticisms of the SA as not fulfilling Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) regulatory requirements.

The updated SA perpetuates and exemplifies the ongoing problems previously highlighted about its inadequacy in meeting SEA requirements to assess ACTUAL changes to the environment.

The SA specifically fails to reflect accurately the level of harm reported in the Heritage and Landscape Study and its significance in terms of specific statutory and policy considerations concerning heritage.

3. Peter Brett Associates Note on Housing and Demography in the Burford - Charlbury Sub-Area

Overview

CPRE is concerned that the overall starting point is an assessment of potential demand, rather than a robust consideration of *local* need, which should be the primary consideration in a designated area.

However, even on those terms, we note that PBA identify the minimum housing need for the area as 834 net additional homes over the period and consider this the most reliable figure. If WODC were to adopt this figure, then the 219 dwellings proposed as part of the 1,060 dwellings across the Sub-Area from 2015 to 2031 would not be required. This undermines the argument around exceptional circumstances.

¹ *Beauty Betrayed*: How reckless housing development threatens England's AONBs - CPRE, Nov 2017

See: <http://www.cpre.org.uk/media-centre/latest-news-releases/item/4705-gov-failing-to-protect-england-celebrated-landscapes-from-mass-housing-developments>

Specific comments

Natural change in the sub-area would lead to the population falling by 779 and the workforce would also fall by 658 from 2015 to 2031.

The Local Plan model leads to a population increase of 1,767 from 2015 to 2031 (or 2,355 in the Plan Period from 2011 to 2031). This growth at 16% approx. (2,355 increase on 14,805) is lower than the average for the District, but higher than anticipated national population growth which is about 10% over the same period. There is an associated workforce increase of 673 from 2015 to 2031.

The trend based model based on 2005-15 trends shows lower growth than the Local Plan and the model based on 2010-15 trends shows higher growth than the Local Plan.

It is quite clear, and indeed stated, that the growth is in-migration driven ie it is a choice being taken to meet a perceived demand.

To be sure that the demand is there, evidence is needed that there is potential for 673 extra jobs in the area.

Additionally, the effect of increased building rates in other Districts should be considered with regard to the sustainability of demand in West Oxfordshire.

It is of note that in 2015, there were 15,397 people living in 6,844 households ie living at an occupancy of 2.25 on average.

Under the Local Plan 1,060 homes (which if 5% are empty in accordance with Local Plan assumptions would be 1,007 households) are planned for 1,767 people. That represents an average occupancy of 1.75 amongst new households forming.

Considering that the model relies on in-migration to grow the workforce, it's likely that working age people with families will move here, so it doesn't seem likely that occupancy will fall. In fact, this is a regular assumption that is made that never seems to pan out.

Part of the reason for this is that developers continue to build homes of a mix that accommodates and encourages an average occupancy of 2.5-3. People cannot afford to under-occupy homes, so the mix that is being built is driving a higher occupancy than is being assumed.

The labour force per household was 1.17 in 2015 (7,980 workforce and 6,844 households). Yet 1,060 homes (and 1,007 households) are being planned for 673 jobs. This gives a labour force of 0.67 per new household leading to a drop in economic activity per household overall to 1.1. This is not viable, as people cannot afford homes without sufficient income. It would lead to a fall in prosperity.

If a realistic occupancy of 2.5 were assumed in line with the mix proposed, 1,767 people would require 707 households or 742 homes. That would mean that labour


force per new household would be 0.95 which would be an improvement. There is therefore scope to reduce the target by restricting in-migration.

The only other way that this model would be viable would be if the planned 1,060 new homes were occupied at a higher occupancy than assumed, but this would lead to a greater population increase and more jobs would be required and there is no guarantee that the supply of people who want to move to the area will stretch that far. In any event, even higher growth than that planned would be damaging. It should never be forgotten that this damage would be irreversible.

Otherwise, the only way to achieve a lower occupancy is to build only 1 and 2 bed houses at higher density (taking up less land), but this is not what is planned. By building only small low cost homes, new households could form at low occupancy and hence reduce occupancy on average, plus free up the plentiful stock of family housing amongst the existing stock, many of which are under-occupied at present. Housing for the elderly and starter homes should be the main focus for the current housing model to be viable.

It should be noted that similar arguments apply to the District as a whole, which is basically that the level of growth planned is too high and that the model is flawed with too many people moving here for the expected additional jobs.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Helen Marshall".

Helen Marshall
Director, CPRE Oxfordshire