

Rural Economy and Environment Task Group

Final Report to the Bledlow-cum-Saunderton Neighbourhood Plan Working Group

Introduction

1. Rural Economy and Environment Task Group (TG) was set up by the Bledlow-cum-Saunderton Neighbourhood Plan Working Group in December 2015. Its initial work programme was focused upon establishing:
 - *the current evidence base relating to business use within the Parish;*
 - *the evidence relating to the natural environment assets as a basis for possible opportunities to enhance the natural environment;*
 - *the evidence of demand for new small scale business units with the Parish;*
and
 - *the evidence of demand for farm diversification within the Parish.*
2. The membership of the TG comprised: 3 farmers within the Parish, the Land Agent for Carington Estates Limited and a Business Management Consultant who is also a Trustee of a national wildlife charity.
3. This report summarises the evidence obtained from a range of sources, sets out the TG's analysis of that evidence and makes policy recommendations to the Working Group for inclusion in the Bledlow-cum-Saunderton Neighbourhood Plan (NP).

4. Methodology:

- a) Establish a framework to guide the TG's work. It was decided to base this upon the three category framework used as a model by the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) for their recent report on the Rural Economy (January 2016)ⁱ;
- b) Apply this framework to the analysis of the range of issues affecting the Rural Economy and the Environment. However, for the purposes of analysis and report, the TG decided to amalgamate the CLA's Land based and Land related Businesses into a single segment and to assess Other Businesses/Employment and the Environment as discrete segments in their own right;
- c) Gather evidence relating to these three segments seeking meetings as appropriate, assess available data, assess supply and demand relating to business use in the Parish, and investigate history of planning applications, decisions and appeals over last 15 years using individual post code units;
- d) Assess issues relating to the Environment on the basis of the current legislative framework and local designations;
- e) Assess feedback relating to all three segments from the Survey and Public Events;
- f) Analyse the above; and
- g) Make recommendations.

5. Evidence:

a) Land based and Land related Businesses

Primary sources/secondary data sources:

- There is no Parish specific data on the number of agricultural holdings, size or type of cropping held by the CLA, NFU (National Farmers Union) or the Agricultural Economics Department of the University of Reading;
- The Rural Payments Agency calculates that there are 69 agricultural holdings of > 5 ha. lying within the Parish or straddling its boundary;
- There is no Parish specific data relating to farm diversification nor any evidence of demand;
- There are few examples of economically viable farm diversification in the Parish;
- An analysis of the history of planning applications and decisions over the last 15 years did not reveal any consistent patterns that might help guide the development of policy in the Neighbourhood Plan. In particular, the TG did not feel that the analysis demonstrated any noticeable areas of controversy, each planning application appeared to be dealt with on its merits in the light of existing Local Plan policies. The outcomes appeared, with few obvious exceptions, to strike an appropriate balance between the interest of the local economy, the protection of the environment and the interests of the applicant;
- This analysis revealed 5 cases where historic planning conditions restricting occupancy to rural workers had been lifted and 2 recent applications for new rural workers dwellings, one of which had been granted.

Survey Responses:

- 80% of respondents supported the continued use of land for agricultural purposes;
- 51% of respondents supported farm diversification;
- Many respondents valued the open space, wildlife and countryside within and around the Parish, and its rural character. Others expressed concern about the demise of agriculture and the restrictive views of parishioners on farm diversification and farm business adaptation.

Feedback from Public Events:

There was only 1 specific item of written feedback:

- Applications for Agricultural Tied Housing should be subject to a minimum term of 50 years.

b) Other Businesses/Employment

Primary/Secondary data sources

- A meeting was held with Buckinghamshire Business First and a meeting sought with WDC Planning Department but neither body was able to provide Parish specific data on the current number of light industrial units, small businesses or home-based businesses;
- Evidence gathered from representatives of the Parish Council shows a pattern of continuing loss of light industrial and small businesses units in the Parish over the last 30 – 40 years;
- Evidence from the internet and site inspections shows that the majority of such units (Ministry Wharf and the Crownfield Industrial Estate (comprising six B1 units)) are located in or near South Saunderton and are currently substantially occupied;
- 13 out of the 16 units at Ministry Wharf are owner occupied and only 3 are sub-letⁱⁱ. There is little turnover of units on which to base any assessment of demand;
- Evidence from the Clare Foundation Centre’s website indicates that c. 80% of their office units are currently let;
- Evidence relating to the supply and demand for light industrial and small business units in the central Buckinghamshire area is mixed. The Consultation draft of the HEDNA Reportⁱⁱⁱ considered the position up to 2036 and concluded that there was a theoretical surplus of employment floor space over that period. This was, however, qualified by uncertainty that all the sites identified would come forward for development. The overall conclusion was that there was likely to be a shortage of suitable land for employment use;
- The HEDNA Report also pointed to a lack of flexible space suitable for start-ups and SMEs looking to expand;
- Enquiries of one firm of commercial agents active in the local market (Duncan Bailey Kennedy) indicated that demand for space in the existing light industrial/office units in South Saunderton was good^{iv}. Brown & Merry were also contacted but deferred to Duncan Bailey Kennedy as being the more appropriate firm to advise. Units of this type evidently meet some demand for relatively low cost employment floor space within the Parish;
- The Consultation draft of the HELAA Report^v identifies one site within the Parish as suitable for future employment use and potentially developable over the next 6 – 10 years. This is the former Coal Yard site in Smalldean Lane, Saunderton which is currently the subject of an outline planning application for 5 dwellings;
- ONS Census data 2011^{vi} shows that 14% of residents worked from home;
- Evidence from the Local Enterprise Partnership^{vii} indicates that 42% of businesses in Buckinghamshire are home-based SMEs. While only 29% of businesses in a recent Buckinghamshire Business Survey reported that their broadband speeds were too slow, the LEP anticipates that the ‘...explosion of hand-held devices and rich media content ...’ is likely to have an impact on that figure.

Survey Responses:

- 80% of respondents favoured the use of brownfield and/or existing units for business use;
- 64% of respondents supported policies relating to working from home;
- 40% of respondents wished to encourage more visitors to the Parish to support local facilities;
- 40% of respondents worked from home for at least one day per week, with 29% having a business based in the Parish;
- Many respondents referred to the limitations imposed by the lack of high speed broadband and poor mobile reception.

Feedback from Public Events:

There were 2 items of written feedback:

- Recommendations – OK; and
- Support recommendations in relation to the Rural Economy and Environment.

c) **Environment**

Primary/Secondary data sources:

- Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2014 – 2019 – Chilterns Conservation Board;
- Natural England data shows two SSSIs lie within the Parish boundary – Lodge Hill (29 ha.) and Buttler's Hangings (4.3 ha.).

Survey Responses:

- 92% of respondents wished to protect views of and from the Chilterns AONB;
- 80% of respondents supported the protection of existing mature trees, hedgerows and woodland;
- 80% of respondents wished to minimise noise and other forms of pollution caused by development and transport infrastructure;
- 75% of respondents supported the preservation of key local habitats and wildlife biodiversity;
- 73% of respondents were in favour of managing the visual impact, scale and location of alternative energy installations.

Feedback from Public Events:

There were 4 items of written feedback:

- Priorities should be to keep any development as small as possible and protect AONB;

- Recommendations – OK;
- Do everything possible to protect the natural beauty and distinctive character of the Parish;
- Support recommendations in relation to the Rural Economy and Environment.

6. Analysis:

a) Land based Businesses

Agriculture and forestry are the predominant land uses in the Parish and are likely to remain so. The use of land for agricultural and forestry purposes lies largely outside the scope of planning legislation.

The fact that there are few examples of farm and land based business diversification projects within the Parish is not surprising. While the National Planning Policy Framework encourages land based businesses to diversify, the number and range of different types of diversification and the need for any diversification to fit the financial and managerial capabilities of the entrepreneur makes it impossible to define, in policy terms, what might be right in any particular set of circumstances. It is up to individual landowners to decide, where it is economic to do so, what form of diversification they wish to pursue.

The TG noted concern about creeping urbanisation of the landscape in the Parish. A contributing factor to this was felt to be the number of successful planning applications for the removal of historic agricultural ties on rural workers' accommodation. The TG considered that the rules relating to the criteria that had to be satisfied in relation to applications for Agricultural Tied Housing could be relatively easily satisfied by those who knew how the system worked. The criteria used in PPS 7 had been superseded by paragraph 55 of the NPPF (2012). This new guidance is very general in nature. The TG felt there would be merit if the Parish Council were to engage with Wycombe District Council (WDC), when the draft Local Plan is published later in the year, to influence the selection of criteria against which new applications for rural workers' dwelling are to be assessed.

Other Business/Employment

The use of brownfield sites and/or existing buildings for business purposes is encouraged in the National Policy Planning Framework and this principle underpins Local Plan policies.

The loss of light industrial and small business units in the Parish is a pattern that can be detected in many rural areas. The apparently conflicting signals about supply and demand for such units in such areas is not unusual. Any assessment of demand in an area as small as a Parish is not easy.

As a general principle, the demand for employment floor space will tend to be focussed in areas where there are centres of economic activity, critical business mass and reasonable access to transport infrastructure. Demand for employment floor

space will be correspondingly less in areas where such factors are limited. In reality, the Parish is too close to other locations with greater commercial draw and better infrastructure to be able to compete effectively. On any assessment of normal commercial drivers, South Saunderton does not score particularly highly as a location for commercial property, although further residential construction locally may itself stimulate modest additional demand.

The Parish is not included in the current ‘Connected Counties’ broadband rollout^{viii}. The funding for a second rollout is currently being modelled and will have to be reviewed and agreed by funding partners before it is finalised.

The TG felt that, while the evidence showed that the number of light industrial units and small businesses in the Parish had decreased, the number of those working from home was likely to continue to increase aided by further developments in communications technology.

The local shop and the three pubs in the Parish rely primarily on local support to sustain their economic viability. To a large extent this depends on people making individual purchasing decisions in favour of local enterprises, rather than attempting to use the planning system. The role of pubs in villages and rural areas in helping to stimulate socio-economic activity is documented in a recent econometric report by the University of York Management School (2013)^{ix}.

b) Environment

Approximately 70% of the Parish falls within the Green Belt and the Chiltern Hills AONB. The latter is covered by the AONB Management Plan^x policies. The TG considered the case for the possible extension of AONB policies into the non-AONB area of the Parish but decided against this for the purposes of the NP. Although the boundary of the AONB is not a matter for the NP, the TG noted the Chiltern Conservation Board’s view that it was possible that the boundary of the AONB might be reviewed during the timeframe of the current Management Plan.

The Lodge Hill and Buttler’s Hangings Sites of Special Scientific Interest, with their calcareous grassland, have statutory protection under the 1984 Act^{xi}. The latest Natural England condition summaries show that 100% of Lodge Hill SSSI is in an unfavourable condition but 31% is recorded as ‘recovering’, with all necessary management conditions in place; similarly, 100% of Buttler’s Hangings is in an unfavourable condition but all of that is recorded as ‘recovering’.

Farmers in the DEFRA Basic Payments Scheme are required to keep their land in ‘Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition’ and there is a range of environmental options available for farmers under the Environmental Stewardship Scheme. Farmers and land managers play a material role in the stewardship of the natural landscape and the wildlife biodiversity it sustains.

Although, the natural beauty and distinctive character of the landscape are already well protected by national and local planning policies, a general NP policy to protect the landscape and biodiversity of the whole Parish would be appropriate.

7. Recommendations:

Based on the survey results and the other supporting evidence set out above, the TG makes the following policy recommendations:

a) Land based Businesses:

- i) The Parish Council should engage with WDC to help influence the drafting of appropriate criteria for deciding planning applications for new rural workers' dwellings in the new Local Plan.
- ii) No other recommendations are made in relation to this segment.

b) Other Business/Employment:

- i) The NP should include Home Working Policies to assist in the likely future growth of micro-businesses within the Parish.
- ii) Such policies might (a) require all applications for new dwellings to include a Connectivity Statement and (b) require applications for residential conversions to business use to include provisions to protect local residential amenities and character.

c) Environment:

- i) The NP should contain policies protecting the landscape and its biodiversity consistent with the local character of the AONB and its setting.
- ii) The NP should contain policies (a) against development resulting in the loss or deterioration of important natural features, including trees and hedgerows and (b) facilitating the use of conditions and/or planning obligations to secure landscaping schemes and the replacement of trees, hedgerows or other natural features or their protection during the course of development.
- iii) The NP should contain a policy to help minimise the impacts of noise and pollution from development and infrastructure works, including through the use of conditions.
- iv) The preservation and protection of key local habitats is already covered by existing statutory designations. If the Parish Council were to consider making any funds available to assist the recovery in condition at either SSSI, an approach should be made in the first instance to Natural England to establish the correct protocols.
- v) The NP should contain a policy relating to applications relating to the installation of renewable forms of energy. The guiding principles should be to discourage large scale power generation facilities that would have a negative impact on the AONB or its setting and to encourage small scale/domestic installations, provided they have a minimal impact and are properly sited. A suggested draft policy is set out in Annex A below.

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- ⁱ Standing Up for Rural Businesses (Country Land and Business Association) January 2016.
- ⁱⁱ Evidence from Martin Chignall, Managing Director of Thames Restek UK Limited, 8 – 16 Ministry Wharf
- ⁱⁱⁱ Consultation Draft (October 2015) of the Housing and Economic Needs Assessment for WDC by Opinion Research Service and Atkins.
- ^{iv} Jim Sheldon of Duncan Bailey Kennedy.
- ^v Consultation Draft (November 2015) of the Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment for WDC.
- ^{vi} 2011 Census – Method of Travel to Work (QS701EW).
- ^{vii} Buckinghamshire Thames Valley LEP Strategic Economic Plan 2012 – 2031.
- ^{viii} Burrows R. Broadband Project Assistant Buckinghamshire Business First – February 2016.
- ^{ix} The Impact of Pubs on the Level of Socio-Economic Activity in Rural Parishes: An Econometric Study – Mount M. and Cabras I. – 2013.
- ^x Chiltern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural beauty Management Plan 2014 – 2019.
- ^{xi} The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1984.

Annex A

SUGGESTED DRAFT POLICY ON RENEWABLES

The Parish supports the low or zero carbon generation of electricity from renewable resources in appropriate locations, and the use of low carbon technologies for heat and power, provided the generation systems:

- do not detract from the AONB, its setting or Conservation Areas by reason of their cumulative visual, landscape or environmental impact;
- are in keeping with the scale, form and character of the surroundings; and
- do not significantly adversely affect the amenities of residents in the area.

Specifically, the Parish will support:

- i. the use of roof areas of commercial, farm and residential buildings as suitable locations for PV solar panel installations;
- ii. the installation of domestic and farm scale wind turbines and external air source heat pumps, which comply with this policy; and
- iii. farm scale anaerobic digestion facilities for the processing of locally produced digestible materials, provided that there is no impact (including smell) on nearby settlements.

The Parish will not support the installation of renewable energy facilities that do not comply with this policy.