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Taunton Deane Borough Council's observations on the content of the Draft Bishops Lydeard & Cothelstone Neighbourhood Plan.

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General

It is clear that the Bishops Lydeard & Cothelstone Neighbourhood Plan Group (BLCNPG) has invested much time in the production of their Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP). Officers recognise the considerable hard work that the Neighbourhood Plan Group has put into the document to-date. This is to be commended. Officers have previously made a number of suggestions on earlier drafts of the Plan relating to policy wording, content and emphasis, and evidence base requirements. A significant amount of this advice has been taken on board by the BLCNPG and has already resulted in changes to the Plan.

SEA: Taunton Deane Borough Council (The Council) commissioned Lepus Consulting Ltd to undertake an initial screening of the draft Bishops Lydeard & Cothelstone Neighbourhood Development Plan. The Lepus report notes that although there are matters which would likely require a full environmental assessment under the SEA Directive, these have been assessed in the TDBC Site Allocations and Development Management Plan (SADMP) Sustainability Appraisal (SA) which incorporates the requirements of the SEA Directive. Therefore as currently drafted Lepus have recommended that the Bishops Lydeard and Cothelstone Neighbourhood Development Plan should be screened out of the SEA process. A copy of the report is attached.

Policy Comments

The comments proposed are intended to ease the Plan's progression through examination, pass the referenda, and ultimately be a planning policy document which Taunton Deane can adopt which will amplify and support existing development plan policies.

The Bishops Lydeard & Cothelstone Neighbourhood Development Plan appears to be in conformity with national planning policy and local adopted and emerging development plans (The Core Strategy and Site Allocations and Development Management Plan).

As currently drafted Officers have no significant concerns about the content or effectiveness of the Plan. There are a small number of items which Officers suggest should be amended to strengthen and make the Plan more effective before its submission to TDBC for the regulatory consultation period and its subsequent independent examination.

Masterplanning: It was agreed at an early stage with the Neighbourhood Plan Group that the Neighbourhood Plan would include an indicative masterplan for the Council's allocation south of the village. This was to be instead of TDBC including a mini design brief in the SADMP. The Neighbourhood Plan includes a policy which builds on the TDBC SADMP Policy MAJ4, including details about cycle ways, footpaths, parking, open space uses and plots for custom-build. However; officers recommend that it could be strengthened to contain additional details on such matters as flooding, affordable housing, TPO's, density, height of dwellings, access, and highways. Officers also recommend that the accompanying illustration could contain more details. These changes would improve the effectiveness of the Plan and the allocation.

Cothelstone: The Plan covers the joint parish of Bishops Lydeard and Cothelstone, but omits any policy steer for Cothelstone. Whilst there are limited development opportunities in Cothelstone, being classed as Open Countryside in the Core Strategy, there is potential for development in line with Core Strategy Policy DM2. In addition Cothelstone has a conservation area designated in 1993 but no appraisal. An opportunity exists for the Neighbourhood Plan Group to produce a conservation appraisal for Cothelstone, in conjunction with the Council's Heritage Officer.

Evidence Base: Policy H1 and H2 aim to place an obligation on developments of 5 or more dwellings to provide single storey 1 and 2 bed housing for elderly people and 4 bed homes with extension potential for families. There is a difference between a perceived desire to have these and an identified need to provide them. It is not clear if beyond the anecdotal evidence of residents there is an objective evidence to support this. For example; the latest housing need survey for Bishops Lydeard shows only 8 families requiring 3 bed plus properties, but a significant number of couples and single people (of working age) needing 1 and 2 bed properties. In addition with the Council's SADMP requirement for developments to include adaptable Lifetime Homes and 3% of dwellings to be fully wheelchair accessible; it is likely that an element of new housing on qualifying schemes could cater for such a need.

Viability and Deliverability: There are instances where policy wording may have unintended consequences. For example the requirement in policy E2 for the marketing of the public houses for at least two years prior to change of use being permitted. The risk is that the building will remain empty, deteriorating, becoming an eyesore. In addition TDBC Policy Guidance for change of use of rural service provision and conversion of existing buildings states that

“the marketing process should last for 12 months, unless a focussed marketing strategy has been pre-agreed in writing with the local planning authority, in which case a reduced timescale may be accepted.”

Policy TR1 requires all new dwellings to include at least one charging point for electric and hybrid vehicles. The Council did not receive support to pursue this as a requirement in its SADMP therefore it has not, to our knowledge, been viability tested. To impose a financial burden on new development which has not been tested is counter paragraph 173 of The Framework.

Policy TR1 also states that transport infrastructure is to be built concurrently with new development and be operational before the relevant development is occupied. Whilst this is a perfectly understandable desire and the Council will make every effort to

ensure the timely delivery of essential infrastructure, there may be instances where this is not possible. It is likely that onsite roads, cycle routes and footpaths will be completed on the Bishops Lydeard allocation because of its size. However; off-site infrastructure, for example the cycle path from Bishops Lydeard to Cotford St Luke, Norton and Taunton, or junction improvements on the A358 may be reliant on Community Infrastructure Levy, or other sources of funding.

It should be noted that the comments above are unlikely to prevent the Plan progressing to examination and subsequent referenda.

Conclusion

As currently drafted Officers feel that the Neighbourhood Plan would meet the basic conditions set out in the Regulations. However; there are a number of items which would strengthen and make the Plan more effective; to enable it to carry full weight in planning application decisions.

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