

Thriving Towns and Villages – Stokenham Parish response to the Consultation on the Plymouth & South West Devon Joint Local Plan

Although there is much we could take issue with in the way it has been managed, the Parish accepts the premise of this Consultation, namely that the provision of additional housing in our part of the world is mandated by central government and is therefore inevitable. If development there must be, then we strongly support a planned rather than piecemeal approach. We agree that the pooled approach to a Joint Local Plan is of benefit to all partners.

The methodology of establishing the number of houses needed for the JLP is not well explained, and little evidence is produced to substantiate the numbers given, but we see no advantage in disputing the overall strategic approach. The specific requirement for areas such as ours, however, is the provision of homes principally for those who live and work in the area. Additional development only adds to the pressure on overstretched local services and highlights the inadequacy of the supporting infrastructure, which – in the case of the road system, for example – is often not amenable to improvement at a viable cost.

In response to the question of where new homes should be built, we do not seek to evade our share of the overall burden. We understand why – given the existence of a large primary school and a health centre – the Parish has been designated a Local Centre. At the same time, however, our location at the heart of the AONB severely constrains the scope for further development. Paragraphs 115 and 116 of the NPPF say that “great weight” should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in the AONB, and further state that planning permission should be refused for major developments “except in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated that they are in the public interest.” This leads us to conclude that any developments in that part of the Parish lying within the AONB (the majority) ought to be small-scale and organic in nature. Our view is reinforced by the 2013 High Court judgement in the case of *R (Mevagissey PC) v Cornwall Council*, where Mr Justice Hickinbottom held that the Council had erred in law in its interpretation of the relevant paragraphs of the NPPF. We feel it would benefit colleagues to pay close attention to that judgement, in particular to paragraphs 51 and 52, where the judge reasons that even a demonstrable need for the delivery of a significant number of affordable homes does not amount to the “exceptional circumstances” required to set aside the protections offered by the NPPF. From this it should be clear how much less likely is it that a development with fewer mitigating circumstances would pass this test. In our view it is not just likely but inevitable that major developments within the AONB are increasingly going to face legal challenge.

With regard to the specific sites proposed for Stokenham/Chillington, the consultation did not provide enough information to allow locals to understand the rationale for the choice of sites. This more than any other factor impeded proper

consideration of the document. There is already a significant body of local opposition to the proposed development at Green Park Way in Chillington, as will be seen from the numerous and overwhelmingly negative responses to the application for OPP. Chillington has had a significant amount of housing development in the last few years and villagers are unwilling to countenance any further burden until such new community has settled. The mood in Stokenham is more nuanced, with villagers not wholly against development in principle, but the choice of site left them scratching their heads in bemusement, as it had already been considered and dismissed as unsuitable by the Planning Inspectorate. The authors of the plan would have considerably strengthened their case had they bothered to explain this sudden volte-face, especially when there already exists a site, at Holbrook Terrace, which has been identified by the village as suitable, and where plans for a small-scale development with a significant affordable housing component would be likely to raise far less in the way of opposition.

It was noted that the assessment failed to allocate any employment sites within the Parish. Not only does this lead us to question the economic viability of providing significant additional housing in such a sensitive area; it also points to the conclusion that further development would be designed to provide homes in the Parish for people whose economic activity is outside the Parish, creating additional traffic pressures and leading to a proliferation of hollowed-out, dormitory-style settlements that fail any reasonable test of sustainability.

In summary, we question the viability of any major development in the Parish in view of the overarching protection offered by the AONB designation. Small-scale developments that address the needs of local communities for affordable housing with ownership covenants would be generally acceptable. We would like to see the AONB designation given full weight in District planning policies in this most sensitive area, under constant threat from coastal erosion and inland development. Finally, we cannot agree that Outline Planning Permission is an appropriate route for sites within the AONB unless the reasons for setting aside the protections offered by paragraphs 115 and 116 of the NPPF are specifically addressed within the grant of permission.

Gill Claydon, Stokenham Parish Clerk.

6th August 2016