

**NOTES OF THE SPC & SONNING & SONNING EYE SOCIETY PRESENTATION
ON NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN TUESDAY 18 FEBRUARY 7.30pm
PEARSON HALL SONNING**

PRESENT: ANTHONY FARNESE (CHAIR SPC): TREFOR FISHER: JOANNA HARVEY (ALL SPC): MIKE HART (CHAIR S&SES): JEREMY GILMORE: BOB HINE: PATRICK HAMBLIN, ALI DRIVER (ALL S&SES); 120 VISITORS.

INTRODUCTION

Tony Farnese (SPC) thanked everyone for attending the meeting and said that he was delighted with the number of people present. Mr Farnese thanked Mr Gilmore for all the work he had done in preparation for the evening. Mr Farnese then introduced himself and members of the Parish Council and the Society. Regrettably two Parish Councillors were on holiday. The two organisations had come together in order to protect Sonning from the continual threat of development. The Neighbourhood Plan was an ideal way of doing this which, if adopted, would be a legal document and dovetail into the Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) Local Plan, which was currently being updated and was out for consultation. Mr Farnese said that WBC were holding exhibitions in four locations around the Borough to provide information about the consultation and said that he strongly advised residents to attend the one closest to Sonning. This was being held in the Oakwood Centre in Woodley on 10 March 7pm to 9pm. The Parish Council had already passed through the first stage of the Neighbourhood Plan, which was to request that WBC declare the whole Parish of Sonning as a Neighbourhood Area. The next stage was to establish if there was the necessary support in the community to produce a Neighbourhood Plan, which would ensure that Sonning had a voice in its future. Looking at the agenda Mr Farnese said that Mr Fisher would talk about the threat to Sonning, Mr Gilmore would then present a solution and Mr Driver would explain the threat to the Environment. Following this there would be a short break followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Hart said that he would just like to point out the two fire exits in case of a fire.

THE THREAT

Mr Fisher said that everyone should have seen the WBC leaflet about the Local Plan Consultation which covered the period from 2026, when the current Local Plan ended, to 2036. The proposal was to build 650 houses per year (6500 in all), across the Borough during this time. The map on display showed that the Plan proposed a new Garden Town of 3,750 homes, eventually becoming 10,000, at Grazeley. The overall number of houses spread across Wokingham, Winnersh, Charvil, Twyford and Barkham amounted to 1350. There were 99 new homes and 9 Gypsy and Traveller sites proposed across Finchampstead, Hurst, Ruscombe Shinfield and Sonning. WBC considered that the 1300 additional homes required would be achieved through individual applications submitted via the planning system. Of the 99 new homes mentioned, 25 of these would be on one site in Sonning, off Glebe Gardens (5S0001 on the plan), which was already in the current Local Plan, but there were no Gypsy or Traveller sites planned for Sonning. SPC and the Society had already recommended that part the Glebe Garden area was suitable as a car park. Seven other sites had previously been considered in Sonning (5S0002: 5S0003: 5S004: 5S0005: 5S0006: 5S0007:5S0008) and one new site 5S0009. A further possibility was the Readingensians site which the Club hoped to sell in order to move to better facilities. Mr Fisher said that the level of development planned across the

Borough would be bound to affect Sonning Bridge. WBC were hoping that Grazeley would allow less pressure on parishes but there was already resistance to the Grazeley proposal, and WBC might have to relook at other sites it had originally dismissed, such as those in Sonning. Planning permission had already been granted for 13 new houses on the Golf site and there could be more. Additionally, there could be development at Readingensians and Thatched Cottage. The Golf Club development on its own would have a huge effect on Sonning. A lot of work had been put into the recent Sonning Conservation Area Assessment, but this was only an advisory document and did not have the same powers as a statutory document. The Neighbourhood Plan, if adopted, would be a legal document and assist SPC, giving them teeth when making planning recommendations. Other issues the Neighbourhood Plan might look at were sustainability and planning further beyond 2036, water and flood risks (locals knew where these were), road traffic, car parking/congestion/air quality and respecting the requirement of local businesses. Mr Fisher then handed over to Mr Gilmore, who would discuss the solution.

THE SOLUTION

Mr Gilmore said that in order to produce the Neighbourhood Plan the way to go forward would be to put a questionnaire together and circulate to every household in order to gather the views of everyone in the Parish. Parishioners would have a say in where new homes, school, shops etc should be built, the style/type of housing that was appropriate to Sonning. They could say they supported the Local Plan's view of development but could not say NO development, they could even say they wanted MORE development. Overall the Plan would need to concern planning but could make mention of traffic etc. it could promote sustainable development and transport solutions, it would help protect Sonning from opportunistic developers until 2036. Several members of the Parish Council and the Society had already met with residents of Oxfordshire Parishes who had been involved in producing their own Neighbourhood Plans, and they had received a lot of support from Oxfordshire CC. It was unclear how much help WBC would provide. The advantage of a Neighbourhood Plan was that once it had been approved it became a legal document in line with the WBC Local Plan, in fact it would give Sonning a voice. Completing a joint Neighbourhood Plan with Eye & Dunsden had been ruled out and it had been decided to include the whole of Sonning Parish rather than dividing it into specific sections. The first stage had been completed and the next stage would involve a lot of leg work in gathering evidence to produce a vision. Once a draft plan was in place it would need to go out for consultation and, if agreed, it could then go to WBC and finally to an external examiner. Then a referendum would take place, this required at least 50% of those voting to accept the document. Funding was available, WBC were obliged to provide a grant of £9,000. A side benefit of having a Neighbourhood Plan was that 25% of any CIL would go to the Parish rather than the 15% currently received from WBC through the scheme. Currently WBC charged £365 per sq. metre to developers (but not for householder plans), Shinfield and Arborfield and Barkham had successfully agreed on their neighbourhood Plans and many other parishes were in the process of development including Eye and Dunsden, Hurst, Twyford and Ruscombe. The process would take a year or two, would need help from the community and, having been notified WBC had to work with Sonning to ensure that the Sonning neighbourhood Plan was taken into account within the Local Plan. It would be important to decide what was important to the community, housing/safeguarding heritage and history/ecology and landscape/traffic/ local business/ local services. Many Neighbourhood Plans had been approved and published so it would be helpful to copy from these, the Oxfordshire contacts would provide

spreadsheets for surveys, which would assist in producing the final document. Mr Gilmore then handed over to Mr Driver who would present the Environmental View.

ENVIRONMENTAL VIEW

Mr Driver said that he was the Environment adviser to the Society and for him there were four key areas. The first was accumulating evidence, then enhance, eco systems and influencing planning.

Evidence. Mr Driver said that Sonning was a Conservation Area with a schedule of Listed Buildings, it had a Habitat Survey, commissioned in 1995 with a lot of wildlife data which was still relevant.

Enhance. Mr Driver said there was an opportunity to improve the area for wildlife, to connect areas together by creating corridors. Opportunities were there such as the old Sewage works behind Thames Street, which still belonged to the Environment Agency. Potential for a new LNR.

Plans to manage land for flood risk, managing run off from development in the village to avoid flooding onto the lower levels by the river. Some gardens were particularly special for wildlife and Sonning was lucky to have areas such as King George V Field and the Wharf and benefitted from large numbers of trees, although many had now gone. Plans should be put in place to ensure trees were retained.

Planning Considerations. These should be built into the Plan and consideration given to the knock-on effect of planning on others. If Readingensians were to be sold the Club could move to a site opposite the existing one and give rise to pressure to build on the adjoining land. The Plan should encourage renewable energy such as solar wind etc. and designate valued landscapes. Unbelievably the Thames was not designated, nor was Sonning Cutting. Network Rail had denuded a two-mile section of the embankment and only local action had prevented it doing more. New development should be carbon neutral. Most importantly the green gaps between Sonning and adjoining parishes should be maintained. The recent proposals included large scale development which would have reduced the 800metre gap between Sonning and Charvil to 600 metres. The next stage would be Sonning becoming part of a large Sonning/Charvil/Twyford Town. The western boundary was even closer to Thames valley Park so it was critical that these gaps were maintained. To the North the River was the boundary and to the South the railway line was, both offered some protection.

Mr Gilmore thanked Mr Driver and said there would be a short 10-minute interval after which a Question & Answer session would commence.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Mr Hart opened the session by saying that everyone had heard the presentation, and everyone was now invited to ask questions.

Q1. What happened to green belt land in private ownership?

A Mr Driver said that these could be covered by writing protection into the Plan. Mr Hart said that Sonning was lucky to have so many sports facilities which could be protected in the Plan.

Q2 How much work was involved in producing the Plan?

A2 Mr Hart said there was a lot of work involved but Sonning were lucky to have examples of other Neighbourhood Plans to refer to. The main report was often six or seven pages long. If there was a need for a detailed report on one aspect a separate survey would need to be carried out.

Q3 Was this why funding was required?

A3 Mr Hart said no, funding was required to cover printing and other expense. A major survey, such as traffic, would require the involvement of a consultant and be very much more expensive.

Q4 Considering how much more traffic flowed through the village, did WBC have any responsibility for traffic.

A4 Mr Hart said that traffic was the single main issue that united everyone. The Neighbourhood Plan would cover 10 years and there was a need to plan beyond this.

Q5 Do WBC do anything to relieve the problem.

A5 Mr Farnese said that, as had been mentioned earlier, WBC Highways officers working on traffic plans were unaware that there was a Bridge at Sonning. There had been suggestions of 'residents parking only' in some areas. This was for the residents to organise and they would need to establish that the majority of residents in that road supported the idea and then they should go to WBC. The main problem would be policing it. Staff from local businesses were expecting to park in Sonning streets.

Q6 Couldn't the local MP get involved.

A6 Mr Hart said that Mrs May (MP) was fully supportive but the main problem was the resistance of Oxfordshire Council's who considered a third bridge to be a threat to their rural villages. At the recent meeting with Oxon residents the Chairman of SODC had shown a more supportive attitude but he had lost his seat at the last election.

Q7 The main problem was parking, couldn't the police say no parking.

A7 Mr Hart said that he agreed that parking was a problem. Mr Farnese said that he was concerned that certain areas of the village were becoming car parks. Again, policing, was the problem, it had to be carried out by officials and could not be left to residents to approach offenders.

Q8 Regarding the proposed development behind Little Glebe, would residents have a say in what type of houses were to be built.

A8 Mr Farnese said that any proposal would need to go through the planning system, and everyone would have the right to comment at that time.

Q9 Could Sonning insist that any housing plans should only be approved if enough parking/traffic solutions were included.

A9 Mr Hart said that the location off Glebe Gardens was already in the existing Local Plan (up to 2026) and it was possible to identify preferences in the Neighbourhood Plan. Mr Gilmore said that the community could be asked what their preferences were for the Glebe Gardens/Little Glebe development. Mr Hine said that parking provision could be included in

the neighbourhood Plan and the possibility of accessing it from an alternative route. Mr Farnese said that he would encourage everyone to go to the exhibition in Woodley where they could ask questions of the officers.

Q10 What would happen to the Readingensians site if the Club moved, would it go for housing development.

A10 Mr Farnese said that the Club had applied for planning permission for an all-weather pitch which had been approved. However, the owners of the grounds, Reading School, had refused to let this go ahead so they would need to agree any future use of the grounds. The School would need to be asked for their views. A visitor stated that an all-weather court wasn't practical for rugby as the surface was too harsh.

Q11 What about the Gypsy Traveller site off the A4

Q11 The Clerk said that the lead officer overseeing the current WBC Local Plan had confirmed in an email that this site had been assessed as unsuitable. In addition, there was an Enforcement action underway that required the owners to vacate the site and this was currently going through the courts.

Q12 How many houses would Sonning be expected to take.

A12 Mr Fisher said that he had asked if there was a formula for allocating a certain number (10%/20%) of houses to each parish, The answer had been no. Mr Hine said that one of the benefits of having the Neighbourhood Plan was that it would give Sonning the power to say what it wanted. The Neighbourhood Plan would tie into the WBC Local Plan and become a Statutory Power and would be classed as a Neighbourhood Development Plan.

Q13 What were the priorities.

A13 Mr Hine said that it would be important to ensure that Sonning retained what it already had. Mr Farnese said that currently any planning application in Sonning was sent to SPC for comments. Under planning terms there was no mention of drains etc, although SPC did often express concerns about the infrastructure, but to no effect. Drains in Sonning were all Victorian, beautifully built but not able to cope with modern demands, particularly the use of wet wipes which were responsible for blocking the main drain in Thames Street to the extent that raw sewage regularly overflowed into resident's gardens. Mr Driver said that trees were important and Sonning needed to stand up and be counted.

Q14 Did anyone know what the University planned to do about their dairy herd.

A14 Mr Driver said not, but there was a bill going through parliament that would reward farmers who changed their ways to be more environmentally friendly. It was of course possible that the University would look to sell the farm.

Q15 A resident of Sonning Lane said that he was concerned about rubbish in the ditches and speeding traffic. Cameras might offer an answer.

A15 Mr Farnese said that WBC did have a strategy on fly tipping, which should be reported to them. Response times would depend on the urgency (dangerous materials would be given a high priority) and ditches should be maintained. Speeding was something that SPC were working on. They had a Speed Monitoring Device (SID) with a smiley face outside the school

in Pound Lane and another more mobile SID, which was currently in Thames Street. These devices did display the speed vehicles were travelling at, monitor speeds and the time of day they were occurring. Speeds of up to 80 mph had been recorded outside RBCS. These statistics were being sent to WBC Highways on a regular basis. SPC had also been asking WBC to improve the crossing outside Sonning School, unfortunately WBC considered the crossing to be safe as there had been no reported accidents. Mr Fisher was now qualified to be part of a Speed Watch team (3 trained people) and a Watch would be undertaking in Sonning soon. The results would go to the police and WBC. Mr Fisher said that over 4000 vehicles travelled along Pound Lane every day in both directions. Charvil Lane was shown to have 3500 vehicles and Sonning Lane 2000. Provisional numbers in Thames Street showed 8000. It was hoped to extend the 20mph zones.

Q 16 Many of the pavements in Sonning were very narrow, in poor condition or none-existent and vehicles did not slow down when passing pedestrians. Mr Fisher said that the Speed Watch results showed vehicles travelling over 24mph in a 20mph zone the details would go to the police. If offenders were recorded several times their details would go onto a register. If anyone saw a HGV lorry they should report it to Mr Fisher who would report it to West Berks Trading Standards, who could take action. It would be important to supply as much information as possible, registration number, dates, times etc.

There being no more questions Mr Hart thanked everyone and said that it was heartening to see such a show of interest. Now that people knew what was involved it would be important for volunteers to offer their help with working parties. It was important that all parts of the village should be represented in order to produce a truly co-ordinated Plan that represented everyone, and a lot of work would need to be done to cover traffic calming and the environment along with development.

Mr Pascall asked to say a few words about the Scarecrow event during which funds would be raised to support village organisations, including the Neighbourhood Plan. There would be an open meeting in the Hall on 17 March for anyone interested in taking part.

Mr Hart said that the Society was now holding Film Nights in the Hall, the next of which would take place on Tuesday 25 February. The film to be shown was Aftermath. Additionally, the Society held regular and interesting talks in the Hall.

Mr Gilmore said that all the information could be found at Sonning.info

The meeting finished at 9.10pm