



PITSTONE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN ~ 'ROADMAP' A SHORT GUIDE TO HOW IT WORKS AND WHAT IT DOES

This note explains why we need a Neighbourhood Plan, what it does, and how the lengthy and formal document that we are now consulting you about seeks to achieve this. It has been prepared by the Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) team, a group of about local 30 volunteers who have been working on this project since long before last Christmas. The note aims to assist your understanding of the Plan itself, and to allow you to make fully-informed comments as part of the consultation process that is currently being undertaken.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Why we need a Neighbourhood Plan

There is an acute housing shortage in the UK, and District Councils are under massive pressure from central Government to achieve stringent quotas of new housing stock. There is a “statutory presumption” in favour of sustainable development: what this means is that, unless it can be positively shown that a proposed development is not sustainable, district planning authorities (in our case Aylesbury Vale District Council) effectively have no choice but to approve applications and grant planning permission.

This in turn means that a lot of the open countryside in and around our village is potentially at risk of aggressive development schemes, of the kind being promoted by Gladman in Ivinghoe (and, now, Cheddington), unless local planning policies are in place to moderate the type and extent of development that can take place. Our corner of Buckinghamshire is especially vulnerable because there is no “local plan” in place – the emerging Vale of Aylesbury Plan was ‘thrown out’ last year – and therefore with no Neighbourhood Plan in place

either, there is no counterbalance to what profit-motivated developers might seek to achieve.

It is therefore imperative that we as a village seek to put a robust, justifiable Plan of our own in place as soon as we can. We are already facing the prospect of an unwanted planning scheme (ironically from Buckinghamshire County Council and AVDC themselves) in relation to the land opposite The Crescent. The quicker we get a Plan in place, the quicker we are able to control what development does take place in our village. But it's not a short process: the consultation exercise that we are currently undertaking is the first of four 6-week steps that have to take place, sequentially, before a Neighbourhood Plan can come into force.

1.2. What is a Neighbourhood Plan?

A Neighbourhood Plan is a planning document that sets down local planning policies, which dictate what development may take place and what is to be obtained in return for it. It has real legal force – once in place it carries the same weight, when AVDC consider any planning application, as their own Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan (anticipated to come into force mid 2016). Indeed, until then, it will be the only thing which dictates local planning policy. The real legal 'meat' of our Plan is contained in Section 4: Land Use Policies. This is where you will find, in somewhat legalistic language, the real crux of what the Plan does. A later section of this note looks in more detail at those policies and what they do.

A Neighbourhood Plan can't be used as a means of saying "no further development". In order to get the other benefits of having a Plan in place – such as the ability to manage where development goes, what it looks like, and what we as a community get in return – it has to be sufficiently supportive of development. There is no magic number here as to how many new houses are enough, and there are no cast-iron rules about how a Plan should show that it supports development. Our proposed Plan therefore has to strike a difficult balance, without a crystal ball, to support enough development for AVDC to approve it, but not so much that we end up over-developing our village.

1.3 Steps involved in getting a Plan in place

These are the steps that we now have to go through, in order to get our Plan in place.

(i) Public consultation

Consultation has to last for a minimum of six weeks. It is a formal legal process. We are required to bring the Plan to the community's attention and to take due

account of feedback received. This latter step is the essence of ‘proper’ consultation. It does not mean we have to alter the Plan to take account of all feedback; but we do have to take a justifiable stance as to whether to change it or not, to reflect what people have said back to us.

The Plan is then submitted to AVDC: that is why the document, on which we are now consulting, has been termed the “pre-submission” version of our proposed Plan.

(ii) Publicity

AVDC start by publicising our Plan for six weeks. Again, their approach is to post it on their website. They recently started this process with Cheddington’s Neighbourhood Plan, which was publicised on 20 May and can be found at <http://www.aylesburyvaledc.gov.uk/planning-policy/>.

(iii) Examination

After that a Plan proceeds to “examination” by an independent examiner who essentially checks that it conforms with central Government planning guidance (and, in particular, the National Planning Policy Framework). By this stage the Plan’s progress is well-and-truly out of our hands but one can expect this stage to take in the region of six weeks as well.

All being well the examiner will recommend that the Plan proceeds to referendum (possibly with some changes, possibly in the form in which it was submitted for examination). This is where you come in again!

(iv) Referendum

This is the final stage, where the village votes on whether to adopt the proposed Plan. A simple majority of those turning out (i.e. one vote in excess of 50%) is sufficient to give it full legal force. It is AVDC who are obliged to operate the referendum (which will take the same form as voting at the recent elections) and they also have to give six weeks’ notice of it to the electorate in the village.

1.4 How long will this take in our case?

Consultation runs until 13 July, and then a period of time (generally in the region of four weeks) is needed to take due account of feedback received and make any necessary changes to the Plan. It is envisaged that the “submission” version of the Plan will then be tabled for approval at the Parish Council meeting in early September.

The publicity and examination process (steps (ii) and (iii) above) will then collectively take in the region of three months, meaning we can expect this stage to be concluded at some point during December.

And finally, AVDC will then pick a date for the referendum to be held, and give (at least) six weeks' notice of this. The referendum will take the same form as the recent local elections and, in particular, will be a legal process run in accordance with strict democratic guidelines.

Assuming the Plan is approved by a majority of those voting, AVDC are required to 'adopt' it: this is the point at which it obtains full legal force, and can really shape the way in which development takes place within our community.

2. THE PLAN ITSELF

The real substance of the Plan is in Section 4 which sets down its Land Use Policies. However it is probably more instructive to consider it from the start, to give a real flavour for how the document has been put together and why it's therefore doing what it does.

Please read the Foreword first. This explains what the Parish Council and the NDP team see as being important for Pitstone in the future. It sets out our collective plans and aspirations and desires, for your village and your community.

2.1 Section 1: Introduction

This section contains a lot about the history of our Parish and the environmental constraints that exist to any development which might take place. It then goes on to explain how all this historical and environmental background interacts with local planning policies, and sets out the most important 'saved' policies from the Aylesbury Vale District Local Plan of 2004: these are still in force and will remain so until the new Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan takes effect next year (or until such earlier time as they are superseded by specific policies of our own Plan).

2.2 Section 2: Community Views

This part of the document essentially rehearses what you told us at the two Engagement Days that were held in March. It also refers to other aspects of community engagement that have taken place as a part of the work of the NDP team's four specialist sub-groups.

It is very important to remember here that the two Engagement Days were only one small part of a much wider community engagement ‘piece’ that has been ongoing since the start of the year under the auspices of the NDP team’s four specialist sub-groups. Local employers have been surveyed, numerous local interest groups have been spoken to at considerable length, and meetings have taken place with all significant local land-owners.

Furthermore, it is worth bearing in mind that community engagement has in turn been but a part of the overall work of those sub-groups. Site assessments, transport planning analysis, environmental investigations, discussions with local authorities, facilities and infrastructure planning, assessing the local education situation and comprehensively reviewing the other ‘land assets’ that the village has, are just a few examples of the very considerable amount of work that has been going on since long before Christmas.

2.3 Section 3: Vision and Objectives

This section of the Plan rehearses the “vision” for Pitstone that emerged from Visioning Workshops held in November 2014, as re-directed or confirmed by the subsequent work of the sub-groups referred to above. It then translates this into a series of bullet-point objectives for our Neighbourhood Plan, which essentially form a useful one-page summary of what the Plan is ultimately seeking to achieve.

2.4 Section 4: Land Use Policies

The introductory text is self-explanatory and it is worth concentrating our efforts on the actual Policies, which as previously mentioned are the real crux of the proposed Neighbourhood Plan.

(i) Policy 1: Settlement Boundary

The location of the Settlement Boundary is one of our key weapons in preventing unwanted outward expansion of our village. We have already designated our Neighbourhood Area (being the entire area to which the Neighbourhood Plan relates) as Pitstone Parish. Within that Area we can set a Settlement Boundary. Doing so gives tacit approval to residential development within the Boundary, and designates any land falling outside the Boundary as “countryside use only”.

This part of the Plan explains more about the Settlement Boundary, and the first maps in Section 6 show where it is proposed that it goes. The maps go on to show the sites that the Plan is supporting for residential development: Rushendon Furlong, Farriers Corner, the Pitstone Development Area (PDA) site

which forms an L-shape around the Memorial Hall, and Vicarage Road. The remainder of the maps in Section 6 all show the Settlement Boundary too, in order to put the other things they illustrate into geographic perspective.

(ii) Policy 2: PDA Site

This sets down a development policy for the PDA Site. It is not necessary to implement a Land Use Policy in relation to every parcel of land that the Plan would like to see developed, but it is possible (and it gives us the important ability to exert influence over what then goes on that plot).

This policy seeks to implement the remaining part of the Pitstone Comprehensive Plan of 2005, i.e. what was originally the final part of the Castlemead development. It requires the inclusion of various community facilities first set out in the Comprehensive Plan – e.g. pub/restaurant and nursery/pre-school, as well as paths, play areas, etc. – as part of any planning application submitted for the site.

(iii) Policy 3: six-acre 'horse field'

The six-acre field next to the Pavilion Site, currently used for grazing horses, is designated in the Plan as being for educational use only. The Plan would support (for example) the development of a new school or the re-siting of the existing one, but prevents the land in question being developed for any other purpose. Of course it does not compel the owner of the land to put an educational facility on the site, but it does restrict the other uses to which that land may be put.

(iv) Policy 4: Pitstone Green Business Park

This straightforward policy prevents land that currently forms part of the Business Park being used for anything other than employment purposes. Specifically it guards against any 'change of use' application for that land (and, in particular, the un-developed site designated for use as a Data Hub that sits between the Safran factory and Garrard Windows on Westfield Road).

(v) Policy 5: Areas of Special Landscape Value

It is anticipated that this policy is self-explanatory: it protects against the development of, and the loss of important views across, important pieces of open countryside. It focuses on four, each of which are coloured blue on the relevant map in Section 6:

- land south of Marsworth Road and land east of Vicarage Road across and beyond the windmill (naturally it doesn't impose a policy on National Trust land);
- land either side of the far end of Vicarage Road, which has long been designated as an Area of Attractive Landscape in AVDC's own policies;
- land north and east of the Chequers Lane to Rushendon Furlong footpath, both for the views and in order to provide an important buffer against 'coalescence creep' towards Ivinghoe; and
- Quarry One, to the eastern (left-hand) side of Westfield Road as you exit the village in the direction of the Upper Icknield Way and Tring station.

(vi) Policy 6: Design Principles

This is self-explanatory, and sets down parameters of design 'look and feel' with which any residential development must comply in order for the Plan to be supportive of it.

(vii) Policy 7: Local Green Spaces

Along with Policy 1 (Settlement Boundary), this policy provides very important protection against loss of our most valued open spaces. Designating a piece of land as Local Green Space gives it significant additional protection, equivalent to being in the Green Belt. This is therefore a means of ensuring that the open space that is most important to a community is protected.

Parcels of land cannot be designated as Local Green Spaces on a random or scattergun basis. It is only land which meets strict qualifying criteria in the National Planning Policy Framework that can qualify. In order to be viable for designation, land must be:

- in "reasonably close proximity" to the community it serves;
- "demonstrably special" to a local community and it must hold "particular local significance"; and
- "local in character" rather than an "extensive tract" of land.

The sites which it is proposed that the Plan designates are those, chosen from a vast number (all of which have been considered in detail by one of the specialist NDP sub-groups), which it is felt are of most benefit to our community.

(viii) Policy 8: Community Facilities

This short policy places an additional layer of protection upon any buildings or other community assets that the Parish Council chooses, independently from the

Neighbourhood Plan process, to register for a 'Community Right to Bid' (explained in more detail in relation to Section 5 below).

2.5 Section 5: Implementation

Whilst there are a lot of things that a Neighbourhood Plan can do, there are a lot of things it can't. Our Plan will sit alongside AVDC's own planning policies and hence it can only set down an enforceable policy about something that is otherwise within AVDC's gift.

Many things, by contrast, are within the remit of other authorities such as Buckinghamshire County Council (probably the best example being traffic and highways). In respect of these matters our Neighbourhood Plan can only be aspirational: what we would like to happen, rather than what we can ensure happens. The exception concerns matters (such as highways) that are consequential on a planning-related matter having effect (e.g. access / road layout configuration), which our Plan can properly address.

This section of the Plan sets out those aspirational matters that we would like to see happen. It looks at traffic management policies, infrastructure projects, and assets of community value that we might like to register under the Community Right to Bid (i.e. to get 'first refusal' if they are ever up for sale).

There are, finally, a variety of matters that are covered by neither Section 4 or Section 5 of the proposed Plan. Outside of our defined settlement boundary, much of the land is not commented upon or explicitly protected (by our Plan). There are however a wide range of existing policies and protections in place, each of which are considered sufficient to fully protect the of land in question:

- the 'saved' policies of the Aylesbury Vale District Local Plan referred to under Section 1;
- the AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and CWS (County Wildlife Site) and aspirational SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) designations; and
- the protection arising by virtue of land being owned by The National Trust;

are to name just a few.

2.6 Section 6: Policy Maps

And finally, we find here the policy maps which illustrate the Settlement Boundary, the location of the land that is supported for development (as referred to in Section 3), and that which is being made subject to Land Use Policies (see

Section 4) be they Areas of Special Landscape Value, or designated as Local Green Space, or otherwise.

3. WHAT NEXT?

We hope this 'digest' gives you a greater understanding of what our Plan is seeking to achieve and how it all fits together. We hope too that it will allow you to make better-informed comments as part of the ongoing consultation exercise.

Do please come along to one of our Launch Events (Saturday 6 June and Sunday 7 June at 3pm in the Memorial Hall) to hear further thoughts about the Plan, to discuss the important question of a pub for our village, and to generally share a glass of wine and a few words with members of the NDP team whose hard work over the past six months has made all this possible, and which has turned our Plan from a distant dream into an impending reality.

Thank you.