

Planning for the Future Consultation
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
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1st October 2020

Planning for the Future Consultation – response from Bredenbury Group Parish Council

This letter is submitted by Bredenbury, Wacton, and Grendon Bishop Group Parish Council (the Parish Council) in response to the Planning for the Future Consultation.

Background

Bredenbury is a large, rural group Parish in north-east Herefordshire. The Parish Council has a long-standing interest in planning issues and fully embraced the Localism agenda with the decision to progress a Neighbourhood Plan. The Neighbourhood Plan has been grounded in extensive community engagement, based on proportionate but robust evidence and fully reflects the unique characteristics of our Place and the aspirations of our residents. The Plan is at an advanced stage and following strong endorsement from the Examiner earlier this year, is awaiting a date for the referendum. We are therefore anxious to ensure that going forward, our Plan will have full legal status and that our community can continue to have a major influence over what happens in our local area.

The Parish Council recognises that there are elements of the English planning system that would benefit from reform in order to make it work faster and more responsive to the needs of a modern society. But we are deeply concerned that the proposals contained in the White Paper will significantly diminish local democracy and accountability and the role of local places in delivering high-quality, sustainable, community-led development.

The Parish Council Response

Our detailed response to those elements of the White Paper proposals most relevant to our area is set out below in a series of 12 key points:

A. Neighbourhood Plans

1. The proposals to retain Neighbourhood Plans as a key element of the reformed system are strongly welcomed. Neighbourhood planning has arguably been one of the most transformative community powers to come from the 2011 Localism Act, and it is essential that the powers for communities to prepare Neighbourhood Plans are maintained. Crucially, Neighbourhood Plans should have enough breadth and weight – specifically including the ability to allocate sites for development and to

contain a suite of policies to address a range of planning issues, if they are to continue to play their role in creating sustainable places which people are proud to call home.

2. We note the references to Neighbourhood Plans focusing on very small areas, and the opportunity to develop design codes, guides and development parameters. Our Neighbourhood Plan already provides detailed guidance which will ensure that new development is both responsive to the character of our area and is flexible enough to provide opportunities for innovation. The use of binding design codes could be overly inflexible, stifle innovation and result in 'standard' designs. They should be entirely discretionary.
3. The White Paper references to the wider use of digital tools is somewhat ambiguous, but techniques which improve the accessibility of Plans including technology which enables a better understanding of the local impact of development should be welcomed. However, the increased emphasis on digital media as the primary vehicle for community engagement should be treated with some caution. We have found that many households and individuals in rural areas either do not have internet access due to network limitations, or are not comfortable in using it; preferring the use of traditional 'hard copies' of documents and face to face meetings instead.

B. Local Plans and Development Management

4. The White Paper includes changes which would simplify Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plan land categories into three zones (growth, renewal and protected) in order to speed up the process for identifying potential building land. The simplified three zone system is overly crude and without a more sophisticated approach involving sub-division or the ability to have overlapping designations, the approach would be insufficient to replace the range of existing Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plan designations currently required by national guidance; each of which has a distinct policy approach. For example, within a typical village settlement, Neighbourhood Plans have the ability to identify important views, areas of open space, woodland, important landscape areas, local heritage assets and wildlife habitats that under the proposed approach could be overlain by a simple 'Renewal area' designation that could erode the ability to safeguard these features and the unique characteristics of a settlement.
5. The introduction of prior approval type processes through the further expansion of permitted development rights has the potential to significantly erode the ability of the local authority to control development and the ability of the Parish Council and the community to engage in shaping development proposals as they come forward. In our area, it is often the smaller scale and incremental forms of development which over time can change the much-valued overall character of settlements and the

surrounding countryside. These changes to the prior approval process are not supported.

6. The replacement of locally distinctive policies with standard national policies would be a major detrimental change to the existing system. While there may be scope for the guidance contained in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) to be given more weight and potentially in a 'policy' format, providing greater clarity on issues such as energy efficiency standards, or nationally described space standards, it is paramount for local authorities and Neighbourhood Plan bodies to retain the discretion to adopt locally distinctive variants which add a local layer of detail reflective of specific issues and priorities.
7. We are strongly opposed to the proposed extreme shortening of the Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plan preparation timetables and removal of key stages which provide opportunities for local authorities and Neighbourhood Plan bodies to conduct and respond to public consultation, which forms the core of democratic accountability in the Plan-making process. In particular, it is noted that the first time that communities will be consulted on actual Local Plan proposals is at stage 3, which is the same stage the plan is submitted to the Secretary of State for Examination. This risks the process being viewed by communities as a *fait accompli*. Equally, stage 3 part (ii) suggests that the public can request changes to the plan. It is assumed that developers will also have a say at this stage, but it is unclear how the Inspector would view either of these proposed changes. This could ultimately result in a Plan that is substantially different to the one submitted and not really 'Local'.
8. We recognise the desire to simplify the evidence requirements for Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plans. In particular, the evidence requirements associated with the Habitats Regulation Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment are onerous and a new system would be welcomed. However, any replacement will need to be sufficiently rigorous to ensure that the environmental impact of development proposals can be judged against other proposals on a fair and consistent basis. It is also critical that policies and proposals should continue to be evidence based - for example the preparation of a local Characterisation Study to support our Neighbourhood Plan has been commended by Historic England and supports a range of policies and proposals contained in the Plan itself.

C. Fast-track for Beauty and Design Codes

9. Improving the quality of new development is a key priority for our community. As set out above, our Neighbourhood Plan already provides a comprehensive but flexible suite of policies which if given full weight, will help to achieve the objectives of the White Paper. We believe that Design Codes should be entirely discretionary in nature.

10. The proposals around the fast track for beauty give rise to significant concerns. It is difficult to see how we can set out pre-established principles of what beautiful design looks like as this will often vary dependant upon the building's setting. A "fast track for beauty" should rely on the local authority and local community having confidence in the design proposal for a site which genuinely supports their aspirations and policies. The planning system should be efficient but it should also enable full scrutiny and engagement in assessing development proposals which, once approved will impact on local communities for decades to come.

D. Planning Contributions

11. We note the challenges and inconsistencies in the manner that s106 Agreements and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) have been used in England. However, where used effectively these mechanisms are essential in providing for local infrastructure which is essential to support new development. We are concerned that the nationally set Infrastructure Levy will be disconnected from what is actually required; potentially leaving a funding gap that would need to be met by the local authority or Parish Council.
12. Instead, we recommend that there may be scope for combining s106 Agreements and CIL into a single levy and that this should be made mandatory for all forms of development but set at the local level. It is critical that a proportion of the new levy continues to be ring-fenced for Parish Councils in order to provide appropriate levels of funding to deliver wider Neighbourhood Plan priorities.

We trust that this representation will be given full consideration.

For and on behalf of Bredenbury Group Parish Council

V H Hancock

Vicky Hancock – Parish Clerk

cc: Bill Wiggin MP

John Harrington, Ward Councillor, Hampton Ward

Lynda Wilcox, CEO HALC