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WIRKSWORTH CIVIC SOCIETY COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT DERBYSHIRE DALES LOCAL PLAN OF APRIL 2016

Civic Society representatives attended the public meeting in Wirksworth on 11th April 2016.

An extraordinary meeting of the Society Committee was held on 25th April to consider the draft plan and the following comments were formulated:

HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

It is noted that Wirksworth is considered to be in the top category of the three level settlement-hierarchy, ie the market town category, but this is an unhelpful simplification if applied without regard to factors such as the availability of town centre parking, school capacity, sewage infrastructure etc. Also it is presumed one reason for market towns being at the top of the settlement hierarchy relates to a relatively high level of access to public transport. The withdrawal of subsidies from certain bus routes could reduce the sustainability of Wirksworth to accommodate a large increase in housing without adverse impact on car numbers and parking or access to wider support services for those without private transport options.

It is noted that the task of the planning authority in meeting the government's housing target of 6,440 dwellings is made extremely challenging by virtue of the fact that 50% of the district lies within the Peak District National Park, which is protected from new development on any significant scale.

The Society was impressed by the plea from the floor at the public meeting, by a resident of the national park, arguing that it is harmful for the families who live in the Park for their children and subsequent generations to not have the opportunity to live in the area because of this restriction. The Society believes a modest level of extra house building should be allowed within the Park.

The Society was pleased to hear from the Leader and officers of the Council that there is a strong commitment to protect the special character of Wirksworth.

The existence of a relatively large number of small independent shops is a strong part of this character. Many are of marginal commercial viability and therefore particularly vulnerable to impacts such as the arrival of out-of-town or town-margin retailers. It is hoped the Plan will prevent this happening.

The growth of housing has the potential of benefitting the town in supporting the local shops and keeping comprehensive school pupil numbers up. However if new residents shop predominantly out of town and place their children in schools elsewhere the dis-benefits will outweigh any benefits.

Wirksworth has significantly less town centre car parking provision than the other market towns in the District. This is a major problem. The protection of existing town centre car parking provision is therefore of the highest priority and the Society hopes the Plan will make provision for some new town centre parking. The only undeveloped site of any size relatively near the town centre is the heavy goods vehicle depot in Coldwell Street. The Society believes the Council should give serious

consideration to zoning this for parking and helping the business find an alternative base to make this possible, over the 20 years of the Plan.

The Society notes the draft Plan identifies three principle sites for new housing.

MIDDLE PEAK QUARRY Ref HC2(ff)

This is a proposal new to the community and needs very careful consideration. The scale of the area identified in the draft Plan, relative to the size of the town, is such that it merits a 'master plan' of its own, with its own design code, and requires the skills of expert urban designers plus a stand alone public consultation process. It is hoped the Council will be able to negotiate successfully with the owners to secure the skills required as well as a commitment to a thorough public consultation process. It is noted that the initial housing number identified for this location is 220 but clearly with extensive remediation the 56.68ha site is capable of accommodating a significantly greater number. The Society believes that the total number should be limited by an assessment of the number which, if exceeded within the plan period, would damage the character of the town - which the Council has stated publicly it is committed to preserving.

It may be helpful to consider the 56.68ha site in three zones: The former Dale Quarry or Big Hole Zone, the Middleton Road Zone and the Middleton by Wirksworth Zone.

The Society noted that the owners are willing to agree to the extinguishing of their mineral planning permissions. However there are outstanding conditions on these permissions which need to be complied with - most importantly the work needed to fulfil the promise to create a park from the former Dale Quarry by land-modelling to create a relatively level surface some 30'-0" below the quarry edge, thereby creating a wind protected landscaped environment with public access.

No development should be allowed in this zone.

It is understood the Middleton Road zone will accommodate the initial 220 dwellings.

The northernmost part of the former quarry relates more to Middleton by Wirksworth than Wirksworth. Development in this area should be planned as an extension of Middleton by Wirksworth, thereby assisting in developing and underpinning community facilities in Middleton, such as a village shop.

The master plan for the whole site should provide the opportunity for some self build development.

Employment uses for some parts of the former quarry would help to meet sustainability objectives, but this may require some subsidy to make take up a reality.

Connectivity is a major issue.

The opportunity to create pedestrian links to the town centre via The Dale and Greenhill needs to be explored. There is a danger that development in the former quarry could be an enclave, separate from the town, if a pedestrian infrastructure is not put in place.

The opportunity for the creation of a new road access, other than off Middleton Road needs to be explored, possibly across Middleton Road and through the other site identified for mixed use, to the west of Cromford Road.

The T junction of Middleton Road and Cromford Road will need remodelling but the Society would strongly oppose any proposal to create a roundabout here, which would have severe negative impacts upon the character and appearance of this entry to the town centre.

MIDDLETON ROAD/CROMFORD ROAD Ref HC2 (ee)

The identification for part of this site to be set aside for the development of a new combined infant and junior school obviously reduces the number of dwellings which can be accommodated.

Mixed use is supported.

The western most part of the site is a landscape of considerable historic interest and character, having narrow fields made up of combined medieval strips, with dry-stone boundary walls. It also contains evidence of lead mining activity and other industrial archaeology. Any development needs to respect this strong landscape character. The westernmost part of the site might make a good location for allotments.

EMPLOYMENT DEVELOPMENT

The previous comments on the major housing sites include some comments on employment uses.

PORTER LANE/CROMFORD ROAD

The Society strongly objects to the proposal to extend the existing employment site northwards, beside Cromford Road as this would visually damage the eastern entry to the town. Much better would be an extension westward, beside the new road.

A MAJOR OMISSION IN THE DRAFT PLAN: THE MEADOWS

It is understood that the County Council's recent policy decision to remove protection of The Meadows as a 'notified site' for the development of a new combined infant school came too late for the draft plan to include a new policy for the site. This needs correction.

The Meadows may be thought of as a random piece of land which by chance has not been built on. But this is not true. In fact it has been protected from development quite deliberately as a result of the far sightedness of a member of the family who still own it, because that person wished to retain the open aspect of views from his home, which faced onto it.

It remains a 'lung' of open land between the old town and the housing estates built in the 1960s 70s and 80s.

As such it is much valued by the community and particularly by the many who use the footpaths which cross it.

The view of the old town which can be enjoyed across the open land from its south-west corner, centred on the medieval tower of the parish church, is outstanding and unique.

Appreciation of the antiquity of Wirksworth is assisted by the old town having retained a sharp edge around its eastern, northern and western boundaries. This quality is nowhere better demonstrated than at The Meadows, the open nature of which allows a view of the edge of the medieval borough, retained archaeologically in the rear walls of the medieval burgage plots which ran east - west down

the sloping land behind the properties in St John Street, which are now generous sized gardens.

Beside the rear boundary walls runs a linear depression, which is most likely the archaeological remains of a back lane which serviced the burgage plots. Back lanes were a standard arrangement in the layout of medieval boroughs, giving access to the burgage plot yards, which were used for farming and craft trade purposes.

Along its northern edge The Meadows abuts the pleasure grounds of the town's one surviving mansion house. These grounds lie behind a high stone wall. Although now split in ownership, they retain the distinctive decorative trees so valued by the gentry. These cedars, firs and pines which lie against its northern boundary and 'contain' the open space, give further distinction to the appearance and character of The Meadows.

The Society believes that any housing development of The Meadows should be limited to one plot deep along the western edge, thereby preserving the qualities described. The remainder should remain open and undeveloped as a recreational amenity for the townspeople.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

The Society understands the 'planning status' of the Neighbourhood Plan may be undermined by the existence of the new draft Local Plan, because although it was 'in conformity' with the former draft Local Plan it is not with the new one.

This is clearly a major issue that needs resolving and the Society hopes it will provide assistance to the Neighbourhood Plan working Group to make this possible.