

SHERSTON NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

PUBLIC MEETING

Notes of Meeting held on
Thursday 26th January at 7.30 pm

Present:

Mr John Matthews (JM) Chairman
Mrs Sarah Wood (SW) Admin Support/note taker
144 Members of the public attended

1. Apologies

Apologies sent from Hillary and Vicky Johnston who was unable to attend. However they wanted it noted that they were in full support of the proposal.

JM welcomed all for coming and explained the format of the meeting and that the purpose of the meeting was to talk about the Neighbourhood Plan (NP) and its proposal and to answer any questions. In the January Cliffhanger there was an article about the draft plan and JM explained that the questionnaire survey that was in the Cliffhanger is not binding or a referendum and is purely to gauge the public's views on the proposal.

The meeting began with a summary of the proposal by the steering group, which was then followed by talks from representatives from the pre-school, surgery and Wiltshire Council. A Question and Answer session followed.

2. Steering Group

JM began by saying how Sherston was such a vibrant, buzzing village with a primary school, shops, businesses, prize winning post office and a GP surgery. Since the last World War there has been a series of increases in housing and it was not until the Strongs Close Development, which effectively paid for the new school, that any were directly connected to a benefit. Yet still the village flourished.

JM explained that the emerging draft NP differs from previous development proposals as it offers multiple benefits to the village, including the delivery not only of a new surgery but also a level of protection against unwanted major development. Without this plan the village will likely lose the surgery within a few years and may have housing unilaterally forced upon its residents.

JM gave a brief history of the NP since its first Steering Group meeting in February 2012, the meetings, workshops and events. JM summarised the initial objective of the NP identified at that time which included protecting village facilities and services, providing extra burial ground and to secure a site for a new surgery. More recently, the surgery has come to the fore of the NP due to the situation it finds itself in and the current building becoming not fit for purpose.

Over the years different sites have been considered. The Sopworth Lane site has proven to be the top choice due partly to its location and also because of the land ownership situation (i.e being owned by Wiltshire Council). Additional benefits of the proposal as explained in the recent Cliffhanger include the construction of a new surgery, land for a new preschool, land for any future expansion of the school and the potential for some affordable housing.

3. The School

JM read out a letter from the Chairman of Governors at Sherston Primary School expressing the school's full support for the proposal. The school is currently slightly undersubscribed so any increase in pupil numbers can only be a benefit and being allocated extra land for an onsite pre-school and future possible expansion is a real bonus to the school.

4. The pre-school

Saara Sharman who has been looking into ways of creating a new pre-school for the village (since Busy Hands closed last year) reported on her findings on what makes a viable pre-school. One of the most important elements to successful pre-schools is that they are situated next to primary schools. This plan therefore presents this opportunity. Saara has to date received full support for a new pre-school from Wiltshire Council Education department and Sherston Primary School.

5. The surgery

Doctor Simon Watkins spoke at the meeting and explained why the surgery is under threat due to the inadequacies of the current building. There are multiple difficulties with the site, including shortage of nursing space, steep steps and no opportunity to expand.

The partners for some time now have been looking into all options to enable a new surgery. This includes NHS grants, a private equity company, funding by PFI schemes and GPs personally funding. None are sustainable. Young GPs are not prepared to fund new premises and the Tolsey Surgery needs new GPs if it is to survive. The NP gives the surgery a lifeline. The concept of a Parish Council owned surgery is not unique and will help attract young doctors without any financial burdens.

6. Wiltshire Council

JT explained the complex land situation on the site and how this created a unique opportunity. When the present owners bought the land from Wiltshire Council, certain conditions were attached to the transaction in the form of a covenant. This means Wiltshire Council has a controlling interest in the whole site as well as an option to buy back about two hectares of the land fronting Sopworth Lane. The covenant means that the landowners would not be able to sell any of the land for development. However if it is the village's wish expressed in the NP that a new surgery should be built on this site, WC would then be prepared to release the landowners from the covenant thus enabling the land to become available for development. If the NP goes ahead, Wiltshire Council and the present landowners have agreed in principle to set a portion of the proceeds aside from the sale of the land to the developer for the construction and delivery of a new GP surgery. The covenant expires in 2022.

When built it would be held by the Council for a period of time and leased to the GP practice. The proceeds from the sale of the land must be sufficient to fund the construction of surgery premises. A feasibility study was produced which shows an approximate figure of 45 houses would be needed to make the proposition viable. The survey has so far not been fully available for the public to read due to its sensitive commercial information. A Freedom of Information (FOI) request has been presented to Wiltshire Council and they are waiting for advice regarding which information can be released under the FOI process. However, an Executive Summary of the document is now available to view on the village website.

7. Questions and Comments from the public

Q: John Weekes used to be on the parish council and acted as Chairman for many years. He expressed his support for the proposal and stated although, for some, 45 houses may seem a lot, he believes the village must do everything it can to secure surgery. He thanked all those involved with working on this NP for the last 5 years.

Q: Leslie Cox agreed the village needs to safeguard the surgery but asked why Sherston has to have the houses when other villages use the surgery? Why could they not provide the extra houses?

A:JT explained that there are 5 main villages around the Malmesbury Area that can take extra housing as they have facilities to support additional development; Sherston is one of those villages. Currently 19% of housing in this area is 'affordable'. It should be higher and this development would include affordable housing. Unlike other sites, this site comes with additional benefits if houses are built e.g. a new surgery.

Q: Eve Miller, who has had vast experience working in the NHS as a consultant anaesthetist and on many medical boards, gave a background of the NHS system and its funding and why the Tolsey is

becoming unfit for purpose. She fully supports the proposed NP and urged the public to visit the Surgery's open day on the following Saturday.

Q: Mr Clampton, although in theory is behind supporting a new surgery, has concerns that if it goes ahead by the time it is built what with the current changes in the NHS , including insisting on longer surgery opening hours it could close anyway.

A:Dr Watkins – although a valuable point was made by Mr Clampton, he thinks that if this happens small practices in local area would join together to form a cluster group. Of course nothing is entirely certain in life. However Dr Watkins made the point that one could simply resign oneself and give up, or fight - and he is a fighter! Dr Petit went on to say that the concept of 12 hour GP shift has been rumbling on for many years. She doesn't think this can ever be enforced due to the lack of workforce. The surgery needs to train more GPs to help it survival.

Q: Zoe Metcalfe is fully supportive of a new surgery but would like to see the retention of the character of the village and roads clearly managed. She appreciated that the UK has a national shortage of housing / affordable housing but it would be naive to think that this development would be the last one in the village and that the village could safeguard beyond the current 15 years. One of her concerns was what would happen if the school became land locked and can't expand.

A: JM said one of the major benefits of the plan is allocating extra land to the school which will allow any possible future expansion. Regarding affordable housing the potential new development would have a percentage of affordable housing.

Q: Mr Jolliffe has concern regarding traffic going through the village. Over the last few years construction traffic has increased due to developments in Malmesbury and surrounding areas. If development in Sherston goes ahead, he asked if it the village could it be made into a 20mph.

A: JT - believes more people will be working from home in the future traffic should balance out. He also doesn't believe that 20mph zones work (unless enforced) and currently they are not.

Q: Mr Robinson asked could the number of houses originally recommended in the Wiltshire Core Strategy (26) be clarified. Does it include the vicarage site houses and any other sites that have planning permission yet haven't been built? He fully supports the new surgery and multipurpose site but could 20 houses be allocated instead of the 26?

A: MJ said as yet there is no absolute number as the figure that was recommended in the Core Strategy Document has since become irrelevant as we have a different number to achieve a certain outcome which is the requirement of a new surgery. It is a unique opportunity as normally with the planning system you can't require land owners or developers to build something like a new surgery. Only through a land deal agreed through the two land owners can this be achieved and the outcome can only be achieved with the numbers of houses in the proposal not less.

Q: Zoe Metcalfe asked if other options had been explored. She offered to forward a work contact: a company who could help investigate alternative funding.

A: MJ explained that it had taken over 4 years to get to this point and many options have been analysed and discounted by the GPs over that time. There may be other ways -however at this stage, with such a short time frame remaining for the GP surgery and given the pressure to complete a NP, he was naturally concerned about spending further time examining other options.

A: JT has spoken to many private companies who may have wished to invest, however because the build and lease of a surgery is a totally different model the interest was not there. Also with the current proposal the building after a period of time will be handed to the village to become a community asset, this would not be possible with other private options.

A:JM thanked Mrs Metcalfe for her comments and asked if she could leave her business card.

Q: John Shipsey – thanked the NP Steering Group for all their work over the past 4 years. He has been to many of the meetings so is aware of the time spent on the project.He went on to say he is also a patient of the surgery and fully supports the surgery and its wish to move to better premises. However his personal view is that he doesn't want 45 houses in the village. He asked if more time could be spent on looking at other options on how best to fund surgery without the need for this amount of houses, and not to rush into this proposal. He also expressed doubts about Neighbourhood Plans safeguarding unwanted developments and mentioned Malmesbury as an example.

A: Dr P Petit mentioned that for more than ten years the Surgery have been looking into all possible options of funding a new surgery; they have not had their eyes closed. Unless a generous benefactor donates over £2 million for a new site and surgery, which has happened to a doctor friend, the NP proposal is the best option.

Q: Mr Andrew Walden thinks the location for a new surgery is great but has concerns about traffic at peak times and that the junction at Sopworth Lane/Court Street has to be improved as it is already hazardous.

A: JM stated the parish council own the land adjacent to the school and Sopworth Lane where the current Wildlife Area is sited. If the development went ahead this would be used to improve access. At peak times, the junction and the car park mentioned could be shared to ease any parking issues at peak times.

Q: Ros Bates Supports the surgery and the proposal but has real concerns over the impact on Green Lane that extra traffic may have if the development goes ahead.

A: JT read out an extract from the WC Highways report on the area if the development was built and that it is stated that Green Lane would need to be improved and measures built in to slow down traffic. Before any development could take place a study would be needed to look into the impact on pedestrians, cycling and cars. All such issues would be brought up at the Local Transport Group if development went ahead for thorough investigation.

Q: Caroline Moore totally supports a new surgery, pre-school and schools. Her only concern is regarding affordable housing and if built how they can be retained if and when sold?

A: JT explained that they would have conditions on them so they were not allowed to be sold off as non-social housing if part owned. They would need to be sold back to the local housing association or WC. So yes 40% will always be retained for affordable housing.

Q: Mr Cox asked who would own and operate any new affordable houses? Local housing authority or Wiltshire Council?

A:JT In reference to the running of any new affordable housing he would prefer it to be Wiltshire Council but this would be decided at a later stage if the development goes ahead.

Q: Discussion took place regarding the site and it was asked why WC couldn't secure site now so option clause would not expire. Also asked was if the existing footpath would stay?

A:JT explained that the options allow WC to purchase the site until 2022 as long s the council apply for planning permission for some kind of community use on the site WC will not make any decisions until the community decide on what they wish to do on this site through the NP process.

due to an agricultural right of way on the land this is not possible and yes the footpath would

remain.

Q: Mr Shipsey asked if a separate sub-committee could be formed to formally look into other funding options?

Q: Mrs Shipsey asked why the Committee was continuously knocking back expertise when it was offered?

A: JM answered that if she was referring to the Mrs Metcalf who spoke earlier offering assistance, it was the first time that the group has ever heard from her and he has asked for her business card. Regarding a new sub-committee, JM and MJ will have to talk to the Steering group before any decision can be made.

Q: Nic Fisher asked why make the process last longer with yet more committee and group discussions? After four years can the committee now just please get on with it?

Q: Mike Barnes asked why would the village become more vulnerable without an NP in place?

A: MJ explained that the Steering group were told 12 months ago that if a plan isn't produced, Wiltshire Council will itself have to allocate sites for housing only development – but nothing else (i.e leaving out consideration of sites for extra burial space, expansion room for the school, site for pre-school etc. Without a NP developers could press ahead with their own proposals.

Q: Rachel Wagstaff is fully supportive of proposal and housing, but asked whether the houses on the Green Lane future housing plot are included in the amount of houses required in the plan and WC Core Strategy?

A: MJ explained that the plot on Green Lane has been identified as a plot for a small amount of houses for many years. This will remain until the plot becomes available. The Vicarage site will provide extra burial space, 1 new house and the current vicarage will be redeveloped. This will allow the vicar of this and surrounding parishes to once again live in the village.

Q: Mrs Pat Jones has lived in the village for 35 years and in that time has seen many houses built in the village and believes it has only benefited the village and more houses will help keep the village thriving and working.

Q: Andrew Tremellen was supportive of a new site of the surgery however asked how it was decided on 45 houses and would like to see more details before the big vote. He would for example like to see the design of the development, garden sizes etc. He made a point that recent developments in the village have ended up with very small outdoor spaces and would like to see bigger gardens for any new homes.

A: MJ explained that it should be a relatively low density development on this site, and there will be a mixture of different size properties some with larger gardens than others. However it is impossible to talk about any more detail regarding layout, design and garden sizes as at this stage as no developer is involved and won't be until an agreement is made on the NP and the sale of land that such plans are produced.

Q: Rupert Evelyn thanked all those who have been involved on the NP on behalf of the community. He informed the meeting that he asked to see the Feasibility Study requested under the FOI as mentioned previously. Mr Evelyn would like to see all the costs and figures and how it results in 45 houses so he can make an informed decision. He also mentioned concerns about traffic around the village and school especially after a recent traffic accident involving a child outside the school. He asked if a small sub-committee could be set up to look at alternative ways of funding the surgery.

A. JM asked if Mr Evelyn would be interested in joining a sub-committee if one was formed, Unfortunately however he advised that due to his work commitments he is unable to join one at this current time.

8. Meeting closure

JM thanked all those who attended and reminded those that the questionnaire survey is not the final referendum only an exercise to gauge public feeling and asked those who haven't already to return all surveys into the boxes in the post office and surgery by 31st January.

JM stated that the views regarding alternative funding options for a new surgery had been noted. He repeated that the survey was not the final referendum and was an exercise to gauge public feeling. He asked those who had not done so already to fill in their surveys and to return them to the boxes in the Post Office and Surgery. Finally JM thanked all those who had attended the meeting and reminded everyone of the Surgery Open Day on the Saturday.

Meeting finished at 9.30pm. Notes taken by SW.