



## WDC's Local Plan Consultation

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## **Halesworth Town Council's response to Waveney District Council's Local Plan**

### **1. Introduction**

Halesworth Town Council's (HTC) has given careful consideration to Waveney District Council's (WDC) final draft Local Plan (LP). It acknowledges the considerable pressure central Government is placing on planning authorities to promote house building, but has serious concerns about the impact on both social and utility services infrastructure. HTC appreciates that WDC cannot have all the answers and it recognises the work that has gone into identifying many of the needs that will arise from the proposals for Halesworth. Nevertheless, HTC sees a significant gap between the identification of needs and actual delivery. HTC wants to work in partnership with WDC and the community to address the challenges that face the town.

HTC's response to the LP is based on the requirements set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), using its criteria for "soundness".

- Positively prepared – the plan should be prepared based on a strategy which seeks to meet objectively assessed development and infrastructure requirements, including unmet requirements from neighbouring authorities where it is reasonable to do so and consistent with achieving sustainable development.
- Justified – the plan should be the most appropriate strategy, when considered against the reasonable alternatives, based on proportionate evidence.
- Effective – the plan should be deliverable over its period and based on effective joint working on cross boundary strategic priorities.
- Consistent with national policy – the plan should enable the delivery of sustainable development in accordance with the policies in the NPPF. **(defined sustainable development meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs)**

The LP is proposing a level of district-wide development which if implemented, will have a profound impact on Halesworth and other towns, and many of the surrounding villages. With regard to Halesworth, it is clear that many people have real concerns which test the NPPF soundness criteria

Notwithstanding the above, HTC, together with many Halesworth residents, recognise the need for some housing development to correct the significant age imbalance in the town. However, there is already deep concern about the lack of services and social infrastructure in the town for the current population. The major developments being proposed will substantially exacerbate this currently unacceptable situation.

HTC's key issues concerning the soundness of the LP are as follows:-

### **2. Consultation Process and Content**

During the LP consultation last year, no concrete changes were made to the LP in response to any of the submissions concerning Halesworth with the exception of the Dairy Farm site that HTC pointed out had been omitted

In its Consultation Statement, WDC summarises concerns but provides no practical road map by which they can be resolved. For example, it states that “The Council will also work with Suffolk County Council to ensure that new residential development is adequately serviced by pre-school, primary and secondary school provision”. WDC has no powers in respect of education and cannot guarantee a single school place. This sense of an inability to deliver is reinforced in the main chapter concerning the town where the need for a secondary school is not recognised at all, but only comments that there isn’t one.

HTC believes there is a serious issue of credibility in the consultation process, which does not meet the NPPF soundness criteria apart from that of “Justification”.

The lack of any comments by statutory consultees in the Consultation Statement says much about them, particularly in respect of Anglia Water and Essex & Suffolk Water. HTC notes that these companies’ responses to planning application usually involve standard letters stating, in effect that their only real concern is to protect their revenue. The LP should investigate any possible avenues where these companies can be required to undertake proper assessments and publish the findings.

### **3. Housing**

HTC’s major concern is the level of housing proposed, the weakness of WDC’s proposed controls over the bedrooms per unit mix and its reduction in the level of “affordable” housing quotas.

HTC is not against new provision, per se. However, the basis upon which the scale of the LP’s proposals is supported is questionable. It states that a population increase of 10,600 is expected for the WDC area, but does not provide hard evidence, either about the total, or where these new people may choose to reside. WDC’s own Strategic Housing Market Assessment (2017) is caveated in such a way as to suggest it is just a best estimate, based on the data gathered. Then it states *“the population has increased at a slower rate than the number of households between 2001 and 2011, resulting in a falling average household size, as is illustrated in the table below. This is also the pattern nationally, however at a regional level the number of households has risen at broadly the same rate as the population in households between 2001 and 2011 and the average size of households has remained.”* It is hard to know what to make of this but it seems that calculations are being made on the basis that because a given population and numbers of households have risen at a given rate over a period of time, it will simply continue to do so. Ultimately, the LP concentrates on identifying sites thought to be suitable for development and, on the basis of previous consultation, using limited options, has arrived at a particular permutation for how development is to be distributed.

HTC is particularly concerned about the demographic imbalance in the town and would welcome some development which focuses on this issue. However, based on the pattern of the past, it is clear that none of the major proposals for the town are likely to meet this objective. Planning applications for housing in Halesworth have, to date, not got even close to the 30 – 40% level being proposed in the LP for 1-2 bed units. HTC sees no evidence that this will change. Rather, its experience is that all the potential developers will build a

housing mix not relating to the town's needs, but instead, focused on maximising profit. The Hill Farm proposal is a perfect example of the reality on the ground.

Section 8 of the LP serves the interests of developers, rather than the community. Firstly, para. 8.5 is too vague, in respect of housing mix. It refers to "flexibility" which can be interpreted in whatever way suits the reader. The key requirement here is local need and the paragraph needs to be reworded accordingly.

Secondly, the LP proposes reducing the affordable housing requirement set out in the first draft of the LP from 35% to 30%. However, HTC understands that WDC has calculated that insisting on 35% affordable housing makes it difficult for developers to make an agreed level of profit. Reducing the percentage of affordable housing to 30% is only acceptable provided that WDC holds developers to supplying this percentage of affordable housing.

Para 8.11 enables developers to easily renege on their commitments by claiming that to meet them would not be financially viable. HTC believes that WDC must resist this kind of pressure and focus on what local people need. The LP needs to be re-worded to enable planners to enforce compliance. If not, it cannot be seen as meeting the soundness criteria.

HTC also believes that unless the LP is reinforced to provide a planning structure which enables WDC to enforce the LP's housing mix requirement, it cannot be considered as being able to deliver its policy, a policy which HTC strongly supports.

The LP should enable WDC planners to set out clear briefs for developers, which focus on what is needed in the town. This should include the overall unit numbers, the unit bedroom mix, design affordability, and a range of tenures, including rentable social housing. In respect of the latter, the design of properties provided by social landlords should not identify them as social housing, as is the case with the Hill Farm development, thus creating "discrimination by design".

In the context of housing, generally, HTC believes the LP falls short of all the NPPF criteria.

**Chediston Street Development** - HTC believes that WDC has made a serious error of judgement in the way in which it is already dealing with the Chediston Street planning application, and by including it in the LP. In terms of the former aspect, the scheme is widely held to be unsuitable, on the following grounds:-

- There are serious problems regarding surface water run-off and sewage management which have not been recognised, in any meaningful way.
- It will create traffic management problems both in the immediate vicinity and at the junction of Roman Way and London Road
- The topography of the site is unsuitable.
- The proposals represent an over development of the site
- It will have a most detrimental impact on the existing housing around it.
- It will undermine the sense of a green gateway to this part of the town.
- It will destroy a valuable wildlife habitat.

WDC granted potentially challengeable outline planning permission on the basis of the current LP, in which the site is not included. However, the planning committee was clearly

considering the scheme on the basis of the proposed LP, which has been adopted by WDC's Cabinet and is currently being checked for compliance with Government Policies.

This was a wholly avoidable situation, given that the new LP states in appendix 1 that “*If landowners do not bring this site forward, there will still be sufficient housing delivered as **the Local Plan has over-allocated**”*. In other words, there was no sound reason for its inclusion, in the first place. HTC requests that WDC revisits its decision and takes into account the objections to this site, in particular, the current problem of flooding caused by surface water run-off and the impact of an additional 350 to 400 vehicles creating traffic management problems. This project should not be progressed until robust solutions are identified and confirmed as being feasible for these two problems, and until the other objections have also been addressed.

As things stand, and in the context of the NPPF, this specific site is not considered as being positively prepared or justified.

**Policy WLP8.29 – Design** states, amongst other things that developers must make “use of materials and detailing appropriate to the local vernacular”. HTC supports this objective but, on the basis of the current LP (Policy CS02 – High Quality and Sustainable Design) which requires developments to “reflect local character and distinctiveness”, HTC sees no evidence that developers have any regard for this aspiration. The LP says that non-compliance will result in planning permission being refused. HTC would like to see the LP strengthened on this matter, for it to have any real impact. In the absence of this, HTC believes that it would not meet the criteria for being effective in accordance with national policy (sustainable development).

**Change of Use** - Central Government has changed planning regulations to enable offices to be converted into housing units without the need for “change of use” planning permission. A local planning authority can only resist this under certain conditions. HTC would like the LP to set out clear guidelines, as far as it is legally able, on how it will prevent developers' proposals having a detrimental impact on the vitality and viability of the town centre. HTC see this as essential, in order to comply with the NPPF justification and sustainable development criteria.

### **Self-Build / Custom Build**

HTC supports the principle of small self-build / custom development. However, it has already made its concerns known to planners about one scheme in the town, where this classification seems questionable. On making its enquiries with WDC planners, HTC is now concerned about WDC's interpretation of the rules relating to this kind of development, particularly as it is exempt from the CIL.

HTC believes there are a lack of safeguards within the LP that prevent developers from avoiding CIL payments, by presenting schemes under the guise of self-build / custom build. By creating clear guidelines WDC would, in HTC's view, enable the LP to meet the NPPF justification effectiveness criteria.

#### **4. Infrastructure**

HTC has major concerns about the lack of both utility and social infrastructure required to meet development on this scale. By referring only to water and sewage infrastructure, WDC is not considering the potential impact on electricity and gas supplies or telecom services. The LP needs to include a strategy for working with service providers to assess likely needs, analyse whether there is a capacity shortfall and if so, develop a funded programme to address it.

HTC is told repeatedly that CIL funds and additional council tax revenue will address social infrastructure needs but:-

- a) HTC is concerned that the CIL will not generate anywhere near the capital required, or that WDC will necessarily commit sufficient funds to meet the essential infrastructure improvements needed to support a population increase of approximately 2,000 people.
- b) There is no guarantee that additional council tax will be used for Halesworth's revenue needs, either via WDC or Suffolk County Council
- c) HTC is deeply concerned that the CIL and council taxes raised by these developments will not become available in a timely fashion to enable the medium-long term planning necessary for the wide range of new resources required.
- d) Health services are outside the remit of WDC. The medical services in Halesworth are short staffed and under serious pressure which will only get worse with the expected population increases.

Unless the LP addresses these issues fully, HTC believes it cannot meet any of the NPPF criteria.

#### **5. Education**

HTC supports the LP's recognition of the need for a significant increase in primary school places. However, it does not indicate how this might be achieved or where the revenue will come from for additional teachers and the related services. It is hoped that WDC can convince Suffolk County Council to provide the necessary funding and so avoid the real risk of an increase in pupil to teacher ratios and overcrowding. Alternatively, there is a real possibility of children having to attend schools outside Halesworth, putting pressure on resources in towns and / or villages already earmarked for housing development. Bussing of primary school children, or parents having to transport them in cars, must be avoided at all costs and it should be noted that local bus services are themselves under threat. HTC would like WDC to clarify this major issue.

Given the significant population increase envisaged by the LP, HTC is deeply concerned that no mention is made of secondary education. Currently, all secondary school children have to travel to schools in other towns. The development envisaged in the LP will significantly increase both bussing of school children and parents having to drive them to school. It is inexplicable why the need for a secondary school in Halesworth is not recognised in the LP. It could be achieved by either a new stand-alone school, or developing a Halesworth-based annexe to an existing school.



However, the concerns about funding for primary education noted above, also apply to secondary education. In addition, if no provision is made for the town, further pressure will be put on schools elsewhere, as the towns in which they are located are also subject plans for significant housing development. The continued lack of a secondary school will dissuade families with school age children from moving to Halesworth and so make it impossible to correct the age imbalance in the town's demography. .

From HTC's perspective, in the absence of serious forward planning for Halesworth's educational needs, the LP meets none of the NPPF criteria

## **6. Health**

There have been many comments from people in Halesworth about the serious lack of health provision in the town, and the distance to centres where it can be obtained. A major issue is the huge workload being undertaken by the Cutlers Hill surgery and its difficulty in attracting new GPs. HTC would like WDC to clarify how it can propose expansion for this key service when it has no control over finance for it, or the recruitment of GPs. The WDC Consultation Statement notes that "The Council (WDC) will work with the CCG to ensure that new development is adequately served by health facilities". This could mean anything, or nothing. However, HTC expects that the end result is that the CCG will develop and fund medical services sufficient to meet the needs of the expanded population of the town. If this is not achieved then HTC does not think that the LP meets the NPPF criteria.

The development of health facilities and supported housing (Healthy Neighbourhood, WLP 4.1) is welcomed. However, HTC would like information about any proposals for public health services and SCC social care allocations planned for this site.

## **7. Employment**

In addition to the Broadway Farm site, there is another light industrial / workshop area which should be included in the LP, to safeguard its current status and also, to encourage improvement. It is located on the southwest boundary of the town's mainline railway station, and comprises single storey workshops on one side, and a maltings which is part-used by a car showroom garage business, on the other side. The single storey workshops are used by small businesses and HTC would want their tenancy terms and conditions to be protected, in the event of any improvement scheme.

## **8. Environmental Issues**

HTC supports the principle of policies designed to protect and enhance the environment and promote biodiversity. .

In this respect, HTC obviously supports the proposals for the protection of protected species but would like the requirement to provide "suitable mitigation measures" to be strengthened so that developers are unable to avoid their responsibilities on these matters.

HTC supports sustainable construction practices (Policy WLP8.28), using materials that are as safe as the state of the art allows, and design which promotes maximum energy efficiency, although HTC would like to see a greater emphasis on far better insulation so as to reduce the energy requirements. However, the policy summary makes it easy for

developers' to avoid their responsibilities by its use of the phrase "where practical" in relation to all the initiatives. HTC asks WDC to reword the summary in such a way that puts the onus on developers to justify any departure from the policy".

### **Flood Risk, Surface Water and Sewage**

HTC supports the principles that inform Policy WLP8.24 on Flood Risk. Unfortunately, some recent planning applications have been submitted for which the known risks of surface water flooding and the current problems of sewage disposal put at risk the viability of these developments. Instead of giving priority to dealing with these known risks in the initial stages of evaluation, they are treated as a reserved matter to be dealt with later after considerable time and money has been spent on less critical aspects of the application. At this late stage it is more difficult to reject the application.

The LP should provide a non-negotiable framework that requires developers to provide solutions at the beginning of the planning process, to known serious risks before a full planning application is accepted.

Halesworth Thoroughfare 08/08/2017





## **Roads and Traffic**

WDC does not accept that the proposed housing developments will increase the level of traffic in the town, or that it will have any impact. It refers to Suffolk County Council's **Waveney Local Plan: Suffolk County Transport Model (SCTM) - Preferred Option Traffic Forecasting Report (2018)** to support its view. However, this does not take into consideration what Halesworth residents and HTC have said about this issue. It is quite obvious that a population increase of 30+%, in a society for which two-car ownership is essential will have a significant impact. This will result in increased congestion, pollution, noise, and a lack of parking.

It is a curious situation where on one hand, the LP states "*Traffic congestion is an issue in some areas*" but not in Halesworth where 740 houses are to be built, increasing the population by 30-40%.

All of the above, in HTC's view, do not meet the NPPF criteria on justification effectiveness or consistency with national policy

## **9. Community Provision**

HTC welcomes the LP's recognition of the need for community resources and supports the proposals for the Dairy Farm site. However, it would like to see the highlighted section (Policy WLP4.5) reworded, explicitly stating the site will provide facilities for local groups currently housed in the London Rd Building, office and meeting rooms for the Town Council, a pre-school facility, community activities including those currently held at the Rifle Hall, and a meeting space for local groups and organisations.

HTC supports proposals which enable the Apollo Youth Centre to remain on the Middle School site, and stresses the need for its own designated and appropriate accommodation.

Both of the initiatives above will require capital resources. The reference in the LP, noting that the existing community building in London Road can be used towards financing the proposals for the Dairy Farm site (Appendix 1 – Infrastructure and Delivery Framework), is welcome but it is insufficient without further funding sources being identified.

In addition, the Apollo Youth Centre has no medium / long-term revenue resources and this must be addressed in parallel with capital funding.

## **10. Conclusion**

Having given consideration to key areas of the LP, HTC believes that it does not meet the test of "soundness" as defined by the four criteria set out in the NPPF, either in part or in some case at all. Therefore, it is not consistent with the national policy requirement for "sustainable development meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

HTC's has concerns that Housing, Education, Health, Traffic, Employment and Environmental issues are not adequately addressed, nor are those relating to the impact of developments on flooding, surface water run-off, sewage and other utility services.

HTC is also concerned that sufficient capital funding will not be generated through the CIL to support the proposed capital projects. In addition, there is no guarantee that enough council tax can or will be, directed to support capital projects, (eg. additional primary school places).

Finally, HTC has identified a various aspects which require a greater clarity and a stronger framework in the LP, to prevent developers' avoiding obligations and thereby frustrating some of its key objectives.

## **Appendix A**

### **Halesworth's Lack of a Community Centre**

#### **Introduction**

Halesworth is one of the very few market towns which does not have a community centre. The consequence is that there is nowhere in Halesworth where residents, clubs and voluntary organisations can meet in conducive surroundings for social events, meetings and other activities which help create a cohesive force within the community.

Halesworth Town Council, along with three voluntary organisations, currently have their offices in the London Road building, a Victorian building which at one time was a police station, court house and WDC offices. It is far from being a suitable venue for HTC or the other organisations currently using it.

WDC has decided to divest itself of any unwanted premises in its property portfolio, with the London Road building being one of them. As a consequence the current users have to find alternative accommodation.

#### **Alternative Venues**

Various venues were investigated but have been rejected due to them being unsuitable for various reasons; too small, inaccessible for residents with disabilities or were part of a social venue serving alcohol.

Two possible existing venues remained; the Rifle Hall and the London Road building. Both buildings would require major structural modifications and upgrades to comply with modern safety and building regulation requirements.

The Rifle Hall has major structural problems to the rear wall and would require a completely new internal restructuring of the internal space and a modernisation of its services. Even so, it would not provide the space required to house the existing users of the London Road building. It has very poor disability access and no convenient parking.

Similarly, the London Road building would need to be completely restructured internally and its electrical, water and heating systems replaced. The Town Council and the volunteer organisations currently use only part of the building. If HTC were to take over the entire site, it would need to be able to convert the currently unused old WDC offices in such a way that they would make the building self financing. This conversion would require considerable sums which HTC does not have. However, without this income, HTC would not be able to finance the building.

#### **Preferred Option**

The preferred option is a purpose-built Community Centre which would meet the needs of HTC and the volunteer organisations and provide a Community Centre for Halesworth residents.

Part of the Dairy Farm site has approximately 0.4 ha nominated for community use. This site is on the edge of the town centre, close to the shopping centre with adequate parking close by. It would provide an ideal position for a Community Centre which Halesworth does not have.

It will be required to provide the following as a minimum;

- Town Council offices and archive space.
- Smaller meeting rooms for Council use and for hire to outside organisations.
- A large meeting hall which can be used for Council Meetings, the Day Centre, social functions, club meetings, talks, mother and toddler groups, yoga, Pilates, and other wellbeing activities, etc
- A kitchen with cooking facilities for the Day Centre which provides lunches for elderly and socially isolated residents of Halesworth and the surrounding villages
- A base for other voluntary organisations such as CAB, etc

### Summary

The structure of the Rifle Hall has parts which are unsound and even if converted is unlikely to provide the space and internal arrangement which would meet the requirements of the current London Road building occupants. Also, its unfavourable position and lack of parking makes it an unsuitable replacement venue and is deemed to be unsuitable.

The London Road building would require major restructuring and new services throughout to meet modern safety and building regulation legislation requirements. Also, the economic viability of the building is doubtful due to the need to generate an income from unused accommodation to the rear of the main building.

It would be far better to dispose of both buildings and use the funds generated to help finance a purpose-built Community Centre which would meet the future needs of Halesworth's residents.