

## **WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

### **Examination of Salt Cross Garden Village Area Action Plan (AAP)**

**Inspector:** D.R McCreery MA BA (Hons) MRTPI

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### **Post Hearing Sessions note from Inspector to the Council**

This note to the Council follows the conclusion of the Hearing Sessions on the AAP. It relates to the discussion at the final wrap up session on 8 July and provides written advice on the next steps for the Examination. For general guidance on process, we continue to follow the Procedure Guide for Local Plan Examinations<sup>1</sup> (Procedure Guide) insofar as it is relevant to this Examination.

I would like to start by restating my thanks to the Council for hosting the Hearing Sessions and to all those who participated for their contributions and the spirit in which they took part.

#### **Infrastructure delivery - phasing**

A purpose of the AAP is to provide a policy framework for ensuring that essential infrastructure will be there when it is needed. This function is expressed in Policy EW1 of the West Oxfordshire Local Plan, which includes requirements relating to the phasing of development in accordance with the timing of provision of essential supporting infrastructure.

The importance of this issue has been expressed by those who have taken part in the Examination, including participants at the Hearing Sessions. This is both in terms of delivering the quality of development required by Policy EW1 and also managing any effects on existing communities. The relationship between the timing of infrastructure and the level of development that can be supported is also relevant to establishing whether the AAP is deliverable and feeds into the work on viability.

The AAP currently sets out the level of development anticipated at Salt Cross, including a housing trajectory and expectations relating to the provision of a science and technology park and other commercial development. To support this overall level of development the AAP identifies a wide range of infrastructure requirements, in some cases allowing the detail of what is needed to be established at the planning application stage and in others specifying in greater detail with more limited flexibility for variance built into the policy.

However, there is a lack of consistent evidence to show that dependencies over the lifetime of the plan between the level of development and the infrastructure needed to support it have been adequately considered. As such, I cannot conclude on the basis of the evidence available that the AAP is sound and, in particular, effective.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/examining-local-plans-procedural-practice/procedure-guide-for-local-plan-examinations#section-3-initial-assessment-and-organisation-of-the-hearing-sessions>

Over the course of the examination, and following thorough testing of the evidence at the Hearing Sessions, this is an issue that I believe the Council recognised. As such, at the conclusion of the Hearing Sessions the Council indicated a wish to carry out further work, in particular on phasing.

In the spirit of working proactively and paying regard to factors including where I think the evidence is at, the importance of the issue under consideration, and the likelihood that further work could potentially address it, I am content in the circumstances to allow the Council time to do the necessary work.

Without prejudice to the need for me to consider and reach a final conclusion on the detail, the scope of further work should include:

- Establishing an appropriately detailed phasing plan for essential infrastructure (not just transport infrastructure). Including assumptions relating to trigger points for specific pieces of infrastructure to be in place related to phases of development (residential and commercial). Whether the phasing plan is incorporated into the AAP itself or used as evidence to support it is a matter for the Council to consider further.
- Written evidence justifying the assumptions made and approach taken in the phasing plan and how it is effective, including details of any continued engagement with key stakeholders that has helped to inform it.
- A review of the existing evidence base (including information relating to viability) to ensure that it is consistent with the phasing plan.
- Detailed changes to the policy wording of Policies 13-17 in the Movement and Connectivity chapter to significantly improve legibility so that each requirement is clear. This should include reducing the length and complexity of the policies. Overall, they should be clearly written and unambiguous so it is evident how a decision maker should react to them.

## **Next steps**

The Council should reply to me as soon as possible with a timescale for completion of the work, which could usefully include a more detailed brief of what will be done.

To allow the Council time to do the necessary work I will now pause the examination. This approach is consistent with that set out in the Procedure Guide, specifically in Section 9. Given the overarching nature of the issue it is appropriate for a full pause to take place. In reaching this conclusion I have also paid regard to the cost implications for the Council if I were to continue to work on the plan in the absence of the necessary further evidence.

Once the work has been completed and submitted, I will ask the Programme Officer to include it on the examination website. I will also give all those who participated in the Hearing Sessions a short period to make comments, which I will consider before making a decision on the way forward for progressing the Examination. In establishing the timescale for the remainder of the Examination, my availability and other commitments may also be a factor.

If, at that point, we are able to move forward to the Main Modifications and Reporting Stage I will send a further note to the Council confirming that. In that note I will set out the modifications I feel would be necessary for soundness.

Beyond the changes to the policy wording of Policies 13-17 in the Movement and Connectivity chapter mentioned above, I am not formally asking the Council to work up suggested drafts of any

of the other modifications that have been discussed so far. However, the Council is of course free to develop these modifications in more detail behind the scenes where this is possible. This approach would be at the Council's own risk but would allow for quicker progress should get to the Main Modification and Reporting Stage.

I am also conscious that there are a number of actions for the Council that were identified over the course of the Hearing Sessions. Most of these actions can and should be progressed now. I will agree a format and timetable for completing these actions with you via the Programme Officer shortly.

If in the meantime, if you require anything further, please contact me via the Programme Officer.

*D.R. McCreery*

INSPECTOR

27 July 2021