

SONNING COMMON PARISH COUNCIL

Parish Office

VILLAGE HALL, WOOD LANE
SONNING COMMON, OXON, RG4 9SL

Clerk – Philip Collings

Tel 0118 972 3616

Email: clerk@sonningcommonparishcouncil.org.uk

Mr Phil Moule
Planning Officer, Major Projects
South Oxfordshire District Council

Friday 21 October 2016

Dear Mr Moule

Re: P16/S3142/O. An outline planning application by Gallagher Estates to build up to 95 dwellings including affordable housing; new public open space; landscaping; surface water attenuation; access on to Kennylands Road; services; utilities and associated works on land off the Kennylands Road.

Sonning Common Parish Council's Planning Committee met on Monday 17 October 2016 to consider the above planning application. The meeting was attended by around 50 residents evidencing the deep local resentment felt about this application.

Andy Lawson, Michael Knott, Matt Grist and Andy Williams attended on behalf of the applicant, Gallagher Estates. They proposed the scheme and answered questions from councillors and residents.

The meeting lasted for one-and-a-half hours with both proponents and opponents of the proposed scheme given ample opportunity to have their say.

The parish council's Planning Committee now recommends to SODC, in the strongest possible terms, that this application be refused.

REASONS

1. This application goes against the adopted Sonning Common Neighbourhood Plan

The Sonning Common Neighbourhood Plan (SCNP) was adopted by SODC on Thursday 13 October 2016, following the highest YES vote to date for the adoption of a neighbourhood plan in south Oxfordshire (confirmed by SODC's returning officer Steven Corrigan).

A total of 1,429 votes were cast in the referendum on 29 September 2016. An overwhelming 94 per cent of voters endorsed the Plan, based on an impressively high turn-out of almost 48 per cent of residents.

The adopted Plan has been rigorously tested by the independent examiner; overwhelmingly endorsed by residents; and allocates land for new development in Sonning Common over and above our housing allocation of 138 homes. The SCNP makes provision for 195 new homes on six allocated sites and has a robust back-up plan for an additional 44 homes on two reserve sites.

This decision to 'future-proof' the Plan was taken in the knowledge that additional new homes might be allocated to Sonning Common to cope with overspill from Oxford (although it should be noted that, currently, south Oxfordshire has not yet agreed its 'Oxford allocation').

At the meeting of the Growth Board for Oxfordshire on 26 September 2016, Cllr John Cotton, SODC leader stated:

“South Oxfordshire recognises the difficult situation the (Oxford) City Council is in. However, the pressure to find space for more homes is one that affects us all, and residents here rightly expect the City Council to leave no stone unturned in its efforts to meet its own need.”

In keeping with the SCNP’s strategic objectives of spreading new development around the village, 108 new homes have been allocated to the south of the village, of which the 26 homes on SON 6 are part, and 87 homes to the north-west. In determining the SCNP’s development strategy, the working party carefully assessed the effect on the village’s infrastructure of 195 new homes.

Adding an extra 69 homes on a greater SON 6 site would place an unnecessary and unsustainable burden on the village.

Through its land allocation policy the SCNP has had full regard for National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) guidance to ensure that up-to-date housing needs evidence is assessed and that new development is sustainable.

Nigel McGurk, the chartered town planner and experienced Independent Examiner of Neighbourhood Plans who examined the SCNP, is satisfied that it meets national planning policy requirements.

In his report to SODC he states, in relation to Policy H1 on Housing (Examiner’s Report p18-19):

“The Neighbourhood Plan recognises that the Oxfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) could lead to a requirement for more housing in the Neighbourhood Area than the minimum 138 homes referred to above. Whilst neither this, nor providing for Oxford City’s unmet housing need has translated into adopted strategic policies in a development plan, it is clear that, in providing for comfortably in excess of 138 homes, the Neighbourhood Plan has taken a positive approach to providing for future housing growth in the light of relevant information.

In addition, by identifying reserve sites, Policy H1 provides additional allocations which help to ensure that emerging evidence of housing need is addressed by the Neighbourhood Plan (I consider reserve sites in the land allocations section of this Report).

I find that the above approach has regard to the Framework, which seeks to “boost significantly the supply of housing” (Paragraph 47). In addition, by providing for considerably more housing than that originally required by South Oxfordshire District Council, the Neighbourhood Plan takes into account relevant information relating to future housing need.

Further to all of this, I note earlier in this Report that the Neighbourhood Plan has undergone robust public consultation. The housing land allocations have emerged through an appropriate, transparent process and their inclusion in the Neighbourhood Plan reflects the direct power afforded to communities “to develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood and deliver the sustainable development they need” (Paragraph 183, the Framework).

Taking everything into account, I find that Policy H1 contributes to the achievement of sustainable development”.

2. The development of the greater SON 6 site would adversely impact on the countryside and character of the surrounding area (contrary to Local Plan policies G2 and G4).

The SCNP allocates 26 homes to SON 6 in a linear-style development to join up a gap in the existing settlement pattern along Kennylands Road. This proposed infilling would be very much in keeping with the character of the surrounding area.

On the contrary, the development of the greater SON 6 for 95 new homes would project development outside the built area of the village into the open countryside resulting in the permanent degradation of Sonning Common's landscape setting.

The proposed development of the greater SON 6 site is contrary to the SCNP's key strategic objectives of:

- maintaining separation distances between Sonning Common and neighbouring settlements
- protecting the character and countryside setting of the village
- ensuring that new development is sustainable (taking into account social, economic and environmental factors).

In March 2016 Gallagher Estates met with the SCNP Working Party to propose developing the whole of SON 6. The working party decided against inclusion of the whole site in the SCNP on the basis that:

- it was not an approved SHLAA (Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment) site as identified before 2012 (see map A)
- the greater SON 6 site had been considered by residents in 2012/13 and rejected (see map B)
- the decision for a site allocation of 26 homes emerged through a robust community consultation process which carefully considered the best combination of housing development to create the least impact on a thriving rural community. It was decided to design development on-site so as to complete the housing line between 56 and 80 Kennylands Road (see map C).

The SCNP's independent examiner endorses the 26-home site allocation in relation to Policy H4 (Examiner's Report, p47):

"I acknowledge that representations have been made in respect of the scope for this site to provide for more housing. However, there is no requirement for plan-makers to allocate land for more housing than they do. I note above that the land allocations meet the basic conditions and that the Neighbourhood Plan has emerged through a robust consultation process".

3. This application is contrary to the principles of good design (Local Plan policy D1).

The principles of good design require that developments should:

- respect the existing settlement pattern, the character of the existing landscape and the distinctive character of the existing settlement

This application fails in respect of all of these Local Plan requirements.

4. Increased traffic movements arising from an additional 69 new homes on SON 6 would place an unacceptable burden on the village centre (contrary to Local Plan policies G3, T1 and T2).

Traffic and parking issues in the village centre are a number one cause of concern among residents, the parish council and local police. Inadequate parking space in the service and retail centre results

in regular blockages of Wood Lane, making it extremely difficult and often dangerous for residents, buses and delivery vehicles to pass through.

So concerned is the parish council about this on-going problem that it is planning to commission a major traffic study later this year in the hope that some solutions may be found.

5. The proposed development would lead to the loss of prized open green space (contrary to Local Plan policies G2, G4 and C4).

Land adjacent to SON 6 (as allocated in the SCNP) is a local, green leisure and recreation asset. It provides public open space and opportunities for enhanced recreation.

The public right of way along the site is regularly used by residents from all parts of Sonning Common and the surrounding villages of Kidmore End and Chalkhouse Green. Being flat with wide, easy access from the main road, the route is of particular value to less agile residents, allowing them to easily enjoy open views of the countryside.

In spring, the view of the bluebells in Rudgings Plantation is currently enhanced by a backdrop of green vegetation in the field – a public open view that would be destroyed by the addition of tarmac roads and brick buildings.

Therefore, the development of the greater SON 6 site into the open countryside would destroy the landscape setting in this area and lead to the permanent loss of prized landscape features.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) respects open land and the need to plan housing in rural areas to meet local needs. The applicant has failed to demonstrate that additional development on SON 6 is needed to meet local needs.

6. The proposed development would adversely affect the area's biodiversity, habitat links and wildlife corridors (contrary to Local Plan policy C6).

SON 6 is a wildlife corridor between the adjacent AONB, Bur Wood and Hagpits Wood, possibly extending to the AONB and beyond.

There is evidence of a badger sett in Hagpits Wood and SODC's countryside officer found one in Rudgings Plantation/Bur Wood when assessing a previous building application for SON 5. Badgers are regularly seen crossing Kennylands Road.

Consequently, this proposed, extended development would damage local wildlife habitats (see map D).

7. The proposed development would lead to increased disturbance to existing residents.

Inevitably increased disturbance to existing residents would occur as a result of significantly more building work and traffic movements linked to the greater SON 6 site.

Neighbouring residents have already reluctantly accepted that they will have to endure some disturbance as a result of the planned construction of 26 new homes on-site; they should not be expected to endure additional disturbance arising from the construction of 69 extra homes that are not required to meet the village's housing allocation or existing, assessed housing need.

8. The proposed development of the greater SON 6 has already been rejected by residents.

Numerous site, landscape and character surveys were conducted by residents during the assessment process for proposed site allocations within the SCNP. Development outside the boundary of the existing SON 6 was roundly rejected by residents.

Again the independent examiner endorses the site allocations' policies within the SCNP and the public consultation process that informed them.

SC Neighbourhood Plan Consultation (Examiner's Report, p10-11)

"A series of well-attended public meetings were then held from 2013 onwards, with much focus on land allocations. During these, residents' views on a range of neighbourhood planning matters were sought and taken into account. I note that a total of 170 site, landscape and character surveys were completed in relation to the assessment of possible land allocations.

It is also worthy of note that a total of 37 meetings, plus one conference call, with landowners/agents/developers, took place between 2012 and 2015. I find this indicative of the significant lengths that plan-makers went to in order to consider the allocation of land through the neighbourhood planning process. Furthermore, nine meetings were held with residents living close to land identified as potential development sites.

It is clear that plan-makers went well beyond legislative requirements to actively engage with local people. Comments were proactively sought over a sustained period of time.

Taking everything into account, the Consultation Statement presents an audit trail to demonstrate that consultation was wide-ranging, comprehensive and transparent.

Comments received were duly considered and there is plentiful evidence to demonstrate that the Neighbourhood Plan reflects the views of local people.

People and organisations were provided with a fair chance to have their say and as a result, there is plentiful evidence to demonstrate that the local community shaped the Neighbourhood Plan.

I am satisfied that the consultation process was comprehensive and robust."

9. Outline versus full planning application.

The Planning Committee, Parish Council and residents are deeply concerned that the Gallagher Estates proposal is an outline rather than a full planning application.

We understand that if outline planning permission were to be granted for this development then matters pertaining to the scale, appearance, layout and access could all be subject to change during Reserved Matters deliberations, which would take place between the developer and planning authority behind closed doors.

While we strongly recommend refusal of this application and cannot conceive of any circumstances under which approval would be justified, in the unlikely event that SODC was minded to approve it we would ask for very strong conditions to be imposed upon the development to constrain further adverse changes under Reserved Matters.

In conclusion

We urge SODC to stick with the pre-application advice it gave to Gallagher Estates that it would be “unsupportive” of this application, (as admitted by Gallagher Estates at our Planning Committee meeting).

Gallagher Estates will contend that their application is consistent with the SCNP’s locational strategy of spreading development between the north and south of the village. They are correct that this is our strategy. However, we have already reached our objective of spreading development satisfactorily around the village within our allocated and reserve sites. This proposed development would unfairly and unsustainably weight development in the southern quarter of the village.

They will say that developing a greater SON 6 site is preferable to developing sites SON 2/3 within the SCNP – sites that are within the AONB surrounding the village. However, the SCNP examiner was satisfied that the inclusion of SON 2/3 within the Plan met the NPPF’s ‘exceptional circumstances’ test on account of the development of 50 houses on SON 2 leading to the transfer of SON 3 to the parish for the provision of much-needed sport, recreation and community facilities.

The examiner’s report states:

“There is no doubt in my mind that, in providing for 50 homes in a small settlement, site SON 2/3 comprises a major development. As such, there is a need to demonstrate the “exceptional circumstances” referred to by the Framework. In considering the allocation against paragraph 116 of the Framework, the Neighbourhood Plan does this. In this regard, I am particularly mindful that the development of the site will result in the delivery of new sports and recreation facilities, for which there is significant local need and which would otherwise be unlikely to come forward.

Whilst I acknowledge that national policy affords great weight to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in AONBs, it does not preclude appropriate development and nor does it require all other possible development sites to come forward before the development of land in the AONB. Paragraph 116 sets out the relevant tests and the Neighbourhood Plan has regard to these. The allocation of site SON 2/3 meets the basic conditions”.

Gallagher Estates will say they would create public open space within their proposed development of up to 95 homes. Our response to that is that we already have a far greater degree of open space and publicly enjoyed open views by maintaining the open land behind the 26-home development on SON 6, as set out in the SCNP and approved by residents, the independent examiner and SODC.

They will assert that a greater SON 6 development would be less impactful on the adjacent AONB than the development of SON 5, an allocated site within the SCNP. We share Gallagher’s concerns about the impact of development in the southern quarter of the village on the adjacent AONB.

However, SON 5 was reluctantly included in our Plan, upon SODC advice, because it was an approved SHLAA site (unlike the greater SON 6); and only after the site was constrained within the Plan - the Alpen Rose orchard having been removed - so as to prevent housing sprawling towards Kidmore End, Emmer Green and Reading.

Finally, a core principle of the National Planning Policy Framework is that planning should, “*be genuinely plan-led, empowering local people to shape their surroundings, with succinct local and neighbourhood plans setting out a positive vision for the future of the area*”.

Ultimately, this principle, enshrined in the Localism Act 2011, inspired members of the Sonning Common community to devote almost five years to the creation of a robustly-researched and tested Neighbourhood Plan.

The overwhelming endorsement it received from residents at referendum recently demands that it be given due weight in the deliberation of all future planning applications for the area.

SODC has ample grounds upon which to refuse this damaging planning application by Gallagher Estates – 26 means 26.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ros Varnes', written in a cursive style.

Ros Varnes
Deputy Parish Clerk
(On behalf of Sonning Common Parish Council's Planning Committee)

cc John Howell MP, Adrian Duffield, Head of Planning Services (SODC), Councillors John Cotton and Paul Harrison (SODC) and Councillor David Bartholomew (Oxfordshire County Council)