

HIGHCLERE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN – 2020-2021 – THE YEAR IN REVIEW

Almost a year ago we reported that "*As the lifting of some lockdown restrictions becomes more likely, activity on the Highclere Neighbourhood Plan (HNP) will soon restart*". Sadly the lifting hardly started before lockdown returned and we are only now, thanks to the vaccine programme, beginning to see the possibility of really gearing up with our work.

Our ability to progress further or faster was also impacted by three significant issues arising which affect both the local and national regulatory context of Neighbourhood Planning :

- Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council had entered a period of review for the Local Plan (which defines the planning rules for the Borough) and was unable to give any clarity on the nature or scale of any housing requirement which might be placed on Highclere parish as a result of the review. Indeed, although their initial work on a Settlement hierarchy indicated that Highclere would still be in the lowest category, and least likely to have a requirement, the spectre of a Settlement Policy Boundary being re-introduced has arisen.
- The Government's proposed revision to the formula used to calculate Borough housing requirements would have seen a 14% increase in overall Borough numbers, creating significant pressure for pushing requirements further down the Settlement hierarchy and potentially a serious housing number for Highclere, where currently it is zero. Although the proposal received massive pushback countrywide and was effectively withdrawn, the period of uncertainty created a degree of paralysis in the B&D process, and no progress for us on a key factor in our thinking.
- In August 2020, the Government published a White Paper for a twelve-week consultation called Planning for the Future, proposing fundamental changes to Planning policy:
 - Introducing a "zoning" approach to planning, purportedly to clarify where development can happen at a more granular level than currently,
 - Creating "Design Codes" to embody local views at settlement level, and
 - Revising Infrastructure financing to ensure it is delivered concurrently with or before the dependent development.

Our response to these issues has been two-fold. The second issue became rather a non-issue and essentially put us back in the position of waiting for B&D to say something more concrete on the first issue. Our consultants have advised and we are agreed that moving ahead when we can and as if neither will happen before we conclude our Plan is the best approach. On the impact of "Planning for the Future", we are advised that this is likely far enough into the future that a similar "keep calm and carry on" approach works for this as well.

Having said that, the year has not been entirely wasted. We moved the definition of our Plan Objectives forward and commissioned a Housing Needs Assessment (HNA) to determine whether and what new housing numbers are justified.

The HNA was done by the AECOM consultancy, funded directly by Locality, the government's Neighbourhood Planning quango. Although it's results remain subject to future to B&D decisions, we have firm evidence to support our position that even if B&D decide to push us towards having a Settlement Policy Boundary, it is unlikely to impose on Highclere a Housing Requirement greater than 20 new dwellings over the Plan period from now to 2035. This is actually less than has been delivered over the past 15 years, so a manageable total. The key, however, will be to identify sites where small groups of four or five houses could be

brought forward, of the right size, in locations that conform to our Plan Objectives. Under those circumstances, it would then be straightforward for developers to get permission on those sites and very difficult indeed anywhere else. If some of that housing could be built to standards to suit older local downsizers, so much the better, releasing larger family homes for younger, incoming families.

The current work by our project consultants, PlanET, is on making our objectives Inspector-ready, and building a Parish questionnaire on all Plan areas of housing, environment, sustainability, services and employment and this is in development. The exact timing and sequence of publishing the questionnaire and looking formally for appropriate development sites is the next decision for us to make.

We are about to re-apply for this fiscal year's Grant money, and are extremely grateful to the Parish Council for providing a substantial additional sum in this year's budget. We are hopeful that the combined funds will take us to the point where B&D are required to fund the further stages of consultation, examination and referendum.