

Concerns Over New Government Planning Policies

Parish Councils and all those interested in the welfare of our Shropshire villages will be aware of the Government's draft National Planning Policy Framework and its "Presumption in favour of sustainable development". While many of us are lobbying our MP, Owen Paterson, with our concern and also responding to the consultation on the draft policy (which concludes on October 17th), it is deeply worrying to read in the "Telegraph" that developers are already quoting the draft policy's presumption that the Council response to applications should be "yes", even if communities are not in favour of the development and the Council planners would normally have grounds for rejecting the application.

If the draft policy is confirmed in law, the advice from Council planning staff is that there will only be a defence to housing applications on green field sites if parish councils have in place fully developed parish plans, which include development boundaries that allow for some sustainable house building within them. Village Design Statements, which set out the type of development which would be in accord with and which would enhance the village appearance, are also desirable. Council planning staff also believe that any parish plans which are over five years old will be liable to be challenged by developers as not being up-to-date and fully relevant to current community aspirations. When completed, parish plans and village design statements should be formally submitted to Shropshire Council for retention by our planners, and they will always be referred to in responses to planning applications. Parishes will effectively become a statutory consultee through their filed plans, so that reports on planning applications will have to state whether or not an application is in compliance with the parish plan.

As parish councils will be aware, Shropshire is in a slightly stronger position to resist unwanted development by having in place its Adopted Core Strategy of March this year. This allows for 27,000 houses to be built across the county before 2026, a rate which will be defended as being "sustainable" since it has been calculated that this is the number which will satisfy the county's needs within the 15 year plan period. This number of houses is being "cascaded down" to town and parish councils from the largest, such as Shrewsbury and Oswestry, to the smallest villages. These proposals will become clearer when our planning staff publish their response to the SAMDEV submissions that parishes should have made last year. These responses should be available in draft form in January for further discussion with parishes before being included in a final document to be published by our planners in mid 2012.

In the light of this situation which I have set out above, I would urge all parish councils to arrange to prepare a Parish Plan if they have not got one or

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refresh their plan if it is likely to become more than 5 years old by the end of 2012. "Refreshed" parish plans should be re-printed and re-published as new plans and will clearly state that they are the considered views of the village community in 2012.

Obviously there will be considerable costs to parishes in doing this and I doubt if there will be many grants available from sources outside the parish. I would therefore urge parish councils to precept for the cost of producing such a document, if their existing resources do not cover the cost, which is not insignificant.

Finally, no one can guarantee that, despite the fact that the Council's Core Strategy and current parish plans are in place, unwanted development will not be allowed. Shropshire Council is handicapped in defending its decisions against appeals by large and well financed property developers. We have very reduced staff resources and a financial situation which will not allow us to pay the costs of developers who win an appeal. The value to a developer of gaining planning consent for 30 or 40 houses on a green field site adjacent to one of our many attractive villages means that they can employ the top planning barristers, surveyors and consultants to put their case and, since the law says that a council has to pay the other sides costs if the developer is successful on appeal, that can easily be £200,000 to £300,000. This is why Shropshire Council, in considering applications, needs to be certain, if it believes that there are grounds for refusal, that it is armed with up-to-date parish plans which quite clearly show the vision which communities have for their village.

I urge all parish councils to treat this matter with the greatest possible concern and attention. This report can be circulated as widely as possible among parish councillors and other concerned residents in each community. The greater the awareness of the threat of unwanted development, the better!

Brian Williams
Shropshire Councillor
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