Dear Mrs Walsh

RESPONSE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN GROUP

Thank you for your feedback on the Neighbourhood Plan. We welcome all comments on the project so far. The Plan is in the first draft stage and is subject to amendment at all future stages until pre-submission, when the statutory consultation procedure will begin.

We will attempt to address your concerns and explain, how and why we have drafted the policies we have.

The dates of this current consultation were not intended to be exclusive. The Thursday evening event has been arranged in response to comments that previous consultation events held on Saturday’s were not convenient to those who work during the week and wish to spend family time at weekends.

The Neighbourhood Plan process began in 2013 and built on the work carried out for the Parish Plan published in 2012. We have held 6 Public consultation events, delivered leaflets explaining the process and asking for volunteers. We have had a number of articles in the Parish Newsletter.

The landowners and residents from Front Street were invited to a meeting on 16th February specifically to discuss the possibility of the site being allocated for housing development. The invitations to this meeting were confined to those resident on the south side of Front Street as we felt they were the most affected. 15 residents and landowners attended.

Two further village wide consultations took place on 21st February and 30th May both 3 hour drop in sessions held at Cooper Hall where residents were encouraged to comment and ask questions. These sessions were attended by around 100 and by 70 people respectively. A leaflet advertising both consultations was delivered to every house in the Parish. The Parish Newsletters carried an open invitation for any residents to attend our regular meetings and become a group member. This was taken up by one person on one occasion. The approach we have taken to consultation is the conventional approach taken when consulting on any local plan. The point of consulting at every stage is to take on board the comments of residents and act accordingly. The development of a local and neighbourhood plan is fluid and continually amended and updated. It would not be practical to knock on every resident’s door at every stage of the plan.

The Neighbourhood Plan has been conceived as a proactive plan rather than a reactive one. Experience has shown that a community will engage better when presented with proposals for discussion, rather than be given a blank sheet and asked for ideas. As stated in the previous paragraph, the total number of respondents to all consultation events so far is 170, around 15% of the total Parish population. How representative of Front Street residents this is we cannot say as comments were sought, not personal details.

The Steering Group consists of 8 members: 3 Parish Council members and 5 resident volunteers. All live in the parish, some for many years; all give up their time to be actively involved in the community and work to improve village life. Most are actively involved with community activities such as the Walking Group, Heritage Group, Breathing Space Project and the Friends of Witton Dene. Without the time and effort of the volunteers there would be little heritage and natural environment for residents to enjoy.

As you will appreciate Neighbourhood Planning was a new process when the group started and it has taken a great deal of time and effort on the part of the volunteers to understand the process and its possible benefits for the community. We have received advice and support from 3 independent planning consultants, an urban design consultant and advice from the Newcastle University [School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/apl/). Durham County Council also provides support and data. But it must be stressed that this is a community lead process it is not controlled by the County Council. The point of neighbourhood planning is that it adds another local layer of development control on to the County Plan and the National Planning Policy Framework. We cannot change strategic policy in the County Plan or NPPF, but we can change local level policy.

There are some links on the Community website to sites which explain Neighbourhood Planning.

The new community website where you have accessed the Plan has gone live only within the last week and the priority was to post the plan ahead of the consultation. Supporting and reference documents will of course be published on line but I would ask you to be patient whilst we progress this. We hope you will appreciate that organising documents for uploading to a new website will take time and as we are all volunteers time and resources is limited.

The major reason for deciding to develop a Neighbourhood Plan was to protect our village and sustain it into the future. The plan must be pro-development, that is national planning policy and a requirement of all local plans. The County Durham Plan has recently been withdrawn and is to be amended and resubmitted in December 2017. Until this new plan is adopted, the County is not deemed to have a 5 year supply of land for housing, leaving greenfield sites vulnerable to spurious and speculative development. It is national planning policy that the Local Planning Authority must consider planning applications with a presumption in favour of development. There is already a formal planning application pending for housing development in the western corner of the Front Street site. In designating the site for housing with the provision of a design guide for any development we are trying to protect the area from such spurious or speculative development.

It is important to place this discussion in context. Only 2 of the 13 policies in the Plan specifically deal with new housing and we appreciate that these two policies are very important and have a disproportionate impact. The aim is to protect the Parish from uncontrolled development and ensure the other 11 policy areas are protected. Without a Neighbourhood Plan we face the prospect of uncontrolled development with little control over the quality of the homes or their setting. The Housing Design Brief and the quality requirements of Policy 5 & 6 are intended to control the quality of any development using nationally recognised design quality criteria. If you look at the Draft Design Brief it tries to integrate the parking, and resolve the conflict with habitat We are trying to avoid a “housing estate” and create a neighbourhood which respects its surroundings. You may well not like the example of house shown on the sketches, but this **is** a draft for consultation. One thing you must keep in mind is that there is a current planning application for part of this site and the prospect of another in time. So it is highly likely given current planning criteria that development will take place on the majority of this site whether we like it or not. The Plan is intended to ensure the village gets a development that make a positive contribution.

The fundamental questions regarding the housing issue are;

1. Can a settlement survive and prosper without accommodating some new development? Our reading of the Census data showing demographic changes in our society, the changes in housing tenure, the occupancy figures, changes in our working patterns and the feedback from housing associations and estate agents suggests not.

2. If you disagree with this statement then how will we be able to prevent unwanted development or at the very least ensure we get good quality development if we fail to stop it?

3. If the village does need some new homes where can these to be built so that they make a positive improvement to our community?

One of the final stages of the neighbourhood planning process is to have the plan examined by an appointed professional planning inspector who will test the plan to ensure it complies with the basic conditions, that it does not conflict with EU regulations( we will see how that works after the referendum) and it is a sound plan. Our advice is that if we have not properly assessed the housing within the area and have sufficient housing land supply to meet that need the plan will either fail or could be challenged by a developer determined to build in our community.

The figure of 60 dwellings has been replaced in the Draft Plan with a maximum density figure of 26 units per hectare over a 15 year period. We have worked closely with planners at the County Council and there are no objections from them in principle. The SHLAA sites in the village are amber meaning development will be considered according to detailed plans. The site has also been scrutinised by the Council’s Sustainable Strategy Officer who has conducted consultations on our behalf with the statutory bodies of Environment Agency, Natural England and Historic England with regard to Strategic Environmental Assessment and Habitats Regulations Assessment to ensure we comply with national and EU directives.

We hope the village would benefit long term from good quality development. As you say, facilities are limited. There is no incentive for small businesses to invest in the village unless there is a prospect of growth. The Parish Council in partnership with McColl’s, who own the local convenience store, has commissioned a design company to improve the area around the shop and create a village centre to be enjoyed by all. The intention is to approach the Highways Authority with suggestions for traffic calming.

Green spaces will be protected in the Draft Plan, as will heritage assets. Cooper Hall has a range of organised activities for all ages and is used almost to capacity on a daily basis.

We have had consultations with the school Head Teacher and Governors and with the Council’s Pupil Place Planning Officer, to determine the position on capacity. Forecast figures based on the school census show a school capacity of 203 whilst forecast figures up to 2030 are not expected to exceed 185. The projections show that over the life of the plan there will be available capacity but as you are aware projections are only the most probable outcome. The actual situate could vary between two opposites. One where the school suffers two poor OFSTED results and the number of new families drop because of the availability of affordable quality homes in our neighbouring settlements and school roll drops and the County Council has to consider its viability. The other is the school has excellent OFSTED results, there is an influx of new families as we do have some new homes and the school roll is at capacity and the County Council has to consider a proper school expansion strategy. You will be aware of which side of the equation the Plan currently moves towards. The Plan’s function is to look ahead to when your son and daughter may be starting their own family; we would hope that they will be able to find a good quality home in their home village and still be able to use the services we take for granted, take their children to the local primary school, use the local shops and enjoy the open countryside.

The historic nature of the Front Street sadly means that parking will always be an issue as it was developed without the modern car in mind.

Surface water and drainage would be resolved within a developer’s planning application, as it has with the current application at the west end of Front Street.

A Neighbourhood Plan is, as you rightly point out, to allow communities to shape the area and that is what our aim is. As stated earlier, the aim of the plan is to protect and enhance the village and this first draft is the start. It will change as it evolves and no policies are sacrosanct. The Group members live here and want this village to thrive. That is why we have given our free time for the last 3 years and will continue to do so.

We are sorry you are unable to attend either of the consultation events this week. It may be beneficial to us both if we met, at your convenience, to discuss your concerns and to clarify the group’s reasoning regarding the plan.