

Dear Mrs Walsh

#### RESPONSE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN GROUP

Further to your email of 19 July which was discussed at our regular meeting last Thursday, we will be able to attend a meeting on a Monday or Tuesday evening at a date proposed by you. Depending on the date selected the number of us that will be able to attend may vary. Please give a weeks' notice as we will need to book a room. Could we suggest that it may be better to keep your numbers low as it will give you more flexibility with the dates and also be more conducive to a focused debate that will allow an opportunity to fully explore the issues.

We hope you don't mind if we copy this response to the other residents who also posted comments on this issue.

We would like to take this opportunity to try and give you some insight into the essential issues and constraints of the Neighbourhood Plan (NP) process in advance of the meeting so that we can focus on the critical decisions which structure the plan.

The first point to make is that a NP is part of the formal planning process and is designed to be used alongside National Planning policies and guidance and the Durham County Plan to determine planning decisions for the plan area. The NP does not in its self initiate development. It is the community's opportunity to set its own rules against which each planning application will be assessed. Provided those rules are clear, accurate and lawful.

Over the last 3 years we have consulted both residents and landowners, as we are required to do, to assess the land use and any potential further development within the parish, so that we are aware of the landowner's plans for development on the site in question and across the parish.

To illustrate the complexity of the planning issues we currently face we refer you to the recent planning approval given to a development for 14 homes on the site. To see the full application and accompanying documents please visit Durham County Councils planning portal on their website. We attach the Minutes of the Planning Committee and the Planning Case Officer's report to illustrate the current planning situation. As you will see despite residents, the Parish Council's and the County Council Spatial Planning Teams objections the scheme it was approved. The Applicant was able to resolve all of the planning constraints on the site and has probably set a precedent for the adjoining sites.

We understand the difficulty faced by the Planners in restricting development given the now very strong presumption in favour of development built into the National Planning Policy Framework and how relatively easy it currently is to overturn a refusal.

We expect the situation to worsen as the Government is under extreme pressure to deliver on its housing targets; it is likely to further loosen planning restrictions at National Level. Although the housing crisis may not be directly affecting Witton Gilbert the planning policies used to try to alleviate it will. The NP will sit alongside the County Plan but under the NPPF. So until we have a new County Plan and our Neighbourhood Plan, Witton Gilbert is vulnerable to speculative development in any part of the parish (except the Green Belt).

To illustrate some of the strict criteria the NP is required to meet we attach a recent Independent Planning Inspectors Report on a NP for Sedgfield. All Neighbourhood Plans have to be submitted for independent examination prior to the public referendum to ensure the plan meets the "Basic Conditions" and that they do not conflict with NPPF. As you will see from the report Sedgfield

sought to be very restrictive in its housing policy by not allocating potential housing sites to meet the housing need. It is very difficult to argue at a time when the population is expanding and there is a national housing shortage that a community does not need new homes over a 15 year period and can be sustainable and that their plan is positive in outlook. In Sedgefield's case (Policy 1) the Inspector has recommended deletion of a substantial section of the policy rendering it redundant.

Though this is not conclusive (the appointment of an Inspector is a bit of a lottery) the guidance we have received and our own research indicates that for a housing policy to properly function it should have a clear indication that there is sufficient deliverable land available to meet housing need.

This highlights the choices which face the community.

1. Don't have a Neighbourhood plan- Which leaves the parish without any local planning rules and vulnerable to speculative development. We would also not have the protection for the other policy areas such as Protected Green Spaces, Historic Core and heritage, Environment, Sustainability, traffic etc..
2. Have a Neighbourhood Plan without a viable Housing Policy. We would have the protection for other policy areas, but we would still leave us open to speculative development.
3. Have a Neighbourhood Plan with a viable Housing Policy. Protect the village from unwanted development and have the protection of the other policy areas.

We anticipate from our public consultations that the majority of parish residents would prefer option 3. Also given that of the 9 sites we have considered so far, only the Front Street site is in imminent danger of development; option 3 would seem to have the best outcome for the village and the residents of Front Street.

We are aware that other parts of the Front Street site are being considered for development. If these come forward quickly our influence will depend on the stage we are at with the NP at the time of the application. We cannot stop a landowner from selling their land to a developer or developing it themselves. Especially if we have no viable alternative sites to meet the requirements of planning law; that is a deliverable land supply which can accommodate the need.

Regarding the Front Street site in particular this site was selected for consideration and consultation for the following reasons

- The site is deliverable as the significant land owners had expressed their intention to develop the land.
- The site is large enough to accommodate a significant proportion of the overall need.
- We considered that there are a number of problem areas in or adjacent to the site which a development of high quality could help to resolve.
- The site has very clear physical boundaries which would prevent development bleed into adjacent agricultural land.
- The development would help rebalance the village and help revitalise the historic core of the village
- With a coordinated design approach with the help of a Design Guide that would tackle the issues of parking, public green space and respect for the design, materials, scale and layout of the neighbouring buildings to create an integrated neighbourhood not a housing estate.
- There are a number of gaps and potentially vulnerable buildings and sites along Front Street which may over the plan period become subject to small scale extension or development. A

design guide would give the opportunity to control these developments and ensure they are appropriate and that parking and refuse collection are properly dealt with.

- To dispel a myth currently circulating; the site is not in the Green Belt. The NP has no powers to change the Green Belt.

The Steering Group would hope that the residents of the historic Core would take an active role in trying to improve and protect Front Street. It is an attractive area but no one can deny that there are significant eye sores and problems which blight the area. Front Street is important to all the residents in the village as our consultations have shown. As change is inevitable we would urge you as custodians of this important place to take an active and positive view towards change. Helping to protect the features you consider important and trying to improve the things which need improvement: this is the point of planning. The Neighbourhood Plan is not something imposed from above. It's the communities plan so get involved and be positive.

The Steering Group have since the beginning repeatedly asked for volunteers to help deliver the plan. The only qualifications required is to live in the parish, have its best interests at heart, and be prepared to give up your spare time. You don't have to attend all the meetings but you will have to make a positive contribution, there is research to do, public events to organise, consultants to brief, proof reading to do, typing, photography, maps to draw, data to analysis etc.....

There are three other significant issues which have a bearing; the first is **timing** i.e. when will the NP start influencing planning decisions. The second is **where?** If we have to allocate sites where are they to be? The third **housing need** i.e. how many houses do we need over 15 years?

**Timing;** this is variable and would be less time consuming to discuss at our meeting.

**Where;** we have examined a numbers of sites and these are detailed on our Housing Site Assessment Forms. Sites were put forward by residents, landowners and we also used the County Durham Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment 2013(SHLAA). The viable sites were put on a map and together with the other housing issues this formed the basis of a focused public consultation in Feb 2015, which was advertised, leafleted and was featured in the Newsletter. This event was well attended. Following the feedback from residents the current proposals were produced.

**Housing Need;** determining housing need requires the assessment of demographic and population changes and market demand both social and private. There are also issues about the quality of the existing housing stock. The current housing need is based on a paper prepared by the steering group which is currently with the DCC for verification of method.

When reading some of resident's comments it is easy to get the impression that they have only read the small section of the plan that they have decided to object to and only a small section of that which directly affects them. We struggle to get people to lift their heads and look at the bigger picture and see the possibilities this presents us. May I remind you that the NP is not just about housing it offers us so much more, it allows us to protect our important public green space (note they have to meet certain criteria and just in case you think the paddocks fall into this category, they do not), We have designate the Front street area as an Historic core, protection of our landscape and improvements to our environment. We have aims to improve the traffic and make Witton a better place to walk and cycle, encourage small and rural businesses, help people improve the energy performance of their homes. To achieve these goals we need to resolve these conflicts and

work together to improve our village not just for Front Street but for the whole community especially for the next generation.

We look forward to meeting you and your neighbours and so that we can have a constructive discussion.