

Malvern Hills AONB Joint Advisory Committee

1 May 2015

7. NEIGHBOURHOOD DEVELOPMENT PLANS IN THE MALVERN HILLS AONB – A LANDSCAPE BASED APPROACH

Background

1. Neighbourhood planning was introduced through the Localism Act 2011. The idea behind localism is that decision-making is passed to a more local level. Neighbourhood planning legislation came into effect in England in 2012.
2. A Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) or Neighbourhood Plan is a community-led framework for guiding the future development, regeneration and conservation of an area. A Neighbourhood Plan is about the use and development of land and may contain a vision, aims, planning policies, proposals for improving the area or providing new facilities, or allocation of key sites for specific kinds of development. It may deal with a wide range of social, economic and environmental issues such as housing, employment, heritage and transport or it may focus on one or two issues only.
3. A Neighbourhood Plan will be part of the statutory development plan for the area if it is approved at a referendum. This statutory status gives Neighbourhood Plans far more weight than some other local documents such as Parish Plans or Village Design Statements.

Summary

4. The Malvern Hills AONB Unit is currently working with three parishes which are developing Neighbourhood Plans in the AONB: Colwall and Cradley in Herefordshire and Welland in Worcestershire. Each of these communities approached the AONB Unit for help because they are keen to ensure that their Neighbourhood Plan helps to protect the environment which local people value so highly. The prospect of having strong Neighbourhood Plans which can work alongside the AONB Management Plan in helping to conserve and enhance the landscape is the basis for the Unit's active engagement in the process.
5. The exact nature of the AONB Unit's engagement in the NDP process varies. In all three cases the Unit is involved in the Working Groups which are spearheading this work at a local level. Unit staff have raised queries, made suggestions and contributed to discussions in the context of these groups, as well as attending public consultation events. In the case of Colwall we have also helped to draft

policies for inclusion in the NDP. However, our most significant involvement to date may be in advocating a landscape led approach to NDP work.

6. All Neighbourhood Plans must be in conformity with Local Plans produced by District or Unitary Authorities. Draft Local Plans all indicate that the three named parishes must accommodate housing growth. Therefore, the NDP for each parish must demonstrate that space has been allocated for sufficient residential development. Given that new housing development may not be greeted with open arms by local people, especially those who might live next to it, the question is how best to go about identifying development sites.
7. The AONB Unit has attempted to answer this question by working with the NDP Working Group in each parish to help commission, finance and manage a landscape assessment. The central theme of the assessment in all cases has been a Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study. These studies involve an assessment of all potential development sites in and around a settled area. A number of criteria are considered when carrying out the assessment, including the visibility of a particular area in local and wider views, the condition and quality of the landscape within it, the function which it may serve, for example, in acting as a gateway to a settlement or in providing an important biodiversity resource. At the end of the assessment a map is produced which grades potential development sites on a scale, usually from very high to very low.
8. Of great importance is the fact that the landscape assessment is carried out by a qualified Landscape Architect who is independent of the locality and any parties involved. Whether people like them or not, or agree with them or not, the conclusions reached are transparent and based on professional opinion. The AONB Unit has found that this helps to take some of the local politics out of agreeing a way forward. It also feels like a better and more consensual way of determining where development should go, compared with the approach of the past where land owners interested in selling simply raise their hands, wherever they happened to be.
9. It should be stressed that the landscape led approach is not a panacea. Other social and economic issues need to be considered, including very practical ones such as drainage, willingness of land owners to sell etc. It may be that some sites identified as having a high capacity for development in an area cannot or will not come forward.

This may precipitate a move down the list to a site which has lower landscape capacity, but at least the assessment allows this to be done in a structured and systematic manner. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the landscape assessment led approach is becoming better known and may be followed by other parishes engaged in NDP development.

Recommendation

10. The Committee is recommended to:

- 1) Comment on the above, in particular the landscape assessment led approach to Neighbourhood Planning.**
- 2) Consider and identify other parishes within the AONB which might be interested in this approach to Neighbourhood Planning.**