

SHROPSHIRE LOCAL PLAN EXAMINATION Stage 1 Hearing Statement

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| Representor unique Part A Ref * | A0507 |
| Matter | 3 |
| Relevant questions nos | Q2, Q3, Q4, Q15 |
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*Your
unique

reference can be found in the Schedule of Respondents (Schedule 3 of document SD014.01) at:

<https://shropshire.gov.uk/planning-policy/local-planning/local-plan-review/draft-shropshire-local-plan-2016-2038-examination/examination-library/earlier-regulation-18-plan-making-stages-of-consultation/regulation-19-pre-submission-draft-of-the-shropshire-local-plan-consultation/>

Shropshire Local Plan Review Examination

Stage 1: Matters, Issues and Questions

Matter 3: Development Strategy

Hearing Statement by Mr C Roberts

Wednesday 6th/Thursday 7th July 2022

Introduction

This Hearing Statement is prepared in order to set out the Representor's position, with regard to a number of policies contained in the Draft Local Plan Review, but most particularly the operation of Policies SP3, SP4, SP9 and SP10.

The Statement concentrates on the issues raised by the Inspectors in questions and which will be discussed in Stage 1 of the Examination which relate to the "Development Strategy" (Policies SP1-SP15) of the Draft Plan. The main concern is the manner in which the strategy for development in rural areas is likely to lead to settlements either failing to improve their sustainability or, worse, actually a reduction in sustainability. Maesbury Marsh is used to illustrate the issue.

Summary of the objection

In brief, the objection submitted in respect of the Regulation 19 consultation draft of the Plan Review and which remain the Representor's concern are:

The strategy outlined in Policy SP2.2 as far as it relates to residential development indicates that some 30,800 dwellings will be delivered during the Plan period. This will be accompanied by 300ha of employment land. The "rurality" of much of Shropshire is noted in Policy SP2.6 as is "the importance of ensuring the long-term sustainability of rural communities". On this basis development in the rural area of the County will be guided towards Community Hubs and Community Clusters, outside of which new development will be limited to affordable housing and to support rural employment.

This approach is considered appropriate by the Representor as a general principle but in practice the system set up to identify settlements to be as Community Hubs or Community Clusters based on a points scoring is too inflexible to deliver rational categorisations, and thus to secure short or long term growths of sustainability.

Policy SP8 relates to managing development in Community Hubs which, the policy says, are significant service centres in the rural area. These settlements will be permitted appropriate levels of development, subject to a number of detailed criteria.

Policy SP9 relates to managing development in Community Clusters, which consist of individual or groups of small rural settlements with “aspirations to maintain or enhance their sustainability”, subject to meeting some detailed considerations. Existing Community Clusters (presumably identified in the current SAMDev Plan) are identified in Schedule SP2.2 to Policy SP2. No new Community Clusters are identified in the Review.

Policy SP10 deals with Managing Development in the Countryside, and says that the focus for new development in rural areas will be on Community Hubs and Community Clusters, and fostering evidenced local need for affordable housing and appropriate rural employment opportunities. Outside the Hubs and Clusters development is to be restricted to evidenced local affordable housing need and appropriate rural employment opportunities.

Measbury and Maesbury Marsh are situated abutting each other, with the unclassified county highway connecting Knockin and Oswestry running through the middle of both. Together, they do not rely on any other small or nearby village for any particular public or community service. They do, however, rely on each other, and share community facilities. They are an example of the sort of situation that the idea of Community Clusters was designed for. However, they have not been designated a Community Cluster in the Local Plan Review, this means they will both be regarded as open countryside, and development opportunities will be extremely limited.

Settlements are assigned as Community Hubs on the basis of a scoring system which reflects the availability of **existing** community services. The scoring system is an attempt to redress the situation that was promoted through the existing Core Strategy and Site Allocations and Management of Development Plan, where Parish Councils were encouraged to determine which villages should accept development, and where and how much such development might be. If no development was wanted by the local Council then the village was given a designation that would not allow any. The present system is an attempt to make the designations of villages more objective. Those villages that do not reach the appropriate level of points to be regarded as a Community Hub may, depending upon their size and provision of facilities, be designated a Community Cluster or might simply become open countryside. The Parish Council concerned will again be able to determine what level of development it feels is appropriate in a Community Cluster – in some cases the Council concerned might decide that they do not want further development.

As indicated above, Maesbury and Maesbury Marsh act as one, sharing services. Each has a population (according to Table 9: Population and Dwelling Estimates for Recognisable Settlements, of Appendix A to the Hierarchy of Settlements evidence paper (December 2020) produced by Shropshire Council) of over 200, with Maesbury having 211 residents and Maesbury Marsh 245. Together, then, they have a population of over 450. Many of the settlements that are listed as being elements of a Community Cluster in Schedule SP2.3 of the Hierarchy of Settlements paper, do not have populations approaching 200 (some as low as 20) and a number of the Clusters do not reach a total of 450 residents when all the settlements in that Cluster are added together. Indeed, the combined population would be greater than that of the 42 settlements (17%) that have been identified in the Review as Community Clusters.

The Council appears to refuse to accept that Maesbury and Maesbury Marsh act as a single settlement on a day-to-day basis, though there are some 21 other Clusters and indeed, eleven Community Hubs where villages comprising two distinct elements are included.

There also appears to be a somewhat questionable apportionment of ‘points’ in relation to the assessment of local facilities and services in Maesbury/Maesbury Marsh. For instance, there is a Pre-

school Children's Nursey, in the village (created in the former Primary School building, and several businesses that employ more than five people. Combining the scores of the two settlements and adding in those points that should have been attributed to the villages but have not, brings them very close to the score required for being designated a Community Hub.

Through the planning policies adopted in relation to Maesbury/Maesbury Marsh over the past twenty years or so, the joint settlement has become LESS sustainable than it was. The most important factor in this situation is the loss of the village primary school that was located in Maesbury, but it also lost its village shop. While the points system now adopted brings a form of objectivity to the designation of villages being suitable for various levels of development, it is not sufficiently sensitive to the actual needs of the community. Restrictions on development simply perpetuate the trend, with loss of sustainability being used as justification for further losses.

Maesbury and Maesbury Marsh do, indeed, operate as a single entity, and should be the subject of detailed consideration of what might be needed to make the settlements MORE sustainable; they might then begin to grow and retain the services that currently exist. As the plan stands, a settlement of 450+ residents (i.e. Maesbury and Maesbury Marsh together is not to be allowed any development (other than for special purposes) for the next 16 years. This is not in line with the strategy expressed in Policy SP2.

Background

Maesbury Marsh is a village lying around 4.5km south of Oswestry.

Before Shropshire became a Unitary Authority the area in which Maesbury Marsh is situated lay in the jurisdiction of Oswestry Borough Council (OBC). The last Local Plan prepared by OBC before it became part of Shropshire Council was adopted in December 2005. In that document Maesbury Marsh was classified as a "smaller Service Village" which offered possibilities for smaller scale growth in the form of groups of houses and infill development. It was hoped that allowing some development would help sustain existing services and community facilities.

OBC become part of Shropshire Council Unitary Authority in April 2009. Shropshire Council adopted its first strategic plan, the Shropshire Core Strategy (CS), in 2011. This document introduced the concept that, in the rural area of the County, "communities will become more sustainable" by focusing private and public investment and allowing development, ensuring that development made appropriate contributions to compulsory infrastructure and by identifying Community Hubs and Community Clusters. The identification of Community Hubs and Clusters was to be carried out in the following site Allocations and Management of Development Plan (SAMDev), adopted in December 2015.

The Core Strategy indicated that its purpose was to improve the sustainability of rural settlements and their hinterlands, and not "abandon settlements that may have lost services to perpetual unsustainability". A key consideration in identifying Hubs and Clusters, the CS said, was the views of the local community on the status they wished to adopt. In fact, the Council produced a document entitled Shropshire's Localism Approach to Plan Making (July 2014).

The Council took the Localism Act 2011 to heart and indicated that "The identification of Community Hubs and Cluster settlement and their settlement policies have been based primarily on the aspirations of those communities as expressed in their Parish Council/Meetings, but also with regard

to the evidence base and to information and views from the promoters of sites, residents and stakeholders”.

Basing the category of settlements that each village might be placed into primarily on the aspirations of local, usually Parish Councils, has not been carried forward into the current Plan Review. There was concern that the over-riding principle that rural settlements should become more sustainable was not being fulfilled by this approach, with some sustainable settlements not opting to grow at all, and some settlements being granted allowances for development which increased marginally the number of dwellings in the settlement but in fact created no uplift in sustainability.

Maesbury Marsh was recognised in the 1999 Oswestry Local Plan as a settlement that had a limited range of local services and that some development was needed to help support them.

The Oswestry Rural Parish Council within which Maesbury Marsh is situated did not wish to become a Community Hub or Community Cluster, and instead opted to be regarded as Countryside where only very little development would be allowed.

The “community opinion” approach to categorisation of villages has been substituted in the current Local Plan Review by a system of point scoring, whereby the presence of local facilities are awarded points based on pre-determined values (see Table1: Settlement Functional Scoring which follows para 1.14 of the Hierarchy of Settlements document issued by the Council in August 2020 – doc. EVO60).

The suitability of this approach depends upon adopting the appropriate number of points for each function against the relative value of other functions. The total number of points then fixes the categorisation of a settlement – the lowest category being Community Hubs. This system is considered to be far too rigid, and ought to involve an accurate assessment of the functions of the village then a careful analysis of the results of the scoring system and finally, an appreciation of what has caused the score recorded and an assessment of what might be done to increase the score by making the settlements more sustainable.

As it is the village will be regarded as “countryside” where the Plan Review’s policy is to restrict development to affordable housing for evidenced local needs or appropriate rural employment opportunities. The result of this will be that virtually no development will be permitted in Maesbury or Maesbury Marsh during the Review Plan’s plan period. The inability to grow the village is likely to result in greater loss of services.

As a general principle the idea of classifying villages, where they have local services that need support is considered an appropriate strategy. However, the manner in which the adopted scoring system works, and the lack of careful and informed consideration of the reasons for the scoring and what should be done with the conclusion, is considered likely to present significant difficulties and restrictions to the stated aim of making rural settlements more sustainable.

It is appreciated that this statement touches, at times, on matters specific to Maesbury Marsh, but the issue is one of strategy and trying to improve sustainability in the rural area.

There is also provision in the Review for settlement to apply to have their status reviewed if they wish to become Community Hubs or Clusters, but that depends on the local Parish Council wishing that to happen. It is unlikely that that will happen in Maesbury/Maesbury Marsh as the general approach to development by the Parish Council has been to try to restrict it, irrespective of the matter of sustainability.

It is essential, therefore, that greater and more detailed consideration is given both to the points awarded to individual services/functions, and that greater though is actually given to the current and future sustainability of villages like Maesbury/Maesbury Marsh.