

THE DENMEAD GAP AND OTHER OPEN SPACES

INTRODUCTION

1. The purpose of this chapter is to:-

- a) **provide** the people of Denmead with an up-to-date brief about the “Denmead Gap”;
- b) **inform** residents about the official planning policies which will govern the creation of gaps between villages, towns and areas likely to be the subject of future development within the Winchester District Council area for the next 20 years;
- c) **highlight** lessons learned by the residents and community groups from the recent granting of planning permission on a very sensitive green part of Denmead; and
- d) **set out** proposals/objectives for gaps around Denmead in order to:-
 - i) protect the Village’s distinct identity;
 - ii) maintain and visually enhance the separation of the village of Denmead from the Waterlooville urban area and any future development by preserving appropriate open amenity space; and
 - iii) ensure an open and rural feel by preserving green open spaces and corridors surrounding the village’s currently developed areas.

BACKGROUND TO THE DENMEAD GAP

2. The term “the Denmead Gap” is understood by the majority of Denmead residents to be the general open space either side of the Hambledon Road between the village of Denmead and the town of Waterlooville. The preservation of the Gap is a highly-contentious matter; and has been so for nearly forty years. Some – e.g., those who could gain from development along the Hambledon Road - would wish to reduce its size. Others, mainly the residents of Denmead, wish to see no erosion of the Gap. Indeed, the preservation of the Gap was the principal reason for the creation of the Denmead Village Association (DVA) in 1973; and this continues to be the DVA’s main objective. Also, Denmead Parish Council bought a parcel of land (known now as Goodman’s Fields) to provide something of a green buffer zone between the two settlements. Latterly, “the gap” has become an increasingly hot topic because of the on-going West of Waterlooville Major Development (part of which is within the Denmead parish boundary) and, as many are saying, the construction of unsightly, urban-style flats and houses too close to Denmead’s boundary.

3. At this point it would be sensible to indicate more precisely the length and breadth of the so-called Denmead Gap in order to avoid any misconceptions about the meaning of the term. A map (extracted from the Denmead Village Design Statement

2007) showing its dimensions is therefore attached at Annex A. In simple terms, the Denmead Gap is bounded by the formal Denmead parish boundary to the East of Closewood Road, Anmore to the North, parts of Newlands Lane to the South and part of Forest Road to the West.

OFFICIAL POLICY GOVERNING THE CREATION OF GAPS

4. The main official local government documents governing the creation of gaps are:-

- a) “A Policy Framework For Gaps”, produced in December 2008 by the Partnership For Urban South Hampshire (PUSH) (www.push.gov.uk); and
- b) the emerging policy (“Policy CP18 – Settlement Gaps”) contained in Winchester District Council’s 2012 “Core Strategy” [which is currently the subject of community consultation and which will need to be formally accepted by the Department For Communities & Local Government (DCLG) in due course].

Other documents which are relevant to “gap” initiatives include: the Localism Act 2011 (and its associated Regulations); the National Planning Policy Framework document [currently working its way through Parliament]; the 2007 Denmead Village Design Statement; and the revised Regulations forming part of the Sustainable Communities Act 2007, which, it is hoped, will reduce central government control over the striking of agreements between local councils and communities to improve local areas.

5. The PUSH Framework mentioned at 4 (a) above advocates the following criteria for use by planning authorities (Winchester District Council in Denmead’s case) to select locations for designation as gaps:-

- a) *the open nature/sense of separation between settlements cannot be retained by other policy designations* [what does “retained by other policy designations” actually mean to someone on the Clapham Omnibus?];
- b) *the land to be included within the gap performs an important role in defining the settlement character of the area and separating settlements at risk of coalescence; and*
- c) *in defining the extent of a gap, **no more land than is necessary** to prevent the coalescence of settlements should be included having regard to maintaining their physical and visual separation.*

The PUSH Framework also states that it will be individual Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) that identify the location of gaps and include policies to set out the types of development which will be permitted, based on the following principles:-

- a) *it would not diminish the physical and/or visual separation of settlements; and*

b) *it would not individually or cumulatively with other existing or proposed development compromise the integrity of the gap.*

(NB It should be noted at this point that Winchester District Council's recent draft LDF has been subsumed into its draft "Core Strategy" document (see sub-paragraph 4(b) above, currently the subject of public consultation).

DISCUSSION

6. It would appear from the policy criteria referred to in para 5 that some reasonable safeguards to ensure continued open space gaps around Denmead are in place. For example, there is a section (**CP18 – Settlement Gaps**) in Winchester's draft "Core Strategy" which says:

*"The Local Planning Authority will retain the generally open and undeveloped nature of the following defined settlement gaps: Bishop's Waltham-Swanmore-Waltham Chase **Denmead-Waterlooville** Furthermore, the same section says: "Within these areas only development that does not physically or visually diminish the gap will be allowed."*

7. However, a second, more detailed reading of the above policies and the quoted "Core Strategy" wording begins to raise the following concerns:-

a) there is no specific open space defence of other parts of Denmead outside of the defined Denmead-Waterlooville Gap – i.e., the very sensitive areas to the North, South and West within the Denmead parish boundary;

b) parts of the above-mentioned gaps criteria – e.g., the PUSH policy at paragraph 5(c) which bears on Winchester's "Core Strategy" as a result of the subsumed LDF - are open to very different interpretations and could be construed as vaguely and awkwardly worded: a developer could, for example, interpret the point at 5(c) very differently from a Denmead resident anxious about erosion of the Denmead-Waterlooville gap;

c) Denmead residents and community groups have learned some very valuable open space lessons from the Little Frenchies Field planning inquiry and subsequent planning approval, namely:-

(i) how easily sensitive, characterful parts of the village can be developed despite them being outside the Village Design Statement's desired development envelope;

(ii) the need for more watertight wording about green spaces in local authority documents given that developers have recently out-flanked under-resourced and inexperienced residents;

d) there is no assessment as yet about the new South Downs National Park increasing, albeit inadvertently as a result of unintended consequences, development pressure on its neighbours, of which Denmead is one (Denmead abuts part of the said national park at the Northern edge of the parish boundary).

8. When discussing “gaps” in general it makes sense to consider the much-valued green breaks that already exist between the built areas **within** the parish boundary. Key among such breaks are: Kidmore Fields close to the village centre; the Old River site behind Denmead Junior School; the fields to the East and West along Inhams Lane; Anthill Common; the southern side of Forest Road; and the southern side of Soake Road. It is not unreasonable to assume that at some point in the future one or all of these areas will come under pressure from developers. Indeed, Kidmore Fields is already the subject of some development speculation and Old River is being considered for in-fill housing in the middle of the wider Forest Road estate. The argument likely to be employed by developers is that these green spaces are so close to other developed parts of Denmead that coalescence in those areas would have a minimal impact on the wider parish. It is at this point, however, that attention should be paid to the desired building limitations contained within the Denmead Village Design Statement. This relatively recent (2007) document (produced after extensive consultation within Denmead) defines clearly the desired limits of development within the parish and puts all the areas mentioned in this paragraph, with the exception of the Old River site, outside the desired development boundary (see Annex B, which defines, using a thick black line, the Village’s desired development envelope). Thus, the way to protect these particular green spaces would be to recognize formally that the Village Design Statement development boundary should not be breached. Such a stance would, however, subject to any further schooling needs review in the wake of the West of Waterlooville Major Development, permit development on the Old River site which is well within the stated boundary.

9. In the broader gaps context, sub-paragraph 1(c) above highlights the need to learn lessons from the development of a very sensitive, green part of Denmead – namely, Little Frenchies Field (LFF) at the western edge of the village – in order to ensure that similar contentious developments do not happen again. Despite being just outside the Village Design Statement’s desired development envelope, Little Frenchies Field had been designated as a “Reserve Site” for development in Winchester District Council’s Local Plan. To many in Denmead the likelihood of LFF being built on seemed a remote possibility given the 3,000 dwellings scheduled to be built to the west of Waterlooville; and such a view was encouraged by Winchester District Council’s repeated rejection of planning applications to develop the site. Taylor Wimpey (TW) decided, however, to take Winchester’s rejection of planning permission to a public inquiry. TW argued very strongly that, as house-building targets in Winchester’s area had not been met by a given date, they (Winchester) should release the LFF Reserve Site for development. In reality, the site was ceded for development for little more than statistical and legal hair-splitting reasons. The residents of Denmead, despite being legitimate stakeholders and putting forward well-reasoned arguments to the public inquiry, were simply out-flanked and out-resourced by the developer.

10. It is for all of the above reasons that this chapter has been drafted in a deliberately protective manner. Despite, however, Denmead’s very good track record of housing development in the past, it is felt that:-

a) its major and very positive contribution to Hampshire’s housing needs over the past 25 years should be rewarded by stronger protection of its remaining green spaces; and

b) greater district-level recognition should be paid to the fact that it's much-valued rural character and personality is on the brink of collapse because of the closeness of the West of Waterlooville Major Development and the development of Little Frenchies Field..

The population of Denmead has grown from 4,000 in 1976 to over 6,600 in 2012 with no commensurate increase in green space amenities. It is therefore essential that a sound, reliable policy for the protection of the village's gaps, valid for the life of the forthcoming "Core Strategy", is put in place.

CONCLUSIONS

11. The following conclusions can be drawn from the above references and the study of published documents (e.g., Winchester's gaps policy CP18 and the 2007 Denmead Village Design Statement, etc) :-

a) **some** protection of the Denmead-Waterlooville gap exists in the form of the 2008 "PUSH - Policy Framework for Gaps" and Winchester District Council's draft "Core Strategy" (Policy CP18 – Settlement Gaps);

b) **however**, the particularly pivotal PUSH criterion referred to at sub-paragraphs 5(c) and 7(b) above is considered to be unsound on the grounds that it is open to widely differing interpretations. The view is taken that the words "*..... no more land than is necessary to prevent the coalescence of settlements should be included [in gaps] having regard to maintaining their physical and visual separation*" begs the question: How long is a piece of string – a mile, half-a-mile, two hundred yards? Developers would argue strongly for absolutely minimum distances whereas residents would demand maximum ones. In such circumstances an unseemly fudge is likely to be the result;

c) the case of the recent Little Frenchies Field (LFF) public inquiry and the subsequent grant of planning permission on a particularly sensitive and green part of Denmead has demonstrated that:-

(i) developers with options on land outside the existing Denmead Village Design Statement development boundary are still likely to try and obtain planning permission in gaps between existing developed areas within the parish boundary;

(ii) by exploiting the wording in planning policy documents and interpreting short-term housing requirement/shortage statistics to their advantage, developers appear to win the day (this, in reality, is what happened in the LFF case);

(iii) the granting of planning permission to develop agricultural land (e.g., LFF) owned by Winchester College creates a somewhat dangerous precedent in respect of large tracts of open land (approximately 1,500 acres) owned by the College on the northern side of Hambledon Road; and

d) given that Winchester District Council's embryonic "Core Strategy" proposes that no more than 150-250 dwellings (of which LFF will provide 80) need to be built within the parish of Denmead over the next 20 years, future development should be

on a small-scale in-fill basis within the desired development boundary shown in Annex B. Good examples of recent in-fill development include Geranium Gardens and The Shrubbery along Hambledon Road.

12. Other important conclusions can be reached at this stage of the production of the Denmead Neighbourhood Plan, viz:-

a) many of the legislative documents that will govern future planning policy are still works-in-progress – e.g., the NPPF is still being fought over, the Regulations to support the Communities Act 2011 are still being interpreted; changes to the Sustainable Communities Act 2007 Regulations which may support the thrust of neighbourhood plans are still being debated within the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG) and Winchester’s “Core Strategy” is still the subject of consultation and will not be approved by DCLG until the summer of 2012;

b) given the above fluid legislative situation, the poor economic climate and the Government’s scarcely-concealed desire to see housing development as a major component of economic growth, Denmead should be very wary about its ability to resist development on land surrounding it. As seen in the LFF case, developers are quick to seek public inquiries because of the high chances of overturning planning permission refusals; and the Planning Inspectorate appears to be siding more with developers than communities while new legislation remains incomplete.

13. It may be deduced from the foregoing that the existing and likely future policy on gaps is not yet strong enough to:-

a) guarantee that the existing, formally-delineated Denmead-Waterlooville Gap will not be eroded by determined developers during the life of Winchester District Council’s “Core Strategy”; and

b) there is only an ill-defined and loosely-worded policy that may afford protection of the green spaces/areas within the parish.

RECOMMENDATIONS

14. The following recommendations are made:-

a) in order to protect the green space between Denmead and the West of Waterlooville Major Development from coalescent development, Winchester District Council should amend policy “CP18 – Settlement Gaps” to ensure that there will be no further development within the area defined as the Denmead Gap in the Denmead Village Design Statement 2007;

b) the Denmead desired development boundary shown in the Denmead Village Design Statement 2007 should be incorporated into Winchester District Council’s “Core Strategy” document so that, when the latter comes into law, it will have sufficient status to protect the green spaces to the South, West and North of the parish boundary; and

c) the green spaces referred to in paragraph 8 above should be excluded from development proposals on the grounds that Winchester District Council's estimate of the number of dwellings required for Denmead over the next 20 years can most likely be met by the LFF new-builds and future in-fill development similar to those at Geranium Gardens and The Shrubbery.

[Note closing date for comments on the draft Core Strategy is 12 March 2012].

AND FINALLY

15. To support the above conclusions and recommendations, it is worth reiterating the importance of the Denmead Village Design Statement and mentioning its principal tenets:-

- a) it sets out the character of the village in a way that will encourage locally distinctive design;
- b) it gives the community a recognized voice in the planning processes that affect the quality of life in the village;
- c) it supports and strengthens the role of the parish council when consulted over planning applications;
- d) it is a representative view of local people of the character of the village;
- e) it demonstrates local commitment to high quality design and appropriate development that will improve the quality of life of the village;
- f) it contributes to securing a thriving and viable future for the village;
- g) it enables local priorities to be considered in the development process;
- h) it enables local people to be able to respond in an informed and professional manner to planning and development proposals in the village.

16. This draft chapter must be read [and re-drafted if necessary] in conjunction with other parts of this draft neighbourhood plan, most notably the chapters relating to:-

- a) the Strategic Housing Land Area Assessment; and
- b) the updating of the Village Design Statement.

17. All of the above points are in accord with the Localism Act 2011 and should, therefore, be given formal recognition within Winchester District Council's "Core Strategy". **Not to do so would reduce or even negate the empowerment of local communities afforded by the Act.**

dvg, nk-s and jk 29.2.2012