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## **Watlington Neighbourhood Plan Regulation 16 Consultation**

Howard Sharp & Partners act on behalf of the Diocese of Ely, owners of land within the parish of Watlington. Two areas of land east of Downham Road within Watlington fall within the ownership of our clients. One parcel is in use as playing fields and another is grassland not accessible to the public but adjoining Downham Road. Howard Sharp & Partners have previously commented on the Regulation 14 draft of the Neighbourhood Plan.

We continue to support the Parish Council's aspiration for a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) for Watlington, however we still have significant concerns that the NDP will not meet the basic conditions set out in the National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) when it goes through the independent examination process. Our previous comments raised issues with the conformity with the emerging development plan and the justification for the Local Green Space Designation, and we continue to have concerns on these points.

### Conflict with the emerging spatial strategy in Development Plan

The NPPG lists the basic conditions Neighbourhood Plans must meet at paragraph 065 and this includes "*e. the making of the order (or neighbourhood plan) is in general conformity with the strategic policies contained in the development plan for the area of the authority (or any part of that area).*"

Therefore in order to be found sound and become a part of the development plan the NDP needs to be in conformity with the Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Local Plan. The review of this is currently at examination however, following a letter from the Inspector raising concerns about the Plan, the examination has been paused to allow further work to be carried out. Some of the concerns raised by the Inspector are particularly relevant to Watlington and its Neighbourhood Plan.

On 20<sup>th</sup> December the examining Inspector published a *Specification for Policy Note on Rural Settlements to be prepared by the Borough Council of KL&WN*. This points out that Watlington is designated as one of two Growth Key Rural Settlements in the settlement hierarchy. This means it is capable of accommodating a higher level of growth than previously.

The submitted Local Plan did not set out a housing requirement for the neighbourhood area of Watlington, and the Inspector asked the District Council to review this approach given the lack of conformity with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

The examination hearings were adjourned to allow the Borough Council to carry out further work on the Plan Review and on 30<sup>th</sup> January the Inspector wrote to the Council to explain the evidence required to allow the hearings to recommence. With regard to Watlington, the Inspector stated:

*“Watlington is identified in the submitted Plan as a Growth Key Rural Service Centre (KRSC), because it lies on the main line railway between King’s Lynn, Cambridge and London within the Strategic Growth Corridor, and is a sustainable settlement with a wide range of facilities. However, the submitted Plan allocates just one site (G112.1) at Watlington for 32 dwellings, which is a carried forward allocation from the SADMP, intended to meet needs in the existing adopted Plan period to 2026. No further housing growth is proposed at Watlington for the submitted Plan period to 2036. Whilst the supporting text of the Plan (at paragraph 11.2.7) indicates that it would be appropriate to consider further allocations through the emerging Watlington Neighbourhood Plan (NP), there is no requirement for the NP to do so, in the form of a housing requirement for Watlington to support its status as a Growth KRSC.”*

In March 2023, The Council resolved to calculate a housing requirement for designated neighbourhood areas. The Consultation Statement supporting the Regulation 16 Local Plan states that there is no requirement for the NDP to allocate housing to support Watlington’s status in the emerging Local Plan, and that this is a matter for the Local Plan Examination, not the NDP. However, the Borough Council has committed to setting out requirements for neighbourhood areas so once these have been set out the NDP as currently drafted would be in conflict with the emerging Plan.

Therefore basic condition (e) within paragraph 065 of the NPPG is not satisfied and the Plan requires amendment to be found sound – i.e. it should allocate housing growth.

The Neighbourhood Plan is premature as the adopted Local Plan is out-of-date and the emerging Local Plan Review is still at examination with unresolved issues.

Furthermore, whilst the NDP is some way off the examination stage, an indication of the issues it may face is evident in the emerging Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Local Plan. The Inspector has specifically raised issue with the lack of growth directed towards Watlington when it is identified as one of two locations suitable to accommodate a greater level. There is an issue with this emerging Watlington NDP therefore of prematurity. Until the issues that the examining Inspector has identified with the strategic policies in the emerging Local Plan are resolved it cannot be known whether the NDP is in conformity with it. The NDP process should therefore be paused until the examination of the Local Plan is adopted, or has at least reached a more advanced stage.

### Local Green Space designations are not compliant with national policy or guidance

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires sets out the requirements for Local Green Space (LGS) designations at paragraph 102:

*“The Local Green Space designation should only be used where the green space is:*  
*(a) in reasonably close proximity to the community it serves;*  
*(b) demonstrably special to a local community and holds a particular local significance, for example because of its beauty, historic significance, recreational value (including as a playing field), tranquillity or richness of its wildlife; and*  
*(c) local in character and is not an extensive tract of land.”*

Firstly, it is not demonstrated that the LGS designations satisfy criterion (b) above. In particular, we question the special significance of LGS 3 (formerly LGS 5 at Reg.14) ‘Glebe Field’ which is owned by our clients. It has no public access or rights of way, and is barely visible from the public rights of way network. There is no apparent justification for its proposed designation and should not therefore be identified as a LGS.

The Consultation Statement produced to support the NDP points to the Local Green Space Assessment 2023 by way of justification for the designation. However, this was produced in March, well after the designation was initially proposed in the Reg 14 draft of the NDP, so it is difficult to see how the designation has been led by this evidence. Much of the justification refers to the trees on the site but a Local Green Space is not the appropriate designation to protect these trees which are already covered by a Tree Preservation Order 2/TPO/00650.

Secondly, many of the proposed LGS, and especially when taken together, would constitute an extensive tract of land. The scale of the designations lacks justification and so criterion (c) above is not satisfied. The LGS designations should therefore be reduced in scale and number.

The NPPG provides further guidance on the designation of LGS and the proposed LGS in Watlington conflict with the NPPG on several points. Paragraph 007 states:-

*“Designating any Local Green Space will need to be consistent with local planning for sustainable development in the area. In particular, plans must identify sufficient land in suitable locations to meet identified development needs and the Local Green Space designation should not be used in a way that undermines this aim of plan making.”*

Given the serious issues raised by the examining Inspector with the emerging Local Plan’s lack of allocations within Watlington, the indications are that LGS designations in the NP would not be consistent with local planning for sustainable development in the area, and their designation would be premature. This is especially the case when LGS 3 Glebe Field was identified as a suitable development site in a previous draft of the Local Plan. The LGS Assessment notes that it was previously proposed for allocation, suggesting the proposed designation is simply a reactionary measure which undermines proper plan-making.

Summary – Local Green Spaces must be reviewed and we recommend pausing the Neighbourhood Plan until the Local Plan examination concludes.

Due to the issues raised in the emerging Local Plan Reive Examination, and the various conflicts with national policy and guidance, we take the view that the Neighbourhood Plan process should be temporarily paused until the emerging Local Plan can be given weight. The NP must be in accordance with strategic polices, and these are not yet fixed, but indications are there is a significant conflict.

Whether the NDP process is paused or not, it is clear that additional growth should be accommodated within the neighbourhood area. This should be accommodated through this NDP.

Finally, a major review of the proposed Local Green Spaces should be carried out. LGS 3 should be removed entirely. The central group amounts to an extensive tract of land. The designations also appear to be in conflict with local planning for sustainable development and would be premature ahead of the Local Plan examination concluding.