

## The Local Plan and Little Abington

Following a note in the March issue of the A&H News, a number of people have made comments or asked for more information. This note attempts to provide a simple explanation of a complex subject!

South Cambridgeshire District Council has a Local Plan that sets out planning policies for its area and includes allocations of land for housing and for employment. The Plan is reviewed about every 6 to 8 years and updated. The District Council started work on an updated Plan in 2011, and following a number of rounds of consultation, submitted the updated Plan to national government on 28 March 2014, the same day as an updated Cambridge City Local Plan was submitted. An Examination in Public of the submitted Local Plans (City and South Cambs) by nationally-appointed planning inspectors began in the Autumn of 2014. Further details are available at <https://www.scambs.gov.uk/localplan>.

The examination is still in progress, with the inspectors sifting through a large volume of comments from public consultation at various points in the process. The Abington Housing Committee submitted proposals for three potential development sites in, or close to, the village. Regular reports in the A&H News have kept residents informed about progress on these. One of the three is the old Bancroft farmyard in Church Lane, which is sensitive as it is within the Conservation Area and close to two listed buildings. It is adjacent to the meadow between Church Lane and Cambridge Road, which has been listed as Protected Village Amenity Area (PVAA) for many years. There is also a Public Right of Way across the meadow quite close to the farmyard. [Note: As with other planning designations, this refers only to development policy and says nothing about ownership.]

As part of the Local Plan development, a review was undertaken of open spaces and a new designation, Local Green Space (LGS), was introduced. Little Abington Parish Council requested that the Bowling Green, the old Scout Camp site and the Church Lane Meadow were listed as LGS. The executors of the estate of Mr C. Nutt challenged the designation of the Church Lane Meadow in the submitted Local Plan, suggesting that it should be neither PVAA nor LGS. The parish council responded to the inspectors' questions on all three sites in November 2016. Among other things it cited, as evidence of the meadow's importance to residents, unlimited access to the westerly part (around the right of way) and involvement by the parish council and others in planting trees within the meadow. Full details of these public consultations are available on the district council website.

The inspectors carrying out the Examination in Public into the Local Plan has been working slowly through various issues, and there was a hearing on 18 January 2017 focussing on this challenge and some similar challenges in other villages. The Nutt Estate was represented by a barrister, and the District Council by a barrister supported by two SCDC planning policy officers and local representatives as appropriate. Tony Orgee, our district councillor and local resident, was asked to represent the village. He also had the benefit of some very useful comments from a number of local residents and parish councillors. Peter Brunning attended to observe the proceedings.

The inspectors will consider all the relevant written and verbal evidence, and stated that there would be a visit to the site. However, the inspectors gave no indication of their views at this point and it was expected that we would not hear the outcome until the inspectors' report on the whole submitted Local Plan is published after the end of the hearings.

However, there has recently been a significant development. The Lead Inspector has written (16 March 2017) to the District Council with a statement of **Interim Finding in respect of Policy NH/12 Local Green Space**. Text from this letter is reproduced below:

'Following the hearing session on 18 January 2017, which included the consideration of 48 of the 172 sites proposed for designation as Local Green Space (LGS) in accordance with Policy NH/12, the Inspector has now carried out a number of site visits as agreed at the hearing.

The Inspector has commented as follows: Policy NH/12 seeks to respond to the requirements of paragraphs 77 and 78 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework). The paragraphs state that "The Local Green Space designation will not be appropriate for *most* (Inspector's italics) green areas or open space. The designation should only be used:

- where green space is in reasonably close proximity to the community it serves;
- where the green area is *demonstrably special* (Inspector's italics) to the local community and holds a *particular local significance* (Inspector's italics), for example because of its beauty, historic significance, recreational value (including as a playing field), tranquillity or richness of wildlife; and
- where the green area concerned is local in character and is not *an extensive tract of land* (Inspector's italics).'

The letter then set out the Inspector's preliminary comments on each of the sites followed by further comments on what further work the Inspectors expect to be carried out.

#### **'LGS Site NH/12-104-Meadows, Bancroft Lane, Little Abington**

This is a fairly extensive area of land at Bancroft Farm used as animal pasture and is surrounded by residential development. This site is also referred to in a modification to the Plan as Policy H/1:k- 'Land at Bancroft Farm' in the context of an allocation for housing development. Whilst it would be inappropriate to make any comment at this stage of the examination in respect of the latter regard, I find nothing demonstrably special about the site which would warrant designation as a LGS.'

'In light of the above, the Inspectors have given further consideration to the LGS designations as a whole. The Inspectors clearly recognise that it would not be appropriate or practical to visit all 172 sites. However, they have serious concerns that the Council's assessment of the proposed LGS designations has not been carried out with sufficient rigour nor focussed fully on the stringent criteria set out in the Framework which set a high bar given that LGS sites enjoy the same level of protection as Green Belt land.

The Inspectors are also concerned that, as part of assessment of all of the proposed LGS designations, the Council does not appear to have given consideration as to whether alternative designations in accordance with Policy NH/11: Protected Village Amenity Areas (PVAA) or Policy NH/13: Important Countryside Frontage would be more appropriate in terms of the protection to be afforded to the sites.

As a consequence of the above concerns, the Inspectors would now expect the Council to carry out a further more rigorous review of all of the LGS designations taking full account of the matters set out above and the PPG [Policy Planning Guidance] guidance.'

The Examination in Public may well not finish until very late this year or even perhaps early next year, and then allowing, say, three months for the inspector to complete their report, we will not know the inspectors' final decisions until early to mid 2018. The timescale is very frustrating for us all, but the District Council can do almost nothing to change the pace at which the Examination in Public is being conducted by the independent planning inspector.