

Release date:

Debenham provided further boost to making their own decision on development as Neighbourhood Plan Passes the First Hurdle to a Democratic Referendum on Growth

Planning Examiner Praises Debenham's Neighbourhood Plan Rejecting Objections from Taylor Wimpey Who have Set Out Their Own Controversial Alternative Vision for this Historic Suffolk Village

Debenham village's Neighbourhood Plan, setting out three future housing development sites, has now been approved by the Independent Planning Examiner for a democratic referendum. The plan which has taken more than five years to put together, receiving widespread community support during local consultation, has now made it over the first crucial hurdle. Independent Examiner, Janet Cheesley (Hons) DipTP MRTPI, has praised the village's Neighbourhood Plan saying *'The Plan is a well-written document'*, and *'...a clear Vision for the Parish has been established...The consultation and publicity went well beyond the requirements... to ensure that local residents,...and businesses were able to engage in the production of the plan...'* adding, *'I congratulate them on their considerable efforts.'*

The examiner's report dismissed a 160 paged objection to the Neighbourhood plan from developer Taylor Wimpey, who are attempting to push through their own controversial vision for large scale development of this historic village. The company's alternative 45 acre site had already been discounted by the Neighbourhood plan because of the detrimental impact on traffic, pollution, flood run-off and the rural setting of this Suffolk village. In contrast to the Taylor Wimpey site, which has been heavily criticised not just by the community but by Conservative Member of Parliament Daniel Poulter, former Conservative MPs John and Ben Gummer, and Fiona Cairns, Director of the Suffolk Preservation Society, the three smaller sites in the Neighbourhood plan have met with broad approval. The examiner, Janet Cheesley says in her report that the sites put forward for housing by the Neighbourhood Plan have met planning requirements for development, concluding *'I do not consider it necessary for the inclusion of additional or alternative sites.'*

While the government has encouraged local communities to have a say on their own development through Neighbourhood plans the national demand for housing has still left many rural villages across the UK vulnerable to unsustainable large scale speculative developments. Where local councils cannot demonstrate that they can provide enough land for housing quotas over a five year period, developers have been able to override local government and communities, with serious and irreversible impacts on the environment, quality of life, and character of rural villages.

In July this year Mid Suffolk District Council, who have been criticised for leaving communities vulnerable to speculative developments because they had not finalised a local plan for development land, announced that they were able to meet government quotas for housing land supply not just for the next 5 years but the next 6 and a half years. However, in a recent test case, developers successfully

challenged this in Woolpit in Suffolk, forcing through an application against the wishes of the community and the recommendations of the Neighbourhood plan. Debenham village is now concerned that even with widespread approval of the Neighbourhood plan Taylor Wimpey will exploit any opportunity to force their own proposal through.

Many villagers cannot understand why the company have set themselves up in opposition to the widely supported Neighbourhood plan which presents an opportunity to work with the village rather than against it, particularly when the three sites in the Neighbourhood plan potentially deliver more houses than Taylor Wimpey's current alternative proposal. There are more serious concerns that the company are still secretly pursuing much more ambitious plans to impose their vision on this historic village. Taylor Wimpey have produced a document which has not been distributed to local residents but is available on Mid Suffolk's planning site. This sets out a grand scale vision for future development in the village - with a proposition to build a further 640 houses on a site neighbouring an existing development, which was also rejected in the village's draft Neighbourhood Plan.

Despite an environment which is heavily weighted against community decision making Debenham's Neighbourhood plan committee are cautiously optimistic that the village should have their say in how new housing is incorporated into the existing community. Steve Palframan, Chairman of the Parish Council, and Neighbourhood Plan Delivery Committee was quick to praise the Examiner's Report but also warns that delivery will depend on the actions of Mid Suffolk District Council as well as local residents at the ballot box. He said:

"We have worked hard to produce a plan that is truly consultative, putting forward development sites that are sensitively placed and we feel our efforts to get this right for the whole community have been recognised. It is clear the independent examiner, Janet Cheesley, has put in a considerable effort to understand the Plan, how it has been constructed and the complexities of developing an historic village such as Debenham. She, has endorsed the sites the community has allocated and approved....and not any others. Her expert advice and guidance to improving the Plan will, I feel sure, prove invaluable.

The next step for a referendum will now depend on Mid Suffolk District Council's planning cabinet so we hope they will give this consideration as soon as possible and serve our community well. Sadly it doesn't follow that a widely approved Neighbourhood plan will take pre-eminence despite central government recommendations. Developers have the money to exploit the system and we are fully aware that in Woolpit, developers, Landex Ltd, have successfully overridden the recommendations of a Neighbourhood plan and the wishes of the village by challenging Mid Suffolk's five year supply of land.

We now await MSDC's agreement to proceed to a village referendum, where every vote by local residents in support of the Plan will be absolutely crucial. In the meantime, the examiner's report has provided a solid frame of reference for the Planning Committee Members at MSDC when considering any existing, or future, planning applications in this special village."