

Bucklebury Parish Council's comments on the Thatcham North East Settlement Boundary Review

Introduction

Bucklebury Parish Council (BPC) **strongly OBJECTS** to the proposed settlement boundary for Thatcham North East.

WBC's consultation request on this proposed settlement boundary (SB) change was sent to some parties, but not BPC, on or about 9th March 2021. Bucklebury parish boundary is but metres from the proposed SB so it is hard to understand why WBC would consider that BPC lacked a legitimate interest in this matter. The initial boundary review took place in Feb-Mar 20 of which BPC was not informed. Given the wider circumstances at that time, it is understandable that Parish Councils did not search out the changes that were proposed for their neighbours. The consultation is lacking in its communication.

BPC has had the benefit of reading the comments on this boundary review by Thatcham Town Council and adopts and endorses those in this response.

Consultation Process

It is BPC's view that the consultation process is flawed in that it fails any test of 'community involvement'. WBC failed to inform BPC of the proposed changes to the SB that lies just over the parish boundary. This casts doubt on the integrity and legitimacy of the whole LPR consultation, which WBC states will be a "...a detailed 'on the ground' community led assessment ...". As SB changes are an important part of the proposed Draft Local Plan consultation, not involving bordering Parish Councils, and arguably individuals, means that the local populations are not being adequately consulted on the entirety of the Local Plan review.

BPC expects WBC to launch a new and meaningful consultation to take account of the views of all communities affected by the proposed settlement boundary change.

Strategic Gap

A tenet of past planning in West Berks has been the maintenance of strategic gaps to separate communities. Until this boundary change proposal was tabled, the land north of Floral Way has provided the gap between Thatcham and Bucklebury. The proposal all but eliminates that separation and will visually and socially break natural community boundaries. Breach of the strategic gap has been cited by WBC to both refuse planning applications and to remove site allocations from the HELAA process eg THA9, CA16. The description of CA16 in the HELAA documents acknowledges that the Thatcham - Upper Bucklebury Strategic Gap would be sacrificed and the separate identity of Upper Bucklebury lost, despite WBC's stated intent to "protect the character of a settlement..."

It should be noted that the treatment of the 'country park' within THA20 causes particular concern. The SBR documentation states that: "1. Boundaries will exclude: Recreational or amenity open space which extends into the countryside or primarily relates to the countryside in form and nature. This includes designated Local Green Space." There appears to be no provision for this necessary protection - a change in the plan could see building to the proposed settlement boundary and the 'country park' lost. There must be some provision to limit the SB to the edge of the proposed building line to protect the 'country park' from any development.

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Landscape Setting

The Landscape Character Assessment LCA Section WH4 states "Open farmland on the lower slopes contributes to a sense of separation between the elevated character area and the towns of Thatcham and Newbury in the valley below." This sense of partition and openness is amplified in the Landscape Sensitivity Study (LSS): Thatcham "LLCA14F: *Colthrop Manor Plateau Edge...forms an important ... rural transition zone between the urban area and the AONB,*" "Lower slopes of important ridgeline," "Good views across the area and long views across the Kennet Valley," and "The area is highly visible from the Kennet Valley and the Greenham escarpment"

The SBR documentation states that "1. Boundaries will exclude: Highly visible areas such as exposed ridges, land forms or open slopes..."and "Specific issues to be considered...The wider setting and important views both into and out of the settlement will... be taken into account..."

WBC should reconsider the proposed SB in light of its own guidance. Account should also be taken of the proximity of the ancient woodland and the historic settlement at Siege Cross Farm. WBC should also review the landscape-based defence it put forward to oppose the previous development proposal at Siege Cross, and recognise the failings of this SB change proposal.

AONB and The Common

The proposed SB would inevitably have a lasting negative impact on these special environs that WBC is specifically charged, through legislation and its own Strategic Objectives, with protecting.

Not only would the AONB settlement pattern be distorted by the movement of the SB (as acknowledged in the comments in CA12 of the Site Selection Paper), but Bucklebury Common, part of the AONB, would be irretrievably damaged. The impacts would fall into two categories: those that would impact the Common directly, and those resulting from the inevitable increase in visitors. The Common requires protection because of its flora, fauna and AONB situation; it contains remnants of ancient and fragile habitats that are home to rare and protected wildlife. These would be put under increased pressure if the SB were moved to the proposed location and building could literally overlook and overshadow the delicate ecosystems. Increased footfall would inevitably exacerbate the direct damage caused by the effects of the SB change.

Exclusion of a more adequate "country park" from the Thatcham North East proposed settlement boundary would be a starting point in protecting the Common, but the AONB would only be truly protected if WBC was to reconsider this entire proposal in light of its strategic objectives.

Conclusion

Thatcham North East is a deeply unpopular plan that is marked by flawed execution of the consultation process. In what is a fundamental part of the progression of the LPR, WBC has failed to adequately consult all the communities, and all community members, in the areas surrounding the proposed settlement boundary changes. The area delineated by the settlement boundary itself is too close to the AONB and fails to adequately protect it, and inadequate weight appears to have been given to the effects on the landscape.

BPC strongly OBJECTS to the proposed site settlement boundary changes at Thatcham North East.

Barry Dickens
Chairman BPC