

The Neighbourhood Plan has selected the Six Acre Field for development - the only site in Warborough and Shillingford which:

- is bordered for 320 metres on over two sides by the Warborough Conservation Area
- contributes to its setting and to those of around 15-17 Listed Buildings including Warborough Church and Manor House, both Grade II*
- is “an important open space” (SODC Head of Planning) with two designated Important Views
- boasts a well-documented community history as the place of village allotments and ‘wheelbarrow farming’

Nevertheless, the WSNP’s Site Assessment judges (p56) that development on the Field faces no constraints. Ignoring NPPF and Historic England requirements and guidelines, it produced no Statements of Significance for the heritage assets around the Field nor analysis of its contribution to their settings. Redacted comments against the WSNP’s final Site Assessment for the Six Acre Field confirm its heritage shortcomings.

The WSNP has consistently supported Rectory Homes, the property developer seeking to build on the Six Acre Field, yet experts have raised serious concerns about and objections to Rectory Homes’ revised planning application:

“The loss of the linear character of development and rural views identified in the appraisal would...entail a degree of harm to the significance of the conservation area...Historic England has concerns regarding the application on heritage grounds.”

Inspector of Historic Buildings and Areas, Historic England; 23rd August 2017

“The relationship between the village and open land is considered to be one of the conservation area's defining characteristics....The Six Acre Field directly abuts the conservation area to its north and west....these open views are significant in preserving the setting of the conservation area....We consider that there are flaws with this application that would result in harm being caused to designated heritage assets.”

Save Britain's Heritage; 11th September 2017

“CPRE South Oxon District would like to object to this development. Warborough is a historic and 'classic' rural village and every effort should be made to protect its rural character. This protection is a fundamental part of our planning system and more recently reiterated in the NPPF.”

CPRE 16th October 2017

“Overall, the proposal is not in line with Core Strategy Policy CSEN3 and Local Plan Policies CON5 and CON7 and would not preserve or better reveal the significance of Warborough Conservation Area or the listed buildings, contrary to paragraph 137 of the NPPF and resulting in harm to the heritage assets.”

SODC Conservation and Design Officer; 20th December 2017

Far from taking on board the concerns of these independent, professional heritage experts, the WSNP downgraded its heritage score for the Six Acre Field from Red to Amber. It preferred to draw on the heritage report prepared by Bidwells for the property developer. Yet Bidwells' Heritage Statement:

- minimises the new housing estate's effect on the settings of Warborough's heritage assets, particularly along Thame Road
- mistakenly sees setting in terms of view rather than following “a more holistic process which seeks to understand their significance and value.” - Historic England

- exaggerates the density of hedgerows around the Field
- ignores the effect of development on the setting of Grade II* Warborough Church, over the objections of SODC's Conservation Officer and South Oxfordshire and Vale's Urban Design Officer
- uses misleading photographs taken in high summer and wireframes from non-contentious or irrelevant positions
- asserts that SODC's Warborough Conservation Area – a Character Study identifies no listed buildings affected by the proposed development – in fact it mentions five

Bidwells' Heritage Statement has been criticised by SODC's Conservation and Design Officer:

"I disagree with the statement that there will be no perceived challenge to historic settlement pattern (Bidwells Heritage Statement, 28 July 2017, page 54) as development of this open space beyond just the main street frontage is fundamentally different to the established character of the historic settlement. I also disagree with the conclusion that there will be low adverse impact to the conservation area given that the assessment has correctly identified that open rural setting is a contributor to the area's special interest and development here would erode that characteristic."

SODC Conservation and Design Officer; 20th December 2017

Importantly the WSNP has not demonstrated that it has balanced correctly the harm to these many heritage assets against community benefits from development. As SODC's Conservation Officer has advised:

"...less-than-substantial harm is not a less-than-substantial objection and you should be satisfied that this harm is demonstrably outweighed by public benefits."

Given the WSNP's demonstrably flawed assessments of alternative sites and the absence of community benefits (school governors reject the school car park as unsafe; village rejects street lighting; village pub and tour guides say development on the Field a threat to the village economy; development

manifestly unsustainable), the “statutory presumption in favour of preservation” must take precedence over the “statutory presumption in favour of sustainable development”.

Recent case-law stresses the ‘considerable weight’ to be given to the protection of heritage assets even if the harm is less than substantial.

“In the aftermath of the Barnwell Manor and Forge Field decisions, focus has very much been on the ‘having special regard’ to the desirability of preserving the setting of designated heritage assets, in accordance with legislation.... the judgement reinforces the importance of Forge Field, making clear that when any development will harm a listed building or its setting, that harm alone gives rise to a strong presumption against the grant of planning permission.”

Jennifer Holgate; Pinsent Masons

The WSNP’s catch-all answer to heritage challenges is ‘mitigation’: “ The information available...suggests that the right scheme could minimise harm and further mitigate visual and landscape impact...”. This wishful, vague thinking hardly justifies causing irreversible harm at Warborough’s historic heart.

Finally, the WSNP’s own Character Assessment of Thame Road gives as one of its ‘Most Positive Features’:

“Rural character maintained by hedged fields and paddocks interspersed with houses along length with areas of openness being important to maintain.”

The last remaining hedged field interspersed with houses along the Thame Road is the Six Acre Field.

Jonathan Lewis