

Response to the further submission to Examiner by Ridge

The NPT's response to the Examiner's initial enquiries regarding the Orchard site provided the background and rationale behind the changes proposed in the neighbourhood plan review. In our response we also sought to reflect our understanding of our community's concerns and aspirations as evidenced through our community engagement.

Ridge states that the content of our response to the Examiner's initial enquiries is "unjustified and, in some places, factually incorrect". The first part of the claim - that the content of our response is unjustified - is not a matter of fact, but a matter of judgement. We are content for the Examiner to judge the merits of Ridge's arguments and our own on the various points of disagreement.

The "factually incorrect" part of the claim appears to relate primarily to their belief that "we were in full knowledge of the ownership of the Site and the intention to deliver this part of the allocation separately to the DWH land from an early stage in the process". We have never disputed that the site was in fact in separate ownership, but have simply stated that we were not aware that the Orchard was in separate ownership to the rest of BEN4, until we were told this by Giles Brockbank of Hunter Page (the applicants' agent) on May 15th 2017. This was our first meeting with anyone connected with The Orchard site and at the time we met, we had already completed our Reg 14 consultation on the original NP.

It is important to be clear about the nature of this first meeting. It involved just the Hunter Page agent and the then Chair and Vice-Chair of the NPT, and it was short and exploratory. The agent said his client might be interested in putting in an application for a small development and asked us for our views on this; we explained that our NP was already a long way through its process and that we would not support a standalone development; he promised to let us know if they decided to proceed. We left the meeting genuinely unsure whether they would bring forward an application or not.

The NP was submitted to South Oxfordshire District Council in October 2017. We have no records of any meeting with representatives of the site in October 2017, though we do have records of our first meeting with them on 15th May 2017 and of a follow-up meeting on 5th February 2018. On 19th January 2018, prior to this February meeting, we received an email from the agent suggesting that we 're-engage' and confirming their intention to pursue a standalone application. At that stage, the Reg 16 consultation on our NP was well underway. For the record, at no stage either did SODC advise us about any pre-application discussions regarding The Orchard – and we would not have expected them to do so, as we understand such discussions are confidential until an application is submitted.

As the issue of 'what the NPT knew and when' has been a recurring theme of Ridge representations, we have revisited our records and have provided the Examiner with the relevant background. More importantly, we have explained the rationale for the proposed amendment of the BEN 4 site allocation. To avoid repetition, we rely on our response to the examiner's initial enquiries.

We have asked the Examiner to form his own view on the degree of coalescence with Rokemarsh and on the Inspector's comments for the 2019 appeal, and now further suggest that he might take View 8 into consideration, as well as more local views. Ridge reproduces the Insets Map from the Berrick and Roke Neighbourhood Plan - showing separate boundaries around the built areas of Roke, Berrick Salome, Berrick Prior – and proceeds to argue that the map demonstrates that there is "clear open space between the settlement boundary [of Roke] and the Orchard site". Our concerns are not about the space between the Orchard site and the settlement boundary of Roke, our concern is

the very limited gap remaining between Benson and the hamlet of Rokemarsh. It is that gap to which we refer in the text relating to Policy NP27 of our Revised Plan (Para 11.42, Bullet 5); and it is that gap which we are asking the Examiner to consider.

The suggestion that the site should be considered as an Important Local Gap does not seem unreasonable either. It is a logical extension of the approach taken in the Revised Plan and it reflects our focus on preventing coalescence and protecting the rural setting and locally important views. We attach an annotated version of the Ridge map and some photos to illustrate these points.

Regarding Ridge's concluding comments: we believe that our Plan is robust and will continue to deliver sustainable development by providing well in excess of the requirements of the development plan.

NPT rationale regarding landscape, rural setting and coalescence at Land adjacent to the Orchard (the Orchard site)

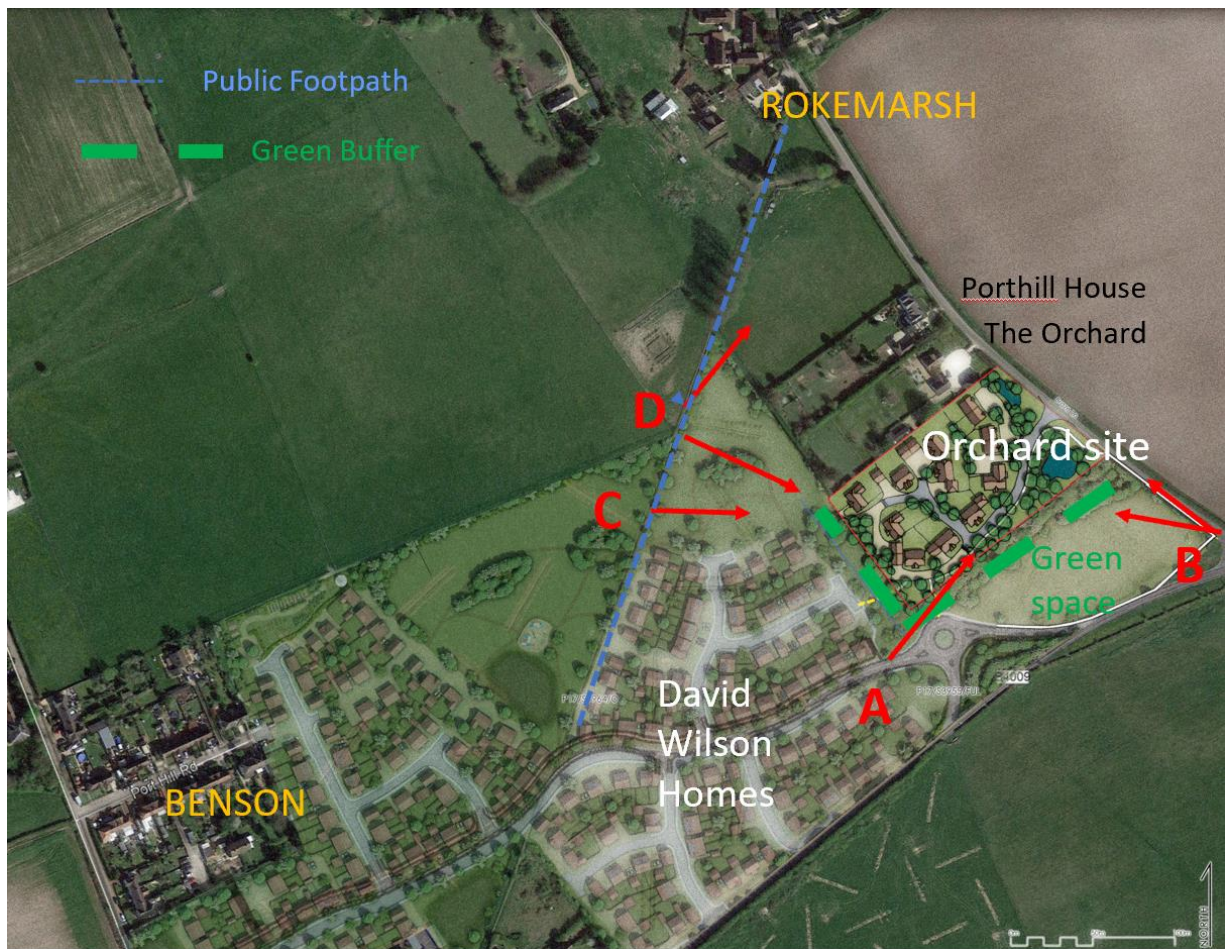
The NPT submit the following figures and photographs to help explain how the Land adjacent to the Orchard relates to the rationale of the Revised Plan the in above respects, and how development of the site would be prejudicial.

Figure 1: the context of the site



This figure is copied from the Concept Schematic plan for Land adjacent to The Orchard, submitted by Ridge as part of application P21/S0882/O and available to view on the SODC website. It is included to show both the scheme for the 19 houses proposed by Ridge within the thin red outline, and the new context provided by the David Wilson Homes (DWH) development adjacent to the west. Since the original Plan there is far greater certainty about this context. The roundabout is already complete and the green area to the north east already laid out and planted with trees and hedging. The DWH development is currently under construction, with some of the houses along the eastern stretch of the Relief Road (nearest the roundabout) already complete, and the bases of houses to the north already visible above ground level.

Figure 2: the same plan marked up by the NPT to show relevant views discussed below, and to clarify the location of the public footpath and the vegetative landscape buffer.



The DWH landscape buffer is designed to accord with Policy NP29 and with paragraphs 6.8.21 of the current NP and 6.27 of the Revised Plan, both relating to ongoing Policy NP4.

The views Marked relate to visibility of the Chiltern Hills (subject to paragraphs 6.8.22 of the current NP and 6.28 of the Revised Plan), to the sense of Benson's rural setting, and to separation from Rokemarsh.

The following photographs were taken on 19th February 2023 to illustrate the views and the current context:

1. View eastwards from A:



This view shows the eastern DWH green space to the right, with the vegetative landscape buffer already planted to the north of it. The post and rail fence is the boundary with the Orchard site to the left. NP29 states that the buffer is to “go around the outer edge where development meets and connects with the rural landscape”. Paragraphs 6.8.21 of the current NP and 6.27 of the Revised Plan state that the buffer “will need to be provided such that the settlement of Rokemarsh remains distinct and separate from Benson”. “Settlement” is used here in a broad sense and not just in relation to the settlement boundaries of the Roke and Berrick NP. The Orchard site is outside the buffer, in the rural landscape. The layout suggested by Ridge for the Orchard site strengthens the buffer by providing additional vegetation against the boundary with DWH, but does not provide for a further buffer along the boundary with The Orchard, or for substantial separation from that property.

2. Views north and westwards at B:



The verge of the B4009 and the DWH green space and buffer are in the foreground, with Braze Lane to the right. The first few DWH houses appear to the left, and as seen from this view will extend towards the centre of the picture approximately as far as the small grey stable building. If the Orchard site were to be developed as proposed by Ridge, the houses would occupy the land beyond the post and rail fence in the mid ground, extending behind the buffer and across to the right. The upper parts and roofs of these houses would be visible beyond the buffer, in close association with Braze Lane, Porthill House (seen further down the Lane) and the approach to Rokemarsh, and also with extended Benson. The NPT sees this as harmful erosion of the rural setting and as reducing the degree of separation between Benson and Rokemarsh. The Orchard site houses will also block views looking north-west past the extent of the DWH houses, across the DWH open spaces and the trees/hedges bounding the long undeveloped rear gardens of The Orchard and Porthill House.

3. View from C:



This view looks east from the public footpath across the northern open green space of the DWH site towards the Chiltern Hills in the distance, with the trees/hedges of The Orchard and Porthill House behind the far fencing. The low brickwork in the mid distance marks the footings of the outermost DWH houses, and the grey building is the stable on the Orchard site. Houses on the Orchard site will be visible in the remaining open space between the DWH houses and the trees and hedges, and will be partially visible running behind the latter. The glimpse of the distance will be closed off, and the Orchard houses will be evident as an arm of development stretching into the countryside.

4. Views from D:

The first view (below) is similar to C but shows the issue more clearly at a focal length of 37 mm. The yellow wires are included to show that it was taken by the electricity pole close to the junction between the path and the field boundaries.

The second view shows a view north-east along the footpath from just a few paces further north east, with Porthill House to the right and Rokemarsh to the left. These views provide a sequential experience of how the developments and the spaces relate, and of just how close the Orchard site will be to Porthill House and the rest of Rokemarsh.



While the small field between Rokemarsh and Porthill House, together with the green space in the northern part of the DWH site, will provide a modest gap between Benson and Rokemarsh, the NPT remain convinced that further housing on the Orchard site cannot but reduce the sense of separation as experienced from the footpath and the B4009/Relief Road, and would wish to see the site remain essentially as countryside in the interests of minimising coalescence.

