

Sherston Neighbourhood Plan Update

- Neighbourhood Plan essential to help safeguard village from unwanted future development
- Priorities defined by village surveys in 2012 and 2014
- Recent work reveals retention of GP surgery in village at risk
- Steering Group identifies means of securing new build surgery as part of mixed use development on Sopworth Road
- Urgent feedback required from village to help guide Neighbourhood Plan strategy

Since the beginning of 2012, a Steering Group set up by Sherston Parish Council has been developing a Neighbourhood Plan for the village. When adopted the Neighbourhood Plan will be used by Wiltshire Council as part of the formal planning process for determining development proposals in and around the village. This will apply until at least 2026.

The Steering Group has sought to consult villagers throughout and to keep the village informed of progress, through workshops, meetings, an exhibition and occasional progress reports. Some of the progress reports appeared as articles in The Sherston Cliffhanger, while some took the form of separate publications distributed with the Cliffhanger to all households.

Neighbourhood Plan Objectives

The Neighbourhood Plan will be underpinned by a number of objectives that have been agreed by the Steering Group following earlier survey work. (Details can be found on the www.sherston.org.uk website.) These objectives include the following:

- The protection of a range of existing services, community facilities and business premises within the village, and the protection of those open areas within and around the village that are considered to be worthy of specific protection because of their distinctive character.
- The need to safeguard existing open air sports and recreation facilities, and a desire to secure improvements to the existing changing room facilities at the football ground; also, to try to safeguard some land immediately adjoining the football field so as to allow for the possibility of expanding the available sports facilities at some future date.
- The need to consider the provision of certain new community facilities: a new GP surgery; a possible expansion of Sherston Primary School; a possible new pre-school facility; and additional burial space.

In connection with the objectives relating to sports and recreation facilities, during the early stages of its work the Steering Group was considering the Football Field as a potential housing development site, which could have released significant funds for the creation of new sports facilities on an alternative site. However, it turned out that although owned by the Parish Council it is subject to a restrictive covenant which would have made such a move so difficult and complicated as to rule it out. The Football Field therefore will remain the village's main sporting venue.

Community Priority – the GP Surgery

The need to secure the future of the GP surgery in Sherston was identified by earlier surveys as being of high priority for Sherston residents.

What has become clear to the Steering Group in the last few months however is that there is now a very real possibility that, without a new building, the Tolsey GP practice will close within the next 7 years. The Steering Group believes that it needs to give this matter high priority as it moves towards finalising the Neighbourhood Plan.

In June 2016 the GPs published a newsletter setting out their thoughts on how best to protect the future of a GP surgery in the village. It explained that the existing premises on the High Street was not 'fit for purpose' and that unless steps were taken now to try and secure the delivery of alternative premises in the village there is a real danger that we could lose our GP service altogether with residents having to travel to Malmesbury (or elsewhere) for continuing health care.

The GPs have investigated all of the potential usual funding options, including NHS grants, private equity funding, personal funding by the GPs themselves, and funding by PFI schemes. None of these appears likely to be achievable or affordable. So it seems that if there is to be any realistic chance of keeping a surgery in the village then the question of funding is one that the Neighbourhood Plan must address.

The Steering Group believes that a way must be found to fund a new GP surgery, or Sherston's GP practice is likely to be closed within 7 years.

New Housing in Sherston

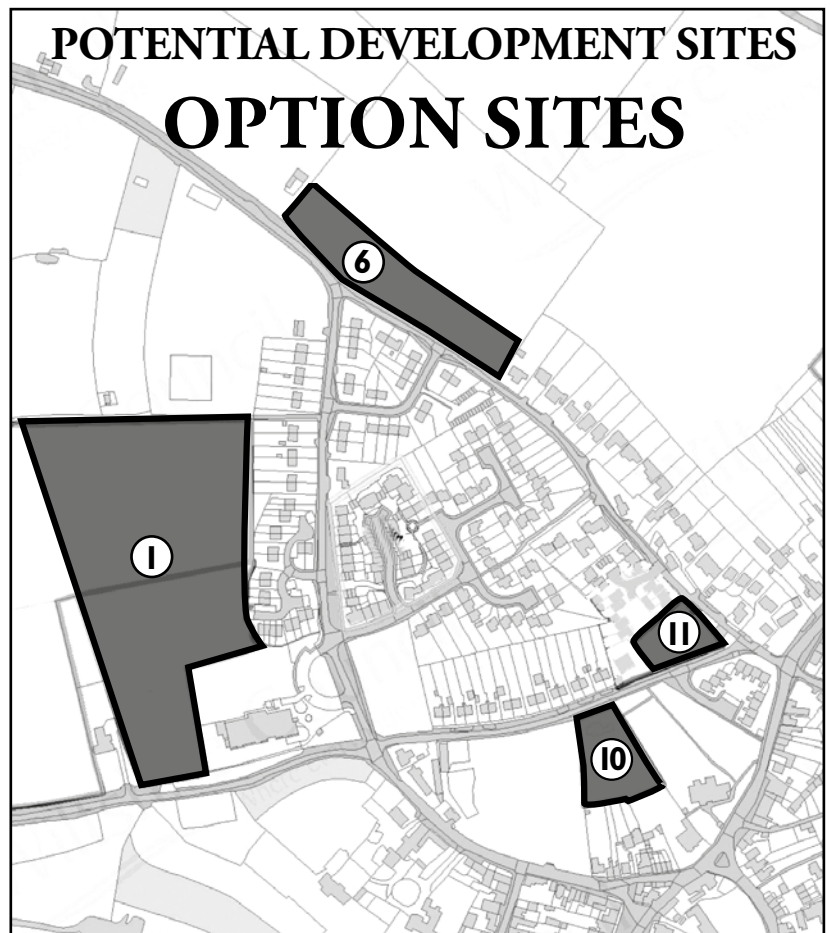
Wiltshire Council Core Strategy requires Sherston to make provision for its share of new dwellings in the future development of the village. The actual number of new dwellings specified by Wiltshire Council has varied since the Steering Group began its work, but it has settled at a minimum of 26. The Steering Group must now determine, in consultation with the village at large, what figure, at or above this minimum of 26, it wants to include in the Neighbourhood Plan.

The Steering Group has identified two small sites that it believes should be allocated for housing in the Neighbourhood Plan: the vicarage site on Green Lane, next to the churchyard (site 10 on the accompanying plan), for about 3 dwellings (this site, incidentally, would also provide the desirable additional burial space); and a site at the corner of Green Lane and Sandpits Lane (site 11), which could take about 4 dwellings. The choice of possible locations for further housing now comes down to two: the Sopworth Road site adjacent to the Primary School (site 1); and the frontage of the site at the top of Sandpits Lane (site 6 - up to 16 dwellings).

The major questions that now have to be answered before the Neighbourhood Plan can be finalised are these:

- Where would a new GP surgery be sited, and how can it be paid for?
- How many new dwellings are to be allocated in the Plan, and where are they to be sited?

In the last 24 months the Steering Group has explored multiple options, considering in detail the pro's and con's of several potential development sites. Whilst most of these have been discarded as unworkable or unsustainable, the Steering Group has identified one solution that it considers answers these remaining questions. This is by locating the surgery on the Sopworth Road site (adjacent to the school) as part of a mixed use development. This would include in addition not only some housing but also the potential for future expansion of the primary school and provision for a pre-school facility. The construction of the surgery would be funded from the income generated by the housing development. But to achieve this the village would need to accept a certain volume of housing on that site.



Sopworth Road option – decision process

What has led the Steering Group to this conclusion? In fact the suggestion first came from John Thomson our Wiltshire Council Councillor. It was the outcome of extensive discussions between Wiltshire Council, the GPs and the owners of the site. Ownership of this piece of land is complicated. When the present owners bought the land from Wiltshire Council, certain conditions were attached to the transaction in the form of a covenant. This means that Wiltshire Council has a “controlling interest” in the whole site as well as an option to buy back about two hectares of the land fronting onto Sopworth Road. This being the case, unless the Council were prepared to enter into a transaction with the landowner that would release the covenant, the landowners would not be able to sell any of the land for development.

Wiltshire Council has now formally confirmed that if it is the village's wish, expressed in the Neighbourhood Plan, that a new surgery should be built on this site, then it would be prepared to release the landowners from the covenant, thus enabling land to become available for development, **but only on the strict condition that a new surgery is built on that site as part of a mixed use development.** The Steering Group has been advised that the landowners in turn have agreed that the construction of the new GP surgery should be entirely funded from the proceeds of the sale of the site for development. In other words, Wiltshire Council and the present landowners have agreed in principle to set aside a

portion of the proceeds deriving from the sale of the land to a developer for the construction on the site of a new GP surgery. The surgery when built would be held by the Council for the community and leased to the GP practice with the NHS paying rent on the building up to an agreed level (which is assessed at current market value by the District Valuer) normally for a period of 25 years.

To make this a viable proposition for Wiltshire Council and the present landowners, the proceeds from the sale of the land must be sufficient to fund the construction of the surgery premises. The value of the site to any developer, and therefore the income accruing from its sale, will depend on the number of dwellings that can be built on it. So the question is, how many houses need to be allocated to the Sopworth Road site in order for the sale of the land to fund the construction of the surgery?

How many houses?

To answer this question, the Steering Group at the suggestion of Wiltshire Council asked a local firm to undertake what is known as a Viability Assessment. This work has just been concluded. Their finding was that a mixed use development on the Sopworth Road site comprising 45 dwellings (of which 40% - some 18 units- would be affordable housing in compliance with the Wiltshire Council Core Strategy) could fund the construction of a new surgery. A smaller number of houses would not be viable. These findings have been discussed with Wiltshire Council and through them the owners of the site. Both have agreed that, in principle, this would be an acceptable proposition. In return for the allocation of the site for mixed use development – including an allowance for the erection of up to 45 dwellings (40% of which should be affordable housing units) – the landowners and Wiltshire Council will secure the delivery of the new surgery. To this end, and for the avoidance of any doubt, Wiltshire Council has now formally resolved at a recent Cabinet Capital Assets Committee meeting chaired by Councillor John Thomson to support this proposition.

After a good deal of deliberation the Steering Group has reached the point where it sees this as the preferred way forward and commends it to the village. This being the only way that the Steering Group considers that a GP service will be retained in the village over the longer term.

It is worth noting that this is a very unusual (almost unique) situation. In normal circumstances all that the Neighbourhood Plan could reasonably do is identify and allocate a site for a proposed replacement surgery. It cannot actually require it to be built. It is only because Wiltshire Council has a controlling interest in the land and because the local landowner is a willing participant that this type of “post allocation” arrangement can be offered. Sherston is extremely fortunate that this arrangement is possible.

Steering Group Recommendation

The figure of 45 new dwelling units on this site is probably one that some villagers may find hard to accept. Nevertheless, this is what the Steering Group now recommends as the best way of ensuring that a GP service is retained in the village.

This proposed solution also meets a number of other Neighbourhood Plan priorities including:

- providing more affordable housing in the village;
- making provision for the future expansion of the primary school;
- providing land for a new pre-school facility;
- helping to preserve existing green spaces elsewhere in the village;
- protecting the village from further unwanted development until at least 2026; and indirectly
 - helping to fund improvements to existing sports facilities in the village (via Community Infrastructure Levy funding); whilst also
 - helping secure the future of many of the existing services and facilities in the village.

But this all depends on the village supporting the Steering Group's proposal. This is: in return for the construction of a new GP surgery and the reservation of land for the possible future expansion of the Primary School and/or for the erection of a new building for the pre-school group, the Neighbourhood Plan will allocate land on the Sopworth Road site for the erection of up to 45 dwellings including affordable housing for local people.

Next Steps

The Sherston Neighbourhood Plan will in due course be the subject of a public referendum. If it is to be adopted by Wiltshire Council and used to determine future planning applications it must first be approved by over 50% of villagers who vote in that referendum. The vote to approve or reject it will be held later this year. So now the Steering Group needs the widest possible feedback to ensure that whatever proposal is made stands the greatest chance of being approved.

What do you think?

We invite you to respond to the short questionnaire attached to this article (see over). Ideally we would like to receive your completed questionnaire by 31st January 2017 at the very latest. This will allow the Steering Group to make the final decision on both housing numbers and land use allocations – which will be published as a draft plan as soon as reasonably possible. Support for this proposal will mean that

a Policy incorporating all of these elements will be included in the draft plan. If there is clear opposition to this proposal then the plan will most probably allocate land for fewer houses, plus a possible site for a new surgery. But in this case there would be little prospect of a surgery actually being built, because of the clear lack of available alternative funding options.

In responding to this questionnaire can you please ensure that all of the requested details are provided (i.e including your name and address). Any questionnaires returned lacking such details cannot unfortunately be taken into account.

A Public Meeting to discuss this proposal will be held in the Village Hall at 7.30 pm on 26th January 2017.

DO YOU SUPPORT THE FOLLOWING PROPOSITION:

In return for the construction of a new GP surgery and the reservation of land for the possible future expansion of the Primary School and/or for the erection of a new building for the pre-school group, the Neighbourhood Plan will allocate land on the Sopworth Road site for the erection of up to 45 dwellings including affordable housing for local people.

	Place cross in box	COMMENTS
YES		<div>.....</div> <div>.....</div> <div>.....</div>
NO		<div>.....</div> <div>.....</div> <div>.....</div>

NAME:..... SIGNATURE:

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