



BUCKFASTLEIGH TOWN COUNCIL

Judith M. Hart
Clerk to the Council

Website: www.buckfastleigh.gov.uk

**TOWN HALL
BOSSELL ROAD
BUCKFASTLEIGH
DEVON TQ11 0DD**

Tel / Fax (01364) 642576
Email clerk@buckfastleigh.gov.uk

Mr Dan Janota
Head of Forward Planning and Economy
Dartmoor National Park Authority
Parke
Bovey Tracey
Devon, TQ13 9JQ

1 February 2019

Dear Mr Janota,

Re: Buckfastleigh Town Council response to Dartmoor Local Plan: First Draft Consultation (Regulation 18)

As a response to the Regulation 18 Consultation, here are the reflections of Buckfastleigh Town Council on the draft Dartmoor National Park Authority's (DNPA) draft Local Plan review:

Biodiversity

Dartmoor 'Special Qualities' and Strategic policy 2.1 'Protecting the character of Dartmoor's landscape'

We are concerned that these goals continue to ensure that the 'distinctive landscape' and the (largely man-made) ecosystems of Dartmoor be frozen in time. Priorities change and the Local Plan might need to reflect that...

2.3 (p35) 2.3.18 (p40) Biodiversity Enhancement

As stated, the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan "...reflects agreements to take urgent and effective action to halt alarming global and national declines in biodiversity".

With, for example, the loss of 75% of flying insects over the last 30 years and 130 bird species fallen by 90% since 1970, it is increasingly clear that we have a duty to safeguard the natural environment for future generations. The National Parks can be seen as the last havens of wildlife in this over-crowded country where man has increasingly wiped out any living organisms.

The National Park Authorities also have powers to enable them to act, in a way that is almost unique, to put the environment first. It is, therefore, we believe, incumbent on the National Park to expand its role in the promotion of biodiversity.

Moorland areas that have been deforested and denuded by sheep and swaling are not areas of high biodiversity and in some of these, biodiversity could be enhanced. There is room for many habitats within the park boundary. The role of DNPA, in our opinion, should shift to emphasising developing Dartmoor as a Centre of Excellence for biodiversity over preserving the current landscape and ecosystems. This might mean allowing and promoting more environmental diversity – for instance allowing the growth and expansion of woodlands and assisting the re-population of flora and fauna.

It is a mistake in our view to overly tie the DNPA into a role of preservation – of *conserving* sometimes barren landscapes at the expense of its other goal – to *enhance* environment and biodiversity. This is an increasingly urgent and essential role.

1.3 (p18) talks about sustainability as ‘...meeting *human* development goals whilst sustaining the natural resources and ecosystems upon which *our* well-being, society and economy depend.” This anthropocentric statement which emphasises the needs of humans as the only measure for sustainability should be extended to include the needs of the natural world for the preservation and sustainment of all life (is there no room for preserving biodiversity that we don’t actually *need*?).

Buckfastleigh Town Council would, for instance, wholeheartedly support the reintroduction of beavers in the Mardle valley, which would in turn produce an expansion of wet woodlands that would not only increase and enhance the fish populations but also allow many other species to flourish, as well as acting as a flood buffer zone to slow down the speed of rainwater that rushes into the river with heavy rainfall and thus decrease the risks of flooding within the town.

We would also support the reduction of light pollution in the National Park and support the current move to encourage DNPA to attain an ‘International Dark Sky Reserve’ status.

2.3.20 (p40) Surely all development of any green field site (and in many cases brown-field sites), will ‘impact on biodiversity’ and therefore should offer biodiversity enhancements?

There is a real risk that these ‘enhancements’ are merely window-dressing, for instance can DNPA put tree preservation orders on trees planted as enhancements to prevent them being chopped down as soon as they reach maturity? This has happened in local developments in Buckfastleigh resulting in a net loss in biodiversity.

2.3.22 (p41) How are financial contributions calculated? What is the value of an ancient oak, for instance? What assessment, ring-fencing and management mechanisms are in place to ensure that these contributions are invested in significant enhancements in the local area?

Sustainability

This is an abused term. ‘Sustainable Development’ is at the heart of the ‘National Planning Policy Framework’ and we would expect the National Park to act as trailblazers and lead the way in this sensitive geographical area where it has the ability to restrain irresponsible development.

The Sustainable Development Commission States that Sustainable Development is about “...Living within our environmental limits...”, “reducing climate change” and “about ensuring a strong, healthy and just society...” which “...meets the diverse needs of all people in existing and future communities, promoting personal well-being, social cohesion and inclusion, and creating equal opportunity”. We would like to see that really taken seriously and for proposals to deliver real change if we are going to have any hope at all of coming anywhere near our national emission targets and building a more just society. Developments that simply pay lip service to this should not be acceptable.

Strategic policy 1.2 g) (p19) says development must ... “conserve the quality and quantity of natural resources, including water, air, soils, geodiversity and biodiversity”. We wonder what happened to the earlier commitment (p14) to “...conserve and **enhance** the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of area”? We would like to see the commitment to enhancement ‘conserved’ throughout the plan.

Strategic policy 1.2 l) (p19) states development should “provide essential services and infrastructure, and promote and enable travel by public transport, cycle or foot”. Unfortunately, against a background of ongoing cuts to public transport in the area and path infrastructure funding, promoting sustainable travel is not enough and developments that might have hitherto been considered sustainable in this regard may no longer satisfy this criteria.

Strategic policy 1.3 (p19). The Presumption in Favour of sustainable development (from the National Planning Policy Framework NPPF) runs counter to elsewhere in the NPPF where it clearly states that the default position for planning permission for any Major Development (over 10 houses) *should be refused unless exceptional circumstances can be proved*. The burden of proof is therefore on a prospective developer to prove this **exceptional** circumstance, otherwise they need to find an alternative location.

We think that the Plan should state that sustainable development will be *expected* and therefore developments that demonstrate significant measures to implement sustainability will be given preference.

1.4 Spatial strategy. We feel that the use of language such as ‘promoting development opportunities’ in this context is inappropriate and sends the wrong message. We would argue that is not the role of the DNPA or this document to ‘promote’ development ‘opportunities’ but to respond to development proposals and safeguard the park and that this is in contradiction to the spirit of the NPPF which states that major development should be refused unless exceptional circumstances can be proved.

1.5.1 Major developments. We pointed out at the consultation meeting at the Parke, that the current wording of this definition of ‘Major Development’ within the National Park is confusing and could be taken to mean that DNPA was opting out of the NPPF definition of 10 dwellings or more. We support any move to further strengthen the definition and be stringent about restricting development within the Park. We would most certainly NOT support any attempt to bypass or dilute the NPPF definition and strictures against major development, for instance deciding that a development proposing more than 10 dwellings should not be considered a ‘major development’ and would therefore fall outside the restrictions in the NPPF. We would like further clarity of this definition to be included and the opportunity to respond.

1.6.9 (p26) It is with regret that we see that the government has watered down its commitment to climate change mitigation/reversal. We would welcome any efforts that are within the powers of DNPA towards meeting carbon reduction targets and agree that the emphasis should be on embodied energy and reduction in the first instance.

Housing

1.4 (p22), 3 p53 We strongly object to both the proposal to increase the annual target from 50 to 65 new dwellings per annum and the reduction in the goal for affordable housing to 45% from 50%.

It was made clear at the consultation workshop at the Parke, that these changes are proposed in response to the fact that the actual percentage of affordable homes being built in the park is between 30 and 35%, so targets for affordable housing to meet identified local need are not being met.

The burden of proof that a development is not viable without reduction of affordable element is on the developer and DNPA should be rigorous in enforcing this. For several recent applications that ask for reduced (or even no!) affordable housing element, we have seen no financial assessment submitted to make their case. This sends the wrong message to developers that DNPA are a ‘soft

touch’ - they just have to say it will ‘affect the viability’, i.e. hurt their pockets and they will be allowed to go ahead.

As set out in the recent report from the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) ‘A Review of Government Housing Policy and its impact on Devon’ which was circulated with ‘Devon Housing Needs Evidence 2018’, the government’s house building targets are vastly inflated. The government’s ultimate target of 300,000 new homes a year is almost **double** that of the actual need according to its own most recent projections published by the Office of National Statistics – *there is no shortage of homes in this country*. In fact there is a surplus of more than 1.25 million houses in England and 2,400 are in Devon.

Government housing policy is clearly driven by free-market economics, the politics of greed, not need.

The ‘Devon Housing Needs Evidence 2018’ report showed that 2/3 of new homes in Devon are actually being built to satisfy inward migration (and figures for the national parks are undoubtedly higher). If properties continue to be developed that are priced outside the reach of local people, this merely contributes to this migration.

We believe therefore that the targets for new homes development are set too high and should be resisted. We also believe the current targets for affordable housing do not go far enough, both in terms of the ratio and the definition of affordability and would like to see these strengthened by the DNPA, not watered down (see below).

Definition of ‘**Affordable Housing**’

3.4 (p61) We are unclear about the definition set out in this section, at one point it is stated that section 106 agreement requires that properties be discounted by at least 25% (75% of market value or rent). In the next paragraph it states that prices should be not more than 3.5 times median local household income.

Given that it is stated elsewhere (p 54) that the median house price in Dartmoor National Park is £272,000 and the median earnings are £22,034 (a ratio of 12.43 – or slightly higher than London), a property at 75% median price is approx £200,000 which is still nine times higher than median earnings, which would make it very far from being affordable. Yet this seems to be the criteria which is being used by developers in their proposals.

A property price of £77,119, 3.5 times median earnings, would actually be truly affordable but how many properties have been built and sold for this price in recent years? It is apparent that most properties developed as ‘affordable’ are therefore clearly not affordable to the vast majority of local people in need, do not deliver for local housing need and therefore do nothing to reduce the numbers of families who are hoping for a home. Whereas, for someone from London for instance, where median house price is £478,853, practically all properties being built on Dartmoor look affordable.

All too often therefore, new development merely adds to the net inward migration into Dartmoor, increasing the strain on rapidly reducing infrastructure and services and encroaching on green spaces, whilst providing very little or no benefit for local people. Thus, the cycle of over-development that threatens the environmental and biodiversity aims of the park continues.

We would like DNPA therefore to clarify that the criteria required for a property for sale to be considered ‘affordable’ is 3.5 times median value. We would also like to see rented accommodation to be truly affordable and therefore would wish to see a high target set for social housing.

3.4.7 (p62) Financial Contributions in Lieu of on-site affordable housing.

Can the DNPA guarantee that any contribution be ring-fenced for providing truly affordable homes for local people? Ideally low-cost social housing? Otherwise this is a loophole and does not provide homes for local people in need.

3.6 Custom and self-build housing

We welcome the positive approach to self-build housing where it encourages and supports building of homes directly for, or on behalf of local people in need, as this precludes development solely for profit and meets a real need. However, we are puzzled by 3.6(1) c) (p69) that states proposals will also be encouraged for unrestricted market housing. The definition of Custom or Self-build on the same page states that Custom or self-build housing means the building or completion of a house by:

- individuals;
- associations of individuals; or
- people working with or for individuals or associations of individuals, of(sic) houses to be occupied as homes by those individuals.

...it is not clear how this corresponds with permission for these as unrestricted market housing and we do not support encouraging that.

3.10 (p82) Low Impact Residential Development

We welcome the recognition that alternative models of low-environmental-impact settlement have value and should be permitted where appropriate.

As we are increasingly aware that the current model of housing and settlement growth is proving unsustainable and damaging to the environment, we need to look to pioneers who are experimenting with ways of living 'within our means'. These settlements can provide a valuable contribution in the form of 'living research' into viable alternative dwellings, models and patterns of living that are more sustainable and may be valuable.

We agree that dwellings/settlements that...

- sit naturally within the environmental
- have minimal visual impact
- off-grid using renewable power generation made of natural materials
- are relatively self-sufficient with localised water and sewage system
- have limited transport infrastructure needs
- and generally have a low impact on or benefit the local environment

...should be treated differently to conventional housing projects.

We understand that this has been a permitted exception on rural sites since at least 2013, but we would however like to see this reflected in practice as so far, we have only heard about sites where residents have been removed from their homes and these torn down.

We are also concerned that what seem like extremely stringent criteria for these sites, may set the bar too high and be outside the resources of many likely candidates. To require that sites are completely self-sufficient and expect a Business Plan, Eco Footprint analysis, Carbon analysis, Landscape and Visual assessment, Biodiversity and Transport assessments is likely to exclude all but the most resourceful (and wealthy!) candidates. We feel that these requirements should, initially for trial settlement period at least, be made less onerous, giving potential settlements a chance to gather data and test viability.

Community Services & Facilities

Given the background of swathing, ongoing cuts to public services and the effects of austerity on local populations, where local education provision, youth service, early years, transport, health, social care, policing and medical resources etc. have all been cut severely in recent years, Services and facilities are at breaking point in many rural communities.

p 85 States “New development will be expected to contribute to the provision of new services, facilities and infrastructure *where this is necessary.*”

Given this reduction in service provision and community resources over the last 9 years, we would argue that if the population of a settlement is to be increased, then service, facilities and infrastructure enhancements will always be necessary. We are living in culturally, socially and financially impoverished communities that are struggling and often failing to cope with current populations. It is unreasonable to expect to add more drain on fewer resources.

4.1 (p87) This states “All existing Community Services & Facilities will be protected” - currently all services and facilities are potentially at risk or already lost in the light of an ongoing background of cuts and the effects of austerity on local businesses. It is not enough in our view to merely make it hard for these to be removed and sites be redeveloped. How can the DNPA be more proactive in the defence of these resources, without which our communities are becoming unviable and populations at risk?

[4.1.4 references ‘reducing household sizes’ as a threat. This is also used to bolster increased home building. In fact, as the CPRE report previously mentioned points out, this trend has halted in the last 5 years so is likely to be no longer relevant.]

Transport

We certainly support the principle of not building more roads across the moor and further negatively impacting environment, however, we would like assurance that 4.3.4 (p 89) will not result in settlements like Buckfastleigh, South Brent and Ashburton, with their proximity to major existing roads, bearing the brunt of the future development targets for the park.

4.3.6 Parking – We concur that parking is a massive problem for settlements such as ours, built on a medieval footprint, there is not enough room for all the cars in the town at present and it is an ongoing problem with which we would welcome help in tackling.

Economy

‘New business and tourism development *will be permitted* within and adjoining Local Centres and Rural Settlements where it is of an appropriate scale and use.’

There is a perception amongst residents (and councillors) that business development, though often more damaging to the environment than small-scale domestic improvements, is given automatic preference and that businesses are not subject to the same rigour as home-owners. We believe the language and wording of this section supports that belief and would like assurance that businesses will be subject to the same level of scrutiny as other residents.

5.1.4 (p100) As mentioned earlier we would like to see affordable housing offset payments if permitted to be ring-fenced for provision of affordable housing.

5.3.8 (p104) States that Local Centre shopping areas are generally successful with low vacancies. Unfortunately, this is clearly not the case for Buckfastleigh town centre, with many retail and business premises having a high turnover and several retailers struggling to break even as economic and other pressures increase. We fear that we are close to dropping below a ‘critical mass’ where Fore Street fails. We have seen quite a few retail outlets and even pubs turned into homes in recent years and can see no reason why this trend will not continue unless innovative solutions are found. If Fore Street fails, then this affects the viability of Buckfastleigh as a Local Centre as laid out in the Local Plan. If the DNPA can find any ways to pro-actively support local businesses, this would be very welcome indeed. A lifeline is needed.

Renewable energy

6.3.2 (p125) states “Dartmoor is not an appropriate location for large scale energy development aimed at power generation to support national and regional energy supply. Wind energy and solar Photovoltaic farm development can significantly harm the National Park’s “Special Qualities.” and Policy 6.6.1 (p125) that “Large Scale renewable Energy development will not be approved”. We agree that large-scale solar and wind farms might have detrimental effects and are glad that DNPA are protecting the park from this, but we would like DNPA to keep an open mind to the possibility that other renewable technologies might be suitable for medium scale energy production, for instance hydro. Are there existing dam sites for instance that could be modified to generate electricity without major environmental impact?

6.3.3 We feel that the plan could emphasize that DNPA will favour potential development that aims higher than building regulations in terms of energy efficiency. It is clear that current building regulations do not go far enough to achieve the necessary carbon reduction levels targeted. They are stacked in favour of the developer not the planet. It is therefore not enough in our opinion merely to ask that developers should ‘aim’ in this direction, it should be a prerequisite for new development.

Towns, Villages & Development Sites

7.1.6 (p128) States: “39% of allocated land is brownfield land”. In the revised plan as drafted, there is zero percent brownfield allocated in Buckfastleigh Local Centre, all is greenfield. This reopens the concerns, in Buckfastleigh at least, of “concreting over of the National Park”, and an ‘urbanisation of Dartmoor’. We suggest that to this end, Buckfastleigh not be aggressively tapped for new development to meet DNPA targets.

Policy 7.1 (1).2 (p129) states “Applicants are encouraged to recognise the benefits of pre-application advice from the Authority, and pre-application engagement and consultation with the community.”

We would like to point out that for some time now, pre-application advice has not been available from the DNPA, so it is not currently possible to take this up. We would like the DNPA to guarantee that sufficient resource is made available to its planning team to provide an adequate service that meets the DNPA’s own standards.

Local Centres

7.4.1 Ashburton

(p130) We would like to point out that Cycle South Dartmoor, a group consisting of representatives from Buckfastleigh Town Council, Ashburton Town Council, DNPA, Teignbridge District Council, South Hams District Council and Sustrans as well as other local representatives, has developed a proposal and feasibility study for a multi-purpose path from South Brent to Ashburton. This has the backing of Sustrans and will be promoted for implementation. We would like this to be considered and integrated in any future plans for development in Ashburton and Buckfastleigh. It

particularly affects the Chuley Rd allocation and the proposals for road changes regarding the Linhay Hill quarry extension.

7.4.2 Buckfastleigh

Allocated sites

7.5.1 Land at Barn Park, Buckfastleigh (p132)

The conclusions of the nascent Neighbourhood plan consultation suggest that this allocation be withdrawn on the following basis:

- Privacy – The site is on a steep slope facing down and towards the existing properties in Barn Park which, from having a view out to open fields and woodland, will now be completely overlooked by new housing. The development will be visible from a large part of the Town where there are currently green fields, trees and hedgerows
- Flood risk – There is great deal of concern about the risk of localised flooding. There is at least one spring on the site and currently at times of high rainfall, gardens become saturated with run-off from the slope. With the creation of an impermeable surface on most of the site this could cause more run-off and thus more risk of localised flooding. Any run-off would flow towards the centre of town, risk further overloading of already strained drainage systems and into areas that are already at high risk of flooding.
- Transport and Access – Access from Barn Park and therefore the site towards the Town Centre is via Jordan Street or via Wallaford/Bossell/New Rd. Both Jordan Street and New Road are narrow, residential roads with only room for traffic to travel one-way at a time and very narrow footpaths on only one side, necessitating pedestrian ingress onto the roadway and frequent traffic blockages and reversing as well as sometimes complete inaccessibility to emergency vehicles.
- Biodiversity – We understand that this is a foraging ground for Greater Horseshoe Bats (GHB) and data for the site is out-of-date. In the last year, local populations of GHB have soared and data available to Natural England is currently insufficient and inadequate to inform the planning process. Buckfastleigh Town Council are taking a proactive role and are currently hosting a forum for all parties with an interest in local GHB populations, with the aim of rectifying this knowledge gap.

...as well as more general concerns about inadequate public transport, services, shops, youth provision etc. and the fact that it is a greenfield site outside the current built perimeter of the town.

We understand that this site originally had the backing of a previous incarnation of the Town Council for allocation on the basis that it was to be 100% social housing. We would reconsider our position if this requirement was reinstated.

7.6 (1) Land at Holne Road, Buckfastleigh

The conclusions of the nascent Neighbourhood plan consultation suggest that this allocation be withdrawn on the following basis:

Flood risk

- Biodiversity – This site is close to the largest maternal roosting site in Western Europe. Any development on this site would encroach further on the remaining green area that surrounds the roosting site, which is partly encircled by human development. Populations of GHB have soared at this site and any development in the green fields surrounding the roost would inevitably have a detrimental impact on flight paths and foraging, in our view.
- Buckfastleigh is at increasing risk of more frequent flooding from the river Mardle with several major incidents over the last few years. We are concerned that although attenuation storage may be included in any development, we have no guarantee that attenuation will necessarily be adequate (especially in the light of increasing rainfall due to climate change) or that it will be effectively maintained in years to come, thus increasing surface water run-off

into the nearby Mardle tributary and subsequent increased and more frequent risk of flooding below in the town centre.

...as well as more general concerns about inadequate public transport, services, shops, youth provision etc. and the fact that it is a greenfield site outside the current built perimeter of the town.

Devonia. We note with regret that the landowner has withdrawn the previously allocated site at Devonia Sheepskins in the centre of the town. As a large, perfectly situated, brownfield site at the heart of the town, approved for mixed development, on which we had commissioned a Site Design and Planning Options Study, this could provide all our potential housing needs as well as offering a vibrant business, leisure and tourist hub. We hope that the site will again be resubmitted for consideration and this will receive our whole-hearted support.

Buckfast

7.22 (p146) Land at Axminster Carpets

In the light of recent proposals for development from Buckfast Abbey, the council would like to support and emphasize that as stated, development on this site should include (a) ‘an element of affordable housing and local needs custom and self-built housing’. Also, that (d) it ‘identify and deliver opportunities to improve pedestrian and cycle access through the area’.

We are also concerned that due to reports of a new roost of Greater Horseshoe Bats being discovered in the near vicinity, that as stated e) ‘development...will have no adverse impact on the SHSAC’.

We again emphasize that any ‘major development’ within the park should, as stated in the NPPF, *...be refused unless exceptional circumstances can be proved*. It is therefore incumbent on the developers to prove that there are exceptional circumstances and that any development would provide significant affordable housing for local people and benefits in terms of infrastructure and services.

We are also aware of considerable concern from Buckfastleigh Town Centre retailers, that any retail outlets such as those currently being suggested at the Axminster Carpets site, will have the effect of creating a mini, out-of-town shopping centre, which because of access to abundant parking, would lead to a drop in turnover for existing shops, many of whom are on a financial cliff-edge in current economic circumstances. We would like this to be taken into account when awarding any planning permission for this site.

We also suggest that, since this is a brownfield site and is within the parish of Buckfastleigh (and because the housing allocation for the village of Buckfast is so small), that any major development of dwellings on this site be considered as part of Buckfastleigh’s allocation and take precedence over development of current greenfield allocations within the parish.

Yours sincerely,

Andy Stokes

Councillor Andy Stokes
Chair of Buckfastleigh Town Council