

Saham Toney Neighbourhood Plan

As explained last time, an independent examination the Plan is underway, and on 17th February, an online public hearing was held to debate the independent examiner's initial questions on the main issues as he sees them. The hearing was an all-day affair which we streamed live on our YouTube channel, where you can find a recording.

Each party – the Parish Council and Breckland Council – was represented by 5 participants. On our side Councillor Hinkins introduced our group and the Parish clerk, Jill Glenn attended in case any administrative questions arose. With help from our consultant, Rachel Hogger, I answered the examiner's questions and Andrew Walmsley from the work group, was on hand to provide any document references that might come up and generally support Rachel and me.

I found the day quite draining, not so much because the hearing ran for 7 hours, but because the examiner's questions were ad hoc, meaning we had to think on our feet while trying to defend the Plan's policies against the challenges he raised.

We've split the recording by topic into 7 shorter videos, with links on our website, so those wanting full details can watch those, but in summary, the points of particular note from the hearing were:

- The examiner noted that while long, the Plan is very clear, with great depth to its evidence base. He also considers the Plan's approach to housing 'remarkably positive and really refreshing';
- At the same time, he was concerned about prescription in the Plan, and wanted to test if a more flexible approach would be better;
- The examiner suggested that housing numbers could be increased by allowing, for example, four 1-bed homes in place of one 4-bed, but neither he nor Breckland could suggest wording for that to prevent the unlimited increase that would be possible if policies are reworded to allow for 'at least x' houses, as Breckland planners want;
- The examiner doubted it is reasonable to ask all developers to check that sufficient infrastructure exists before their development is allowed to proceed. We tried to explain that while an individual small site is unlikely to overwhelm village infrastructure, the Plan is trying to account for cumulative effects, and also reflects the lack of infrastructure improvements over the last decade or more;

- The examiner was concerned that an individual development could not be refused simply because it was proposed at a different time to that specified in the Plan. We argued that the policy allows flexibility in this respect, and so does not need to be amended;
- The examiner was concerned that our policy on affordable housing did not deal with the development of land (as a Plan must), and should perhaps be deleted, but two Breckland housing officers gave good reasons why that would not be appropriate. They even noted the policy sets out an ‘admirably clear approach’;
- Perhaps the hardest part of the hearing was defending our drainage policies: the examiner seemed to agree with Breckland planners that they go into too much detail and cover things that could be dealt with by planning conditions after permission is granted. We vehemently disagreed and can only hope our arguments will have persuaded the examiner of the need to retain our rigorous policies on this topic;
- At the end of the hearing, the examiner gave no indication of how he might decide each topic. On the day, my personal feeling was that he is more likely to require changes to our key policies on housing numbers, density, infrastructure and surface water drainage, than he is to support them in the current form. If that proves to be the case, we will be hugely disappointed, but at the same time, I feel we did everything possible to defend the Plan. Hence if some policies are amended by the examiner, it will not be for want of us making a good case. The reality is there is nothing to be gained from speculating on any conclusions the examiner might reach about what he heard, and we must wait for his report.

The examiner still has to visit the village before writing his report, and cannot do that until Covid restrictions are lifted. He may have more questions after his visit, so we can only be ready to address any new issues he might raise.

As usual, if you have any comments or questions on any of this, or the Neighbourhood Plan in general, or if you'd like to be added to our mailing list, please get in touch with me. **Most importantly, stay healthy and safe!**

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***Neighbourhood Plan
Shaping the future of
Saham Toney!***