

## **Saham Toney Neighbourhood Plan**

Work on the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) of the Plan that I mentioned last month has now started. The two must be tackled somewhat differently:

For SEA the first stage is a report setting out a scope of work for the assessment. Our comments on the draft report have just been included and it on 5<sup>th</sup> February it was sent to the Environment Agency, Historic England and Natural England, who may want changes or additions to the scope. They get 5 weeks to make comments, then we and our consultants will decide if we accept those, then the first stage of the assessment can start. That reviews what's in the Plan, together with what are called 'reasonable alternates' which we've agreed with the consultants. After we've reviewed the report on that, we'll know what changes to the Plan, if any, are needed. Later the consultants will update their report to reflect any changes we make to the Plan over the coming months. That report will be published for a 6-week public consultation, and we may need to update the Plan again as a result of comments.

For the HRA we've just received our consultant's draft report, which assesses the Plan as published last summer. They've advised a few things that should be added to our policies to further protect wildlife and habitats, so we'll need to decide if we agree with those. We may ask Natural England for comments at this stage, but it's not obligatory. Then later the assessment will be updated to reflect changes we've made to the Plan since last autumn's consultation on it. The final report is then consulted on by (only) Natural England for 3 weeks. If necessary, as a result of any comments they have, the HRA report will be amended as may the Plan. We then submit the HRA report to Breckland Council and ask them to confirm if it meets the legal requirements. If it does, we'll then be in a position to make the final submission of the Plan and all its supporting documents.

We've now received the additional grant we applied for and will use it to commission various consultants to do the following:

- A full review of the Plan and other key documents by our main consultant, who will tell us if we've dealt with all the consultation responses correctly and fairly. She is very thorough and will inevitably have advice on how to improve the Plan.
- An independent review of our housing needs assessment, including recommendations for any ways we can improve our approach to affordable housing; and

- A transport study: Rather than solving the village's existing problems with roads and footpaths etc. its aim is to review the impact of the allocated sites on those things, hopefully including a particular look at the junctions at each end of Pound Hill. We can't anticipate what the study report will conclude, but there is every chance its recommendations will lead to changes or additions to the Plan. We're hoping the study will be finished by the end of March (when the grant will lapse), and I'll keep you updated with progress.

Following a meeting with two Breckland Council planners to discuss their comments on our design policy and the village design guide, we have updated both, and if our main consultant confirms they are okay, we'll ask the planners to review them again. This iterative process of review and update is all part of one of our key aims, to get to a point where Breckland will have no comments on the final plan. It means things take longer now, but if we can achieve that aim, the plan should have an easier ride through its examination, and overall time and trouble will have been saved. That's because we get no control over changes made by an examiner, and examiners often accept any objections of a district council.

Having had chance to discuss the sequence of events and timetable for SEA and HRA with the consultants, we've refined our overall schedule. Our latest estimate is that we may be able to make the final submission of the Plan around the middle of August – about a 6-week saving on what I told you last month. After that we have no control over the timetable, but would hope examination of the Plan will be complete before the end of the year. Then a village referendum date depends on Breckland Council. We hope they will arrange one quickly, but it's possible they could defer it to tie in with local elections in May: let's hope not!

As usual, if you have any comments or questions on any of this, or anything else to do with the Neighbourhood Plan, or if you'd like to be added to our mailing list, please get in touch with me.

**Chris Blow, STNP Work Group leader**



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