

Thornbury Town Council

Examination into South Gloucestershire's Core Strategy

The Town Council will be represented at the examination by Cllr Clive Parkinson who has prepared the following response to the Inspector's questions for the hearing on July 13 2012 relating to Thornbury issues.

The response is based on the formal comments made by Thornbury Town Council in responding to Core Strategy consultations and council records. In two instances namely the second paragraph on page 2 and question 6 the Council has taken no formal stance and here the views expressed in the first person are those of Cllr Parkinson.

Question 1 – Consultation process and sustainability appraisal

The responsibility for the consultation process lies with South Gloucestershire Council although some people have criticised Thornbury Town Council for not carrying out sufficient or better consultation.

The Town Council was first consulted about the core strategy by South Gloucestershire Council in May 2008 when there was the opportunity to see and comment on display panels in the shopping centre and attend an open workshop to discuss issues surrounding having more housing in Thornbury.

Eighteen months later in October 2009 the Town Centre Strategy was launched and a workshop was run by South Gloucestershire Council to discuss possible areas for more housing in Thornbury. I understand that invitations to the workshop went out to a wide range of organisations in the town and the event in the Armstrong Hall was well attended.

In March 2010 the Town Council received notification of South Gloucestershire Council's approved Core Strategy documents for consultation between May and July 2010. Opposition to the Park Farm development was raised by Save Thornbury's Green Heritage and others at this time. The Town Council submitted its comments on 20 July 2010. At that stage the sustainability appraisal did not appear to be complete.

In December 2010 the Core Strategy was approved and published by South Gloucestershire Council. The sustainability appraisal contained significantly more information than in the March 2010 version. It was agreed to hold an additional public exhibition about the housing proposals in Thornbury and this was held in conjunction with the Town Council on 18th January in the Cossham hall. The Town Council reviewed all the documents and representations that had been made to them and submitted its comments on the Core Strategy on 18 February 2011.

There have been further small amendments to the Core Strategy in relation to Thornbury since the Inspector's Exploratory Meeting in June 2011 which have been included in the final

Core Strategy documents published by South Gloucestershire Council in December 2011. The Town Council considered this final version of the Core Strategy on 2 February 2012 when it agreed to confirm its decision in February 2011 to support the proposals for housing development in Thornbury.

Following the various amendments and changes to the Core Strategy documents I am unaware of any failure by South Gloucestershire Council to comply with the regulatory or legislative requirements in relation to the consultation process or the sustainability appraisal.

Question 2. Evidence about retaining and improving services, facilities and employment in Thornbury

Although this question is clearly directed towards South Gloucestershire Council it is appropriate to indicate where the Town Council has agreed with information provided by South Gloucestershire Council leading to its support for more housing in Thornbury.

(a) The demographics clearly show that the population of the town has fallen between 1991 & 2001, average household sizes have fallen (by 20% between 1981 and 2001), and the percentage of residents over 45 is increasing rapidly (from 26% to 39% from 1981 to 2001). Because many of those who moved into Thornbury in earlier decades with young children are probably intending to see out their lives here, these trends are likely to continue unless the Town plans for some changes. Although some people have questioned some aspects of these figures stating that the latest statistics show that the older population of Thornbury is about the national average, this does not change the trend over time. What it does say is that 20 years ago our older population was well below the national average and unless we take action now we will have an increasingly ageing population in future years.

(b) The Town Council has always supported our primary and secondary schools. As falling school roles brought about the 'danger' of closure the Town Council rejected all such suggestions from South Gloucestershire Council. Thornbury however must accept that unless it is prepared to accept change now that 'danger' may become a reality. Some people have used national statistics about increasing birth rates and primary school numbers to argue that falling school roles are not a problem. But this is not the case in Thornbury and district where school governors can confirm South Gloucestershire Council's figures that student numbers continue to be well below target with all that means for funding.

(c) There is a need for more affordable housing in the town, opportunities for young people to stay in the town, and for older residents who wish to downsize to high quality smaller dwellings. There is insufficient available space within the existing developments of the town to meet these needs.

(d) There has been much debate about how to improve the viability of the town centre. The truth is that the town needs both a greater variety of shops and more people shopping. To pretend that one without the other will deliver vitality is not sustainable especially in the internet age that has and will continue to affect sales in the retail sector.

(e) In terms of how much development is required figures provided by South Gloucestershire Council show that an increase of 500 houses (which represents an increase of 10%) together with natural infilling within the existing developments would resolve the problem of school roles. In 2008 the Town Council carried out a survey asking residents, in the light of the South Gloucestershire Council's proposals, should Thornbury have more housing? Over half of those responding (57.5%) were in favour of up to 500 more houses and 41.5% did not want any more housing.

(f) These factors led the Town Council to the conclusion, unpalatable for some maybe, that it is in the best long term interests of the town to consider some modest new housing development to re-balance the town for the next generation. Thornbury Town Council believes that such development should not exceed 500 dwellings.

Question 3. Potential constraints at Park Farm

The Core Strategy goes into considerable detail about the relative advantages and disadvantages of each site. No site is perfect least of all for those living close by but the Town Council remains of the opinion that Park Farm is the best or 'least worst' option presented.

It is the only site that would not be separated from the rest of Thornbury by a road, making it the easiest new development site to access and integrate into the existing community. Park Farm would provide the shortest and safest access for children / students going to both primary and secondary schools. The Park Farm site also provides the shortest pedestrian access to the town centre.

Whichever site is chosen there will be problems relating to drainage, loss of open space, and agricultural land. There is no evidence that Park Farm presents significantly higher constraints than other potential sites.

The appraisal by South Gloucestershire Council assesses the overall ecological value of land beyond Morton way as being higher than at Park Farm with two SNCIs. Park Farm is essentially open fields but adjacent to the Medieval Fishponds next to Manor Walk. These Medieval Fishponds must be protected. The Town Council welcomes its recent scheduling (at South Gloucestershire Council's request) as an Ancient Monument and has agreed to be part of a trust to be set up to manage the Fishponds should Park Farm be developed.

Thornbury Town Council has always worked with South Gloucestershire Council and others to protect these Medieval Fishponds and will seek suitable conditions to be imposed at the planning approval stage to ensure that they will continue to be protected.

Question 4. Advantages of alternative sites to Park Farm.

Thornbury Town Council does not consider that the alternative sites have advantages over Park Farm except the absence of archaeological assets beyond Morton Way . The council believes that it was right to rule out at an earlier stage the two smaller sites to the immediate west of the town which are in the green belt and because of their direct negative impact on the conservation area of the town.

All sixteen Town Councillors, including the three North West Ward Councillors from Park Farm who are against the Park Farm development, were against development on the sites the other side of Morton Way during the debate when the Town Council finalised its response to the core strategy in February 2012.

Question 5. Is Morton Way South a more sustainable location for housing?

No.

All of Thornbury's developments since the 1970s have occurred inside the Morton Way / Butt Lane boundary. Of the possible development sites only Park Farm lies inside that boundary making it much easier to access into and integrate with the existing community.

Thornbury has seen various developers with interests in land outside this boundary putting forward proposals for up to 3,000 houses which the Town Council believes would be absolutely disastrous for the town. The Town Council supports the core strategy assertion that once that boundary is breached at one location Thornbury is at risk of not hundreds but thousands more houses stretching towards the A38. Any development the other side of Morton way would adversely affect the rural setting of the Crossways community.

Morton Way South would be further to walk to and from the town centre. It would require children / students to cross an additional main road to get to school. It would lead to an increase in traffic problems in Park Road at school times.

Development at Park Farm would offer the Castle School the best opportunity of realising their aspiration of consolidating the school onto one site.

Question 6. Impact of new Nuclear Power Station

The Town Council has not considered a new nuclear station to be a significant issue in relation to housing proposals for Thornbury. If the new station goes ahead I believe that construction workers are likely to be based closer to the plant, and the long term maintenance staff numbers are unlikely to be significantly different from those that have traditionally worked there.