

THAME NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN EXAMINATION VERSION

A Report to South Oxfordshire District Council of the Examination into
the Thame Neighbourhood Plan

by Independent Examiner, Nigel McGurk BSc(Hons) MCD MBA MRTPI

Nigel McGurk BSc (Hons) MCD MBA MRTPI
Erimax Ltd
February 2013

Contents	Page
1. Introduction	3
2. Basic Conditions	6
3. Background Documents & Thame Neighbourhood Area	7
4. Public Consultation	8
5. The Plan – Neighbourhood Plan Policies	12
• Housing	13
• Working and Shopping	23
• Getting Around	26
• Community, Leisure and Wellbeing	28
• Environment, Sustainability and Design Quality	29
• Delivery	30
6. The Plan – Other Matters	31
• Policy Numbering	31
• Section 3, Housing Allocations	32
7. Summary and Referendum	34

1. Introduction

Neighbourhood Planning

Neighbourhood Planning is a new layer of planning which provides communities with the power to establish policies to shape future development of local areas. This Report provides the findings of the Examination into the Thame Neighbourhood Plan (referred to as the Plan).

The Plan has been produced by Thame Town Council, which is a *qualifying body*¹ for leading a neighbourhood plan. It is one of the first in the country to have been prepared by a local community. This is in line with the aims of neighbourhood planning, set out in the Localism Act (2011) and recognised in the National Planning Policy Framework (2012).

This Report provides a recommendation as to whether or not the Plan should go forward to a Referendum. Were it to go to Referendum and achieve more than 50% of votes in favour, then the Plan would be *made* by South Oxfordshire District Council. The Plan would then be used to determine planning applications and guide planning decisions in the Thame Neighbourhood Area.

Role of the Independent Examiner

I was appointed by South Oxfordshire District Council, with the consent of Thame Town Council, to conduct the examination and provide this Report as an Independent Examiner. I am independent of the qualifying body and the local authority. I do not have any interest in any land that may be affected by the Plan and I possess appropriate qualifications and experience – I have land, planning and development experience, gained across the public, private, partnership and community sectors.

As Independent Examiner, it is my role to make one of the following recommendations:

- a) that the Plan should proceed to Referendum, on the basis that it meets all legal requirements;
- b) that the Plan as modified should proceed to Referendum;
- c) that the Plan does not proceed to Referendum, on the basis that it does not meet the relevant legal requirements.

If recommending the Plan proceeds for Referendum, I am also then required to consider whether or not the Referendum Area should extend beyond the Thame

¹The qualifying body is responsible for the production of the Plan.

Neighbourhood Area to which the Plan relates. I make my recommendation on the Referendum Area at the end of this Report.

In examining the Plan, I am also required, under Paragraph 8(1) of Schedule 4B of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, to check whether:

- a) the policies relate to the development and use of land for a designated neighbourhood area in line with the requirements of Section 38A of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (PCPA) 2004;
- b) the Neighbourhood Plan meets the requirements of Section 38B of the 2004 PCPA (the Plan must specify the period to which it has effect, must not include provision about development that is excluded development, and must not relate to more than one neighbourhood area);
- c) the Neighbourhood Plan has been prepared for an area that has been designated under Section 61G of the Localism Act and has been developed and submitted for examination by a qualifying body.

I am satisfied that each of the above points have been met.

Public Hearing

As a general rule, neighbourhood plan examinations should be held without a public hearing – by written representations only. I have considered written representations as part of the examination process. A public hearing must be held *when the Examiner considers it necessary* to ensure adequate examination of an issue, or to ensure that a person has a fair chance to put a case.

A neighbourhood plan public hearing is different from a planning inquiry, an examination in public or a planning appeal hearing. It is essentially to provide for the Independent Examiner to further consider matters against the Basic Conditions, referred to in section 2 of this report.

Taking the above into account, I decided that it was necessary for there to be a Thame Neighbourhood Plan Hearing (referred to as the Hearing). The Hearing was advertised in the local press and in Thame itself, and was held on 19th February 2013. I invited a number of parties to speak. The Hearing was open to the public and took place in Thame Town Hall, from Midday, lasting until just before 4pm.

I did not invite all of the people who had indicated in their representations that they would like to speak at a public hearing. In a number of such cases, I was satisfied that the parties had had a fair chance to put their case. In addition, there were no questions I wished to put to them and no points further to their representations on which I sought clarification.

One party, which in its representation, had requested to participate in the Hearing “to ensure a full and proper debate of the Neighbourhood Plan process and content...” and was not invited to the Hearing, wrote to South Oxfordshire District Council with a request to attend. They were informed of the information set out above. There followed a letter from that party’s legal representative, requesting “an explanation” for this decision and stating that I had set “an uneasy precedent.” I am satisfied that this party had a fair chance to put its case through the representations it had made and as above, there were no questions I wished to put to them and no points on which I sought clarification.

2. Basic Conditions

An Independent Examiner must consider whether the Plan meets the “Basic Conditions” which were *set out in law*² following the Localism Act 2011. In order to meet the Basic Conditions, the Plan must:

- *have regard to* national policies and advice contained in guidance issued by the Secretary of State;
- *contribute to* the achievement of sustainable development;
- *be in general conformity with* the strategic policies of the development plan for the area - in this case, the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy (2012);
- *be compatible with* the European Union (EU) and European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) obligations.

I have examined the Plan against these Basic Conditions.

I am satisfied that the Plan does not breach, nor is in any way incompatible with the ECHR. Similarly, I am also satisfied that the Plan is compatible with EU obligations.

In this regard, the screening exercise for the Plan’s Sustainability Appraisal concluded that there are no European sites that would be affected by the proposals within the Plan. In addition, South Oxfordshire District Council’s Core Strategy (the Core Strategy) undertook a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) and it was agreed that no HRA was necessary for the Plan.

Although not fundamental to the above, it is worth noting that the Plan’s Sustainability Appraisal followed on from a Scoping Report – submitted to statutory environmental bodies and made available via Thame Town Council’s website – and that the final version took on board comments from both statutory and non-statutory consultees.

A neighbouring local authority suggested that the Plan was not compatible with European Union obligations, with regards to consideration of landscape matters in the Sustainability Appraisal. However, no substantive evidence was provided to demonstrate any breach of, or incompatibility with, European Union obligations.

South Oxfordshire District Council

South Oxfordshire District Council has confirmed that it is satisfied that the Plan meets the Basic Conditions. In so doing, it finds that the Plan is in general conformity with the strategic policies of the Core Strategy, which was adopted in December 2012.

²Paragraph 8(2) of Schedule 4B of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

3. Background Documents & Thame Neighbourhood Area

Background Documents

In examining the Thame Neighbourhood Plan, I have considered the following documents in addition to the Examination Version of the Plan itself:

- National Planning Policy Framework (The Framework) (2011)
- Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended)
- The Localism Act (2012)
- The Neighbourhood Planning Regulations (2012)
- South Oxfordshire Core Strategy (Adopted December 2012)
- Basic Conditions Statement
- Consultation Statement
- Consultation Reports
- Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report (Revision A, May 2012)
- Sustainability Appraisal Report
- Sustainability Appraisal Non-Technical Summary
- Evidence Base Summary
- Delivery Strategy
- All representations received during the publication period
- All comments made during the Thame Neighbourhood Plan Hearing (19th February 2013)

In addition, I have spent 2 days, unaccompanied, visiting the Thame area.

Thame Neighbourhood Area

The Thame Neighbourhood Area coincides with the parish boundary of Thame.

South Oxfordshire District Council wrote to Thame Town Council on 26 November 2012, confirming its agreement to designate the parish of Thame as the Thame Neighbourhood Area. This satisfied a requirement in line with the purposes of preparing a Neighbourhood Development Plan under section 61G (1) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended).

4. Public Consultation

Background

Planning legislation requires consultation and engagement to take place on the production of land use plans, including neighbourhood plans. Open and comprehensive engagement with the community during plan-making can raise awareness and help people to understand the plan's scope and limitations, as well as encourage participation in its production.

Effective consultation is especially important to neighbourhood planning, as it can create a sense of public ownership, achieve consensus and provide the foundations for a successful 'Yes' vote at Referendum.

Given its fundamental importance to successful neighbourhood planning, I have assessed the consultation process undertaken for the Plan in some detail. In doing this, I'm particularly conscious that, despite the Plan having undergone stages of consultation over and above that required by legislation, it was still criticised by some objectors to the Plan.

Simply undertaking various stages of consultation does not in itself ensure a robust and well-tested Plan. I think it is therefore important to understand the quality and effectiveness of the public consultation in Thame, with particular reference to openness and transparency.

Thame Town Council submitted a Consultation Statement to South Oxfordshire District Council, as required by *regulation*³. This Statement contains details of who was consulted and how; summarises the issues raised; and describes how these issues have been addressed.

Prior to its submission— and the subsequent six week consultation period to 24 January 2013 —the Plan underwent five main stages of consultation:

- An initial consultation weekend (October 2011)
- A second consultation weekend around objectives and initial approaches to the Plan (November 2011)
- An option development and testing period (February/April 2012)
- Consultation on the preferred options (May/June 2012)
- Statutory consultation on the draft plan (August-October 2012)

It is relevant to emphasise here that the Plan underwent four more stages of consultation than required to do so by statute. This immediately suggests to me that public consultation was regarded as fundamental to the plan-making process and taken very seriously by the qualifying body.

³Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012.

Public Consultation: Early Stages

The initial consultation stages, prior to developing and testing options, were heavily publicised. In addition to newspaper advertisements, posters and website articles and updates, Thame Town Council also employed innovative approaches, with the aim of making as many people as possible aware of the consultation events. These included an interview on three local radio stations, use of social media and notably, a large banner in High Street. Around 400 people attended the first weekend and 479 people attended the second. These are impressive numbers and indicate a high degree of public awareness. Each of the two events was held over a period of time to include a working day, an evening and at least one full day during the weekend. This demonstrates to me that, from the earliest stage, Thame Town Council sought to encourage an open and inclusive approach, with plenty of opportunities for input into the Plan.

Public Consultation: The Preferred Options

This stage received the most criticism from those people who found the consultation process unsatisfactory. The Preferred Options were reached following a development and testing period, which took into account the views received during the initial stages. It involved a core group of Town Councillors, along with representatives of Residents Associations. Wider public consultation was then undertaken on each of the options considered, with the Preferred Option highlighted. This public consultation stage was carried out over a month and was publicised via extensive leaflet distribution, posters, an exhibition at the Town Hall, through a website (with on-line feedback) and via social media. Local people accounted for 835 feedback forms received at the Preferred Options stage and further responses were received from landowners/agents.

The main criticisms directed at this stage were around how the Preferred Options were arrived at by the core group mentioned above, prior to Preferred Options consultation. Critics considered that the core group did not represent everybody from Thame and that effectively, the choice was made 'behind closed doors.' I have considered these comments in some detail, but it seems entirely reasonable to me that, in order to progress the plan-making process efficiently, some decisions do need to be made by smaller groups. By their very nature, it is inevitable that smaller groups may not be fully representative of everybody with an interest.

Crucially, it seems to me, the choice of Preferred Option was accompanied by evidence as to why it had been chosen and was then very widely consulted on, alongside each of the other options. The 835 feedback forms received provide overwhelming evidence that this critical stage, as a whole, was transparent and widely promoted, with plentiful opportunities for comment. It is important to emphasise, in this regard, that Thame Town Council chose to undertake this stage of public consultation despite there being no statutory requirement for them to do so.

Further to all of the above, I think it a relevant factor that Thame Town Councillors, among others, were members of the core group referred to. Thame Town Council is the qualifying body for the Plan and the Councillors themselves have a responsibility to represent the interests of the wider community.

Taking everything into account, the Preferred Options were determined in a reasonable and appropriate manner, having undergone an open and transparent consultation process.

Public Consultation: Statutory Consultation on the Draft Plan

Following consideration of information received during the previous stage, the draft Plan was produced. It then underwent a six week statutory consultation period. E-mails and/or letters were sent to statutory consultees. All documents were uploaded to the Thame Town Council website and made available in the Town Hall. Five separate topic meetings were held on an open basis and these were attended by 85 members of the public. Landowners and/or developers were invited to hold exhibitions and a further exhibition was held at Thame's weekly market. A newsletter was delivered to every household in the Parish and there were posters, a prominent banner, press releases and a 'wrap around' edition of the Thame Gazette.

People were encouraged to submit responses and 221 were received. Responses received after the closing date (of which there were 25) were also considered.

Taking this and all of the previous stages into account, there is plenty of evidence to show that the consultation process was well-publicised from start to finish and that it comprised an open process, with lots of opportunities for engagement, involvement and feedback.

Public Consultation: Range and Type of Consultees

Effective public consultation should encourage the views of as wide a range of people affected by the proposals as possible. In this regard, it was clearly appropriate for consultation on the Plan to focus on people living within the neighbourhood area. As above, I am satisfied that Thame Town Council did as much as they reasonably could to raise local awareness and to encourage as many local people as possible to get involved. There is evidence that, as well as the views of residents and local business-people, there was input from the earliest stage from other interested parties including the police, local organisations and landowners and developers.

The views of younger and older people were also actively sought, with two small focus groups being set up. The young people's focus group, held at this stage, comprised an open meeting, although there were few attendees. Despite the disappointing turnout, the important point is that the opportunity was provided for young people to give their opinions. Participation in consultation is not compulsory.

It is relevant to note though, that the views of those young people who did take part were subsequently taken into account.

In addition to the statutory consultation, which included a wide range of consultees, the invitation to developers and/or landowners to exhibit their proposals was highly commendable. This provided an additional opportunity, not required by statute, for those parties to have their say – and for people to consider, understand and comment on any proposals.

It is clear that Thame Town Council went to a lot of effort in order to encourage participation in public consultation from a wide range of people.

Public Consultation: Consideration of Issues Raised

Effective public consultation requires the proper consideration of inputs and views. This should include feedback on ideas and proposals which were not subsequently incorporated into proposals.

In addition to the Consultation Statement (the Statement), which is a statutory requirement, Thame Town Council also produced a Consultation Report (the Report). The Statement summarises the main issues and concerns raised at each stage of the process, from the initial consultation weekend, through to the statutory consultation. It also sets out how these concerns were considered, including, where relevant, any subsequent changes to the Plan. The Report is a larger document, which summarises each of the comments received during the statutory consultation period. It also seeks to provide a brief response to these comments, again including reference to any resultant changes to the Plan.

It is therefore evident that Thame Town Council gave due consideration to the significant number of comments received during consultation.

Public Consultation – Summary

Given its fundamental importance to neighbourhood planning and being mindful that there was some criticism of the Plan in this regard, I have scrutinised the public consultation process. I am entirely satisfied that the Plan not only meets its statutory obligations, but exceeds the standard requirements to such an extent that it provides an exemplary approach to public consultation in neighbourhood planning.

5. The Plan – Neighbourhood Plan Policies

Sections 5) and 6) of this Report consider the Plan in detail against the Basic Conditions. Recommended modifications are highlighted in bold print, with any new wording proposed also in italics.

The Plan divides into three main sections: 1) A Vision for Thame; 2) Neighbourhood Plan Policies and 3) Residential Site Briefs. The policies in section 2 are arranged under six sub-sections: Housing; Working & Shopping; Getting Around; Community, Leisure & Wellbeing; Environment, Sustainability & Design Quality; and Delivery.

The layout of the Plan is logical and user-friendly. Its overall design, content and inclusion of plans and photographs, creates a Plan which is interesting and easy to read.

The Vision and Objectives

The first Section of the Plan – A Vision for Thame – recognises the attributes that make Thame distinctive and identifies a set of principles to guide its delivery. The ten-word Vision Statement – *Thame must retain its character as a real market town* - is clear, short and sharp and provides a good introduction, from which the more detailed objectives, and then the policies to support and deliver the vision, naturally flow.

In describing the area – including reference to constraints and opportunities - the Plan introduces the core objectives, which go on to provide each of the five main policy headings. Together, the vision and objectives are distinctive to Thame and recognise those unique local characteristics and aspirations that the Plan aims to protect and where possible, achieve. They set out the need for Thame to provide for its growth whilst preserving and improving those things that are special about the area. This approach contributes to the achievement of sustainable development. It has regard to those national and local strategic policies which seek to combine the protection of local character with provision for appropriate development.

During the Hearing, Thame Town Council emphasised that the vision and objectives reflected the views of the community, derived from the consultation process. I note that there is a clear link between the objectives and the policies and that this is carried through the whole of the Plan.

Housing

The housing allocations in the Plan reflect the Preferred Option for housing, which is described as 'Contained Thame'. This aims to disperse development, but also locate it within the distinct physical boundaries formed, notably, by the river to the south of Thame and the ring road. Thame is identified in the Core Strategy as a sustainable location for growth and all four of the spatial options scored broadly equally (within 10% of one another) in the Sustainability Appraisal. The Preferred Option was chosen following consideration of a range of different options for the growth of Thame. It was also amended, further to consultation, to improve its ability to achieve sustainable development. Consequently, the Preferred Option meets the Basic Conditions.

Together, the housing policies seek to provide the new housing required by the Core Strategy, integrate new housing into Thame, and provide a range of housing types and tenures.

Policy 7A-P1 allocates land for housing.

Core Strategy policy CSTHA1 requires proposals in the Plan to lead to various improvements to the town, including, with particular relevance to the housing allocations: its attractiveness and the quality of its environment; accessibility, pedestrian and cycle links; and the amalgamation of the secondary school onto a single site. The housing allocations in the Plan seek to achieve these improvements, for example, through the following:

- the allocation of land at Site C seeks to improve the quality of views and approach to the town from the south, by shielding the industrial estate;
- the Plan's detailed open space policies require the housing allocations to provide a variety of publicly accessible and connected open space;
- the allocations require improvements to accessibility, pedestrian and cycle links.

Core Strategy policy CSTHA2 requires the Neighbourhood Plan for Thame to allocate land for 775 new homes. The housing allocations in the Plan achieve this and South Oxfordshire District Council confirmed, during the Hearing, that they do so in a way that is in general conformity with the Core Strategy.

Taking the above into account, the housing allocations within the Preferred Option are in general conformity with the strategic policies of the Core Strategy. The Core Strategy was recently adopted and is in line with the Framework and I therefore find that the allocations have regard to national policy. I also note that there was strong support for the Preferred Option's approach of locating the majority of homes on Sites C, D and F, with 67% of respondents to the consultation on preferred options indicating that they approved⁴.

⁴Ref: 3.32, Thame Neighbourhood Plan Evidence Base Summary (November 2012).

I have noted that Thame is a sustainable location for development. The Preferred Option was tested through Sustainability Appraisal and subsequent improvements were made to it. As such, I am satisfied that there is evidence to demonstrate that the housing allocations contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. Policy 7A-P1 meets the Basic Conditions.

I recognise in Section 6a) of this Report that there is potential for some confusion regarding the presentation of policies contained in separate Sections of the Plan. **I therefore recommend the following alteration to policy 7A-P1. As a consequence of the recommended changes in 6a), the words “...of Section 3, other relevant...” (line 4) are deleted and replaced with the words “...set out in the...”**

Policy 7A-P2 concerns the delivery of the Lord Williams’s Lower School allocation. The policy recognises that there is a possibility that this site may not come forward. Should this situation arise, a mechanism is provided for the site’s removal and the release of identified land elsewhere. This provides for appropriate flexibility, in line with the Framework and meeting the Basic Conditions. However, in the interests of producing a clear and user-friendly Plan, the policy could helpfully include a cross reference to the appropriate site-specific policy. Please note that in making recommendations below, I have also introduced the recommended changes to policy numbering, covered in this Report in Section 6b), below.

As such, and subject to any changes to policy numbering resulting from further recommendations below, **I recommend that the policy title is altered, to become *H2: Review Delivery of Lord Williams’s Lower School allocation (HA5: Lord Williams’s Lower School – allocation for 135 dwellings)* and that the first reference to Reserve Land (lines 3&4) should be followed by (*HA6: Reserve Site F – Allocation for 78 residential dwellings; HA7: Reserve Site C – Allocation for 57 residential dwellings*).**

Policy 7A-P3 recognises that the actual number of dwellings to be built upon land at The Elms may be less than that referred to in the policy. Similarly to the previous policy, there is a mechanism for the balance of housing to be provided at Site F, or to be added to Reserve Site C, and the policy meets the Basic Conditions. This mechanism needs to be made clearer in the Plan, as it was established during the Hearing that the policy should prioritise the allocated site over the reserve site and thus, any balance of housing should only pass to Reserve Site C were the dwellings not to come forward on Site F. My recommended changes to this Policy also have regard to my comments on “The Elms” set out elsewhere in this Report.

I recommend that for consistency and clarity “(HA4: The Elms – Allocation for no more than 45 residential dwellings)” should be added to the end of the policy title and that the policy should be altered to read:

“Should a planning approval be granted for fewer than 45 dwellings at The Elms, the balance shall either:

- **be added to the Lord Williams’s Lower School allocation (*policy HA5*); or,**
- ***should this site not come forward in line with policy H2, the balance should be added to Reserve Site F (policy HA6).*”**

Policy 7B-P1 seeks to ensure good connectivity within the allocated sites and between the sites and the wider town and includes a clear cross reference to site-specific policies. This policy is to the benefit of sustainable development and is in line with national policy and the Core Strategy’s aim of improving accessibility. The accessibility, in terms of sustainable transport, of Site C, and to a lesser extent, Site D, was criticised in some representations and at the Hearing. However, this policy demonstrates a way in which the Plan seeks to contribute to the achievement of sustainability and meets the Basic Conditions.

Core Strategy policy CSTHA1 states that in Thame, housing will be allowed on ‘suitable’ infill and redevelopment sites. **Policy 7B-P2** seeks to provide for such windfall development, but I am concerned that, in stating that “Permission will be granted for small residential developments...” the drafting of the policy affords insufficient emphasis to the ‘suitability’ of sites. Whilst the policy goes on to state that proposals ‘should’ be well designed and ‘should’ meet the requirements of other policies in the Plan, I am concerned that the word ‘should’ is not the same as “must”, and that the separation of the policy into two sentences effectively reduces the emphasis afforded to ‘suitability.’ Subsequently, as drafted, the policy is not in general conformity with the Core Strategy. This can be resolved by minor rewording of the policy, retaining its intent and ensuring that the policy meets the Basic Conditions. In this regard, **I recommend that the wording of the policy is changed to the following:**

Permission will be granted for small residential developments on infill and redevelopment sites within the parish, including Moreton village, subject to proposals being well designed and meeting relevant requirements set out in other policies in this Plan and the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy.

Policy 7B-P3 emphasises the importance of good quality design. Notably, there is reference to protecting Thames’s character. This policy meets the Basic Conditions. It has regard to national policy, as set out in the Framework, which requires new development to be of a high quality and which recognises the importance of local character. **I recommend that the words “Proposals for” are added to the beginning of line 11, for clarity.**

Policy 7B-P4 relates to the provision of new facilities and off-site contributions and is cross-referenced to the appropriate delivery policy later in the Plan. There is a small

degree of duplication with the delivery policy, but policy 7B-P4 is helpful in that it provides clarity and further information, particularly for developers when preparing plans. The policy is in general conformity with the Core Strategy, which requires development to support the provision of services and facilities. Two further small changes to the policy would help it to better meet the Basic Conditions. As worded, the policy does not recognise the potential for direct delivery of off-site works by a developer. Secondly, the policy can be worded more clearly, to better reflect what *proposals*, as opposed to *development* (which is referred to in the later delivery policy) can achieve.

I therefore recommend that the policy is altered as follows:

“All proposals for new housing will be required to demonstrate provision of appropriate new facilities on-site and provision of, or contributions to, off-site facilities as required by...”

Policy 7C-P1 requires affordable housing to be provided in line with Core Strategy policy CSH3. In addition, the policy requires the type and size of affordable homes to meet the specific needs identified for Thame. As well as being in conformity with the Core Strategy, this policy therefore requires affordable housing to relate to local needs, thus avoiding a potentially less appropriate ‘blanket’, District-wide approach. It meets the Basic Conditions.

Policy 7D-P1 requires schemes of more than six dwellings to provide a mix of types and sizes. This reflects the aims of the Framework to deliver a wide choice of homes and to plan for a mix of housing based on current and future trends, and the needs of different groups in the community. It meets the Basic Conditions.

Policy 7D-P2 requires planning applications for six or more homes to be accompanied by a Thame-Specific Affordable Housing and Dwelling Mix Strategy. This conforms with the aims of the Framework, as above, and conforms with Core Strategy policy CSH4 Meeting housing needs. As with policy 7C-P1, I also note that it ensures a relevant approach to development based on local circumstances. Given the importance of local circumstances to the Plan, the wording of the policy is appropriate and does not fail to meet the Basic Conditions in respect of outline applications, as suggested by one objector.

Residential Site Briefs: The Housing Allocations

The Plan allocates five sites for housing and, as a contingency measure, reserves a further two sites for development if the allocations do not come forward. The allocations exclude a large site to the east of Thame, known as Site B, which was promoted for housing-led development. In addition to representations received, each of the housing allocations, along with Site B, were considered during the Hearing. I set out my findings and where relevant, my recommendations, under each site heading, below.

Site B

The promoters of Site B considered that their site could deliver on-site infrastructure, whereas others could not. In addition, the promoters considered the site to perform better, in sustainability terms, with particular reference to sustainable transport, than both Site C and Site D.

With regards the first point, the Plan contains policies pertaining to the provision of facilities and services. The Plan also includes cross references to the Core Strategy and to the Thame Neighbourhood Plan Delivery Strategy, which itself identifies infrastructure requirements. I am therefore satisfied that the Plan has regard to the national policy requirement to 'ensure an integrated approach to considering the location of housing, economic uses and community facilities and services,' as set out in the Framework. There is nothing to demonstrate that necessary infrastructure, facilities and services would not be provided by those sites allocated in the Plan. Consequently, it seems no less likely that the allocated sites will 'deliver sufficient community and cultural facilities and services to meet local needs,' as required by the Framework, than would Site B.

Site B has good potential to be served by bus. The Preferred Option recognised that Sites C and D were not close to local bus services. However, whilst national and local planning policies emphasise the promotion of sustainable forms of transport, there is nothing within the Framework or the Core Strategy which requires housing sites to be allocated on the basis of the location of bus services alone. The Plan requires Sites C and D to improve cycle and pedestrian links into Thame, in addition to recognising other benefits brought about by their allocation. This approach will contribute to sustainable development, is in general conformity with the Core Strategy and has regard to national policy requirements.

Taking all of the above into account, I am satisfied that the Plan meets the Basic Conditions without allocating land at Site B for housing. I also note that Site B does not fit within the Contained Thame approach required by the Preferred Option. This point was emphasised by a considerable number of representations to the Plan.

Site F (including Reserve Site)

The promoters of Site F stated, in representations and at the Hearing, that more efficient use could be made of the site by increasing housing numbers and utilising the reserve area, with the additional units being taken from Site C, which itself could become a reserve site. It was the view of the promoters that, by not allocating more housing to Site F – which they considered to be the most sustainable site in Thame – the Plan fails to meet the Basic Conditions.

Site F was originally a draft allocation in the emerging Core Strategy for 600 homes. The Inspector appointed to examine the Core Strategy noted considerable local support for spreading the housing at Thame to a number of different locations rather than focusing on one large single site, at Site F, and he concluded that the allocation would be better determined through the Thame Neighbourhood Plan. The Plan achieves this, in line with the Preferred Option, which meets the Basic Conditions.

Site F has good sustainable transport credentials, but I have noted above that the Plan requires Sites C and D to improve cycling and pedestrian links and there is no substantive evidence to demonstrate that this cannot be achieved. In this respect, the Plan is in general conformity with Core Strategy policy CSM1 and has regard to the requirements of the Framework.

The Plan, in line with the Core Strategy, supports the amalgamation of the secondary school, through the allocation of land for the school adjacent to the housing land allocation at Site F. It is not the role of the Plan to 'set out' a financial mechanism to ensure that the school does amalgamate and there is nothing in this regard which prevents the Plan from meeting the Basic Conditions.

Taking the above into account, the Plan is in general conformity with Core Strategy policy CSTHA1.

The promoters of Site F consider that the approach to the Preferred Option was "at odds" with policy CSTHA2. I have considered the Preferred Option elsewhere in this Report, but I note that Core Strategy policy CSTHA2 requires sites to be "the most appropriate and sustainable." I consider that this emphasises the need for site allocations to be considered 'in the round' and that determining them on the basis of a sustainability appraisal alone, would not necessarily result in the most appropriate allocations. At the Hearing, Thame Town Council confirmed that the Sustainability Appraisal formed part of the process in determining the Preferred Option, and that other factors, notably meeting wider, identified objectives, were also important considerations. Taking this into account, the Preferred Option is in general conformity with policy CSTHA2. I also note in this regard, that South Oxfordshire District Council is satisfied that the Plan meets the Basic Conditions.

There is nothing that leads me to the conclusion that the provision of a substantial area of publicly accessible and natural open space to the north and east of Site F is

either inappropriate or unsustainable, or that it does not meet the Basic Conditions in any other way. The neighbouring local authority, in representations and during the Hearing, pointed out that the visual impact of development at Site F is a significant concern. The Plan addresses this and other factors through its requirement for a design brief and by extending a Nature Reserve, retaining trees and hedgerows, linking green spaces and providing for significant areas of publicly accessible and natural open space in an appropriate and sustainable manner. Consequently, the approach is in general conformity with policy CSTHA2 and has regard to national policy. Furthermore, not undertaking a visual landscape assessment at this stage does not mean that the Plan fails to meet the Basic Conditions, not least as consideration of relevant matters, including the neighbouring authority's involvement in consultation, would take place at the application stage.

The Plan is in general conformity with Core Strategy policy CSH2 Density. The Core Strategy sets a minimum net density of 25 dwellings per hectare and this approach is adhered to by the Plan. The plans provided to indicate development areas for each of the allocations are simply indicative and as above, the Plan requires applications on allocated sites to be accompanied by a detailed design brief. This is a commendable approach which emphasises the importance of design and allows for further scrutiny of design proposals. This is in line with the Framework, which considers good design to form a key part of sustainable development.

In summary, with regard to Site F, the Plan is in general conformity with the strategic policies of the Core Strategy, it has regard to national policy and it contributes to the achievement of sustainable development.

Site C (including Reserve Site)

I am conscious of the significant support for the Preferred Option, indicated during the relevant consultation process, although there was some criticism of Site C, particularly by the promoters of other sites, with specific regard to its distance from, and accessibility to, the town centre. However, the Plan identifies specific proposals to address these factors and the allocation is identified as providing further benefits to Thame, including the visual improvement of the southern gateway to the town and the potential to masterplan Sites C and D together, thus providing for a comprehensive approach to design. South Oxfordshire District Council is satisfied that the allocation meets the Basic Conditions. Although not central to my consideration, I also note that, in 2004, a Local Plan Inspector considered the site to be reasonably well located to services, in terms of walking and cycling and that he considered it 'at least as good' as other peripheral locations. All in all, I am satisfied that the allocation of Site C meets the Basic Conditions.

An objector pointed out that Reserve Sites C and F are under the same land ownership as the principal allocations, but this does not lead me to the conclusion that the Plan is not in general conformity with the Core Strategy, based on a notion

that the Reserve sites might not come forward, due to ownership. On the contrary, the Plan meets the Basic Conditions, in that it provides an appropriate and flexible approach to land coming forward, by providing reserve sites and thus allowing for uncertainty.

The County Council raised a concern regarding possible ecological constraints at Sites C and D, but I am conscious that any proposals for development would require significant ecological survey work. Resultantly, this is not something that would prevent the Plan from meeting the Basic Conditions.

Taking all of the above into account, with regards the allocation of Site C, I am satisfied that the Plan meets the Basic Conditions.

Site D

The promoters of Site D stated, in representations and at the Hearing, that Site C should be removed from the Plan and that Site D should be extended to include the 187 houses allocated at Site C.

Site D could be expanded whilst largely maintaining a maximum 20-minute walking distance to the town centre, but a 'Walkable Thame' is not the Preferred Option. As above, I am satisfied that Site C meets the Basic Conditions and that its removal would fail to bring other identified benefits to the area. Furthermore, I am also conscious that Sites C and D are close together and share some similarities. This is recognised by the Plan, which requires a joint Design Brief to include the two sites, thus enabling a comprehensive approach to good design and leading the Plan to meet the Basic Conditions in this regard.

The promoters of another site considered that Site D should be removed from the Plan, as it does not have good bus connections and that, together with Site C, it represents a large rather than a dispersed site. On the first point, I have stated above that the Plan meets the Basic Conditions with regards sustainable transport. With regards the latter point, the allocation of Sites C and D comply with the Preferred Option, which itself meets the Basic Conditions. Sites C and D do not form one site and there are five housing sites in the Plan, dispersed around the town.

With regards to Sites C and D, there is currently reference in the Plan to their being controlled by the same developer. As this does not appear to be the case, I **recommend deletion of the first sentences in A2.9 and A3.10**

The Elms

The Elms site is within the grounds of a Listed Building, close to four other Listed Buildings and is wholly within the Thame Conservation Area. South Oxfordshire District Council and English Heritage have confirmed that they do not object to the

housing allocation at The Elms site in principle, but both have expressed reservations about the policy. In addition, a number of parties have submitted representations opposing development plans for the site.

Neither national policy, nor the strategic policies of the Core Strategy, seek to prevent appropriate development within Conservation Areas or within the settings of Listed Buildings. Indeed, this site provides an opportunity to provide for some housing and to open up a hitherto private area of land, for the benefit of the town, as well as provide for investment in a Listed Building. Notwithstanding this, the sensitivities associated with the site cannot be underestimated.

The Framework is clear in affording great weight to the conservation of heritage assets. The Plan clearly intends to have regard to this, and refers to the need to preserve and enhance, but the policy approach to The Elms, as worded, appears to give rise to some potential for conflict with national policy.

It was established, through representations and at the Hearing, that the final number of dwellings to be provided can only be determined through further detailed work. This work will be undertaken as part of any planning application. However, a policy reference to the estimated number of dwellings to be provided is important, as the site forms part of Thame's overall allocation. Whilst the principle of allocating land at The Elms meets the Basic Conditions, it is important that the wording of the policy and its supporting text are modified, to ensure appropriate safeguards, whilst at the same time, maintaining appropriate reference to the site's role in contributing to Thame's housing land allocations. It is my view that it is possible to reach an appropriately balanced approach through a slight modification of the wording of the existing policy and supporting information.

I recommend that the reference in Policy HA4 (my reference, based on approach to policy numbering below) to "...up to 45 residential dwellings" in the policy is removed and replaced with "*...residential development. The number of dwellings will be determined through a detailed design proposal and in any case, will provide no more than 45 dwellings. If fewer than 45 dwellings are provided, the balance of Thame's housing requirement will be provided in accord with Policy H3.*"

I also recommend deletion of the reference in paragraph A4.7 "The site's sensitivities mean that it is not possible to define the extent of the built area." In its place, I recommend the insertion of "*The site's sensitivities mean that the residential development will be restricted to the eastern and south-eastern side, although it is not possible to define the exact extent of the built area and open space prior to designs being completed and agreed. In any event, the site will provide no more than 45 dwellings.*"

Subject to incorporating the above modification, the Plan's allocation of The Elms meets the Basic Conditions.

Lord Williams's Lower School

This housing allocation is the only one in the Plan entirely surrounded by existing development. There is general support for its allocation, not least because it allows for the strategic objective of consolidating the school's operations elsewhere, but a number of concerns have been raised with regards to the development of the site.

As with all of the housing allocations, the Plan requires a Design Brief to be produced, and the Plan sets out a series of principles that must be included in the Design Brief. One of these requires the gardens of new dwellings to back onto existing houses, to protect the amenity of existing residents. The aim of this approach is clear, although as worded, the Plan would not necessarily achieve the aim of protecting privacy, nor would it address the outlook from existing dwellings. Subsequently, the Plan may fail to reflect national and local aspirations for high quality design and **I recommend that a simple modification is made to clarify intent, whereby bullet point 6 in A5.10 is altered to "*protecting the outlook and privacy of residents by providing sufficient distance and landscaping between new and existing properties. Where appropriate, the gardens of new dwellings should back on to those of existing properties, with the objective of maintaining privacy and outlook.*"**

Subject to the above, I am satisfied that the allocation of land at Lord Williams's Lower School meets the Basic Conditions.

Taking all of the above into account and subject to my recommendations, I am satisfied that the housing allocations in the Plan meet the Basic Conditions.

Working and Shopping

This Chapter of the Plan reflects the aim of providing for a range of good quality new employment space; and supporting the role of Thame town centre and its shops.

The Plan sets out the policies in this Chapter under four main objectives: supporting Thame's shops; providing new employment; protecting and supporting existing employment; and ensuring that the Cattle Market site supports the town centre. This general approach meets the Basic Conditions.

Policies 8A-P1 to 8A-P10 focus new retail development in the town centre, as well as encourage the diversity of new uses in the town centre, thus supporting its economic vitality. The overall objective of focusing retail uses in the town centre fully reflects Core Strategy policy CST1.

The Framework and the Core Strategy clearly emphasise the priority that should be afforded to protecting the vitality of town centres. It is reflective of national and local policy for the Plan to state that the development of a major shopping centre outside of the town centre would be likely to undermine the vitality of the town centre. However, **I recommend that the statement "Proposals for large out of centre shops will therefore be resisted" is deleted.** The Plan already states that it is unlikely that such a use would not undermine the town centre. However, were such a use to demonstrate, via sequential testing for example, that it did not undermine the town centre – whether such a scenario is likely or not – a policy in the plan resisting it would have insufficient regard to national policy, nor be in general conformity with the strategic policies of the Core Strategy and would thus fail to meet the Basic Conditions.

Typo: Policy 8A-P6 – replace "areas" (line 3), with "area."

Subject to the above, policies 8A-P1 to 8A-P10 meet the Basic Conditions.

Policy 8B-P1 allocates 3 hectares of land for new employment on employment Site B. The promoters of a site to the west of the town, Site 16, consider their site to be more sustainable than employment Site B. Whilst the promoters of this alternative site consider that it may better meet with 'Public Transport Thame' than employment Site B, the relevant Preferred Option, which meets the Basic Conditions, is 'Contained Thame.'

Amongst other factors which contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, employment Site B is well located in relation to existing employment land and the Plan requires its development to provide a pedestrian/cycle link to the Phoenix Trail, together with improvements to links around the eastern portion of the existing ring road. There is nothing that leads me to find that its 'L-shape' will lead to the unsustainable use of land. The allocation is in general conformity with the Core Strategy's aim to encourage residents to work more locally. In providing for a

range of new employment uses, it also has regard to the Framework's requirement for a flexible approach. Consequently, I am satisfied that policy 8B-P1 meets the Basic Conditions.

The promoters of employment Site B objected to the policy's lack of reference to B8 (storage and distribution) uses, as well as to the design requirements set out in the supporting text to the policy. With regards the latter point, the requirements, which relate to access, accessibility and general design principles, are not onerous, but simply ensure that the proposal will contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. I therefore consider that removing the existing "must accord" reference to these would undermine the policy's ability to meet with the Basic Conditions.

Policy 8B-P1 does not exclude B8 uses, as it refers simply to "new employment." The objective behind Policy 8B-P1 states that new employment should "principally" be B1 or B2 uses. Thame Town Council confirmed, during the Hearing, that the absence of a reference to B8 uses in the objective was an oversight. **I recommend that the Objective is reworded as follows "New employment should aim to secure high quality jobs, and be offices/ business use (B1) or hi-tech office/ industrial use (B2) or warehousing/ distribution (B8).**

Policies 8C-P1 and 8C-P2 seek to protect and support existing employment sites. This approach meets with the Basic Conditions. Whilst an objection to the Plan was received on the basis that policy 8C-P2 fails to reflect the Framework's requirement to avoid the long term protection of sites with no realistic prospect of re-use, no such sites were identified.

Policy 8D-P1 The Cattle Market

This policy seeks to ensure that the redevelopment of the Cattle Market supports the town centre. The site is identified as having potential to support the town by providing places for people to live and work close to the town centre, as well as for new retail and a community facility. The policy requires a (non food supermarket) retail-led mixed use development, to include public car parking. A wide mix of other uses, including residential, offices, restaurants and cafes, are identified.

Amongst objectors to the policy was the promoter of a food supermarket on the Cattle Market site. The objector stated that the policy did not meet the Basic Conditions for a number of reasons, including: the policy promotes a single form of development that has little prospect of delivery; it does not provide an option for a foodstore-led development; and that it is not the role of a Neighbourhood Plan to set out prescriptive detail. The promoters of the food supermarket also considered the Core Strategy to be 'fundamentally flawed' and brought my attention to a 'live' planning application on the site, but neither of those factors are a matter for this Report to consider.

Core Strategy Table 11.1 (Thame floorspace needs) shows that there is no need for convenience retail in Thame for the period 2007-2016 and a requirement for just 600 square metres of convenience retail in the whole of Thame for the period 2007-2027. Whilst in this regard, the Core Strategy states that retail figures beyond 2016 will be reviewed, South Oxfordshire District Council confirmed that it considered policy 8D-P1 to be in general conformity with the Core Strategy.

I also note that the Core Strategy refers to the importance of Thame improving its eating out and socialising offer, implementing a major development and attracting new retail and leisure providers to Thame, with specific reference to the Cattle Market as the main site with potential for development, and citing a recommendation for mixed use on the site. Furthermore, Core Strategy policy CSTHA1 states that “Proposals in Thame should be consistent with the strategy which is to: (i)...identify sites suitable for future retail, leisure and community uses... (iii) improve the attraction of Thame for visitors...”.

Taking the above into account, policy 8D-P1 is in general conformity with the Core Strategy. It would contribute to the achievement of sustainable development through the re-use of a brownfield site.

Together, policies 8D-P1 and 8D-P2 do not set out a requirement for a single form of development at the Cattle Market, but do set out the key principles for any redevelopment of the site. It is entirely appropriate for a neighbourhood plan to provide relevant detailed planning policies, so long as these meet the Basic Conditions. I am satisfied that the principles set out in the Plan provide for good quality design and promote a sustainably wide mix of development, which would in turn, be in general conformity with the strategic policies of the Core Strategy, which seek to strengthen town centre commerce and identify sites for retail, leisure and community use. This approach also has regard to the Framework, which requires plans to allocate sites to meet the scale and type of retail, leisure, commercial, office, tourism, cultural, community and residential development needed in town centres. In this regard, I am satisfied that policies 8D-P1 and 8D-P2 meet the Basic Conditions.

Subject to my recommendations, I am satisfied that the Working and Shopping Chapter of the Plan meets the Basic Conditions.

Getting Around

The policies of this Chapter of the Plan seek to achieve the identified objectives of improving connectivity within and around Thame, particularly for pedestrians and cyclists, and to provide for appropriate parking. These objectives reflect national and local policy and have the potential to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.

Policies 9A-P1, 9B-P1 and 9C-P1 seek to improve pedestrian and cycle routes. Oxfordshire County Council pointed out, and I agree, that as worded, policy 9B-P1 is unclear as to how any improvements not directly related to a proposed development would be funded. Such an approach would fail to be in general conformity with the Framework and Core Strategy policy CS11, which requires contributions to directly relate to development proposals.

Taking the above into account, a revised approach proposed by the County Council would more appropriately provide for a strategy to improve pedestrian and cycle connections in a way that would meet the Basic Conditions, and also provides the opportunity to maintain an appropriate link to policy 11G-P2. **I recommend that policy 9B-P1 is changed to “Include a strategy for improving pedestrian and cycle connections related to new development. This could include provision of internal cycleways and footpaths, along with connections to key destinations, for example, schools and other services. This strategy must be coordinated with the Green Living Plan for Thame.”** The remaining part of the existing policy “The Green Living Plan must...” should be deleted.

The County Council stated that it cannot commit resources to progress and help fund the proposal for a cycle link to the Rail Station, as set out in policy 9C-P1. This may be the case, but there is nothing to suggest that there may not be sources of funding, other than developer contributions, available towards the aims of the policy, now or at some time in the future. The policy itself seeks to achieve an aim which is in general conformity with the Core Strategy, has regard to the Framework and which would contribute towards the achievement of sustainable development. However, **I recommend that the supporting information is changed to more accurately reflect the circumstances, whilst still providing for the route to come forward, “Contributions will be sought from all new developments to fully fund the design and delivery of a cycle route to Haddenham and Thame Parkway Rail Station.”** The following paragraph should then be added to the supporting text, **“Should it not be possible to implement this policy within the lifetime of this Plan, the contributions will support other identified projects to improve pedestrian and cycle connections in and around Thame.”**

Policy 9D-P1 supports better co-ordination of public transport and sets out how this will be achieved. It meets the Basic Conditions.

Policies 9E-P1 and 9E-P2 address car parking. Representations and comments during the Hearing, notably on behalf of a nearby Parish Council, suggested that the Plan fails to meet the Basic Conditions as it does not encourage the improvement of car parking in the town.

I acknowledge the references to the town centre being busy and parking being difficult on market days. However, the Plan's policies seek to ensure that car parking supports the viability of the town centre and meets adopted policy standards. There is no suggestion in the Plan that the number of town centre car parking spaces in Thame should be reduced and Policy 9E-P1 explicitly requires the redevelopment of the Cattle Market site to include retention of "at least" the existing number of spaces.

The Plan adopts a wider approach to movement. It places emphasis on the connectivity of land allocations to the town centre, via walking, cycling and public transport and incorporates policies to improve pedestrian and cycle connections. Local and national policies recognise the need to provide for car parking whilst emphasising the need for a balanced approach, incorporating sustainable modes of movement.

Taking all of this into account, Policies 9E-P1 and 9E-P2 meet the Basic Conditions.

Subject to my recommendations, I am satisfied that the Getting Around Chapter meets the Basic Conditions.

Community, Leisure and Wellbeing

This Chapter of the Plan seeks to meet identified community objectives. These include the provision of a large community facility, land for a potential primary school and additional healthcare facilities. A policy is also included to promote community involvement in public consultation.

Policy 10A-P1 identifies three sites with potential for accommodating a new community facility. It was established at the Hearing that there is no clarity yet as to what the community facility will comprise. The supporting text to the policy does state, however, that its main purpose will be to provide accommodation for Thame's many active community groups and organisations. By identifying three specific sites that could accommodate it, the Plan provides for flexibility. The policy meets the Basic Conditions.

Policy 10B-P1 explicitly encourages the active involvement of local people in ongoing consultation with reference to development proposals. This approach meets the Basic Conditions.

Policies 10C-P1 and 10D-P1 allocate land for a primary school and require financial contributions towards additional healthcare facilities, identified in South Oxfordshire District Council's Infrastructure Delivery Strategy. I acknowledge that Oxfordshire County Council has confirmed that a primary school is not required as a result of the Plan's housing allocations, but consider that the cautionary approach taken by the Plan reflects the kind of flexibility sought by the Framework. I am satisfied that these two policies meet the Basic Conditions, as do all of the policies in this Chapter.

Environment, Sustainability and Design Quality

The first part of this Chapter of the Plan provides policies to protect, improve and provide for new open space and natural green space. It also seeks to co-ordinate the approach to sports facilities, address flooding and drainage, and encourage energy efficient and sustainable development. The second part provides policies to reinforce the character and quality of Thame. The general aim of these policies meets the Basic Conditions.

Policies 11A-P1 to 11D-P1 provide: a co-ordinated approach to the protection of open space; the provision of new open space on allocated and windfall sites; the provision of allotments and new burial space; improvements to recreation areas and open spaces; and the provision of riverside walks within natural green spaces. Together, these policies meet the Basic Conditions.

Policy 11E-P1 sets out a co-ordinated approach to sports facilities. This policy meets the Basic Conditions.

Policies 11F-P1, 11F-P2 and 11G-P1 require new developments to incorporate Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS), for applications to be accompanied by a Drainage Strategy, and for proposals for new development to meet the Code for Sustainable Homes Level 4, or its equivalent, respectively. These policies meet the Basic Conditions.

The remainder of this Section of the Plan focuses on reinforcing the character and quality of Thame. This objective recognises Thame's special qualities as a historic market town. Good design is recognised by the Framework, as comprising a key aspect of sustainable development. I commend the Plan's approach to promoting good design quality, through policies which are clearly distinctive to Thame.

Policies 11H-P1 to 11H-P4 combine to ensure that development must demonstrate not only how it relates to its surroundings, but specifically, how it contributes to the unique qualities of Thame as a whole. This approach meets the Basic Conditions.

Policies 11H-P5 and 11H-P6 on Historic Character, require development to be appropriate to its historical context and for proposals to include the provision of relevant, detailed information. However, whilst the accompanying text requires developers to discuss the impact proposals may have on heritage assets at an early stage, there is no specific policy reference to the conservation and enhancement of Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas. I am concerned that, as worded, policy 11H-P6 in particular, affords insufficient regard to national policy, and is not in

general conformity with the strategic policies of the Core Strategy, notably policy CSEN3. This is of particular concern, given the Plan's emphasis on reinforcing Thame's quality and character, and in recognition of there being two Conservation Areas and more than 200 Listed Buildings in the area. Furthermore, the Plan itself points out the 'strong feeling that Thame's character needs to be protected' that emerged during consultation.

Consequently, I recommend that the following sentence is added to the end of policy 11H-P6, "***Listed Buildings and their settings; and Conservation Areas, and their settings, will be conserved and enhanced, to reinforce the quality and character of Thame.***" Such an approach does not preclude appropriate development, but helps the Plan to ensure that any development impacting on nationally designated heritage assets meets the necessarily high standards of design quality required. The addition reflects the objectives of the Plan and its general, and commendable, approach to design quality and ensures that it meets the Basic Conditions.

Policies 11H-P7 to 11H-P15 form the last part of this Section and provide detailed advice and controls. Together, these seek to enhance the quality of new development and improve the existing environment. I particularly commend the recognition of 'the three-dimensional qualities of traditional buildings' and the requirement to 'design in the forgotten elements from the start of the design process.' These are significant factors and reference to them reflects the importance afforded to good design by the Plan.

Taking the above into account and subject to the recommendations, this Chapter of the Plan meets the Basic Conditions.

Delivery

Policy 12A-P1 references the Plan's Delivery Strategy and Core Strategy policy CSI1, which set out what developers are expected to provide in relation to their proposals. Subject to altering the wording to recognise that developers are not precluded from the direct provision of necessary off-site works, as below, this policy meets the Basic Conditions.

I recommended that the words "provide, or" are added to the policy before "...contribute to off-site..." (line 2).

6. The Plan – Other Matters

a) Policy Numbering

During the Hearing, Thame Town Council explained that the numbering of policies in the Plan was the result of the document's evolution and noted that the resultant numbering is a little unwieldy.

Linking policies with objectives is an important part of the Plan, but extending this approach to policy numbering has led to an over-complex system that reduces the 'user-friendliness' of the Plan. Despite each policy number having five or six characters, there is no obvious reference to the subject the policy number refers to.

It is my view that providing each individual objective with its own numbering system is unnecessary and over-complicates policy numbering. There is then a further layer of complexity, as the housing allocation policies (Policies A1 to A7) have a different numbering system to the other housing policies (Policies 7A-P1 through to 7D-P2).

I recommend that a simpler, more user-friendly approach to policy numbering is adopted. Rather than use chapter numbers, I recommend that policies relate to policy topics. Thus:

- ***Housing policies would be prefaced H;***
- ***Working & Shopping, WS;***
- ***Getting Around, GA;***
- ***Community, Leisure & Wellbeing, CLW;***
- ***Environment, Sustainability & Design Quality, ESDQ;***
- ***Delivery, D.***

Taking this approach, the policies would then follow a straightforward numbering system. Thus, instead of 7A-P1, 7A-P2, 7A-P3, 7B-P1, 7B-P2...10A-P2, 10B-P1, the Housing policies, for example, would become **H1, H2, H3, H4, H5** and the Community, Leisure and Wellbeing policies, **CLW1, CLW2, CLW3** and so on. This identifies the subject the policy number refers to and is a more user-friendly approach.

This approach does not diminish the importance of the objectives, which would still be highlighted in the same tabular form at the beginning of each Chapter. Similarly, the explanatory paragraphs, heading each group of relevant policies within each Chapter, would also remain. However, the objectives are not policies and there is no need - and it seems confusing rather than helpful - to provide the objectives themselves with a numbering system.

I recommend that the numbers afforded to each of the objectives are deleted.

b) Section 3, Housing Allocations

The detailed site-specific policies relating to the housing allocations are in a separate Section of the Plan, Section 3: Residential Site Briefs. However, in presentation terms, this sits outside that part of the plan entitled 'Neighbourhood Plan Policies.' As such, it appears that the policies are not part of the Plan. In addition, the title of this Section does not accurately reflect its content. The Section contains policies providing site-specific requirements and it requires developers to provide Residential Site Briefs.

I recommend that the title is changed to *Section 3: Housing Allocation Policies – Site Specific Requirements*. This approach identifies that the Section contains policies and is clear about their content.

I also think that it would be helpful if the cross reference between this Section and the directly related Housing Chapter of the Plan was made more explicit.

I recommend that the last three lines of the first paragraph in the Housing chapter (page 24), beginning "...with the specific allocations..." are deleted and replaced with '*Detailed site-specific policies relating to each of the housing allocations are contained in Section 3.*'

The policy numbering system used in this Section is completely different from that of the rest of the Plan. This is confusing and to the detriment of the Plan's user-friendliness. In addition, there are variations as to how each of the housing allocations are referred, some by name, some by letter. This is potentially confusing for those unfamiliar with the history of the Plan.

I acknowledge the point, made during the Hearing on behalf of Thame Town Council, that a previous suggestion to move away from the historic references to the housing sites was strongly resisted. The fact that this suggestion has already been made by parties with good knowledge of the Plan could be considered to strengthen the point that the resultant names are potentially confusing. However, if there is strong support for the retained inclusion of the site references, I see no harm arising and importantly, their retention would not prevent the Plan from meeting the Basic Conditions.

Taking all of the above into account, I think it important that the policy numbering is brought into line with my recommendations relating to the numbering of the rest of the policies in the Plan. The policies should relate to the title of the section, thus reflecting their content. Consequently, **I recommend that the Housing Allocation policies are changed to become HA1, HA2, HA3, HA4 and HA5.** I see no reason for the inclusion of paragraph numbers in the policies themselves. This is confusing and is different to the approach in the rest of the Plan. **I recommend that the paragraph numbers in the policies themselves are simply deleted.**

With regards the naming of the allocations themselves, I recognise that there is local importance attached to the allocation references. **I therefore recommend that the policy numbering should change to bring it into line with the rest of the Plan, but that the site references should remain. By way of example, Policy A1: Site F – Allocation for 203 residential dwellings would become HA1: Site F - Allocation for 203 residential dwellings.** Each of the first five policies would be treated in the same manner. Note the deletion of the word “Policy” – this is in line with the rest of the policies in the Plan. The other two allocations in this Section relate to reserve sites and these would simply become *HA6 Reserve Site F – Allocation for 78 residential dwellings; HA7 Reserve Site C – Allocation for 57 residential dwellings.* Also note, due to other recommended changes in the Plan, the allocation policy relating to the Elms would become “*HA4: The Elms – Allocation for no more than 45 residential dwellings.*”

Following the above approach would also require any references in the supporting text, and in Section 3, to be revised in line with the changes.

7. Summary and Referendum

Summary

In summary, it is my view that the Thame Neighbourhood Plan, having undergone an exemplary public consultation process, sets out a clear and deliverable vision for the neighbourhood area.

I have recommended a number of modifications to the Plan. None of these fundamentally change its content, but together, they ensure that the Plan meets the Basic Conditions.

Subject to the above, the Thame Neighbourhood Plan

- has regard to national policies and advice contained in guidance issued by the Secretary of State;
- contributes to the achievement of sustainable development;
- is in general conformity with the strategic policies of the development plan for the area;
- does not breach, and is compatible with European Union obligations & the European Convention of Human Rights.

The Thame Neighbourhood Plan meets the Basic Conditions. I have already noted above that the Plan meets paragraph 8(1) requirements.

Referendum

I am delighted to recommend to South Oxfordshire District Council that, subject to the minor modifications proposed, **the Thame Neighbourhood Plan should proceed to a Referendum.**

Referendum Area

I am required to consider whether the referendum area should be extended beyond the Thame Neighbourhood Area. I recommend that the Plan should proceed to a referendum based on the Thame Neighbourhood Area as defined by South Oxfordshire District Council on 26th November 2012.

Finally, I would like to congratulate Thame Town Council on its production of the Plan. As one of the first neighbourhood plans in the country, and the first to contain land allocations and involve a Hearing, Thame Town Council had little in the way of precedent, or examples from elsewhere. To have produced a Plan of such high quality is a testament to the energy, commitment and hard work of all involved. As a result, the Thame Neighbourhood Plan reflects the passion and pride that local people have for the area.

In my view, the Thame Neighbourhood Plan begins to set a high standard for neighbourhood planning across the country.

Nigel McGurk, Erimax Ltd (February 2013)