Response to the South Warwickshire Local Plan: Issues and Options Consultation - Jonathan Devereux

As a member of the Stratford Society which aims to protect the heritage of our historic market town, and to support development which maintains its health and prosperity for the benefit of those in South Warwickshire who live in and around it. I believe that Stratford’s economic wellbeing depends on a combination of respect for the past and appropriate development to meet the needs of the future.

In so far as they relate to the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, I support the Vision and Strategic Objectives set out in the Consultation document. In particular the aim to ensure environmental resilience in terms of air quality and flood prevention for the health and safety of the town’s residents and visitors. It is crucial that this is addressed to tackle the current climate change emergency. Similarly, I support the vision for a well-designed and beautiful South Warwickshire in which the town has a key role to play. There are **opportunities for some iconic architecture** more than pastiche, when eventually the sites of the two, department store’s in the town, long derelict are redeveloped, Stratford needs more than preservation in aspic.

It is the very nature of Stratford-upon-Avon, in terms of its **Heritage assets and open spaces**, that encourage people to want to live there or come to the town as visitors. Contrary to the implication in the Consultation document, this appeal is not confined to Shakespeare’s Birthplace and the RSC. I suspect that is a minority draw to the town. Rather it is the historic appeal of the many old buildings along the Historic Spine between the Birthplace and Holy Trinity Church, and the delightful aspect of its riverside setting, offering peace and tranquillity. This is beneficial to the physical and mental health of residents and visitors alike. At all costs, this must be safeguarded, while not forgetting that it also brings economic benefits to the town’s hotels, restaurants and shops. The service sector may exist because of the Shakespeare connection but thrives on those drawn to the town as a destination in its own right.

A glaring omission from the Vision and Strategic Objectives is any reference to the creation of employment opportunities leading to economic development. The reality is that, given its central location and good connectivity to the wider West Midlands and beyond, South Warwickshire has the potential to become one of the drivers of the regional economy. In posing questions about the quantity of new development and where it should go, the Consultation document focuses on housing to the exclusion of other key issues. Without growth in employment, any expansion of housing in Stratford-upon-Avon and the surrounding neighbourhoods would mean these becoming no more than dormitory towns with their residents having to travel outside the area to cities such as Birmingham and Coventry to find work. This would sound a death-knell to the economy and wellbeing of Stratford-upon-Avon and the wider county unless an **Employment Plan** is created to encourage businesses and organisations to establish themselves in South Warwickshire.

I am concerned that, without the creation of new employment opportunities, further housebuilding south of the river would exacerbate existing problems with congestion and pollution in Stratford-upon-Avon. Given the limited number of crossings over the river Avon, there is the likelihood of an ever-increasing number of vehicles, including HGVs, being funnelled across the medieval Clopton Bridge designed for horse and cart. This ancient, Grade 1-listed structure is already the cause of major bottlenecks for traffic travelling into the town from south of the river, leading to diminishing air quality as fumes are emitted from vehicles at a virtual standstill. The switch to electric vehicles will not come quickly enough to eliminate this hazard to the health of Stratford’s residents and commuters alike.

If passengers and freight are to be taken off the road network, the development of better public transport links and cycle paths are vital. Any new settlements need to be located near existing – and, preferably, expanding - rail corridors, and bus services to and from rural areas should be greatly extended to get private vehicles off the road. Here, the Society agrees with the Stratford-upon-Avon Town Transport Group that a **Transport Plan** should be a key element of any proposals for future development.

There are no cross-town **cycle routes** in Stratford, and none across the Avon. Routes which exist are poorly signed markings now invisible, and dangerous for the unconfident cyclist – too narrow and lacking barriers to other road users. Only a radical approach to cycling (Cambridge) will make any impact on the level of traffic in the town. Any development, housing or employment should be considered in line with whether or not it will increase traffic flows across either of the two bridges across the Avon in either direction.

Furthermore, to support any new development in South Warwickshire, an **Infrastructure Plan** needs to be developed and, very importantly, delivered in a timely manner before residents move in. This should include the provision of schools and medical facilities which match the level of growth. It is a given that these should be built to the highest environmental standards, using green energy. Without such facilities, together with employment opportunities and transport links, the idea of creating 20-minute neighbourhoods falls flat.

In conclusion, there are key issues to be addressed before options for the extent of further housing, and where it should go, can be properly assessed. Only then can consideration of the need for more development be balanced against the impact on the built and natural environment of South Warwickshire.

Jonathan Devereux

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