

NORTH LEIGH PARISH COUNCIL RESPONSE TO “WOLP 2041 – YOUR PLACE, YOUR PLAN – IDEAS & OBJECTIVES CONSULTATION”

THE MOST IMPORTANT CONCERN OF NORTH LEIGH PARISH RESIDENTS

These comments reflect feedback from residents of North Leigh Parish (including 19 residents who attended our November 2023 Parish Council Meeting, 55 who attended a residents’ meeting on the WOLP 2041 and many other residents who wrote to the Parish Council). Before discussing the various options presented under the WOLP 2041, we would like to raise the most urgent priority expressed by every single one of the residents who came forward, which is to prevent any further housing development in North Leigh Parish (including Wilcote, East End and part of New Yatt) until such time as the disproportionate historic contribution to the District’s housing supply by North Leigh has been addressed.

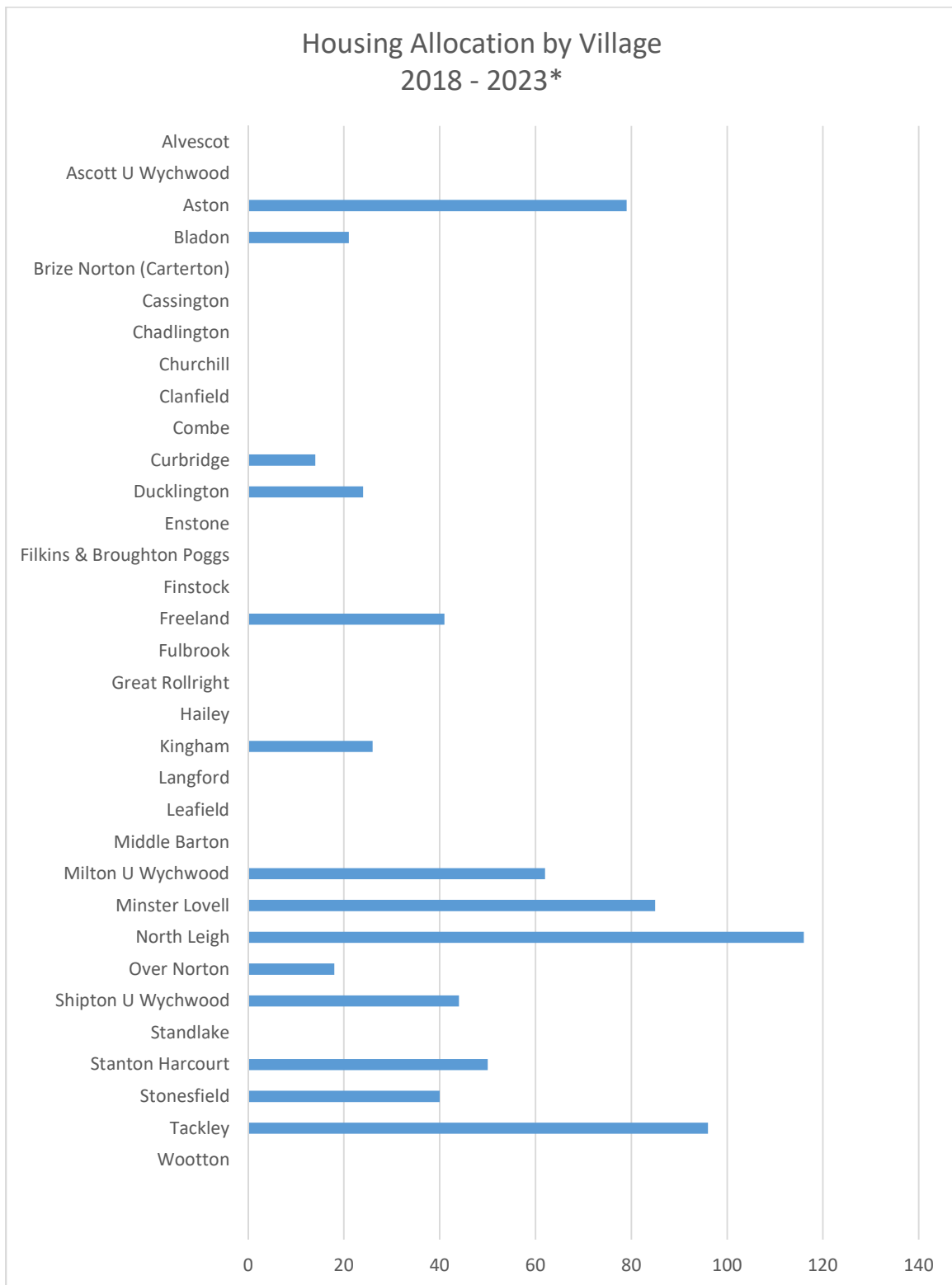
Residents are despairing of the huge volume of planning that has been thrust onto the Parish in recent years together with the associated lack of infrastructure, causing sewage spills and blockages (101 incidents in the last five years), clean water supply problems, traffic and parking issues and general pressure on the infrastructure, and also the amenities of the Parish which are minimal in the village and non-existent in East End, Wilcote and New Yatt. Residents are increasingly cynical that their views will be taken into account by their District Council.

As the Parish Council has clearly stated at a number of Lowlands Planning meetings and Inspectorate Appeals over the last few years, North Leigh has been afflicted with a huge increase in housing supply in the last 6 years, at the last submission this was 297 new houses in a village of 700 houses ie a 42% increase which is excessive and causes a village of this size to lose its rural character rapidly.

In the WOLP 2031 North Leigh is classified in the Table 4b Settlement hierarchy as one of 33 “Villages” in West Oxfordshire and policies OS2 and H2 state that for these Villages there will be “limited development...which respects the village character and local distinctiveness...”. Looking at Fig 4a West Oxfordshire sub-areas, it is clear that many of the Villages have been deemed unable to carry their share of the housing commitment as they are located either in the AONB to the north or on the flood plain to the south of the District.

Looking at the November 2016 Settlement Sustainability Report produced by WODC, North Leigh and Minster Lovell are ranked jointly as the second most sustainable Villages for planning after Shipton-under-Wychwood. However both Minster Lovell and Shipton-under-Wychwood received substantially less housing allocations in the 5 year plan 2018–2023 and more importantly much less speculative development than North Leigh in the last few years. The Sustainability Report is somewhat subjective in awarding “points” for local amenities such as a shop, post office, playing fields etc and the scores of many of the Villages are clustered together so a very small change in deemed amenities has a huge impact on any Village’s ranking in the table and yet developers refer to this ranking in the Sustainability Report to “justify” North Leigh as a suitable site for yet more development. North Leigh has minimal amenities – a tiny shop/post office in one room of the Memorial Hall, only one remaining pub and no playing field in the village although we are recorded in the Report as having one (note: the North Leigh Football Club is a member only facility).

North Leigh was allocated 116 houses (the Shepherds Walk development either side of the New Yatt Road) in the 5 year plan 2018–2023; this constituted the highest amount of housing for any Village in the Plan (see graph).



*Excludes strategic coalescence sites: 700 houses at Brize Meadow, Brize Norton/Carterton and 257 houses at Downs Road, Curbridge/Witney.

No further development should have been approved for North Leigh during the life of the 5 year plan 2018-2023. Yet, due to the lack of a 5 year land plan in West Oxfordshire and resulting “presumption to approval” North Leigh has taken a battering in a developer-led opportunistic scramble for increasingly unsustainable development sites which have been pushed through despite in some cases, significant harms, building on greenfield sites, with inadequate clean water, sewers, sewage treatment and public transport infrastructure, with dangerous access roads, negligible biodiversity net gain, inadequate provision for social housing and unclear S106 provisions. In this way, another 138 houses, from speculative applications, have therefore been approved and there is still the possibility of 43 more houses being approved on appeal at the Manor Oak site which together constitutes a 42% increase in the 700 house housing stock of the village.

We are delighted to hear that on the “standard method” calculation WODC can now demonstrate a land supply of 5.4 years and we sincerely hope that this will result in a return to sustainable planning, the “right housing in the right places”, going forward.

All of this has resulted in North Leigh taking a disproportionate amount of both allocated and speculative planning in the last 5 years - substantially more than its “fair share” compared to other Villages. We raised this issue at the Local Plan workshop for Town and Parish councils on 18th October 2023 at the WODC Council Offices, Woodgreen and the planning policy team was in broad agreement that this was the case. At this workshop there was discussion about what might constitute a suitable level of contribution to housing supply from Villages in West Oxfordshire and a figure of 2% per annum was suggested, compare this to the 42% for North Leigh over the last 6 years. In fact there was discussion about whether the burden on Villages such as North Leigh might be eased by some of the Villages in the AONB perhaps taking some increased share of the housing to balance this out.

The strong concern of residents of North Leigh Parish is that the “uneven playing field” of disproportionate housing allocation for North Leigh in these last 6 years will now be ignored going forward and the danger is that in the new plan from 2023 – 2041, we will AGAIN be allocated our “fair share” of housing with no regard to the additional capacity that we have already just absorbed. We strongly oppose this scenario and we believe that this unjustified past excess approval of housing here should now be rectified. The WOLP 2041 already has accounted for nearly all of its planning commitments for the years 2023 – 2028 (only 250 further houses needed in 2027/28 across the District) but beyond that date North Leigh must get a complete “exemption” from further planning in the Land Plan with NO FURTHER SITES BEING ALLOCATED for North Leigh Parish or approved as windfall until such time as North Leigh’s contribution has been brought back into line with the contribution of the other 32 Villages in the various sub-areas of the District. There must be specific wording and calculations in the Land Plan 2041 to rectify this past imbalance for North Leigh.

Regardless of the disproportionate amount of housing that North Leigh has taken, there are also other fundamental reasons why North Leigh Parish cannot absorb any more planning for the foreseeable future as follows:

- Infrastructure must come first – North Leigh does not have the infrastructure to support the existing level of housing let alone new builds. We have experienced severe problems with the sewer network, clean water supply, excess traffic and insufficient parking etc

- The existing Bellway and Marlborough Gardens housing developments in the village have not been adopted by Thames Water to date
- There is currently inadequate sewage treatment capacity to service the existing housing in North Leigh let alone further new builds. Grampian clauses have been put in place on the approved Rectory Rise site for 55 houses preventing occupation until such time as Thames Water can sign off on adequate sewage treatment capacity at Church Hanborough sewage treatments works (STW) and have been slated for the Manor Oak development if it goes to appeal
- The Church Hanborough STW has been running at 88% of its permit capacity and this must be addressed, also the planned capacity upgrade which was due for completion in March 2025 is now pushed back to at least November 2025 or later. The capacity to service new housing sites should be assessed using a ratio that calculates treatment capacity on a site by site basis so there is no “double counting” of capacity
- North Leigh Parish has very limited access to public transport and the 2016 Settlement Sustainability report showed that 81% of residents drive to work. The S7 bus only services certain locations in the village and further development would be car-led resulting in yet more congestion and parking problems in the village
- North Leigh is a very rural village bordering the AONB with 2 Roman villas and a 1,000 year old church, surrounded by farmland with many beautiful footpaths and bridleways, but is rapidly losing its character with each subsequent greenfield site that is approved for more housing
- Some of these proposed sites such as the recent Manor Oak proposal threaten the coalescence of North Leigh with neighbouring New Yatt thus losing character of both. The North Witney development of 1,250 houses threatens the start of coalescence between New Yatt and Wood Green not to mention a possible further 1,875 cars using North Leigh as a rat run which is unacceptable

COMMENTS ON THE 8 SCENARIOS RELATING TO THE FUTURE POTENTIAL PATTERN OF DEVELOPMENT IN WEST OXFORDSHIRE

Scenario 1 - Hierarchical approach

Whilst this plan sounds commendable in theory, in practice it hasn't worked very well. Many of the big allocated sites in the last plan have not come to fruition which has contributed to West Oxfordshire not having a 5 year land plan. Without a 5 year land plan, housing is allocated by "appeal" rather than sustainably which means it isn't in the right places hence the huge amount of housing that has been targeted at Villages such as North Leigh regardless of what was allocated in the 2018 – 2023 5 year plan.

It is essential that infrastructure is in place AHEAD of making the plan for housing and in West Oxfordshire this has simply not been the case. Thames Water in particular has not invested in the necessary infrastructure to provide reasonable pressure clean water, functioning sewers or adequate sewage treatment capacity to support the EXISTING housing let alone the planned level of housing. Unacceptable levels of sewage are being discharged into our local rivers because the infrastructure is currently inadequate. Much of the new housing approved in the pipeline is currently prevented from occupation, even when it is built, due to Grampian clauses which are designed to ensure adequate levels of sewerage treatment capacity will be in place first.

Until these issues have been solved, it does not make sense to allocate yet more planning as even if the applications are approved, construction of the projects will be frustrated by clauses and conditions seeking to upgrade the infrastructure first and that in turn impacts on the ability to have a 5 year land plan and therefore sustainable planning.

Scenario 2 - Main Service Centre Focus (Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton)

West Oxfordshire is a rural District with a small number of Main and Rural Service Centres but many Villages, so most of the housing development historically has been car-led. Much of the market for affordable housing and smaller housing units is younger buyers who won't necessarily have cars. Therefore it makes sense for a lot of this type of housing to be located in the Main Service Centres (Witney, Carterton and Chipping Norton) where there are a number of options for public transport as well as more facilities within walking distance and more local job opportunities.

It is a universal truth that young people prefer to locate themselves in the major hubs with all of these advantages rather than in the small Villages which have very little to offer in the way of public transport, employment or amenities. Siting the houses here rather than in Villages will result in less traffic congestion and pollution in the District compared to the same housing being spread across a number of Villages in the District. It would also avoid the need for a very large investment in public transport, specifically a much more frequent bus service to a great many more rural village locations which would be extremely expensive.

Another benefit of focussing the housing in the Main Service Centres is in the utility infrastructure. It is more cost effective and quicker for Thames Water to invest in the upgrade of water, sewer and sewage treatment infrastructure in the centres where it will support a much greater level of new housing than to extend branch by branch an ailing Victorian linear sewer system to remote locations at great cost where it might only support a small amount of incremental housing.

Scenario 5 - Dispersed Growth

We strongly oppose this scenario. Whilst the idea that each Village might take proportionate amounts of planning sounds good, the reality is very different. There are a number of Villages where location in the AONB or near the flood plain has meant that they have had very little new development, which means that other Villages get more. Our Villages are the essence of the Oxfordshire Cotswolds and excessive development detracts from their rural character. As stated above, small amounts of infrastructure in each of the Villages will be more costly than fewer large upgrades in the Main Service Centres. This scenario also results in a significant increase in car-led developments and more traffic and congestion or a requirement for a huge amount of additional public transport infrastructure to each Village which may not reduce car use substantially in any case.

Scenario 6 - Village 'Clusters'

We have clarified with WODC that the above suggestion does not imply that nearby Villages will coalesce, but rather that they should be viewed as "groupings" for the purposes of services and amenities. However we strongly oppose this scenario, grouping together two or three small Villages or hamlets with hardly any amenities, does not mean that en-masse the cluster will then have adequate amenities. Grouped or not, residents of these Villages will still need to

venture out of the grouping for most of the amenities and services that they need eg medical care, supermarkets etc.

However viewing nearby Villages as one grouping could easily lead to a slippery slope towards coalescence; it would be tempting for developers to eye up sites and fill in gaps between the Villages as those new houses would benefit from whatever amenities the "cluster" could offer. Each of the 33 Villages has its own identity and character and this would be blurred if the Villages were "clustered" in any way without giving any benefit to the residents at all.

Scenario 7 – New Settlement

We strongly oppose this scenario. The cost of building a new settlement from scratch with all of the associated infrastructure would probably be prohibitive and also begs the question where would we find the (preferably brownfield) site to locate it? The experience with the Salt Cross Garden Village shows how long a project like this might take to come to fruition.

Scenario 8 - Public Transport Focus

Following on from our comments on Scenario 2, another possibility is for some of the housing in the Main and Rural Service Centres to be centred around public transport hubs such as train stations where residents would have easy access to employment and amenities by public transport. This could be viable at stations along the 2 existing train lines through West Oxfordshire or at new sites on the proposed new rail link between Oxford, Witney & Carterton if this project comes to fruition. Traffic on the A40 is now nearing maximum capacity, even with the improved bus route schemes and there is also congestion on the A44, and with housing targets possibly in excess of another 12,000 houses in West Oxfordshire over the next 20 years, leading to an additional 18,000 or more cars on the road, we need to look at other housing solutions that are not car-led.

COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL SITES PUT FORWARD IN NORTH LEIGH PARISH UNDER WOLP 2041.

We have received a huge number of comments from concerned residents on several of the individual land parcels that have been put forward in North Leigh under the "Call for Sites" of the WOLP 2041. We have collated these comments ready for submission to WODC once the full list of sites for North Leigh has been received by the Parish Council. We understand that the full list of sites will be made public in Dec 2023/ Jan 2024 and that the North Leigh Parish Council will then be able to submit comments on behalf of the residents on all of the sites put forward in its Parish. If any of these sites are then shortlisted as "draft allocations" then we understand that residents will have the chance to comment directly at that stage.