

The Parish Council's failure to follow advice in the Government's Planning Practice Guidance Notes

It is my view that Sedlescombe Parish Council has, since publication of the Examiner's Report in February 2015, failed to meet the neighbourhood planning basic conditions. **Paragraph 065** Of the Planning Practice Guidance Notes describes the "basic conditions" stating that regard must be had not only to national policies but also to "**advice contained in guidance issued by the Secretary of State**".

The Parish Council has not followed the advice contained in **Paragraph 047** which describes how the plan should be consulted on. The Parish Council has failed to keep the community fully informed of what was being proposed; has failed to allow members of the community to make their views known throughout the process leading up to the second Pre-Submission Plan; has not allowed members of the community to be actively involved in shaping the emerging neighbourhood plan and has not made members of the community aware of how their views have informed the draft neighbourhood plan.

The Parish Council has failed to fully follow the key stages in neighbourhood planning as described in **Paragraph 080** in that those living and working in the neighbourhood area and those with an interest in or affected by the proposals were not consulted or engaged at any time during the lead up to the second Pre-Submission Plan's publication when something could have been done about what these people identified; Street Farm was not fairly compared with other sites and few of the comments made during the regulation 14 exercise were given proper consideration and respect.

The Parish Council's decision to undertake a Neighbourhood Plan taken in February 2013

In my representation to the District Council for Regulation 16 of the second Plan, I explain that the Parish Council's reason for deciding to do a neighbourhood plan in 2013 was based entirely on stopping even one house being built on the Street Farm site, even though it had been the only site identified as a suitable site for sustainable housing development in Rother's 2010 Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment.

The Parish Council's negative approach to one site despite the introduction of substantial changes

For over four years, the Parish Council resisted any development on the Street Farm site despite considerable changes to the initial proposals being agreed. The number of houses planned reduced from around 50 in 2012 to 16 in 2016 and ancillary development was removed. Between 350 and 400 people live near to Street Farm and, although many obviously value the farmer's green field with its views over the Brede Valley, the Parish Council did nothing to make them aware that, even if all the land were turned into a local green space, there would not necessarily be any public access neither would local people be able to control the management of the land. Nor did the Parish Council inform the community that at the end of 2014, during the discussions at the planning appeal for 18 homes on the site, the owners had offered to give, in addition to land for school playing fields, a sizeable central area to the local authority for use as a public open space which with proper management could be environmentally improved too.

My complaints to the Parish Council about lack of transparency

During 2015, I noticed that, as residents, we did not receive any information about the progress of the neighbourhood plan after January when the Parish Council gave the impression that only a few minor matters needed to be cleared up and then the first Plan would go to referendum. I complained that there was a general lack of transparency with decisions made outside the meeting structure of the Council, power delegated to the Chairman with during 2015 no Neighbourhood Planning Meetings minuted. One meeting without minutes was described as a "work in progress meeting". It was not until 07/06/16 that the Parish Council was formally given the information that three new sites had been included in the second Plan which had been prepared by two professional planning consultants without any input from the public. From the minutes, it seems that the Committee had approved the Church Hill sites without even knowing where the

new roads and wide visibility splays (there could be three to add to those already there) would be situated. It would be just over a month later, on 15/07/16, that the finished second Plan would be published for its Regulation 14 "Consultation" and the public could read about the "new" sites for the first time.

"Alert" document and the Parish Council's communication with the community

The Parish Council used every opportunity in its correspondence with the public to stress the importance of retaining Street Farm as a local green space based it seems on consultations that took place for the first Plan, but conveniently omitted to mention that the landowners were willing to give a large part of the field to the local authority for a public open space. This can be seen in June 2015, October 2015 and July 2016 Bulletins, the 2015 and 2016 Annual Reports, the Minutes of the 2015 and 2016 Parish Meetings and database emails on 18/03/15, 19/11/15, 21/07/16 and 19/10/16, even at the Neighbourhood Plan Exhibition the Parish Council held at the end of July 2016, this fact was not mentioned on the display boards and parish councillors who were there to advise the public did not know about it themselves!

For this short statement, I would like to focus on what I have called the "Alert" document. Delivered to every home in the parish at the same time as the announcement of the second Neighbourhood Plan with its three new sites on or around 15/07/16, it provides what is called a "Neighbourhood Plan update and has the name of the Chairman of the Parish Council at the bottom of the page, although there had been no prior approval of this paper at any recorded Council Meeting. Under the word "Alert" is the heading "Street Farm Development Threat". As was the Parish Council's normal method of influencing results, it went on to "tell" the public to write to Rother District Council and gives them three reasons that they should use to support their opposition to a recently-submitted planning application i.e. the site is outside the development boundary, it would have a negative effect on the AONB and would prejudice the Neighbourhood Plan. The paper does not give any details of what this new planning application included. Nor does it explain why the Parish Council had chosen to include in its new Plan three sites at Church Hill which are also in the AONB and outside the development boundary but with double the number of homes. My assertion that the Parish Council had adopted a biased campaign against Street Farm and its owners was met 11 weeks later, at the end of the Parish Council's consultation period, by the statement from the Parish Council that "rather than being biased the Parish Council has simply and consistently reflected the views of the majority of residents". Community views that were engineered from the beginning.

Refusal to accept any hint of dissent

Every attempt was made to quash any query from the public or even from parish councillors about how the Council had reached its decision. Although a Parish Council only has to record its decisions, the manipulation of the Minutes of the Council Meeting on 27/09/16 to completely exclude any mention of the parish councillors' serious concerns and objections expressed at the meeting was misleading and indicative of what was going on. Following this meeting, one councillor was asked to resign, which he did, and another joined him.

Use of consultations relating to the first Plan in support of the second Plan

Little notice was taken of any comments made during the second Plan and no significant changes were made to the Plan itself. The first 17 pages of the Consultation Statement refer to the first Plan but give the impression that the earlier consultations are relevant to the second Plan. A list of consultations, which mostly related to the first Plan was regularly used by the Council to persuade parish councillors, district councillors, a Planning Officer and other parish councils that the whole community supported the Parish Council's views. It seems that the only purpose of the Parish Council's consultations was to obtain a good set of statistics that showed overwhelming support for retaining the whole of Street Farm as a green site. Nothing else mattered.