

SCNDP

SONNING COMMON
NEIGHBOURHOOD
DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Revision



Sonning Common
Neighbourhood
Development Plan
Revision

Pre-submission
Version (Draft)

October 2021

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Foreword

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Part One: Setting the scene

Sonning Common

Sonning Common is a large village in South Oxfordshire, about four miles north of Reading centre and three-and-a-half miles west of Henley-on-Thames. In the last Census of 2011 it comprised 1,595 homes, and had a population of 3,784, although the housing stock has increased by around 200 since then, and the population proportionately. It is situated along the southern fringe of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in a rural landscape of rolling farmland and woodland. Its neighbouring parishes are Kidmore End to the west and Rotherfield Peppard to the north. Its name is derived from the fact that it was originally the grazing, or common, land attached to the parish of Sonning, which is on the Thames to the south east.

Map 1.1: Sonning Common



As recently as 1900 it consisted of no more than 40 houses on plots along Wood Lane, Woodlands Road and Baskerville Road. The settlement, defined by two dry valleys, the AONB and edged by the B481 Peppard Road and Kennylands Road, expanded slowly over the first half of the 20th Century so that by 1951 the population had grown to more than 1,400. At this point Sonning Common became a parish in its own right.

Thereafter it expanded steadily. During the 1960s and 1970s several new estates were built, as a result of which Sonning Common became one of the largest villages in South Oxfordshire. Between the censuses of 2001 and 2011 its population remained static, but – as has been noted – it has increased steadily since 2011. The 2011 Census showed that over the previous decade the number of 0 - 44 year olds had fallen, the 45-74 age group had increased slowly and that the 75+ numbers had grown quickly. The 65-74 mix was 22% more than the SODC average, while the 75+ was 60% more. Population forecasts suggested these trends would continue.

Narrative of the 2016 Neighbourhood Development Plan

Neighbourhood plans

The right of communities to draw up neighbourhood plans was established in the Localism Act of 2011. The aim was to allow communities to have a more significant role in determining their futures – and in particular where new housing should be located and its design and character. These planning documents - referred to variously as Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs) and Neighbourhood Plans (NPs) – were to have statutory weight in the planning process, to enable communities to choose where they wanted houses, offices and shops to be built, and to influence what those new buildings should look like.

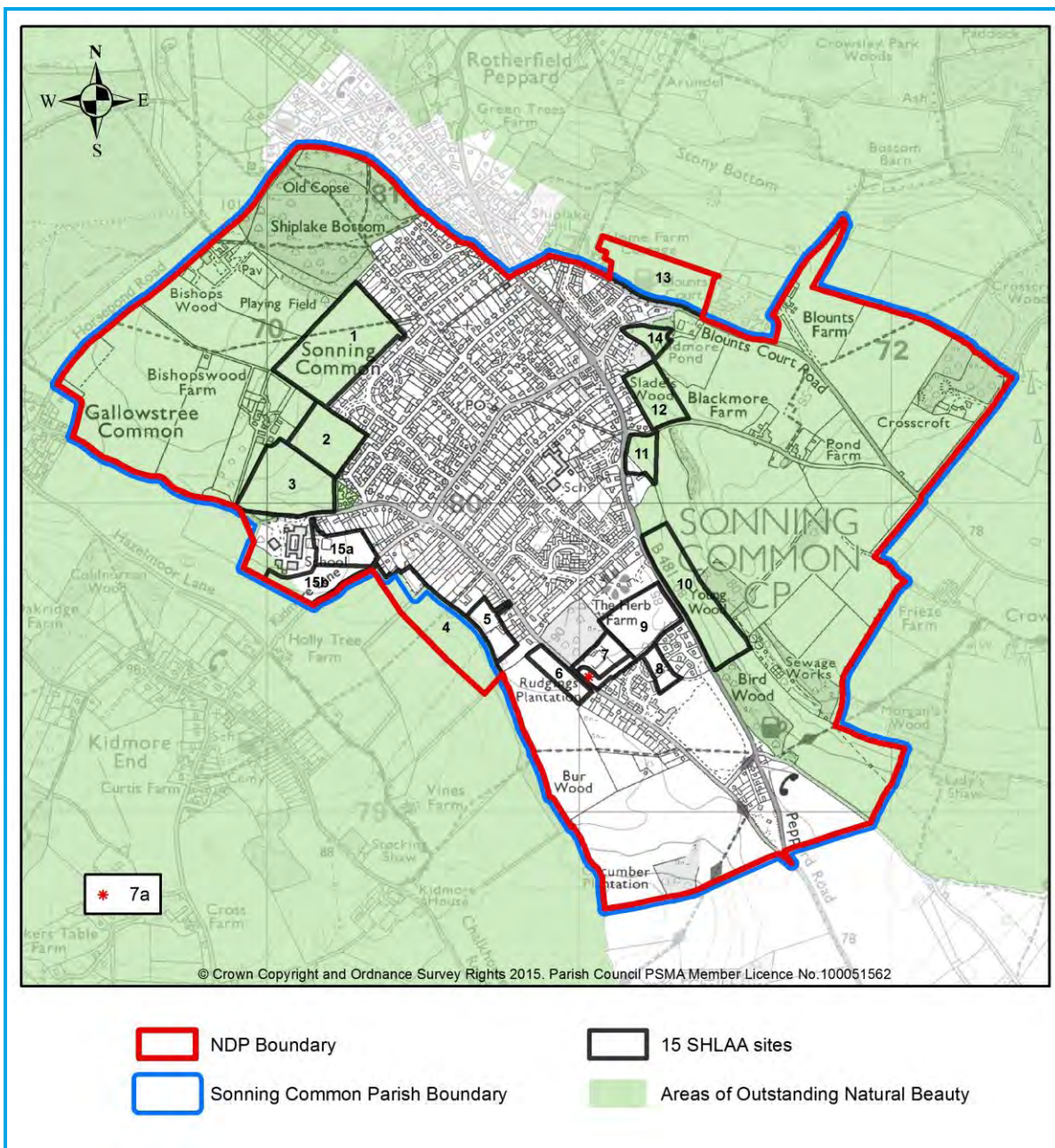
It was emphasised from the outset that neighbourhood plans must be in general conformity with the development plans of the wider area, which in the case of Sonning Common in the period when the original NDP was being prepared were South Oxfordshire District Council's Core Strategy of 2012 and the saved policies of the Local Plan 2011.

The first steps

In 2011 Sonning Common Parish Council decided to embrace the new concept of neighbourhood planning by establishing a working party to prepare an NDP for the village. The decision was taken against a background of growing pressure for new housing development in the area, seen as posing a real and pressing danger of uncontrolled building which would threaten Sonning Common's integrity as a community and separateness from surrounding settlements. The primary purpose was to promote appropriate development on suitable sites which would deliver benefit to the wider community and would not damage the distinctive and highly valued character of the village.

The working party – made up of volunteers among residents and parish councillors – was established in January 2012. Consultants were appointed to assist in the task, with the costs to be met by the parish council and from available grants. Advice was to be sought from South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC), which advertised the proposed area to be covered in the plan and set a consultation period.

Map 1.2: SCNDP designated area and 15 SHLAA (SON) sites Sonning Common NDP



Assessing the sites

At the outset SODC set a target of 138 new homes to be allocated in the plan. Subsequently the publication in 2014 of Oxfordshire's Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) – with its predictions of future demand – made it clear to the working party that it would be prudent to allow for a significantly higher number of homes.

Of the 15 sites identified by SODC in its Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA), several were withdrawn by landowners or ruled out as a result of the consultations with villagers and discussions with the Chilterns Conservation Board, which oversees the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

All the submitted sites were surveyed by residents and the results collated by the NDP Working Party into a 'traffic light' grid which made it clear which sites were considered more and less suitable. An evidence base was established and used to support all the policies and allocations in the plan. It included the Housing and Housing Needs Survey Report (ORCC, 2012), the Interim Traffic Report (2012), the Sonning Common Character Assessment and Design Statement (2013), the Ecological Survey (2014) and a comprehensive statement of community involvement. The evidence base was made available on the website (www.scpc-ndp.co.uk).

Aims and priorities

The SCNDP consultation with residents built on evidence already gathered in the Community Survey carried out in 2009/10. This survey was distributed to 1,800 homes and 78% were returned. Among the top priorities identified were:

- village centre environment to be remodelled
- parking improvements to be implemented
- housing developments to be shared between a number of sites and restricted in size

With regard to housing, 81% favoured small housing developments and two thirds of the respondents believed 40% of homes should be affordable/shared ownership. 82% believed the village centre needed to be remodelled.

The 2012 ORCC Sonning Common Housing Needs Report recorded the strong view of residents that smaller and more affordable homes should make up the majority in new developments. This need for a focus on one, two and three bedroom homes in order to rebalance the housing stock was confirmed by the Census results of 2011, also published in 2012.

The consultation exercise brought a focus on a smaller number of sites which, broadly speaking, balanced development between the north-west and the south of the village. Map 1.3 shows their locations and their relationship to the village centre.

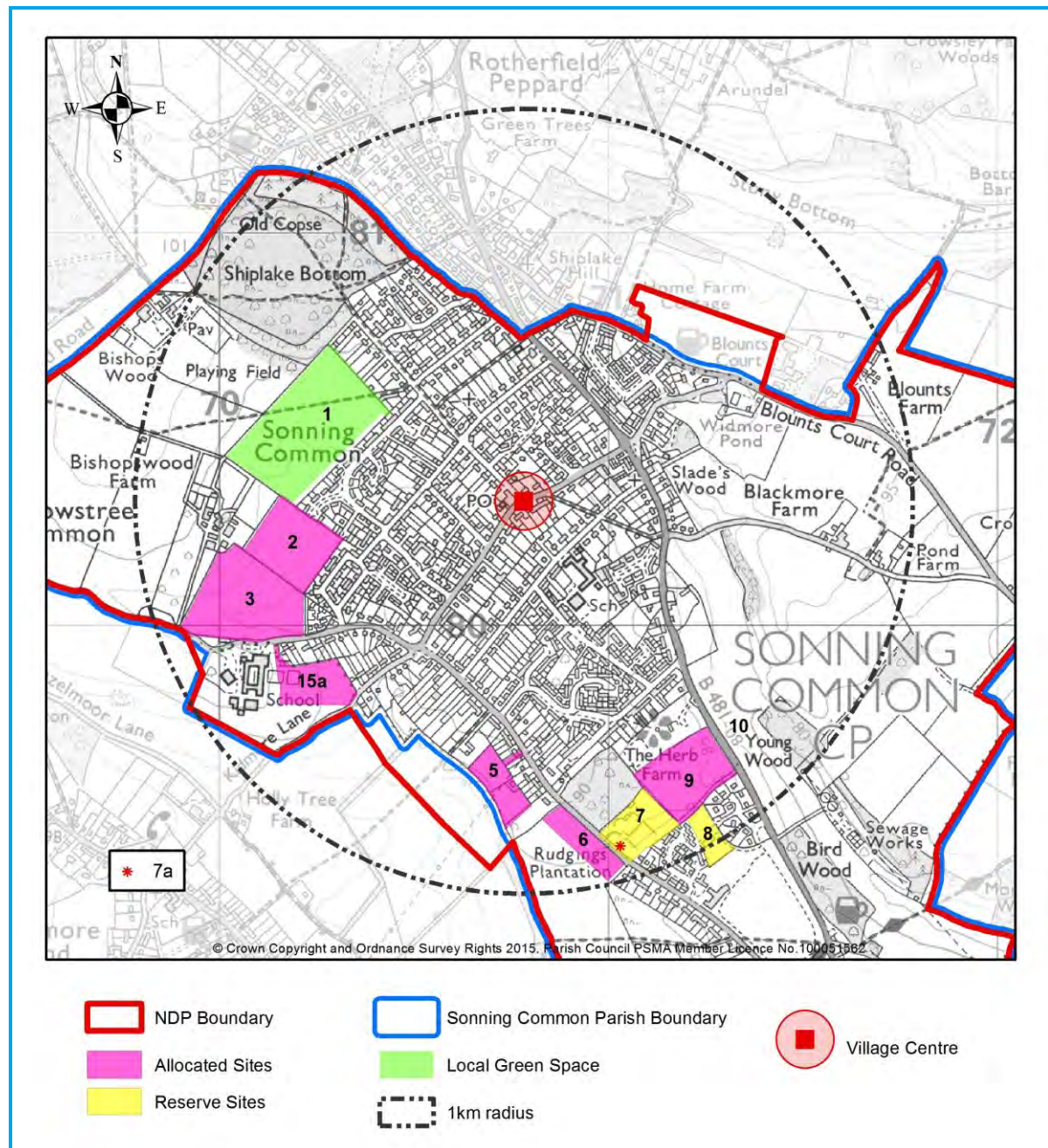
In part this distribution reflected the strong wishes of residents to retain the existing separation between the edge of Sonning Common and Reading town and to resist any move towards a merger with Kidmore End. A key element was that the 'rural feel of the village' should be conserved and enhanced and any development should minimise the impact on the AONB and surrounding countryside.

The following principles emerged to guide the future use of land:

- protect the rural character of Sonning Common in relation to its surroundings
- designate further land for public amenity use to make good identified shortages
- enhance and sustain the retail centre and local employment
- support the schools and other essential facilities
- ease the traffic flow and car parking problems
- promote the use of the bus service, cycling and footpaths
- address shortfalls in the provision of recreational and sporting facilities

Sites selected

Map 1.3: Distribution of sites within 1km radius of village centre



Map 1.2 shows the original fifteen sites in the SHLAA. Map 1.3 shows the allocated sites – including reserve sites – that emerged from the public consultation. They were:

- SON 1 Old Copse Field
- SON 2/3 Bishopswood Middle Field/Memorial Hall Field
- SON 5 Kennylands Paddock
- SON 6 Kennylands Road Infill
- SON 7/7a Hagpits House/Hagpits Orchard
- SON 8 Kennylands Gymnastics (subject to a covenant from 1983 specifying recreation use)
- SON 9 Lea Meadow
- SON 15a Chiltern Edge Top Field

SON 1: designated as Local Green Space

SON 2: allocated for 50 homes

SON 3: designated for amenity land SONS 2 and 3 were treated jointly – the owner of the land offered the two fields partly for housing and partly for recreation. They are both in the Chilterns AONB, but the case was successfully made that the allocation would address the deficit in sports and recreation identified in a report commissioned by SODC and carried out by the Nortoft sports and open spaces consultancy. This was confirmed both in the Sports and Recreation Needs survey done for the existing NDP and the Sport and Recreation Needs Survey from March / April 2021.

SON 5: allocated for 22 homes

SON 6: allocated for 26 homes

SONs 7/7a: reserve site allocated for a possible 30 homes

SON 8: reserve site allocated for a possible 14 homes (this site, occupied by Kennylands Gymnastics, is subject to SODC covenants restricting its use to 'recreation and amenity purposes.')

SON 9: allocated for 60 homes

SON 15a: allocated for 37 homes

The path to approval

Early in 2015 a pre-submission draft plan was distributed for public consultation. Three exhibitions were staged in the village hall to publicise its proposals. After a further period for consultation – to allow for consideration of the accompanying Sustainability Appraisal – a second pre-submission draft was produced. This was subsequently submitted to an independent examiner, Nigel McGurk. In the light of his recommendations a final submission version was completed in July 2016 and approved by SODC. In September 2016 a village referendum was held in which nearly half the eligible voters took part. 94% voted in favour of the plan. It was adopted by SODC on October 13th 2016.

Part Two: Revising the Neighbourhood Development Plan

Why revise it?

In December 2016 the then Minister for Housing, Gavin Barwell, made a statement in the House of Commons stating that a neighbourhood plan should not be 'deemed out of date' if it had been 'part of the development plan' for less than two years. The clear implication of this was a neighbourhood plan retained its full statutory weight for a period of two years after its adoption, and thereafter could be considered progressively to lose that weight as the period extended. Neighbourhood plan groups were therefore advised to proceed with revising plans after the two-year period.

The process begins

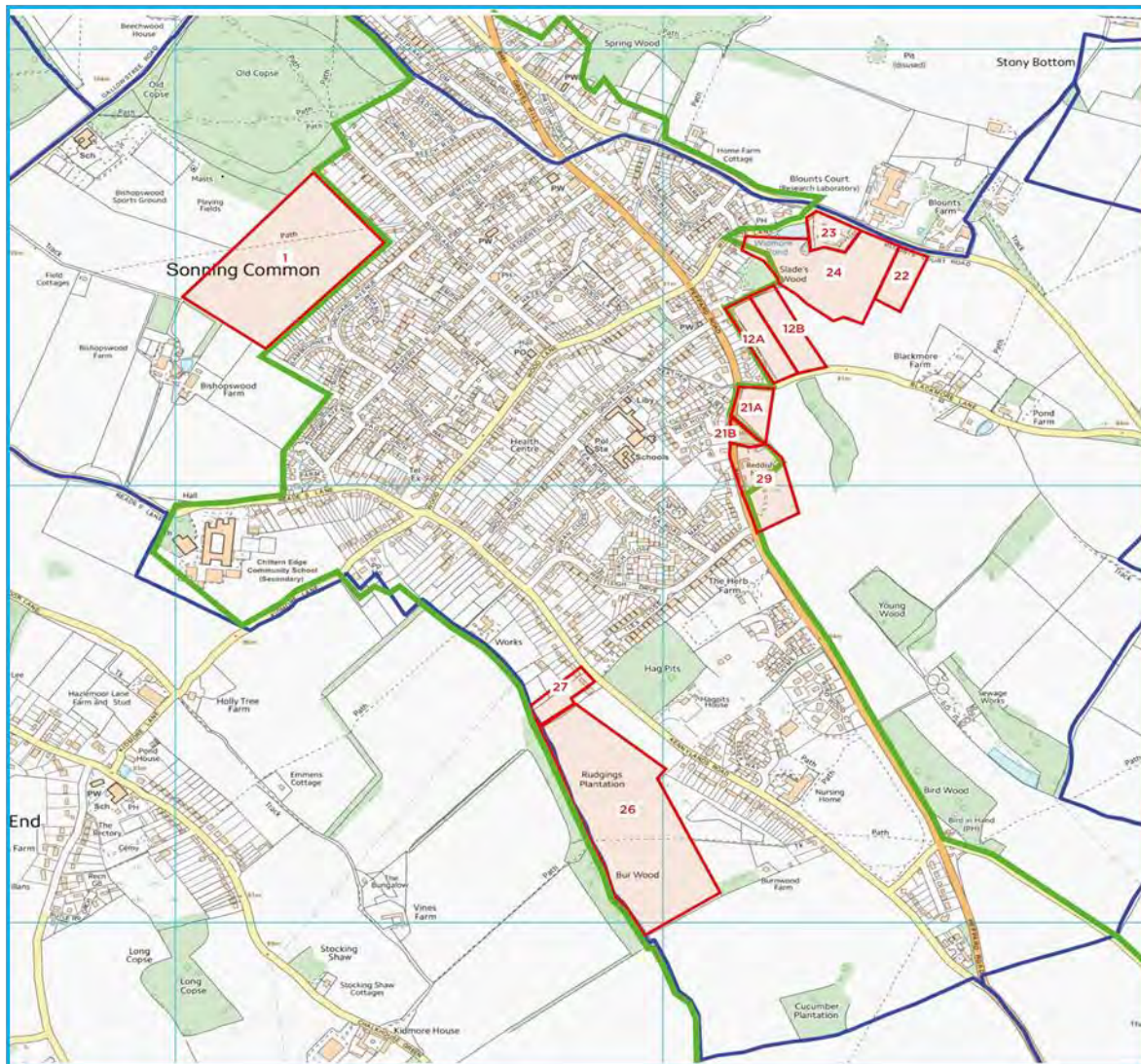
Early in 2018 Sonning Common Parish Council approval the establishment of a new working party to process the revision of the neighbourhood plan. By then SODC was engaged in producing a new Local Plan which proposed extra housing allocations for larger villages, including Sonning Common. The figure for Sonning Common was calculated at 108, on top of the 195 allocations in the existing NDP. Several members of the previous working party agreed to volunteer again and new volunteers were recruited among residents. The first major step was to commission a new Community Survey.

Every household received a two-page questionnaire designed to elicit views on priorities for the new housing and on what principles should guide the revision. The findings were collated and analysed by an independent consultant and a report was published in June 2018 and filed on the website (www.scpc-ndp.co.uk).

Later in 2018 an invitation was issued for landowners to submit sites to be considered for housing in the revision. A total of eleven were submitted, as illustrated on Map 2.1 and were divided into groups according to geographical location:

Group One	Blounts Court Road	SON 22
	Johnson Matthey Car Park	SON 23
	Little Sparrows	SON 24
Group Two	Blackmore Lane North (lower)	SON 12a
	Blackmore Lane North (upper)	SON 12b
Group Three	Blackmore Lane South	SON 21a
	Land north of Reddish Manor	SON 21b
	Reddish Manor (part)	SON 29

Map 2.1: Housing sites submitted for consideration in SCNDP revision



Site selection and underlying principles

All the submitted sites were assessed by volunteers from the village according to criteria used in the original 2016 NDP, covering landscape setting, sustainability, connectivity, views, surroundings, wildlife and wider environmental issues. The results were collated by the working party into a 'traffic light' grid modelled on that used in the 2016 NDP. The grid was then audited by an independent group of residents and following consideration of their suggestions, changes were incorporated. At the same time, the working party commissioned Alison Galbraith of the landscape consultants Terra Firma to undertake a professional assessment of the new sites. This evidence base is available on the NDP website (www.scpc-ndp.co.uk).

The guiding principles were derived from those informing the original NDP. It was felt that the existing village edge along the B481 Peppard Road should be maintained. The separation between the village and Reading should be preserved, as should the gap between Sonning Common and Kidmore End. New housing should, as far as possible, be located closer to rather than further away from the village centre. The rural character and setting of Sonning Common should be conserved.

The working party also considered sites allocated or reserved in the existing NDP but not yet built on. SON 15a was allocated for 37 homes. Subsequently Chiltern Edge School, which had proposed it, became an academy renamed Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge. An approach was made by the school and its agents Savills to explore the possibility of increasing the number from 37 to 50, while maintaining the basic footprint by building two and three bedroom homes and excluding four and five bedroom homes. This principle was agreed by the NDP working party, which also accepted that the proposed scheme should be extended to the whole of SON15 although the 15b part – along Kidmore Lane – would be used only for drainage and would not have any buildings on it.

At the same time discussions were initiated with the owners of the Kennylands Gymnastics (SON 8) – an important facility used for children's parties and other recreational activities as well as teaching gymnastics – about the possibility of developing the site for assisted living / extra-care apartments. In the current plan it was allocated as a reserve site for 14 homes (a density in line with the recommended at the time by SODC and subsequently increased.) The site is subject to restrictive covenants imposed by SODC and Oxford County Council in the 1980's stipulating that it should be used only for recreation and amenity purposes. These discussions did not achieve a final outcome. Meetings were also held with representatives of Johnson Matthey about potentially developing their existing staff car park (SON 23) for smaller two and three bedroom homes.

On 14 November 2019 and 29 February 2020 two public exhibitions were held at the village hall to inform residents of the working party's proposals. More than 300 people attended, the majority of whom completed questionnaires in which they were asked to give their views on the suitability of the submitted sites for development.

In the light of those consultations and all the previous work, the working party agreed that the new homes allocation required of Sonning Common – originally 108 but reduced to around 100 by infill – should be met thus:

SON	Location		Homes
SON 15	Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge	The site enlarged to include the original 15b to allow for drainage – allocation increased from 37 to 50	13

The remainder to be comprised of assisted living / extra care apartments on Kennylands Gymnastics (SON 8), a development of smaller houses on the Johnson Matthey car park (SON 23) and an allowance for continuing infill. In the event, the granting of planning permission for 133 extra care apartments on the site known as Little Sparrows (SON 24) in July 2021, as a result of a planning inquiry, made the allocations agreed on by the working party largely redundant and unnecessary.

Part Three: Village, vision and development strategy

Character of the village

Map 3.1: Aerial view of inner village



The comparatively recent development of Sonning Common means that it has a character very different from many other villages in South Oxfordshire which have much longer histories. It has very few historic buildings; there are only two listed buildings, Pond Cottage and the adjacent barn in Blackmore Lane which are Grade II listed. It does, however, have Widmore Pond, with written records dating back to the 17th Century, and a large area of ancient woodland - Old Copse Wood, extending north from the end of Woodlands Road. There is a 16th Century home, Reddish Manor.

Its 'feel' – spacious, wooded, semi-rural – derives from the 'plotland' model of growth in which houses were built along the existing principal roads, usually with generous gardens. The Character Assessment and Design Statement commissioned in 2013 provides greater detail about the style of homes in Sonning Common. The Google map shows that its woodland character stretches through the very centre of the village and highlights the considerable number of trees.

There is little architecture of real distinction in the village, but there is a pleasing variety of building styles which gives each of the older roads and lanes a distinction and interest much valued both by those who live in them and the residents of Sonning Common as a whole.

The appearance from the 1960s onwards of some housing developments of a more generic and less locally distinctive style has affected the overall impression without seriously compromising it.

The countryside around is delightfully varied in the contrasts between open fields and woodland. There are splendid opportunities for walking and cycling and fine views, particularly across the dry valleys to the east and west. The village benefits from easy access to Reading and Henley, but its separation from both is of especial importance to the residents of Sonning Common.

Sonning Common is blessed in many ways. It is peaceful and pleasant but it is also full of life and activity. The busyness of the retail centres along Peppard Road and Wood Lane gives it real vibrancy. It is regarded by its residents as a great place to grow up in, to mature in and to grow old in. One of the chief aims of this Neighbourhood Development Plan is to protect and enhance the qualities that have made that possible.

When asked why people like living in Sonning Common, the three most commonly identified reasons were “it’s a proper village”, “people who smile” and the “community spirit.” This spirit has been retained in spite of a significant growth in the population over the last 40 years and this is reflected and celebrated in the large number of thriving clubs.

It was also conspicuously demonstrated after the onset of the COVID-19 virus, when large numbers of villagers volunteered in various ways to help vulnerable and isolated members of the community – delivering food and prescriptions, carrying out home visits, taking people to the health centre and so forth.

Facilities and services

Health

There is a health centre in the middle of the village with 11 doctors, 4 GP registrars, 4 nurses and 2 healthcare assistants (several working part-time) serving a total of more than 10,000 patients from a wide area of South Oxfordshire. The patient register extends beyond Sonning Common and includes residents from neighbouring villages such as Binfield Heath, Gallowstree Common, Kidmore End, Rotherfield Peppard, Shiplake, and Tokers Green, as well as parts of Emmer Green and Caversham which are outside the district.

Next to it is a dental surgery with 5 dentists, 4 hygienists, 5 nurses and 4 administrative staff serving 3,500 patients. The spread of patients outside the Sonning Common NDP area is of a similar mix to that of Sonning Common Health Centre.

Abbeycrest Care Home, located at the southern end of Kennylands Road, offers residential, nursing and specialist dementia support and has 70 single rooms.

Education

Sonning Common has a primary school situated in Grove Road; 30% of pupils come from outside the village, mainly from Caversham. The school has around 380 pupils. Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge Academy is in Reade’s Lane. It has just over 350 pupils, although its capacity is considerably more. Bishopswood Special School has locations at both the Primary and Secondary schools in the village, with a pre-school in Gallowstree Common. There is also a Sonning Common pre-school.

Library

Since late August 2014 the library, which is located on the primary school site, has been run with one professional librarian assisted by a team of more than thirty volunteers, who work one shift every two weeks. It is funded by Oxford County Council with additional income from donations from the Friends of Sonning Common Library. The library closed for the first six months of the pandemic, reopened for five weeks and then closed again for the second lockdown (November 2020). It is open for 25 hours a week and is used by the primary school as well as the general public. It offers book and audio book loans, children's DVDs, access to the internet, magazines and newspapers, as well as Saturday story-time and craft activities for children.

FISH

The Friends in Sickness and Health (FISH) centre is staffed by volunteers who arrange car visits for the elderly to hospitals and other appointments. The charity owns a 16-seat bus in which volunteer drivers transport residents for shopping trips and on a variety of other outings. For several years it has had offices attached to a private house in Kennylands Road but is preparing to move to its own premises in what used to be the police office in Lea Road.

Village hall

The village hall was built in the 1970s in Wood Lane. It has a small main hall with smaller rooms – including a kitchen and the parish council office – to the sides. It is extremely well-used for a wide variety of social activities as well as markets, auctions, concerts and other events. It has limited facilities for the modern requirements of a community of our current size. It is efficiently run by a management committee, with capital spending funded by the parish council. Population growth since it was built has exacerbated the need for larger premises.

Within the parish there is also Kidmore Memorial Hall on Reade's Lane which is available for hire for functions and activities and is also used for exercise classes and other activities. The management of the Memorial Hall was transferred from a trust to Sonning Common Parish Council in 2020.

Sport and recreation

Sonning Common has three play areas for children up to the age of 11, all of them well-equipped and maintained and regularly inspected. At the southern end of the village is the Millennium Green, an open area of natural grassland and trees, much used by runners, walkers and dog owners, with paths and seats and a designated natural habitat in the centre. The green is owned by the Millennium Green Trust and run by the Trustees. The mown grass area is maintained by the parish council and the remainder by volunteers from Green Gym.

The village is surrounded by mainly beech woodland and countryside, which is popular for walks and picnics. Sonning Common is where the Health Walks project was started, in recognition of the lack of recreation for health provision. It was set up in the 1970s by a Sonning Common GP, Dr William Bird, with the aim of improving bodily and mental wellbeing by encouraging residents to use their local countryside for walking. Dr Bird also initiated Sonning Common Green Gym to enable residents to regain and maintain fitness via conservation work in the local area. This group meets twice a week to work at various sites in South Oxfordshire and is a thriving self-support voluntary organisation. It has now grown into a very successful scheme that has been adopted nationwide, and even internationally.

Historically there has been a shortage of sporting facilities within the SCNDP designated area. The only playing fields are privately-owned by Rotherfield United Football Club (RUFC), focussing on youth from 5-18 years with one adult pitch, and used exclusively for football. Sonning Common has a cricket club which plays all its fixtures away as there is no cricket ground in the village (although both Kidmore End CC and Peppard CC have grounds with excellent facilities close by). There are two tennis courts at Bishopswood. At the bottom end of the Bishopswood playing fields is a skate park built and owned by Sonning Common Parish Council, which is extremely well used. There is a privately-owned facility, Kennylands Gymnastics, next to the Millennium Green.

The acquisition of the Memorial Hall Field (SON 3) – subsequently renamed Memorial Park - as a result of the allocation of SON 2 for housing in the 2016 NDP has offered the prospect of addressing at least some of the village's deficits. Plans for a MUGA (multi-use games area), running and cycle track and open games area are being implemented. It is hoped in time a new community hall will be provided.

Transport and parking

Sonning Common has a well-used bus service operated by Reading Buses which runs along Peppard Road from the direction of Rotherfield Peppard, along Wood Lane and exits the village along Kennylands Road on its way to Reading town centre. Its frequency has been diminished so that there is now no late evening service. It runs every half hour during the busy morning and late afternoon periods, and hourly at other times of the day.

Car parking in the village centre is a major issue. The one public car park (32 spaces) is behind the Co-op supermarket on the corner of Wood Lane and Woodlands Road and is often full. On-street parking along Wood Lane is largely unregulated and frequently obstructs the free flow of traffic, particularly the buses. The incidence of illegal parking has increased markedly with the decline of enforcement by the police, although SODC is adopting a new system under which enforcement could be delegated.

Churches

There are three churches in the village with small halls or rooms for hire, all were built during the last century. They are Christ the King (Church of England) in Sedgewell Road, St Michael's (Roman Catholic) in Peppard Road, and the Chiltern Evangelical Church in Grove Road.

Retail

Sonning Common's retail centre grew up over three decades in a haphazard fashion without coherent shaping or planning. It has an exceptionally rich and varied range of retail outlets, including a busy small supermarket (Co-op), a butcher, a hardware shop with associated bicycle and machinery repair workshop, dry cleaners, sandwich shop/café, two newsagents, barber, off-licence, florist, two hairdressers, greetings cards/haberdashery, veterinary surgery, pet shop, an Indian restaurant, a fish-and-chip shop and a Chinese takeaway.

The village also has three public houses, two estate agents, three car repair and servicing businesses, a petrol station and a car showroom. The Herb Farm, situated some distance from the village centre in Peppard Road is a plant nursery, combined with a shop and a small café. There are cashpoints outside the Co-op and inside the One Stop convenience store on Wood Lane, which also accommodates the all-important post office.

Employment

For a village of its size with an adult population of over 2,500 between the ages of 16 and 74 years, there is a healthy level of job provision.

The main providers of employment in Sonning Common are the Co-op supermarket (22), Kidby's Yard, which is a small light industrial/office park off Kennylands Road (10), Sonning Common Garage (25), The Herb Farm (8), the three schools (150+ combined), the health centre and dental practice (39 combined), Abbeycrest Care Home (70 full-time and part time).

The biggest employer in the 'wider' area by far is Johnson Matthey. Their research centre, focussed on developing new technologies, which employs nearly 300 people, is actually just outside Sonning Common's parish boundary and the designated NDP area. Although the majority of employees do not live in Sonning Common, the company has a major influence on the village in terms of business for the retail centre and traffic flow. The rising cost of housing in the village has made it more difficult for employees to live closer to the organisation.

Vision

Sonning Common will grow and renew itself while enhancing and protecting its village character

“Over the plan period Sonning Common parish will be at the hub of a thriving community, where the total settlement will extend to some 5,000 people all living within a beautiful and valued AONB woodland area. It will have a modern service centre, providing a good range of retail and healthcare, and modern recreation, sports, youth and care home facilities all serving a total of some 9,000 people from the community and surrounding villages.

Sonning Common will be a healthy place where everyone of all ages can live, learn, shop, access healthcare, travel, work and engage in active recreation, sports and cultural pursuits with modern community facilities. Provision of opportunities for all year activity will recognise the risks inherent in more sedentary lifestyles and work environments.

Our neighbourhood will provide a more even mix of housing which is accessible to each segment of a balanced and inclusive community. We will recognise that changing demographics, longevity and smaller average household sizes require a modest increase in numbers of homes locally. We will plan for and support the construction of our allocation of homes resulting from the SODC Local Plan.

The village centre will thrive and suffer less from congestion if we can tackle the problem of unregulated on-street parking, maintain a good bus service and enable free-flowing traffic through the main internal artery (along Kennylands Road and Wood Lane). We also aspire to see a remodelling of the village centre to focus on its key retail and healthcare service role and to allow modernisation and expansion of these facilities so that they remain of appropriate scale to meet future demands. A comprehensive scheme to address these issues and the car parking problem is being drawn up by the Village Centre working party made up of parish councillors and volunteer residents.

Through the development of the Memorial Park, we aspire to have a new modern community sports hall, surrounded by appropriate provision of recreation facilities and car parking to provide a venue where the wider community can come together and engage in a wide range of social, charitable, cultural and healthy sporting activities. As the Memorial Park is across the road from Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge Academy, we envisage shared use of facilities to the benefit of the whole community.

Sonning Common will continue to be a key nexus of educational facilities with excellent nursery, preschool, library, primary school and secondary school facilities. We would aim for there to be a genuine partnership between the community and these vital facilities so that all can achieve the highest standards.

We will positively support the provision of broadband and communications infrastructure to both local business and appropriate home working. We will encourage a positive employment environment generally with a more sustainable pattern of travel and less commuting.

In embracing development, Sonning Common will actively seek to ensure that change benefits the whole of the local community. We will encourage preferential access to new homes for families and people with strong local connections. Where possible, we will ensure that employment opportunities arising from development benefit local skills and capabilities.

Sonning Common will continue to protect and respect its cherished woodland character and its setting within a beautiful AONB rural environment and ensure that the existing open countryside between the village and neighbouring settlements is maintained; particularly as regards Reading, where there is a very different urban character and density.

As part of the necessary housing development, we will have ensured appropriate landscaping and tree planting to maintain the woodland character and rural feel of our neighbourhood.

Development strategy

The principles guiding our development strategy are the same as those in the 2016 NDP with the addition of one on cycling:

- protecting and enhancing the setting in a rural landscape
- promoting overall sustainability
- supporting and enhancing the village centre
- promoting ‘walkability’ – accessibility of development to local services
- protecting the character of the NDP designated area
- encouraging cycling and the development of new cycle routes – in particular a new purpose-built cycleway between Sonning Common and Emmer Green.

The site assessment surveys of the submitted sites, conducted by volunteers from the village, used sustainability criteria covering views and setting; green space and wildlife; neighbouring character; walkability; public transport; ecology; archaeology; heritage; AONB proximity; flood risk and community facilities. (The full coverage of these aspects can be viewed on an exemplar site survey form on the website - www.scpc-ndp.co.uk). Great attention has been paid to ameliorate the impacts upon the landscape, ecology and wildlife corridors and on the character of the village. This is reflected in the development of the plan’s objectives and policies, including the individual site policies.

Except to the north east, where existing development blurs into Rotherfield Peppard, Sonning Common is surrounded by landscape which is mostly in the AONB or within the setting of the AONB. The existing settlement shape in between the dry valleys is a defining feature of the village. This very important overall setting is to be retained as follows:

- the edge of the village to the east is AONB and not to be developed - with the exception of the Johnson Matthey car park - which is in effect a brownfield site
- to the west of the village the aim will be similar – to preserve the gap between the edge of the village and Kidmore End
- to the south to retain the gap between the village and Reading

Part Four: Revision objectives and policies

Settlement boundary

Objectives: To define the shape of the settlement of Sonning Common within the setting of the surrounding AONB and to protect the community-valued rural character of the village from development which would extend Sonning Common towards Reading and neighbouring villages and hamlets.

Policy RSB1 - The Neighbourhood Development Plan defines a settlement boundary for Sonning Common, as shown on Map 4.1.

Development proposals within the defined settlement boundary will be supported, provided they accord with the other policies of the neighbourhood plan, including: Housing, Design, and Infill. Development proposals outside of the defined settlement boundary will only be supported if they are appropriate forms of development within rural areas suited to a countryside location within the setting of the Chilterns AONB and they accord with policies of the neighbourhood plan relating to the historic environment, heritage assets, landscape character and the natural environment.

Policy RSB2 - Open green space, the Millennium Green and valued woodland that lie within settlement boundary will be protected from development.

Supporting text

The settlement boundary for Sonning Common delineates the border between areas of built development and the surrounding countryside. It also helps to separate Sonning Common from adjacent communities and retain its individual identity. Land outside the settlement boundary comprises countryside, much of it in the Chilterns AONB, and is predominately used for agriculture, woodland and outdoor recreation.

Within the settlement boundary there is generally better access to facilities and services, a consequent reduced need to travel and an opportunity for more sustainable modes of transport. National and local policies generally seek to avoid inappropriate development in the countryside and steer development to land within settlements. Land often excluded from defined settlement boundaries includes:

- large residential gardens or open paddocks more visually related to the countryside than the urban area (eg Reddish Manor, Alpen Rose garden and orchard)
- open space which stands on the edge of the settlement boundary (eg SON 1 which is designated as Local Green Space)
- agricultural farmsteads and or buildings which stand on the edge of the settlement boundary (eg Bishopswood Farm)
- isolated development which is physically or visually detached from the village settlement (eg Blackmore and Pond Farms in Blackmore Lane)

The settlement of Sonning Common is bounded on most sides by the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and either lies in the AONB or within the setting of the AONB. The village also is well provided with trees and has a distinctly rural character.

Through various surveys the village community has expressed a strong desire to maintain this rural character and to prevent any further expansion towards Reading and other nearby settlements, eg Kidmore End. These surveys also showed a preference for new housing, as far as possible, to be located closer to rather than further away from the village centre and for conserving the rural character of Sonning Common.

Sonning Common Village is surrounded by sensitive landscape that needs to be protected from larger scale developments threatening the rural character of the area. It is therefore crucial that new developments remain within the current built-up area, to minimise the impact they would have on the landscape. In this regard, the policy also takes account of the South Oxfordshire LP2035 Policy H16: Backland and Infill Development and Redevelopment, in seeking to ensure that development would not extend the built limits of the settlement.

Settlement Boundary Policy RSB1 sets the spatial strategy for the Neighbourhood Development Plan. Its objectives are to allow sustainable growth to meet its local housing requirement figure, an additional quantum of housing providing flexibility for future housing growth, over the Plan period while also protecting the integrity of the rural character of the village.

The settlement boundary policies take account of the NPPF, para 172, which states that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The conservation and enhancement of wildlife and cultural heritage are also important considerations in these areas. The scale and extent of development within these designated areas should be limited. Planning permission should be refused for major development in the AONB or within the setting of the AONB, other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest.

The existing NDP supported a development of 26 homes on a strip of land (SON 6) adjacent to Kennylands Road. Subsequently, a developer submitted a planning application for 95 homes on an enlarged site behind the NDP supported site. This would have encroached into agricultural land within the AONB setting and towards Reading. The Local Planning Authority, SODC, rejected the application and the developer appealed against their decision.

Sonning Common village raised community funds and opposed the appeal, along with SODC. HM Inspector concluded that the developer's appeal against the LPA decision to refuse planning permission should be dismissed, as it would have resulted in harm to the local landscape, which is a valued landscape, and in visual harm when viewed from the public footway to the south of the site and from Kennylands Road. He also referred to the NPPF requirement for recognising the intrinsic beauty of the countryside and the protection afforded to matters such as valued landscapes. He was satisfied that the landscape and visual harm would be material and significant.

This successful appeal taken together with the community's reconfirmed strong desire not to expand towards Reading has supported the exclusion of SON 26 from within the settlement boundary, with the exception of the strip of land (SON 6) adjacent to Kennylands Road included within the existing NDP.

Starting in the south, the settlement boundary follows the B481 Peppard Road deviating to include the Bird in Hand pub and two adjacent cottages on the east side. Further north, it continues along the B481 but excludes Reddish Manor (which may be regarded as visually detached from the village settlement and includes a large residential garden and grounds more visually related to the countryside than the urban area). Beyond Blackmore Lane the boundary is drawn to include the houses and gardens along the east side of the B481 and Widmore Lane, as well as the current Johnson Matthey car park at the junction of Widmore Lane and Blount's Court Road. It follows Blount's Court Road and then the parish boundary with Rotherfield Peppard Parish along Shiplake Bottom before turning south-west along the southern edge of Old Copse Wood.

The settlement boundary excludes SON 1 (designated as Local Green Space), includes the recently built area of SON 2, and SON 3 (the Memorial Hall Field held in trust for recreational purposes), and then is drawn to include Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge school and SON 15. It then includes the houses and gardens along the south side of Kidmore Lane and the south west side of Kennylands Road and SON 5. It excludes the 'orchard' part of the Alpen Rose property and SON 26, as referred to above. It includes the remaining houses and gardens along the south-west side of Kennylands Road before following Kennylands Road itself to the junction with the B481 in the south.

Housing

Objectives: To comply with the allocation of additional housing in SODC's Local Plan 2035; to deliver a mix of new housing that will do more to meet local needs for smaller starter and downsizing homes; to support infill development providing that it does not have an adverse impact on the character of the surrounding area.

Policy RH1 - New residential development in Sonning Common will be focused on the following housing allocations:

An increase from 37 to 50 homes on allocated site SON 15 (Chiltern Edge Top) - 13 homes with provision for key workers.

The allocation of SON 23 (Johnson Matthey staff car park) for 20+ smaller homes as a reserve site.

The retention of SON 8 (Kennylands Gymnastics) as a reserve site as in the current NDP, with the provision that the density requirements on which that was based have subsequently been revised by SODC and that issues arising from restrictive covenants placed on the site are resolved.

Policy RH2 - On allocated sites – and sites that come forward through infill - support will generally be given to schemes strongly weighted towards one, two and three bedroom homes except in special circumstances such as meeting a need for assisted living accommodation.

Policy RH3 - Infill: Development proposals on infill sites (the infilling of a small gap within an otherwise built-up frontage or group of houses where they are surrounded on all sides by other buildings) will be supported where they are of a design which:

- positively responds to, where appropriate, the prevailing size, height, scale and mass, materials, layout, density and access of the surrounding area
- reflects the existing character of the village
- demonstrates that the amenities of neighbouring residential occupiers will not be adversely affected through overbearing development and loss of light
- includes an appropriate amount of landscaping which complements and enhances the green and wooded character of the local area

Policy RH4 – New developments with gardens backing on to or beside existing gardens should, wherever possible, share boundaries with those gardens so that there is no gap. Where a gap is, for whatever reason, required it must be at least three metres in width, be planted with native species of hedge, shrub or tree at either the developer's or the new owner's costs, and must be maintained either by the new owner or by means of a contract agreed with the parish council.

Supporting text

The original neighbourhood plan, approved at referendum in 2016, allocated a total of 195 new homes for Sonning Common. This target was based on the allocation of 138 homes in SODC's 2012 Core Strategy, plus a further provision resulting from Oxfordshire's Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) of 2014, which projected the rising demand for new housing in the area. At the time of submitting this plan for examination the number of allocated homes completed or nearing completion was about 140.

The clearly expressed desire of the village, reiterated in public meetings and through other consultations, was to see new homes spread across several sites rather than concentrated on a very few larger developments. The result was two clusters of sites – one in the north-west and the other in the south. In addition to the allocated sites in the 2016 NDP, two reserve sites were included in the southern cluster. Of these one (SON 7) was subsequently withdrawn by the owners and the other (SON 8) has been reappraised as part of the revision process.

Following the adoption of Sonning Common's NDP, South Oxfordshire District Council started preparing a new local plan, now adopted as LP2035. This reassessed the capacity of larger villages to take extra housing. The formula employed proposed an overall increase of 15% on the number of homes recorded in the 2011 Census.

In the case of Sonning Common this amounted to a total of 377 new homes. The allocations in the 2016 NDP accounted for 195 of that number. Since then, additions on individual sites arising from the planning application process, combined with the steady accumulation of infill building has raised the number of homes built or with planning permission to 275. This left a target of around 100 to be considered in the revised NDP and is addressed in Policy RH1 – although the granting of planning permission for the 133 extra care apartments on the Little Sparrows site (SON 24) obviously required a major rethink of the working party's recommendations, which is reflected in the allocations now contained in the revision. It is the view of the working party that the permission given to Little Sparrows 'retirement village' should not influence the conclusions reached about Sonning Common's true housing need.

Figures from the last Census of 2011 show the imbalance of the housing stock in Sonning Common. One bedroom homes comprised 3.7% of the total, compared with 7.7% for the rest of the SODC area and 11.8% nationally. The proportion of two bedroom homes in Sonning Common was 20.6% compared with 23.7% for the rest of the SODC area and 27.9% nationally. The proportion of three bedroom homes was 45.4% compared with 39.9% in the SODC area and 41.2% nationally. 30% of homes in Sonning Common were four bedroom or bigger, compared with 28% in the rest of SODC and 20% nationally.

In 2018 the NDP revision working party organised a community survey in which respondents were asked what the priorities for new housing should be. 78% said the first priority should be first-time buyers. 84% said the size priority should be for two bedroom homes. It is clear from all the available data that the provision of smaller homes would help meet the most pressing need in Sonning Common and Policy RH2 addresses that.

Policy RH4 covering gaps between gardens has become necessary because of two instances in which the gardens of homes in new developments have been fenced so as to leave a small gap between them and existing gardens, leading inevitably to disputes over maintenance and access.

Design

Objectives: To ensure that new housing and development achieve high quality, respect the existing character of Sonning Common, and mitigate the effects of climate change as far as possible.

Policy RD1 - All new development should demonstrate good quality design and achieve the highest possible standards of energy efficiency and water conservation, including the provision of car battery charging points for all dwellings. It must respect the scale and appearance of existing buildings responding to and integrating with the surroundings and landscape context. New housing developments should include soft boundary treatments – trees, hedges, shrubs – in keeping with the general village scene, using native species wherever possible.

Parking should be provided discreetly and sensitively, avoiding harsh and intrusive parking courts. Development proposals must specify external lighting schemes which include design features and mitigation measures to avoid over-lighting, thereby limiting the adverse impact of the lighting on neighbouring properties, the character of the area, and biodiversity.

Policy RD2 - In order to respect the rural character of Sonning Common, new buildings should be no more than 2 storeys plus roof (pitched or as normally acceptable) unless there is a robust justification for a taller building. Such a justification will need to include evidence to demonstrate how the proposal addresses local character and residential amenity.

Policy RD3 - Development proposals should demonstrate how the design respects the existing character of the village, having regard to the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (2013), Sonning Common Character Assessment and Design Statement (2013) and South Oxfordshire Design Guide.

Policy RD4 - Proposals for new homes in existing residential streets should have regard to and relate to established plot widths, particularly where they shape the rhythm of the street scene and its architecture.

Supporting text

Sonning Common is a large and spacious village mostly surrounded by open countryside and woodland. Mature trees are prevalent and often right into the centre of the village. Hedges and plot enclosures, together with well planted rear gardens, add to the rural feel. The form of properties is generally quite mixed within streets thus avoiding a bland identikit character. There is virtually no development originally built higher than two storeys, although many homes have added loft conversions. Generally flat-roofed dormers have only been approved at the rear of properties and where they do not intrude on the street scene nor harm the amenity of neighbouring properties. High rise buildings which would urbanise and harm local character will not be appropriate.

The principles guiding these policies are:

- achieving high quality design that respects the scale, coverage and character of existing and surrounding buildings
- achieving low carbon sustainable design to mitigate the effects of climate change
- respecting established building set back and arrangements of front gardens, walls, railings or hedges
- using soft boundary treatments such as trees, hedges or planting to enclose the front of plots and be in keeping with the character of the street scene
- incorporating street lighting on new sites at a level compatible with the rural environment
- avoiding harsh urban parking courts by the judicious use of planting
- using good quality materials that complement the existing palette of materials used within Sonning Common
- adopting the principles of sustainable urban drainage systems (SUDS), where appropriate
- meeting the requirements of 'Secure by Design' to minimise the likelihood and fear of crime

Village centre

Objectives: To protect, support and enhance the vitality and viability of our village centre and to safeguard its role as a key component of the sustainability of the village and the surrounding area.

Policy RVC1 - Within the designated village centre proposals for new or extended premises for 'centre uses' – retail, leisure and ground floor offices – will be supported where they conform with other policies in the NDP.

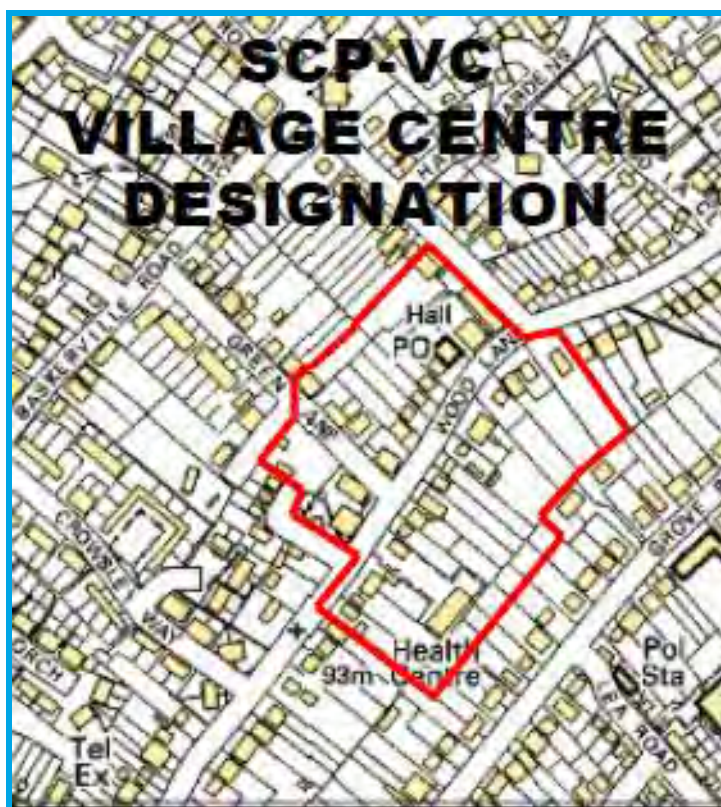
Policy RVC2 - Proposals to improve traffic flow and access and to ease parking problems will be supported, provided they conform with other policies in the NDP.

Policy RVC3 – Proposals to provide electric vehicle charging points will be supported.

Supporting text

Sonning Common's village centre contains an unusually rich and diverse range of shops. These, combined with businesses, offices, the health centre, the dental practice and the village hall – make it an essential hub for the surrounding area in addition to giving the village a vitality and footfall that very few settlements in this part of the country can boast.

Map 4.2: Village centre



But that very success brings problems. The one public car park, behind the Co-op, has 32 spaces. When the village hall is being intensively used – for instance for the monthly markets, exercise classes, parties and other functions – it tends to be full. But at off-peak times there are usually spaces available. However, many shoppers in the village centre prefer not to find out if there is a free space in the car park, and park in Wood Lane – often illegally, often with a complete disregard for the safety and convenience of others.

There has been a long-standing problem of misuse of the health centre and dentistry car parks - causing difficulties of access for patients. The Sonning Common Health Centre already serves more than 10,000 patients, a figure that is certain to rise further over the plan period.

The Village Centre working party established by the parish council has been formulating proposals to address the access and parking problems in the village centre. Design consultants, Stantec have been engaged as part of a broader improvement of the centre. Map 4.3 and explanations have been circulated to all Sonning Common households providing insight as to the draft proposals which include – two pedestrian crossings, improved parking provision on Wood Lane, a mini roundabout, pinch points to make drivers aware they are entering a village, levelling of pavements, improved street lighting, removal of unnecessary signage, planting to enhance aesthetics.

Funding is likely to prove a major challenge in realising some of the more ambitious ideas, but it is hoped that significant progress in easing the parking and access difficulties will be possible in the short to medium term future.

Map 4.3: Village centre re-design



Employment

Objectives: To encourage local employment and new business opportunities by securing new employment sites where possible, and by enabling appropriate intensified use of existing sites.

Policy RE1a - The retention of the existing employment sites will be supported and proposals to establish new employment sites will be viewed favourably subject to detailed assessment of the site or sites in question.

Policy RE1b - To support the expansion and more intense use of the small business park known as Kidby's Yard and to resist any proposal to change the use of this site to non-employment unless it can be demonstrated that the site is no longer economically viable and has been marketed at a reasonable price for that or any other suitable employment or service trade uses.

Supporting text

The biggest single employer in the Sonning Common area is Johnson Matthey (JM), which is situated just outside the parish boundary (June 2020 286 employees).

Within the settlement area the main sources of employment are the three schools, the health centre, the dental practice, Abbeycrest care home and the Sonning Common garage, showroom and tyre centre. There are twenty or so retail and office premises – the biggest being the Co-op. The Herb Farm (garden nursery, shop and café) and the light industrial site off Kennylands Road known as Kidby's Yard also provide employment. The potential area for expansion/development identified in the existing NDP was the part of the Kidby's Yard site closest to Kennylands Road, and a proposal to use that to accommodate the motor repair/MOT business currently located in Sedgewell Road has been supported by the parish council and is currently under development.

The Herb Farm contributes to the sustainability of the village with its retail role. It is important to Sonning Common as it attracts many visitors from other areas and is highly valued within the community. Its location to the south of the village provides enhanced retail potential. For this reason, it is desirable to retain The Herb Farm as a garden centre with its supporting retail facilities.

Community, health and social

Objectives: To retain and enhance existing local community services and facilities; to encourage the provision of healthy recreation facilities for all age groups, and particularly for older children and adults; to support the full range of educational facilities in Sonning Common.

Policy RCSH1 - Development proposals will be supported which enhance local public services, community services and facilities such as the library, the Village Hall, the health centre and dental surgery and the bus service.

Policy RCSH2 - Proposals to enhance, update and improve Sonning Common Primary School and Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge Academy will be supported.

Policy RCSH3 - To support the development – to include appropriate buildings - of the Memorial Park to create a recreation/sports area, using the land for the benefit of residents and to redress some identified sports and recreation deficits.

Supporting text

The overriding principle here is to support the schools in the village and other essential facilities as well as improving the provision for sport and recreation. One of the aspects of Sonning Common life, which is frequently commented upon by residents is its 'community spirit.' This needs to be sustained and developed alongside the population growth.

The range of community facilities is wide and includes the Village Hall and all the many activities that take place there, the play areas, the youth club, the health centre (where pilates and other exercise classes are held) and Kennylands Gymnastics.

Sonning Common Primary School currently has around 420 pupils. The number at Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge is around 300, with plans in place to increase this to over 500 in the short to medium term.

Securing the Memorial Park as a result of the original NDP has opened up a variety of recreational possibilities for the village. The land was granted against a range of identified sports/recreation deficits and was gifted by the developer/landowner. It is intended to create an informal recreation space with facilities encouraging healthy activity, sport and opportunities for community engagement and working in cooperation with Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge (MECE).

The development of facilities on the Memorial Park are planned to include a track around the edge of the site for walking, running and learning to cycle, a multi-use games area (MUGA), community building, gym and informal sports area. In addition, through a Community Use Agreement with MECE, Sonning Common residents will be able to use the school sports hall (due for refurbishment) and the proposed school MUGA out of school hours, during weekends and holidays.

The Memorial Park development is at an early stage. The project is being steered by a working party, the Parish Council and the Parish Office. Financial contributions resulting from new housing developments – both those allocated in the original and in the revised neighbourhood plans – will make a significant contribution towards achieving the vision of providing Sonning Common with an appropriate recreation complex.

Transport and parking

Objectives: To alleviate parking problems in the village centre and close to schools as far as is practicable; to support the bus service; to promote road safety and to encourage journeys on foot and by bicycle.

Policy RTP1- Proposals to improve and rationalise parking provisions will be supported.

Policy RTP2 – Proposals for the provision or improvement of footpaths and cycle ways will be supported.

Policy RTP3- New developments should not cause an unacceptable reduction in road safety including that of pedestrians, cyclists and other road users. Planning decisions should take account of local impacts on:

- traffic speeds in the village
- ability to share all transport infrastructure between all road users
- locations where the existing road system is constrained eg Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge School

Mitigation to improve road safety should avoid impacts such as noise or the introduction of urbanising features.

Policy RTP4 – Proposals to improve road safety and lower vehicle emissions through lower speed limits in the village speed limits will be supported.

Supporting text

There is a lack of detailed data about traffic movements, speeds and volumes along the main routes through the village – Kennylands Road, Wood Lane and Reade's Lane – and the B481 Peppard Rd, which connects Reading and Henley. But local community consultations have regularly highlighted concerns focussed on:

- traffic speeds along the two main roads, Kennylands Road and the B481 Peppard Road as well as Reades Lane
- congestion along Wood Lane in and near the village centre
- parking problems in and around the village centre
- congestion and parking problems in Grove Road linked to the Primary School
- congestion and parking problems in Reade's Lane linked to the Secondary School
- safety in relation to all of the above

As mentioned within the village centre narrative, a study produced for Sonning Common Parish Council by Stantec consultants included a series of recommendations to improve the movement of traffic and the aesthetic quality of the village centre while accommodating the need for parking in a more rational way. These recommendations have been assessed by the Village Centre working party and it is hoped that – subject to funding constraints – significant progress towards implementing some of these recommendations will be possible in the future.

The issue of parking in the village centre and beside the shops along Peppard Road continues to be highly problematic and has been referred to in the Village Centre policy supporting text. It is hoped that the work being undertaken by the Village Centre working party will in time address this situation.

A key requirement of any improvement scheme is to maintain the bus service through the village on its current route. The frequency of the service provided by Reading Buses – currently the 25 – has been cut recently but it continues to be well used by residents and provides a crucial public transport link to and from Reading.

Pedestrian and cycle movement within the village is generally good although community concerns have been raised about pavement conditions and lighting. The need for a safe pedestrian and cycle route between the village and Emmer Green has been raised. There are a number of particular problems for disabled users with wheelchairs and scooters who cannot access some of the footpaths and pavements. The layout of the village roads is also such that some potentially valuable links cannot be made and some others are poor and in need of improvement. However, links out into the countryside are generally good and highly valued by local people.

As a result of the development of Lea Meadow, new cycle/foot paths have been provided along part of the Peppard Road, and from the estate through to Kennylands Road.

A number of suggestions have been made on how to formulate a new traffic scheme outside Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge Academy to deal with safety and traffic movement issues arising from the proposed upgrading of the school and the need to provide accesses to the housing developments either side of the road (SON 2 and SON 15) and the planned Memorial Hall Field recreation complex. It is hoped that these will be taken forward and refined as the planning of these developments is advanced.

The process of reducing existing speed limits is extremely challenging and expensive for an individual village. But it is understood that Oxfordshire County Council is actively considering support to the '20s Plenty' campaign for a general 20 mph limit in built-up areas, and this could make it very much easier to pursue that policy in Sonning Common.

The village has a high density of pupils at pre-school, primary school and secondary school. Many who live in Sonning Common walk there and have to cross busy and often congested roads like Kennylands Road and Wood Lane. There is a risk to them and others from people speeding along these roads, and traffic calming measures, especially speed limit enforcement - and in the future, reductions - will help to limit the risks of collision. We note that the less busy nearby village, Kidmore End, and also the town of Henley- on- Thames have 20 mph limits on significant stretches of their roads. Sonning Common has need for such restrictions, for the reasons given above.

Environment

Objectives: To protect the AONB, to conserve and enhance the Neighbourhood Development Plan area's countryside and open spaces and the wooded and rural character of Sonning Common village and its ecosystems and biodiversity.

Policy RENV1 - To support development which actively seeks to improve the connectivity of green infrastructure and enhance biodiversity (and not to support development which further fragments green infrastructure and impacts negatively on biodiversity).

Policy RENV2 - To support developments which do not negatively impact on the AONB. Planning permission should be refused for development within the AONB other than in exceptional circumstances, where it can be demonstrated that there is a significant benefit to the village community.

Policy RENV3 - To support development which would not have an unacceptable adverse impact on the locally valued landscape setting of the village demonstrated through a Landscape and Visual Impact Statement.

Policy RENV4 - Proposals for development should avoid the unnecessary loss of mature and veteran trees, hedgerows, orchards or wildlife corridors. They should promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of wildlife priority habitat and the protection and recovery of priority species. In line with paragraph 118 of the NPPF, biodiversity features should be incorporated in and around new developments added wherever possible.

Policy RENV5 - New developments which include the provision of trees, shrubs and hedging in keeping with local character will be supported. Applications for development should be accompanied by an indicative planting scheme to demonstrate that a significant level of sustainable planting can be achieved.

Policy RENV6 – New developments which demonstrate a commitment to mitigating climate change through energy and water efficiency, including use of renewable energy and adoption of sustainable drainage systems (SUDs) will be supported.

Policy RENV7 - To support Sonning Common Parish Council's new Climate Change Committee which has embraced aspirations dealing with earth, air, waste, water, energy. health and ecology, where its work conforms with policies elsewhere in the NDP.

Supporting text

The Neighbourhood Plan policies will take all possible action to mitigate climate change, deliver cleaner air and water in the rural landscape, protect threatened species and provide richer wildlife habitats in accordance with the UK Government's 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment (January 2018). Some of these policies are included within this Environment section but others fall naturally under other areas, such as Design.

Sonning Common is bounded by the Chilterns AONB to the north, east and west and is thus significantly influenced by it. Even though the existing built area of the parish is largely outside of the AONB, the policy to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Chilterns AONB is highly relevant to the protection of our rural landscape.

Sonning Common sits on the southern edge of the Chiltern Hills and is located on a semi-enclosed dip slope; gently sloping ground cut through by two dry valleys which trend through the area from NNW to SSE. The elongated shape of the village has been formed by the valleys and the land rises gently on each side of the Peppard and Kennylands Roads. Multiple footpaths link from the village outwards towards adjacent settlements and beyond. They are well maintained and used with gates/stiles recently replaced by volunteer conservationists. The residents value their local environment and are determined that new housing developments will respect the AONB through careful structured planting and screening to mitigate the impact and provide a net gain in biodiversity.

The landscape and character assessment report undertaken by external consultants, Potterton Associates, and other community consultation evidence show that the environment within the village and in the surrounding landscape is greatly valued by local people and considered to be highly distinctive. The generally green and wooded character of the surrounding landscape continues into and throughout the built settlement. The area has a strong structure of woods, hedgerows and trees enclosing open arable fields. Within the parish boundary, significant woodland includes Old Copse, Hagpits Wood, Slades Wood, Bird Wood, Young Wood and Cucumber Plantation. Just beyond the boundary and framing the parish are New Copse, Spring Wood, Rudgings Plantation and Bur Wood, all with well used public or permissive footpaths from Sonning Common leading to the adjacent parishes.

The AONB designation has performed a vital role in protecting the countryside from intrusive and inappropriate new housing, and it must continue to do so. As part of the process leading to the original Sonning Common Neighbourhood Plan, an allocation for housing was made on a field on the northern edge of the village (SON 2) as part of an agreement which saw the neighbouring field (SON 3) transferred to the parish council for recreation purposes, and the designation of a third field (SON 1) as Local Green Space. This proposal was resisted by the Chilterns Conservation Board, which administers the AONB, but was accepted by the Examiner of the neighbourhood plan and eventually became part of the plan because it went some way towards mitigating the significant recreation deficits in the village.

The revision of the plan proposes as a new allocation a site on Widmore Lane (SON 23) which is included in the AONB, even though it has been used for many years as the staff car park for Johnson Matthey. This site shares none of the accepted characteristics of the AONB - it is, in effect, a brownfield site. Its use for housing has been supported in successive consultations with the village, and in the opinion of the revision working party its use for housing comes under the 'exceptional circumstances' proviso.

Although there are no official environmentally designated sites or areas within the Neighbourhood Area, the Millennium Green, Old Copse Wood, Hagpits Wood and the Widmore Pond are distinctive features which are much valued by residents. This is demonstrated by the community's involvement in the purchase of the Millennium Green and the establishment of a trust to oversee its upkeep. The parish council has, with the support of the village, bought part of Old Copse Wood and is actively involved in its maintenance for the public benefit. The existing neighbourhood plan has also incorporated a Local Green Space adjacent to Old Copse Wood on the field referred to as SON 1. Considerable expenditure has been undertaken to maintain and improve Widmore Pond. Hagpits Wood is protected by TPO No 53H07.

It is important to residents that the existing woodland and rural character of the village is maintained. The planting of screening, trees and hedging is considered to be a vital part of any new development. Sonning Common is particularly characterised by its wooded and leafy character. Trees are abundant and this is clearly illustrated in aerial images and photographs. An ecology report commissioned by Sonning Common Parish Council reinforces the point about the 'green feel' within the village by highlighting a good quality of biodiversity both within and close to the village. This has been supported anecdotally by local community comments about specific sites being considered.

Sonning Common and its surrounds support a variety of habitats including woodland, open part-wooded habitats, hedge or other field boundaries, grassland and agricultural land including a large element of arable. A network of wildlife movement corridors has been identified in the wider area around and through Sonning Common.

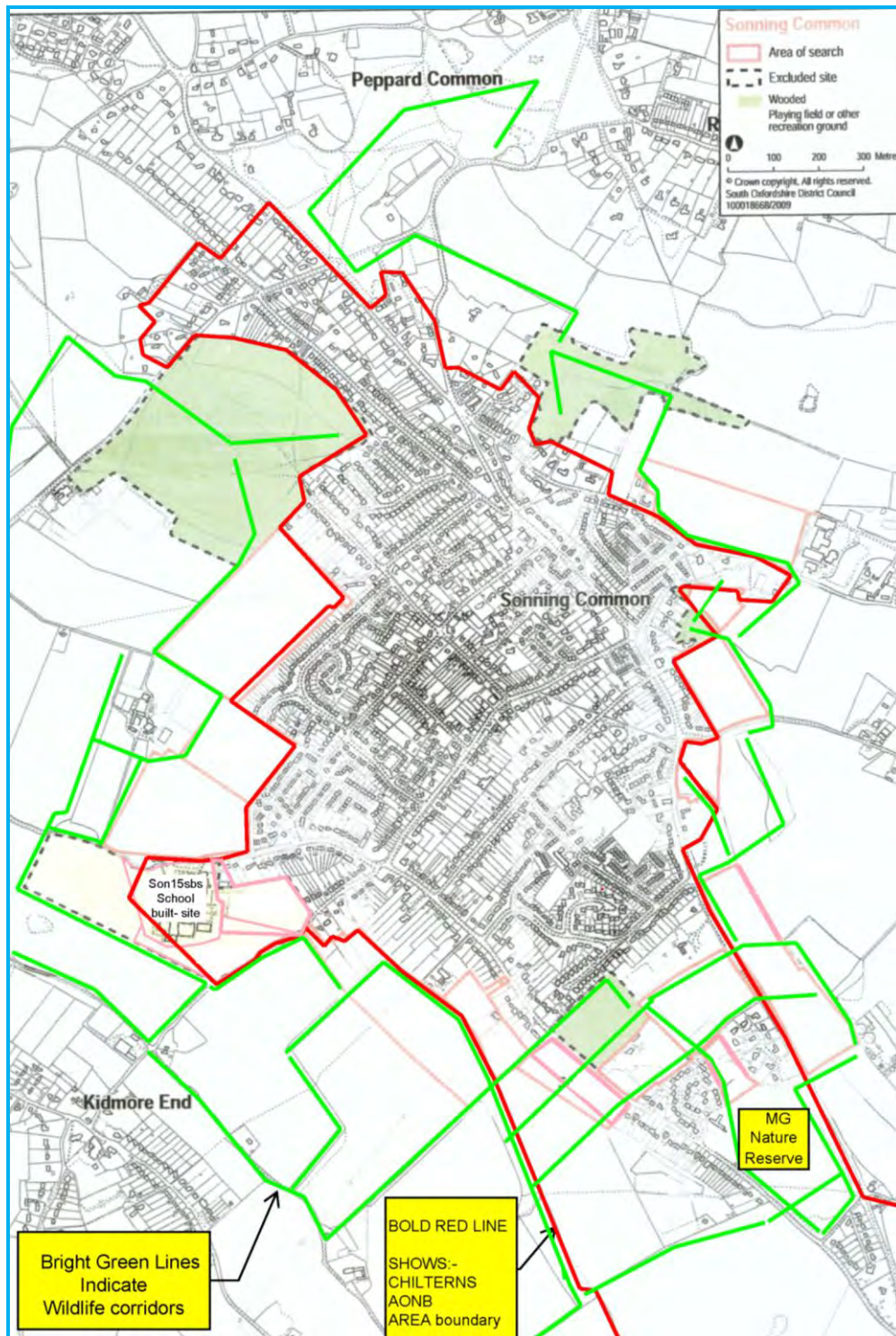
There is good connectivity of wooded habitats – especially west and south of the village. Most of the woodlands proper are linked by a network of linear wooded habitats such as hedges and/or lines of trees. In addition, the village itself has numerous trees and hedges – including some large wooded gardens. Some of the best habitats identified in the aforementioned ecological survey are the more mature hedge/boundary banks such as those in west of village (SON 1, SON 2, and SON 3) - these being much more than simple low hedges containing some large/old trees potentially of high conservation value.

Towards the south of the village, there are some more open habitats perhaps remnants of a previous parkland type landscape (SON 6, SON 7) including a possible 'old green lane'. These sites are adjacent to Hagpits Wood and together they form an area of continuous habitats. It is regarded as highly important that this variety and connectivity of habitats in and around the village should be maintained, enhanced, and improved, where possible.

It is also of great importance to the community that the countryside outside the settlement boundary consisting significantly of woodland and agricultural land should be protected and maintained as far as practicable.

To achieve our commitment to improving air and water quality and mitigating against climate change we will encourage the use of energy and water efficient housing design. This will include the installation of electric car charging points and renewable energy installations together with sustainable drainage systems (SUDs) on all new housing developments. The relevant policies are included in the Design section of this revised NDP.

Map 4.4: Wildlife corridors through and around Sonning Common



Delivery

Objective: To encourage constructive engagement on significant development plans between applicants and the village.

Policy RENV1 - To support development which actively seeks to improve the connectivity of green infrastructure and enhance biodiversity (and not to support development which further fragments green infrastructure and impacts negatively on biodiversity).

Policy RDE1 - To require potential applicants involved in significant developments to consult fully with the community through the parish council. In this context 'significant' is defined as:

- on a site allocated in the Plan or in the Village Centre area designated in the Plan
- any application for more than 10 homes or involving an employment site likely to have 5 or more employees

Supporting text

The guiding principle of the engagement process is that any proposal must be in accordance with the Sonning Common Neighbourhood Development Plan and conform with the statutory plans of SODC and Oxfordshire County Council, as well as national policy.

The NPPF requires applicants to work closely with those affected by proposals to evolve designs that take account of the views of the community, and states that proposals that can demonstrate this in developing the design of a new development will be looked upon more favourably. South Oxfordshire District Council's 'Statement of Community Involvement' states that applicants and developers should discuss proposals with neighbours before making a formal application and should consult more extensively with the community in the case of proposals likely to have a wider effect. It suggests that parish councils are a useful point of contact in the pre-application stage, so that local issues can be identified and addressed.

In this context, the initial contact from the applicant should be with Sonning Common Parish Council through the clerk or deputy clerk. It will be the responsibility of the council to initiate the pre-application process. This may involve degrees of engagement on the part of the applicant or developer – including meetings with councillors, public exhibitions, direct contacts with affected residents and organising publicity. The parish council will offer appropriate levels of support – such as supplying local information, advice on meeting places, access to local media etc.

It will be the responsibility of the parish council to determine how this engagement should be organised.

Part Five: Revision site allocations

Housing

2016 Neighbourhood Development Plan allocations

The process leading to the allocation of sites in the 2016 Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) was robust and exhaustively thorough (and was documented in detail – see the communications log section in the evidence base section of the website – www.scpc-ndp.co.uk). 15 sites put forward in the SHLAA were surveyed by residents against sustainability and environmental criteria. There were extensive discussions with landowners in addition to the multiple information sessions with villagers.

The Plan made provision for 195 homes on 5 sites, 3 additional sites and 3 reserve sites.

Provision for 195 homes

SON 2	Bishopswood Middle Field
SON 5	Kennylands Paddock
SON 6	Kennylands Infill
SON 9	Lea Meadow
SON 15a	Chiltern Edge Top

Additional sites

EMP 1	Kidby's Yard – designated employment site
SON 3	Memorial Park – recreation / sports facility
SON 1	Old Copse Field – local green space

Reserve sites

SON 7 / 7a	Hagpits House and Hagpits Orchard
SON 8	Kennylands Gymnastics

The history of the allocated sites since the 2016 NDP was approved is as follows:

SON 1 (Old Copse Field)

Designation as Local Green Space is unchanged. It continues to be used as an arable field. The public footpath running diagonally across it from Woodlands Road to the Bishopswood sports ground is much used – all the more so since the opening of the parish council's skate park at the bottom end of the sports ground.

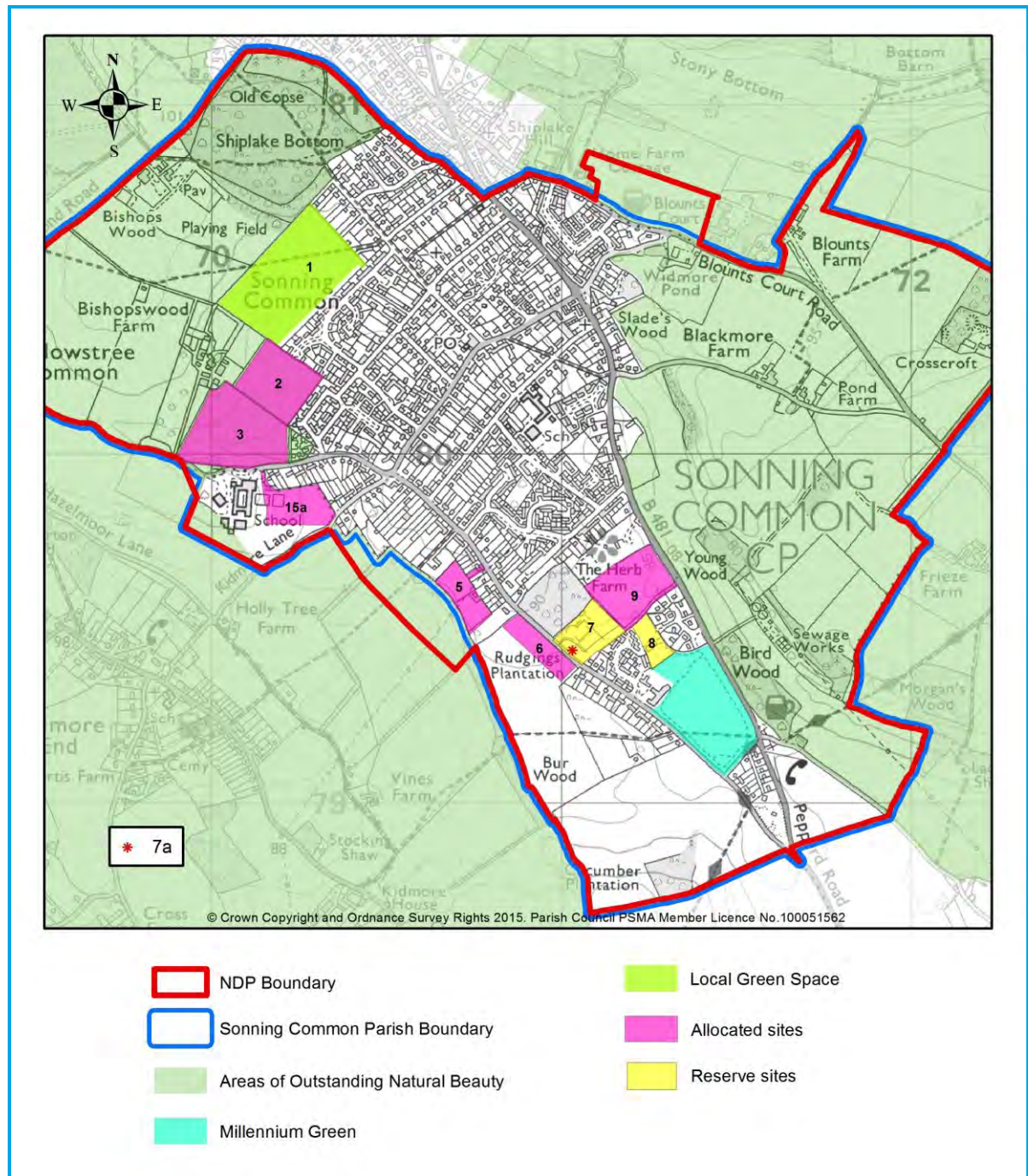
SON 2 (Bishopswood Middle Field)

Planning permission was granted in May 2018 for 50 homes (check) with vehicular access off Reade's Lane. Construction work on the site is well advanced.

SON 3 (Memorial Park)

Ownership was transferred to the parish council by Linden Homes, the developers of SON 2, in 2020. Its future use is restricted to sports and recreation. A working party has been engaged in drawing up plans for levelling and drainage of the site and to plan the provision of facilities. Groundworks have been carried out in the course of 2021.

Map 5.1: Allocated and reserve sites 2016



SON 5 (Kennylands Paddock)

This 1.2 hectare site behind existing houses on the western side of Kennylands Road was allocated for 22 homes in the NDP. As a result of the planning application process this number was increased to 25. Planning permission was granted in February 2019. Construction work on the site is well advanced.

SON 6 (Kennylands Infill)

A 1.5 hectare linear site between existing house along the western side of Kennylands Road, site forming the eastern part of a much larger field. This was allocated for 26 smaller homes. Subsequently an application was submitted by Gallagher Homes to build 95 homes on the whole of the northern part of the field extending west as far as Rudgings Plantation and Bur Wood. This application was strongly opposed by Sonning Common Parish Council and was rejected by SODC's Planning Committee. The developers lodged an appeal which was dismissed by the Inspector following an inquiry. Subsequently an application was submitted to build 26 homes in line with the NDP allocation.

SON 9 (Lea Meadow)

A 3.2 hectare site on the western side of Peppard Road, next to the Herb Farm. This was allocated for 60 homes. As a result of the planning application process this figure was increased to 65. Construction was completed in 2019.

SON 15a (now SON 15, Chiltern Edge Top)

A 2.1 hectare site forming the southern part of the playing fields of Chiltern Edge School (now Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge Academy). This was allocated for 37 homes in the neighbourhood plan. It has now been reallocated at a higher density in this Revision NDP.

Reserve sites:**SONs 7 and 7a (Hagpits House and Hagpits Orchard)**

The Hagpits House site (SON 7) was withdrawn by its owners shortly after the NDP was approved. As any development of SON 7a was contingent on the development of SON 7 this allocation was also set aside.

SON 8 (Kennylands Gymnastics)

In the original NDP Plan this 0.7 hectare site was considered for development in two stages. It has been reallocated in this Revision NDP.

Employment site: – Kidby's Yard

This allocation remains in force. Although Kidby's Sheds – which gave the site its name – has relocated to another site outside the parish boundary, several businesses continue to use the original site. A proposal to extend the existing use by building a motor repair/MOT testing centre on the eastern part of the yard was supported by the parish council and was given planning permission by SODC. Building work is in progress.

New allocation

SON 23 (Johnson Matthey car park)

Homes: 20+

Status: Allocated as a reserve site

This site (0.7 hectare), is on the eastern edge of the village at the junction between Widmore Lane and Blounts Court Road. It is owned by Johnson Matthey, the sustainable technologies company whose research and development centre is located immediately opposite on Blounts Court Road. Even though it is tarmaced and has been used as a car park for many years (currently there are spaces for around 150 vehicles) it is within the Chilterns AONB.

Map 5.2: SON 23 – Johnson Matthey car park



The site was submitted by Johnson Matthey (JM) for potential development in 2018 as a result of an invitation from the NDP Revision working party to all landowners.

At present the car park's vehicle access is onto Widmore Lane, and it is envisaged that this would remain the sole vehicle access in the event of the site being developed for housing. There is a pedestrian access onto Blounts Court Road which could be retained.

There have been extensive discussions between representatives of the NDP Revision working party and JM. It has been emphasised from the start that the working party would want to see any development on such a small site being weighted towards to smaller two and three bedroom homes. The company's representatives have been fully supportive of that approach.

SODC's LP2035 has dropped the 25 dph (dwellings per hectare) density guideline laid down in the previous Core Strategy, and has asserted the need to increase density in order to achieve the most efficient use of development land, without specifying a recommended or prescribed level. The housing market has also seen a tendency towards a stronger demand for smaller homes (and a corresponding weakening in the demand for five and six bedroom homes). It follows that accommodating 20 or slightly more homes on the JM car park would not be excessive – and would help meet identified local housing needs.

In the extensive and thorough process of consulting the village on the sites submitted for possible development the JM car park (SON 23) came out consistently as the most favoured site. Feedback forms distributed after the public consultation on 14 November 2019 elicited a strong response. 68% of those who completed a form regarded the site as suitable for development. The next highest approval figure achieved by any other site was 44%. An equally strong endorsement came from the questionnaires completed after the public exhibition on 29 February 2020. The site was also considered suitable for development in the landscape assessment carried out by independent consultants, Terra Firma on behalf of the working party.

There remains the question of the AONB designation. The Chilterns AONB boundary was designated in the 1960s. The current use of the site as a car park came later, but it is not clear how that use was approved. But the fact is that it was. As a result, it shares none of the accepted characteristics of the AONB, in that it is not open countryside and does not comprise part of a valued landscape. It is partly enclosed by a high brick-and-flint wall, and on other sides by hedging, shrubs and trees.

In those circumstances, and in view of its approval rating in the consultation process, the NDP Revision working party decided unanimously to bring it forward as the one new housing allocation. In view of the Little Sparrows planning permission alluded to elsewhere, this has now become a reserve site.

Revised allocations

SON 15 (Chiltern Edge Top)

Homes: 50 (37)

Status: allocated

This is a 2.1 hectare site comprising the upper part of the playing fields to the east of Chiltern Edge School (now Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge). The lower part of the playing field, along Kidmore Lane and beyond the building line formed by the cluster of buildings forming the southern part of the school complex, was not included in the allocation in the 2016 Neighbourhood Development Plan which envisaged a development of 37 homes.

Some while after the adoption of the NDP, Chiltern Edge School became an academy under the control of the Maiden Erlegh Trust. One of the important aims of the original NDP allocation was to enable the sale of the land to release funds for the refurbishment of the school and to improve facilities. Approval for the sale had been given by the Department of Education. The Trust appointed Savills Estate Agents to act for them in bringing the site forward for development.

At initial meetings between representatives from Savills, the academy and the NDP Revision working party, it was proposed by Savills that the number of homes on the site should be increased from 37 to 50. It is important to note the comment from the examiner who approved the 2016 Neighbourhood Development Plan that *'the precise number of homes on each allocation will only emerge at the detailed planning stage.....it is premature and potentially unduly restrictive to limit housing numbers prior to detailed master-planning....such an approach could prevent the achievement of sustainable development'*.

The NDP Revision working party were sympathetic to the suggestion from Savills that a higher number of smaller (predominately two and three bedroom) homes would be appropriate to the site. One point made forcibly by the working party and re-emphasised at all subsequent meetings was the desirability of keeping some of affordable element of the scheme for key workers – ie teaching staff. The academy have accepted this in principle.

Over the subsequent period more meetings were held between the working party and the academy and its representatives. Potential layouts were produced, in which the lower part of the playing fields (formerly SON 15b) would be used to provide the necessary drainage with a SUDS (Sustainable Urban Drainage System). This would be underground and have no visual impact, making the area – in effect – open space. Extensive public consultation was undertaken by the academy and its agents, including a public exhibition and meetings with those individual householders affected by the scheme living along Reade's Lane and Kidmore Lane.

The allocation in the 2016 NDP laid down the following requirements:

- Ensure that the proposed dwellings are designed to minimise the visual impact of the development on the AONB and neighbouring properties. Particular consideration should be given to the ridge heights of the proposed dwellings and to the colour of building materials.
- Make appropriate arrangements to respect existing residents' prescriptive rights of way from the Reade's Lane rear garden gates to maintain their hedges. Details to be confirmed with residents at planning stage. Any arrangements must ensure that the safeguarding policy at Chiltern Edge School and any statutory requirements in respect of this are fully complied with to ensure pupil safety.
- Ensure that existing properties around the site will be well screened and their privacy respected.

It is fair to say that the academy and their agents have made considerable efforts to respond to the concerns raised by residents in the homes directly affected by the scheme. However, it is also fair to say that those residents have, in general, maintained their opposition to the decision by the NDP Revision working party to accept the increased number of houses on the site. The principle of increasing the number of homes was accepted by SODC's planning department in preparing pre-application advice. The officer concluded that the application *'is not considered to depart significantly from the overall spatial strategy'*.

In the light of the consultations, meetings and feedback received, the working party decided to approve a revised allocation for SON 15a raising the number of homes from 37 to 50. This was presented to the village at a public exhibition on February 29th 2020. Towards the end of the year the Academy also appointed a developer for the site. It has had to re-apply to the Department of Education for permission to release the land for building. A planning application is expected in the near future.

SON 8 (Kennylands Gymnastics)

Retained as a reserve site as in the existing NDP, allocated for 14 homes subject to possible increase in line with revised density guidelines from SODC.

The site known as SON 8 is part of the gap between the main village and its southern extremity. It is set between housing to the north east and south west. It is not widely visible but there are sensitive view receptors in the adjacent Millennium Green and it would be necessary to create a buffer edge between the green and the built-up area.

The village has a deficit of recreational facilities now in the process of being addressed at the Memorial Park. Further progress on this, and the resolution of issues arising from the restrictive covenants in force on the site, would be required before the rest of the site was developed.

Map 5.4: SON 15 – SON 8 – Kennylands Gymnastics

