

REPORT TO STEEPLE ASTON PARISH COUNCIL ON HOUSING SITE ALLOCATIONS

OCTOBER 16TH 2023

SUMMARY: This report is the culmination of several months of site assessment work by a local team, supported by consultants, in order to present to the Parish Council recommendations for possible future housing sites in Steeple Aston, for incorporation into the Review of the Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan (MCNP).

ACTION REQUESTED: The PC is asked to consider the process, the site assessments, and the recommendations contained in this report (see Sections 1 and 12 below) and its appendices. The meeting is asked to provide comments and to decide whether to approve, amend or reject the recommendations.

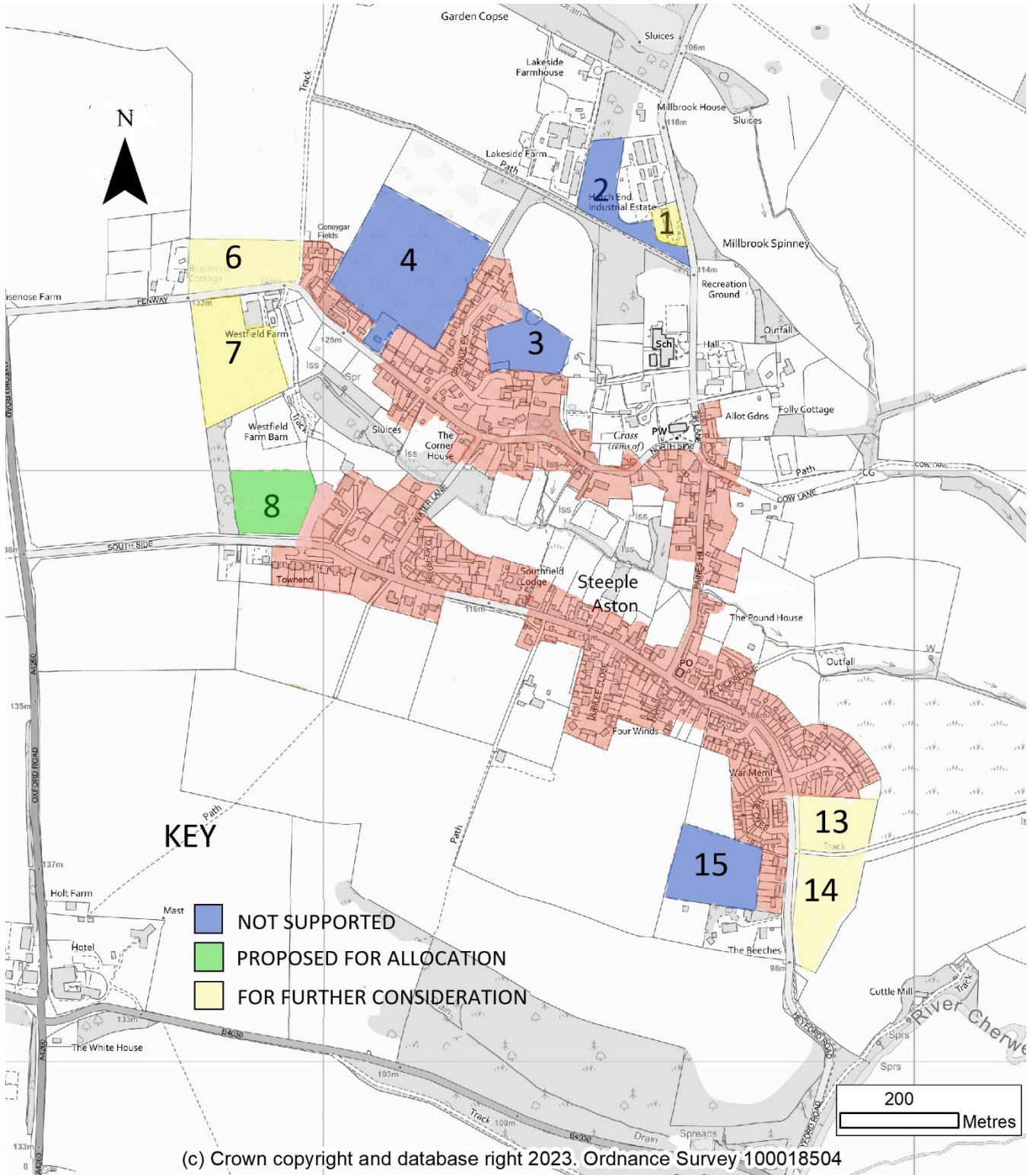
1. ASSESSMENT OUTCOME: the team's findings are as follows:

- The assessment team is recommending that Sites 8 and 13/14 are allocated for future housing development. Not only does the team's balanced assessment of all eligible sites support this recommendation, but it is also fortuitous that the sites are at each end of the village, so avoiding a concentration of construction activity in one area.
- The team also recommends that Site 6 should be held as a reserve site, pending the outcome of the preferred sites (above). However, the team particularly seeks the views of the parish council regarding Site 6, as the team's recommendation is finely balanced.
- Sites 1 and 7 are recommended to be considered for possible Rural Exception Site status, on the grounds that they are not eligible for allocation because of their locations, but may have merit as sites for affordable housing schemes. Site 1 may be capable of delivering up to 8 dwellings, while site 7 is considered suitable for up to 15 new homes.
- The preferred priority order for the team's recommendations is therefore 8,13/14,6,1 and 7.
- The team has reached the view that two schemes of approximately 15 dwellings each – total 30 dwellings – should be supported for the new Plan period 2024- 2040.
- If Sites 8 and 13/14 are both able to proceed on that basis to adoption in the Neighbourhood Plan Review when it is adopted next year, there will be no need to progress the remaining sites in the priority list.
- If however, one or both of the preferred sites is not able proceed, then the remaining sites on the list will be further considered, in order of preference.
- If only one of Sites 8 and 13/14 is able to proceed, and Site 6 is not supported, then Site 1, followed by Site 7, should be further considered.

Rationale

- The team has listened carefully to community views regarding further housing in Steeple Aston, and has also taken account of the existing MCNP policy which supports an indicative number of 20 additional dwellings for the village in the period 2018-2031 (10 of which have already been constructed). The proposed allocation of 30 new dwellings is based on the “bottom-up” approach that has been taken in conducting the site assessment process. That is to say, all possible sites have been considered, the most suitable sites have been chosen, and then thought has been given to how many dwellings should be located on each site. The process has not at any time involved a desire to meet a quota of housing numbers imposed by others. The figure of 47 dwellings initially suggested by Cherwell in January 2023 was withdrawn, and anyway had no evidence to support it, so far as the assessment team is aware.
- The assessment team has also borne in mind that the MCNP is founded on the principle that one of its member parishes – Heyford Park – is a strategic housing site, where a large number of new homes are being, and are still to be, constructed. As a consequence the MCNP area is a special case in Cherwell District, such that its “larger villages” - Steeple Aston and Kirtlington – should be treated on their merits for additional housing numbers, rather than having to accept a theoretical number.
- In the case of Steeple Aston, the local community has expressed a strong view that some limited additional housing would be beneficial, but that those limits should be informed by the current difficulties with traffic volumes through the village, by the lack of capacity of the village’s roads to take any further parking, and by concerns about infrastructure – particularly the capacity of the drainage system. These concerns have led the team to the view that the previous figure of 20 could be replaced by a figure of the order of 30, ideally on two sites, but that numbers in excess of 30 would cause unacceptable harm to the village in the Plan period.
- This is not to say that no other development could take place within the Settlement Areas of the villages in the MCNP area (which includes Steeple Aston). There are a number of possible sites where small-scale “windfall” schemes could be supported if they were to come forward, thus assisting Cherwell in its aims to provide additional homes in rural areas.
- It is intended that all the above sites will be referred to in the revised neighbourhood plan, which will go out to public consultation on 6th November. The possible rural exception sites are, by definition, not suitable for allocation, and will be mentioned as aspirations in the community action plan section of the plan.
- For all the sites, it is the intention of the MCNP Forum to consider establishing a community land trust to deliver housing which meets local needs. It is too early to say whether this will be feasible, but if so the process will determine a suitable mix of housing types and tenures to secure that goal, with a focus on affordable starter homes for young people, and homes suitable for older villagers.

MAP SHOWING ALL AVAILABLE SITES WITH ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES



2. **BACKGROUND:** A review of the MCNP (originally approved in 2019) was commenced in September 2022, to extend its reach to the year 2040. As regards housing policy for Steeple Aston, the original Plan had parish council agreement to support up to 20 additional dwellings in the period to 2031. 10 of those homes have subsequently been built at Townend. In January 2023, Cherwell District Council (CDC) issued a consultation document (subsequently withdrawn) listing Steeple Aston as one of 11 “large” villages expected to take between them 500 new houses in the period up to 2040. The number allocated to Steeple Aston was 47. Another named village is Kirtlington, also in the MCNP area, which was allocated 46 additional homes.
3. **PUBLIC MEETING 16TH FEBRUARY 2023:** The PC held a public meeting to gauge community views about that proposal, and to consider the possibility of the MCNP Forum (of which SAPC is a member) conducting a housing site allocation process for the village. The aim would be for local people to determine whether there were any suitable sites available, and if so to consider the number of dwellings that could comfortably be accommodated, rather than having both the choice of sites and the numbers decided by Cherwell, or by speculative developers or landowners.

The possibility of doing this arises because where a neighbourhood plan is already in place, and is under review, it has the power to carry out site allocations instead of the local planning authority (Cherwell in this case). With support for this line of action from the public meeting (attended by 60 people) and the following PC meeting, MCNP approached CDC with this intention and secured agreement in July 2023 to conduct site allocation for both Steeple Aston and Kirtlington.

4. **THE TEAM:** As a result of the February meeting, and of agreement by both parish councils, teams were established in both Steeple Aston and Kirtlington, as part of the MCNP Review, to identify and assess possible housing sites in each village. A common process is being used for both villages on eligibility of sites, the assessment criteria and the basis for scoring, and the community consultation process. The Steeple Aston team consists of Martin Lipson, Caroline Edwards (from Middle Aston), Paul Rodgers, and Philippa Tickle (from Duns Tew).
5. **SITE SELECTION:** There are three sources of sites: those previously submitted to CDC (sites 2,4, 6 and 7), requests to MCNP by site owners or developers (sites 1, 2 and 7), and finally sites nominated by the assessment team (all the other sites). Sites were not eligible for allocation if their site area was below a threshold size (5 houses) or if no access appeared feasible. Such sites could however potentially be developed in future as unplanned “windfall sites” if the problems can be overcome. The sites considered by the team mostly conform to the existing MCNP policies that requires any new housing to be immediately adjacent to the settlement area. A few sites were included that do not comply with that policy, to satisfy possible demands from the community for their consideration. The 16 sites assessed are shown on the map above, and the list of sites and their owners is in Appendix 3.
6. **INFORMING OWNERS:** All site owners (and those renting the land) were contacted to ask for confirmation of various details, and asked to say whether their site was available for possible development in the period up to 2040. Six sites were stated to be unavailable (sites 5,9,10,11,12 and 16). The owner of sites 13 and 14 stated that the sites “will never be developed as they can be seen from Rousham gardens”. The remainder of the sites were confirmed as available. After some further consideration of the detail of these available sites, the team contacted the owners of sites 3, 4 and 6 to ask for clarification of the site area being offered. As a result, sites 3 and 4 were amended to reduced sites. In addition, the owners of sites 3 and 15 were asked to provide more information on how suitable access could be gained to their sites. The responses have been taken into account in the assessments.

- 7. ASSESSMENT PROCESS:** The teams in both villages developed criteria (see Appendix) based on national standards, to be as objective and factual as possible. The criteria initially led to some broad classifications of the sites: those not adjacent to the village settlement areas (sites 1,2 and 7, which could perhaps be considered as possible “rural exception sites” but are not eligible for allocation); five “backland sites” (sites 3,4,9,11 and 15), which are sites that are generally behind existing dwellings, suffer from difficult access issues, and might produce housing with a sub-optimal relationship with the rest of the village.; and finally two frontage sites, that do not suffer from those problems but might have other issues (sites 6 and 8). This information was published on the village website in early September, as a precursor to the second public meeting (see below).
- 8. THE CRITERIA:** It was initially thought by the assessment teams in both villages that the 31 criteria and the Red/ Amber/ Green scoring system devised for it (see Appendix 4) would be the primary driver for decisions about which sites to take forward. However, it became clear that there are numerous other considerations to weigh in the balance, namely:
- **Planning policy:** how do existing national, District and MCNP policies apply to the site?
 - **Planning history:** had planning applications, “call for sites” submissions, tree preservation orders, etc been associated with the site?
 - **Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA):** how did the independent report by MCNP’s consultants (AECOM) rate the site in terms of its potential environmental impact? (NB this report is available digitally, on request).
 - **Advice from consultants:** was any other site-specific advice received from MCNP’s consultants?
 - **Legal impediments:** were there any known legal issues that might affect development?
 - **Site owner’s comments:** any views or wishes expressed by the owner
 - **Community feedback:** what comments were made by members of the public before, at, and after the public meetings?
 - **Assessment Team views:** points arising from the team’s consideration of the sites

A proforma was devised to capture all the above, and the detail assembled for each available site (see Appendix 1). The proforma concludes with a statement of the “planning balance”, which in the view of the team, taking all the above considerations into account, was the outcome of its deliberations for each site. A recommendation is then made for each site (see section 11 below).

- 9. COMMUNICATION:** Articles and graphics were placed on the village website, in the village magazine Steeple Aston Life, and on the village Facebook page to keep the local community well-informed of progress throughout. An email address was provided so that anyone wishing to send comments could do so. Some two dozen have done so, so far. The map showing the categorisation of the sites is reproduced in Appendix 2.
- 10. PUBLIC MEETING 13TH SEPTEMBER 2023:** A second public meeting was held so that, before the assessment process was completed, the team could hear and take account of views from the village and more widely (75 people attended). A transcript of the meeting is provided in the Appendix. One of the items on the agenda was to check whether there were any other sites that should be considered. Some questions were asked, but this did not produce any eligible additional sites. Views were also expressed that the “rules” which were being followed in the assessment process should be changed, especially as they affected the team’s classification of sites. However, the team, guided by MCNP’s highly experienced consultants, was endeavouring to base its work on well-established principles used in town and country

planning, and did not wish to risk criticism that it had chosen to skew these for any purpose. Several people spoke against having any additional houses constructed in Steeple Aston, mainly because of already existing traffic and parking problems. The majority view, though, was in favour of the allocation process, and numerous comments on specific sites were recorded, and have been taken into account in the assessments.

11. COMMUNITY VIEWS: In addition to the transcript of the September public meeting, a spreadsheet analysing all the emailed responses received to date, is in Appendix 7.

12. SITE ASSESSMENTS: The individual proformas for each of the available sites are provided in Appendix 1. The recommendations are extracted from these and reproduced in the table below:

Site ref	Site location	Assessment Team recommendation
SA1	1 Old Poultry Farm, Fir Lane	The site is not eligible for allocation. It will, however, be referred to in the Community Action Plan section of the NP, and will be subject to further discussions with Cherwell. The Reg 14 consultation will enable community feedback on the proposal.
SA2	Land adjacent to Hatch End Business Park	The site is not considered to be suitable either for allocation or for consideration as a Rural Exception Site.
SA3	Field adjacent to Grange Park and the Beeches	The site is not considered suitable for allocation.
SA4	Old Quarry, Fenway	The site is not considered suitable for allocation.
SA6	Field adjacent to Fenway and Coneygar Fields	The planning balance suggests that this site should not be considered for allocation. A minority view of the assessment team suggests that it should be supported for allocation. The parish council's views on this are requested.
SA7	Field adjacent to Westfield Stables, south of Fenway	The site is not eligible for allocation. It will, however, be referred to in the Community Action Plan section of the NP, and will be subject to further discussions with Cherwell. The Reg 14 consultation will enable community feedback on the proposal.
SA8	Field opposite Townend, South Side	The site is proposed for housing allocation in the Reg 14 consultation.
SA13	Former allotments off Heyford Road, adjacent to Nizewell Head	The site is proposed as a reserve site for further investigation, and to be included in the Reg 14 consultation to seek further community feedback.
SA14	Former allotments south of track off Heyford Road	The site should remain on the reserve list until the viability or otherwise of site 13 is established. If it is viable, this site may not be required. It should be included in the Reg 14 consultation.
SA15	Field behind Heyford Hill houses, adjacent to The Crescent	This site is not considered suitable for allocation.

13. CONSULTANTS: MCNP's consultants associated with the site allocation process are:

- O'Neill Homer, Planning Consultants
- AECOM – Housing Needs Assessment
- AECOM – Strategic Environmental Assessment
- AECOM – Masterplanning

14. MASTERPLANNING: MCNP has the opportunity to commission consultants to produce initial outline schemes (referred to as Masterplans) for some of the sites. This will produce graphics that will help in the consultation process that begins in November, assisting consultees to visualise how housing schemes might be arranged on the sites. In order to ensure that these graphics are available in time, MCNP has instructed schemes to be prepared for sites 7, 8 and 13.

15. NEXT STEPS: The Regulation 14 Pre-Submission Consultation will run for a minimum of six weeks. The draft Plan (containing the site allocation policies and much else besides) together with numerous supporting documents (including this report) will be available on MCNP's website, and on each of the member parishes' websites. Hard copy of some documents will also be available. During the consultation period MCNP has arranged for more public meetings to be held in each of the member parishes, where a presentation will be made and feedback welcomed.

The Review team will then collate all the responses, including those from statutory consultees, including Cherwell District Council, and consider what changes need to be made to the policies and the documents. The next iteration will then form the Submission Documents for the Regulation 16 stage, which it is hoped will occur in February/March 2024. It is then CDC's responsibility to consult again for a another six-week period, after which a final version of the Plan will be produced by MCNP Forum. This then goes to an Examiner, who will decide whether the revised Plan can proceed to Referendum. All being well, that should occur in the early summer of 2024, at which point the revised Plan will officially supersede the existing Plan.

16. LOCAL PLAN 2040 CONSULTATION: To return to where this report started, the parish council is asked to note that Cherwell's consultation on their Local Plan 2040 is now once more under way. The proposal for Steeple Aston (and Kirtlington) to be one of the large villages that will take a proportion of 500 new houses remains in the draft Plan. The precise figures, however, have now been omitted. The justification for MCNP's inclusion of site allocation in the MCNP Review remains therefore as strong as it was. However, the parish council may wish to submit its own views on Cherwell's proposals, and is reminded that if it wishes to do so, the closing date of the consultation is 3rd November 2023.

APPENDICES

1. Assessment proformas for each eligible site.
2. Map showing initial categorisation of sites
3. List of sites and their owners
4. Initial criteria for assessing sites
5. Scores for RAG-rated criteria per site
6. Transcript of September public meeting
7. Spreadsheet of community feedback