

Response by Alasdair Ross on behalf of the Beacon Project

Response type: GENERAL COMMENT

The Plan should be more specific about solutions to the challenges it identifies.

The neighbourhood plan captures many of the most important issues facing the town. It is clear from the census data that the town faces a demographic challenge: there are fewer of us (although we take up more space) and we are getting older. In particular, the large 36-45 cohort that was such a feature of the population profile in 2001 had disappeared from the census 10 years later. This seems to be the worst of all worlds. Not only will the town's vibrancy dissipate if we cannot sustain a diverse and young population, but those who remain will occupy more land as bigger, pricier properties predominate. The Beacon Project, shaped by Charlbury people over eight years, helps address this challenge by offering affordable options for Charlbury families who struggle to meet market prices, and should be recognised and embraced by the Plan. The Plan rightly conveys concern about the landscape and conservation and argues for a well-balanced community but fails to pinpoint specific solutions to these challenges. It is vital that the Plan is clear on how to keep Charlbury balanced and lively. If the town is to maintain its vibrancy, we need more housing and facilities for local workers and younger incomers. We have the fortune of being in the AONB, but we cannot allow this to become a convenient excuse for stopping the town's healthy expansion. Charlbury grew considerably from the 1950s to 1970s, allowing for a younger and more dynamic inflow. Without these developments, Charlbury might already have become an isolated retreat for the well-off and retired. Charlbury needs housing that retains the people who make this a busy, living community. Those who maintain our buildings, teach at the school and keep the service industries ticking need small but reasonably priced houses. This means development within the AONB must be allowed, and the Plan should make this case enthusiastically. The Beacon Project has identified a site that is both available and viable and that offers the opportunity to provide just the kind of housing the town needs. The designs for sustainable living contribute to the environmental priorities, too, while the dwellings provide housing stock available below market prices in perpetuity. Charlbury is recognised as a service centre with a mainline railway station and—for now—a decent bus service. The Plan should embrace this role and welcome the accompanying responsibilities. The Plan should take account of local demands such as 'hidden housing' (those wishing to downsize and yet remain in the town) and look at imaginative solutions such as the division of larger house plots, whilst recognising that potential windfall sites can be found and should be supported.