

North Somerset Council Local Plan Response January 2024

Summary

Bleadon Parish Council recognises and wants to protect Bleadon's Bronze Age rural farming heritage and its settlement character and culture. The Parish endeavours to work towards ensuring community and local food security and protect Bleadon's diverse wildlife and countryside as highlighted in North Somerset Council's current and proposed environmental policies.

Strategic Gap

Bleadon Parish Council repeats its request for a Strategic Gap to be established in the north of Bleadon to help prevent the merging of the settlement of Bleadon, assist in safeguarding the countryside from residential 'encroachment' and help to protect the setting and character of Bleadon settlement.

The Parish Council recognises that some of the local topography of the land creates a natural gap in terms of residential/built development. However, this is not the case in relation to areas adjacent to Bleadon Hill and the Parish Council can see no reason why a Strategic Gap would not be established in this location in the same way that North Somerset Council has agreed to the proposed designation of Strategic Gaps in relation to Locking, Hutton and Banwell, all of which are village locations bordering the main settlement areas of Weston-super-Mare.

Settlement Boundary

Bleadon Parish Council recognises that a number of minor changes are proposed to settlement boundaries and that, in the majority of cases, these changes arise from more accurately reflecting existing property boundaries.

DP53

Bleadon Parish Council is concerned that the proposed Local Plan does not afford land used for food production sufficient protection from development other than residential development.

Food security is one of the 13 national infrastructure sectors identified by the National Protective Security Authority. The UK is already heavily reliant upon imported food in a number of respects. The loss of any further land currently used for food production will, therefore, only serve to exacerbate the current position.

DP53 states that the proportion of Grade 1 land in North Somerset is approximately 7% and 10% for Grade 2. 60% falls in Grade 3 and that the best and most versatile (BMV) land (grades 1, 2 and 3a) will be protected from significant, inappropriate and unsustainable proposals. However, there is no clear distinction between the proportion of land which is classified as Grade 3a and Grade 3b. The definition of

permitted development as currently worded is where development is proposed on sites of one hectare or greater on Grade 3a BMV agricultural land, development will only be permitted if:

- It is one of the exceptions listed under Grades 1 and 2; or
- It is to be used for renewable energy production where the land could be returned to agriculture without a loss of quality; or
- Is for affordable housing; or
- The sustainability benefits of the proposal clearly outweigh the long-term loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land.

As a consequence, the protection afforded to Grade 3a land is limited and no protection is offered to Grade 3b land. Significant land within the Bleadon Parish boundary currently used in relation to food production is classified as Grade 3 and this land is vulnerable to development in relation to such aspects as renewable energy development. This vulnerability is likely to be compounded by pressures upon/incentives for landowners arising from aspects such as the Biodiversity Net Gain regulations. Whilst it is recognized that the proposed wording includes reference to permission being granted only if land could be returned to agriculture without loss of quality, the wording fails to recognize the practical implications of any change of use upon existing communities. By way of an example, agreements in relation to the placing of solar panels will likely be for a number of decades and once such land is lost, the farming communities (and knowledge and skills base) will also be lost.

The Parish Council would wish to see more explicit protection of Grade 3 (and above) land currently used to support food production. If North Somerset Council proposes that such protection/clarification might come by way of the preparation of a Supplementary Planning Document, then the Parish Council would urge early completion of such a document.

DP7

In common with comments in relation to DP53, Bleadon Parish Council requests that sufficient protection be given to land currently used for food production and that this is prioritised ahead of large scale renewable and low carbon energy. The Parish Council notes that the current wording of the policy refers to supporting 'continued agricultural use'. However, 'agriculture' is a broad term and there are agricultural uses which could be brought forward as part of large scale solar farms (as an example) by way of sheep grazing, which would add little to no value in the UK meeting deficiencies in terms of current food production – such deficiencies largely relating to vegetable, grain and fruit production. Diversification to sheep may also reduce any existing dairy contribution.

Frack Free

Bleadon Parish Council requests that the Local Plan recognises the previous decision of the Parish Council to designate Bleadon as 'Frack Free.

Attendance at Public Examinations

Bleadon Parish Council would wish to reserve the right to participate in examination hearings in relation to DP7 and DP53 - as it considers these aspects to be linked. The Parish Council has undertaken considerable research in relation to the issue of food security and the best use of land in this respect and believes that it can add value to the examination hearings in this respect.