

LETTER TO HENLEY STANDARD

FROM GORING NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN (GNP)

GORING SCHOOL - A BALANCED VIEW

Sir,

Jerry Unsworth's letter in your 18 August issue is headed "Don't Ignore School Idea". It seeks to suggest that this is what the Goring Neighbourhood Plan (GNP) group has been doing, but nothing could be further from the truth.

When identifying the village priorities at an early stage of the NP process, it became clear that residents were concerned about the school's capacity to cope with anticipated additional numbers of children once the proposed new houses had been built. The GNP therefore took steps to establish the extent of that issue. After extensive enquiries, it transpired that the objective evidence did not support this concern, and the school's current ability to accommodate all in-catchment children at the reception stage with space for others from outside the village, as confirmed by OCC, demonstrates that capacity is not an issue. Goring has a standard capacity of 30 reception children and the current forecast for the 2017/18 intake is just 23, meaning that 7 will be taken from other villages around Goring. When future figures are predicted using the OCC model, they indicate that a 30-child intake will be sufficient to accommodate the additional children likely to seek places at the school from the predicted new housing.

Part way through the GNP's assessment process it became apparent that options might exist to improve current school facilities. The GNP Steering Group (SG) was instrumental in setting up the first meetings involving all stakeholders (school governors, the Diocese, OCC and Goring Parish Council) in an attempt to encourage them to co-operate in a professional process to evaluate the various options. Notwithstanding the SG's efforts, the meetings and surrounding discussions simply demonstrated that there was no clear consensus amongst the key participants either as to the fundamental issues or as to the way ahead. In particular, there was significant opposition to Mr Unsworth's proposal by

OCC, in part because of the impact that a new school in Goring would have on other schools in the area.

This opposition from OCC is of great importance, because it means that it was and remains unlikely that a new school would actually be built, even if it were to be included in the current GNP. Without all of the key partners pulling in the same direction, a new school cannot happen and the GNP cannot consider anything short of a formal deliverable proposal in which all of the stakeholders concur and to which they are committed. Before there is any chance of this stage being reached, this would require OCC to have been provided with an adequately detailed proposal (which the school governors have not yet done) and then to have undertaken a lengthy internal process in which that proposal and any alternative options together with the future implications of each have been scrutinised, costed and compared. Clearly, that is not going to happen before the current GNP is finished and published. This is not a case of seeking “further clarification” as Mr Unsworth suggests; at this time, no actionable and evidenced proposal has been submitted by the key participants, so there is nothing which the GNP could properly consider including.

Mr Unsworth’s frustration arises from the fact that he has not been able to manipulate the process so as to obtain what he wants for his clients, which is to build a very significant number of additional new houses. He proposes to build nearly double the number included in the GNP and on a plot of land which will not be allocated in the GNP and was also not recommended previously by an SODC landscape study because of its substantial impact on the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

On the clear advice of SODC, and because it was obviously the right thing to do, the GNP set out to treat all developers and landowners fairly and equally. It would therefore not have been appropriate to meet the school representatives and this individual developer together. This was particularly true because at the time when Mr Unsworth was seeking such meetings he and his client had not even discussed the principle of their proposal with OCC, who are ultimately responsible both for Goring school and for the overall school strategy in Oxfordshire and without whose support a proposal for a new school cannot be delivered.

Other developers have also expressed interest in offering land for the benefit of the community as part of their wish to gain approval for new housing developments around Goring. In fact, about 80 ha of beautiful AONB land around Goring has already been offered to SODC for

housing. Without the protection of the GNP, this could result in about 2000 new houses – more than doubling the size of Goring. Given the clear wish of the community to avoid large-scale development and to protect our unique environment, it is vital that the GNP is finalised and brought into force as soon as possible so that the planning authority is required to act in accordance with those community principles.

However, the current GNP does not represent the “once and for all” barrier which Mr Unsworth and others imply; on the contrary, it is simply the first iteration of Goring’s principles and priorities, and it will be reviewed at regular intervals in the future to ensure that it is kept up to date. If and when the options for a new or enhanced school have been properly, thoroughly and professionally considered by all relevant stakeholders and all, especially OCC, have concluded that a particular option should be supported, it is absolutely right that this option should be assessed as part of a future Neighbourhood Plan. However, as stated above, even just the OCC element of that process is complex, has still not been begun, and is likely to take a significant length of time. There can be absolutely no justification for delaying the finalisation of the first GNP for an open-ended period and thus delaying the ability of this community to protect itself and the surrounding countryside from unwanted and uncontrolled development whilst waiting for something that may never happen, namely a decision by OCC to support some unknown form of redevelopment of the school in Goring.

The GNP supports, and always has supported, the desire for Goring’s children to have a first-class school facility and we who have devoted vast amounts of time to the production of the GNP, like many others who live in the village, deplore the lack of care and maintenance applied to the existing school buildings over recent years which has allowed them to fall into their present state. We very much hope that all interested parties and stakeholders will work together to produce a single coherent and deliverable strategy for the future to which they can all commit so that this can be properly submitted to and addressed by another iteration of the GNP in the near future.

Yours faithfully

GNP Steering Group