

Firways
34 Hackford Road
Wicklewood
NR18 9QJ

South Norfolk Council
Village Clusters Housing Allocations Plan
Long Stratton
Norwich
NR15 2XE

31 July 2021

Dear Sir

Village Clusters Development Plan and Wicklewood, nr Wymondham

I refer to the proposed changes to the current plan and note that on-line comments are restricted to 100 words. I'll submit responses accordingly but wish to draw attention in more detail to the issues that I'll summarise.

I attended the Parish Council meeting earlier this month. It concluded (if I recall correctly) that while the Parish Council recognises the need for more housing in the region and that Wicklewood must expect to play its part, there is opportunity for infill development within the current Settlement Limit; and it opposes development beyond the existing Settlement Limit for Wicklewood, that is implied by the District Council's proposals. I agree with that sentiment.

It was commented also, during that meeting, that the proposed Plan includes physical references to Wicklewood that are significantly out of date, raising the question whether planners visited the village for appropriate research before publishing the proposed update.

Such research should have identified several of the issues that follow, including those about road safety, particularly near Wicklewood Primary School, that have been drawn to Councillors' attention on many occasions. These continue to be concerns in spite of the redevelopment of what had been the school's grassed playing field into a shingle car park (that has a tendency to flash-flood), and other measures. Vehicles continue to park dangerously on Hackford Road, potentially blinding the view of motorists driving west.

I agree with others, that extending development beyond the existing Settlement Limit will be harmful to the open spacious character of the immediate locality. Everyone travelling through Wicklewood in either direction between Wymondham and Hingham (representing a growing number of drivers and cyclists), and not only Wicklewood residents, would benefit from retaining the status quo. It's obvious to anyone who has lived in Wicklewood for even just a few years that volumes of all traffic, from cyclists to HGVs, have increased significantly; but my point in this paragraph is that Wicklewood is an outstanding village to drive through because of its spacious character, and that characteristic contributes fundamentally to a favourable quality of life. There's nothing to the south except prime agricultural land and Wicklewood School. Arguably, perceptions of spaciousness in lived-in areas contribute to the positive mental health of all who live in or travel through them; therefore we shouldn't tamper with them.

Perhaps that's a subjective point; but a particularly relevant comment from the Parish Council meeting is that while the current proposal is for 30 + 12 dwellings immediately to the south of the Settlement Limit, there have been previous suggestions that around 100 houses might be proposed on the same site. If I recall correctly, it was suggested that allowing 30 + 12 homes adjacent to Wymondham Primary School would be "the thin edge of the wedge" I read, too, that building 30-42 new dwellings, whether or not outside the Settlement Limit, would contradict the Council's current indication that no more than 12-25 new homes should be built at any site(s), irrespective of any other arguments.

My own thoughts and comments refer to traffic volumes and flows, and how they already impact on Wicklewood's infrastructure that is already struggling, without the addition of more significant building.

In Wicklewood, all road junctions to the south of Wymondham Road and Hackford Road lead onto single-track lanes, and these are dangerous already. (I walked a 4-mile route on these lanes daily around 0800 during the first Covid lock-down, when schools were closed, the Government's advice was to work from home, and traffic flows generally were greatly reduced, so I speak from personal experience of fast-moving and substantial traffic even in those supposedly quieter circumstances!)

Presumably, any roundabouts or other road-widening measures to facilitate access to housing developments to the south of the Settlement Limit would lead onto these single-track lanes (perhaps after 50-100 meters or so, but nevertheless ...). Already these lanes – notably The Green and Milestone Lane, that border the planned developments – are busy with traffic travelling to the A11 junction near Besthorpe. Drivers on these lanes throughout the day have to give way to on-coming traffic frequently, and particularly at "school times" with vehicles from Wicklewood and the surrounding area travelling to and from Wymondham College, and from Morley and beyond travelling to and from Wicklewood Primary School. I've heard that a new primary school at Wymondham College might ease the pressure on already-full Wicklewood Primary School, but I doubt it, even without the threat of another 42 houses. After all, that implies perhaps another 80 schoolchildren; and with multiple-car-ownership already a feature of Wicklewood, perhaps another 80 family cars ferrying them back and forth.

The proposed development areas to the south of the Settlement Limit both sit between the most dangerous stretches of Hackford Road – between the double-bend that commences immediately before the single-track at The Green, at the Wicklewood village sign, and another immediately to the west of Wicklewood School, at the junction with the single-track Milestone Lane.

It is a busy stretch of road, not only at Wicklewood Primary School's starting and finishing times (in winter including the hazard of poor visibility due to darkness and inclement weather, both in the morning and afternoon), but at all times. There's a growing number of family cars travelling through the village already; agricultural vehicles year-round; more and more HGVs; increasing numbers of FedEx and DPD etc vans delivering online shopping; and Waitrose, Morrisons, Asda, Tesco and Sainsbury all delivering more frequently to households' doorsteps throughout the area.

We live on that section of road, and in recent years we've seen the village sign almost demolished, the white "directions" signpost knocked down, the 30mph signpost outside our house knocked down, and my neighbour's wall demolished, all in separate road traffic incidents. On one occasion I recall exiting our drive and almost being hit by a Volkswagon that was being driven along the pavement to avoid on-coming traffic!

It's not only road infrastructure that's an issue. Another matter raised at the Parish Council meeting referred to Anglia Water already requiring its resources and capability around Wicklewood to absorb demand out of Wymondham, where housing growth continues apace. Mobile phone signal on Hackford Road is poor; and for all the work that Open Reach appears to do in the box opposite the Cherry Tree pub, broadband connections are slow compared with the speeds that providers suggest are possible elsewhere.

I mention the Cherry Tree pub. We have the pub, the primary school, and a village hall and playground, but that's it for local amenities. The village shop and Post Office closed years ago, and even the village church had to close recently, because of a plaster-fall. It's good to have The Cherry Tree so that families and friends can go for a drink without needing a designated driver; but otherwise, for shopping, with Waitrose and Morrisons only about 3 miles away in Wymondham, and the trend towards home deliveries, I doubt whether 42 houses outside the Settlement Limit would make it viable for anyone to open a village shop. Shopping out-of-home therefore implies more increased traffic to and from Wymondham and Norwich, and that means negotiating the short but already dangerous section of Chapel Lane at Crownthorpe. It's only a short stretch but it's all double bends; the right-turn junctions in each direction are both difficult; there are two narrow bridges; and two unsigned turnings into developments of allotments including one that's obscured from view.

Finally, perhaps I missed it, but I haven't seen any detailed proposals. Recent experience suggests, however, that developers likely to be interested in Wicklewood will prefer to build more, bigger houses. Do we need more, bigger houses with families and probably multiple-car ownership while so many young adults struggle to find homes they can afford?

As I suggested at the outset, I recognise the need for more housing in general, but in Wicklewood there's infill space that can be developed, such as the proposed development on Hackford Road to the west of the village. Wicklewood lacks the sustainable infrastructure to support significant development, and whatever might be permitted shouldn't be beyond the existing Settlement Limit. The Council's own "no more than 12-25 homes at any site(s)" indication, and the existing Settlement Limit exist for reasons that presumably included issues I've addressed, and they remain valid, perhaps more-so, today and for the foreseeable future.

Yours faithfully

Alan H Highet