

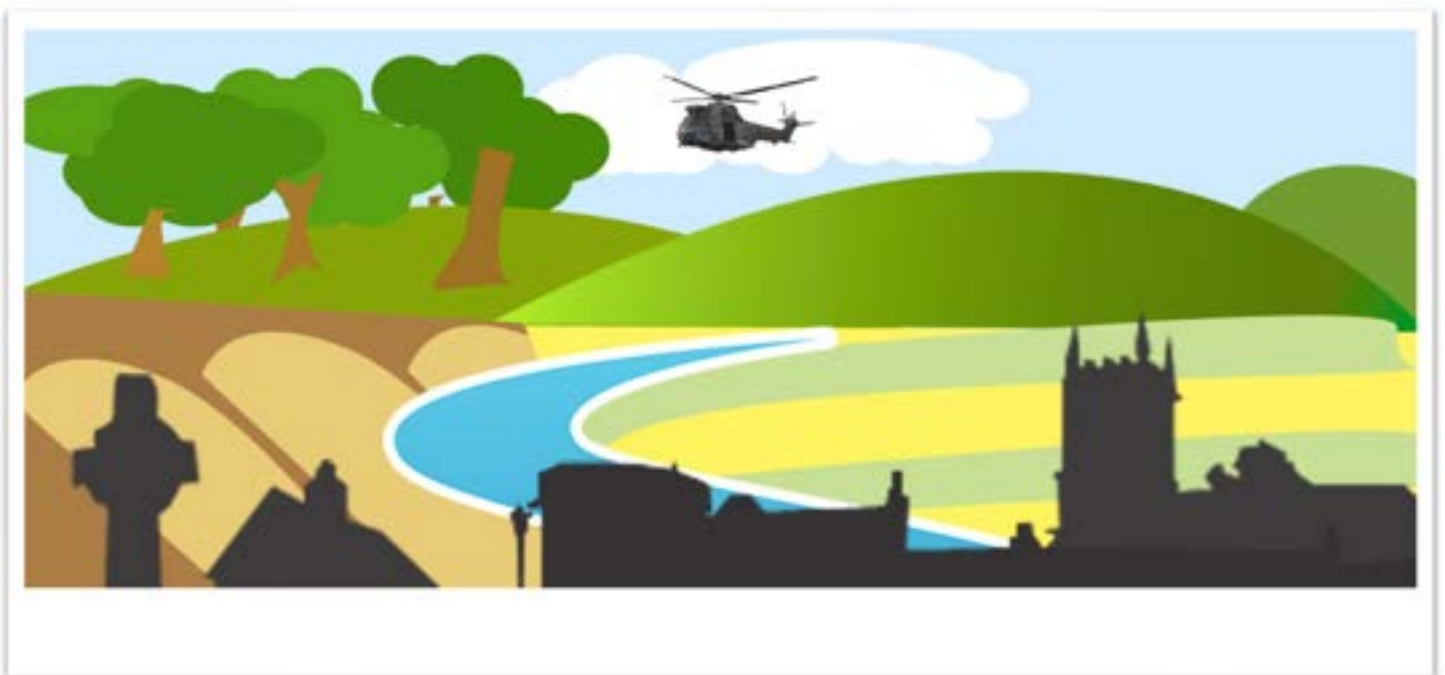


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# Benson Parish Neighbourhood Plan

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**Plan Revision 2022-2035**



# Benson Parish Neighbourhood Plan 2022–2035

This Revised Version of Benson’s Neighbourhood Plan is published by Benson Parish Council under the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 and in accordance with EU Directive 2001/42.

March 2023

## Table of Contents

<b>Benson Parish Neighbourhood Plan 2022–2035</b>	<b>2</b>
LIST OF POLICIES – WITH COMPARISON TO ORIGINAL PLAN	6
LIST OF APPENDICES	7
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>8</b>
Our Ambitions	8
Sustainable Development	9
The Benson Relief Road	13
Climate Statement	13
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>17</b>
Our Vision	18
<b>1. Introduction &amp; Background</b>	<b>19</b>
The Pre-Submission Plan	20
<b>2. The Neighbourhood Area</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>3. Planning Policy Context</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>4. Community Views on Planning</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>5. Vision, Objectives and Land Use Policies</b>	<b>34</b>
Vision	34
Objectives	34
<b>6. Land Use Policies</b>	<b>36</b>
Introduction	36
Housing Allocation Policy	36
NP1 - Housing	43
Site Allocations	44
NP2 – Land to North of Littleworth Road (BEN1 Phase2)	46
NP3 – Land off Hale Road (BEN2)	49
NP4 – Land to North and East of Sands Way (BEN3/4)	52
The Riverside	53
NP5 – Riverside Buffer	59
<b>7. Conservation and Heritage</b>	<b>60</b>
NP6 – Conservation and Heritage	63
<b>8. Design</b>	<b>64</b>
NP7 - Design	66
<b>9. Roads and Transport</b>	<b>67</b>
Background	67
Transport Policies	68
Traffic Pinch Points	68
Traffic Flow	73
NP8 – Traffic Flow	73
Parking	74
Road Safety	76
Road Safety - Speeding	76
Road Safety – Busy Junctions	80
Road Safety - Heavy Lorries	81

Specific Issues – Pedestrians/Cycles.....	81
NP9 – Pedestrians and Cyclists.....	81
Sustainable Transport.....	82
Accessibility.....	83
Public Transport.....	84
NP10 – Access to Public Transport.....	86
Sustainable Travel.....	86
NP11 – Electric Vehicle Charging.....	87
<b>10. Community Facilities' Policies.....</b>	<b>88</b>
NP12 – Community Facilities.....	92
Education.....	93
Key Issues.....	97
Benson Library.....	97
NP13 – Benson Library.....	98
Village Centre.....	98
NP14 – Village Centre - Changes from Business Use.....	99
Other Business and Services Areas.....	100
NP15 – Village Centre – Changes to Business Use.....	100
Assets of Community Value (ACVs).....	101
NP16 – Assets of Community Value.....	101
Burial Ground.....	102
Mill Stream Surgery.....	102
Economic Activity.....	103
Phone and Broadband Provision.....	103
NP17 – Phone and Broadband Provision.....	104
NP18 – Telecoms Infrastructure.....	104
Allotments.....	105
NP19 - Allotments.....	106
Outdoor Recreation.....	106
NP20 – Outdoor Recreation.....	108
Facilities for the Youth.....	108
Facilities for the Elderly.....	108
Benson Community Shed.....	109
Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL).....	109
<b>11. Environmental Policies.....</b>	<b>110</b>
Introduction to Green and Blue Infrastructure.....	111
Benson Community Views on Green Infrastructure.....	112
Benson’s Approach to Green Infrastructure.....	113
Strategy for People and Nature in Benson.....	113
Green Spaces and Connections to the Wider Countryside.....	114
Protecting Existing Green Spaces.....	114
NP21– Protection of Local Green Spaces.....	117
Creating New Green Spaces.....	118
NP22 – Creation of New Green Spaces.....	120
Biodiversity – Nature in Benson.....	120
NP23 - Biodiversity.....	123
NP24 – Wildlife Corridors.....	123
NP25 - Green Infrastructure Management Plans.....	123
NP26 – Benson Brook.....	124
<b>Landscape and Distinctiveness of Settlements.....</b>	<b>125</b>
NP27 – Distinctiveness of Settlements.....	128
NP28 – Landscape and Views.....	129
Views.....	129
Landscape Buffers.....	132

NP29 – Landscape Buffers ..... 133  
Drainage and Flood Risk Management ..... 135  
NP30 – Flood Risk and SuDS ..... 136  
Note on Agriculture ..... 137

## LIST OF POLICIES – WITH COMPARISON TO ORIGINAL PLAN

Revised Plan		Original Plan	
Policy	Title	Policy	Title
NP1	Housing	NP1	Housing Allocation Policy
NP2	Land to north of Littleworth Road (BEN1 Phase 2)	NP2	Land to the north of Littleworth Road
NP3	Land off Hale Road (BEN2)	NP3	Land at Hale Road
NP4	Land to north and east of The Sands (BEN3/4)	NP4	Land to the north and north east of The Sands
NP5	Riverside Buffer	NP5	Land to the south of St Helen's Avenue – Burial ground
NP6	Conservation and Heritage	NP6	Conservation and Heritage
NP7	Design	NP7	Design
NP8	Traffic Flow	NP8	Traffic Flow
NP9	Pedestrians and Cyclists	NP9	Access to Public Transport
NP10	Access to Public Transport	NP10	Pedestrians and Cyclists
NP11	Electric Vehicle Charging	NP11	Sustainable Travel
NP12	Community Facilities	NP12	Community Facilities
NP13	Benson Library	NP13	Benson Library
NP14	Village Centre – Changes from Business Use	NP14	Shops
NP15	Village Centre – Changes to Business Use	NP15	Village Centre
NP16	Assets of Community Value	NP16	Assets of Community Value
NP17	Phone and Broadband Provision	NP17	Internet Provision
NP18	Telecoms Infrastructure	NP18	Broadband
NP19	Allotments	NP19	Allotments
NP20	Outdoor Recreation	NP20	Outdoor Recreation
NP21	Protection of Local Green Spaces	NP21	Protection of Local Green Space
NP22	Creation of new Local Green Spaces	NP22	Creating new Local Green Space
NP23	Biodiversity	NP23	Biodiversity
NP24	Wildlife Corridors	NP24	Wildlife Corridors
NP25	Green Infrastructure Management Plans	NP25	Green Infrastructure Management Plans
NP26	Benson Brook	NP26	Benson Brook
NP27	Distinctiveness of Settlements	NP27	Distinctiveness of Settlements
NP28	Landscape and Views	NP28	Important Views
NP29	Landscape Buffers	NP29	Scope for development
NP30	Flood Risk and SuDs	NP30	Sustainable Drainage Systems

## LIST OF APPENDICES

- Appendix A Site Assessments
  - Appendix B Design Statement
  - Appendix C Heritage
  - Appendix D Community Questionnaire
  - Appendix E Character Assessment
  - Appendix F Transport Assessment
  - Appendix G Parking Plan
  - Appendix H Map of Sustainable Transport
  - Appendix I Community Facilities
  - Appendix J Parish Allotment Usage Data
  - Appendix K Green Infrastructure and Biodiversity Audit
  - Appendix L Strategy for People and Nature
  - Appendix M Settlement Boundary Methodology
- Basic Conditions Statement
- Modification Statement
- Consultation Statement

## Executive Summary

Benson's original Neighbourhood Plan was passed by a large majority at referendum on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2018 and adopted by SODC on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2018. This Revised Plan follows Government Guidelines on Neighbourhood Planning, specifically the section related to 'updating a neighbourhood plan', in which communities are encouraged to review and, where necessary, revise their neighbourhood plans to ensure they do not become out of date or out of step with the LPA's Local Plan and wider Government policies.

This Revised Plan builds on Benson's original Neighbourhood Plan and continues to represent the views of the local community with regard to the future of Benson up to 2035. Like its predecessor, it has been prepared by Benson's Neighbourhood Plan Team and the Parish Council, with support from residents, statutory bodies and the development industry. The updated version fully reflects and complements the policies of South Oxfordshire's most recent Local Plan 2035 in the Benson Neighbourhood Plan area.

### Our Ambitions

Our central ambitions remain unchanged in this Revised Plan, except for two added ambitions reflecting the Climate Change emergency. This Revised Plan is designed both to serve as a planning, land use document, but also to deliver a number of central community ambitions in Benson. Our ambitions are to:

- Plan positively for growth rather than to respond on an ad hoc basis to unplanned growth and development
- Bring forward the implementation of Benson's Relief Road through additional housing development beyond that which is strategically required in Local Plan 2035
- Reduce the impact of through traffic on the B4009 in our village in general, and in its centre in particular (See Appendix F)
- Enhance the vitality and viability of our village centre
- Safeguard the rural character of the village
- Ensure that all development in Benson and Preston Crowmarsh respects fully the increasing risks of flooding from the River Thames, from our network of brooks and from runoff during periods of heavy rainfall
- Respond locally with practical mitigation and adaptation measures, to the impacts of climate change
- Enhance the well-being of the community of Benson Parish



## Sustainable Development

Our original Neighbourhood Plan paid particular attention to delivering sustainable development in the neighbourhood area and this focus is maintained in this Revised Plan. Since the original Neighbourhood Plan was first published, however, it has become increasingly clear that planning, at both national and local levels, needs to be more proactive in considering climate change mitigation and adaptation measures and more urgent in taking whatever practical steps are possible. Section 14 of the NPPF, especially Paragraph 153, summarises very clearly the responsibilities on planners in this regard. Our original plan did take account of the need to avoid or mitigate the impacts of climate change in some areas (e.g. promotion of sustainable transport) but, in preparing this revision, we have reviewed all our policies proactively to see where we can add to the sustainability and resilience of our plan. We are therefore confident that the Revised Plan and its enhanced set of policies will deliver sustainable development within the NPPF's three dimensions.

Our sustainable development aims for each of these dimensions are reiterated (underlined) below, with latest status updates.

### **Reference the economic dimension of sustainable development the Revised Plan will:**

- Deliver approximately 565 new houses  
This number is adjusted in this Revised Plan to 559, reflecting developers' confirmed numbers. This total of 559 houses excludes both the 187 houses approved prior to the Neighbourhood Plan on BEN1 Phase1 and approximately another 80 dwellings completed or committed up to 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020. This is the date used by SODC in their Local Plan 2035 to compare housing quotas for Larger Villages against actual completions and commitments. Table 4f of Local Plan 2035 records Benson as delivering 831 dwellings against the 15% growth quota of 383.  
319 houses have been completed at the time of writing this Revised Plan – all 187 houses on BEN1 Phase 1, plus 132 houses on BEN1 Phase 2.
- Provide considerable assistance in securing a 5-year housing land supply in the District  
In total, 559 housing units have now been secured towards SODC's 5-year land supply figures. This total comprises 241 units on BEN1 Phase 2, 240 units on BEN3/4 and 78 units on BEN2, as all 3 developments have received full planning permission.

- Provide the context for the revitalisation of the village centre through a reduction in through traffic and increase in the population base of the village

All sections of the Relief Road are enshrined in full planning permissions; all 3 roundabouts along the Relief Road have full planning permission; the B4009 will be rerouted along the Relief Road from the Braze Lane roundabout to the roundabout on Oxford Road close to the A4074 and the old stretch of the B4009 into Benson will be signposted 'Village Only'; we expect that Benson will become a 20mph zone as part of OCC's current programme.

**Reference the social dimension of sustainable development the Revised Plan will:**

- Deliver much-needed new affordable housing

All three allocated sites are providing 40% affordable housing, making a total of 218 affordable units.

- Enhance the ability of local people to enjoy the character, the appearance and the services in the village centre (and elsewhere)

Although still relatively early in Benson's construction programme, we are already seeing considerable progress in this area. A new café and a new barber/hairdressing salon have opened up in the village centre and are both proving very popular and, just up from the village centre, a major extension and refurbishment of the Parish Hall has just been completed.

- Enhance access to recreational facilities

Cala has provided the promised Skatepark and Community Hall and will be completing a nature/fitness trail; CIL money from our allocated developments has been used to build the Faye Elizabeth Play Park and an Outdoor Gym on Sunnyside; allotments, a community orchard and a nature area are included in the legal agreement for the BEN3/4 development, as is the option for all major public open spaces in BEN3/4 and BEN2 to be transferred to Benson Parish Council, together with commuted sums to maintain them for 20 years. In general, we feel that significant progress has already been made towards our vision of a more joined-up, well managed network of public green spaces, from which our community can derive great recreational, health and social benefits.

**Reference the environmental dimension of sustainable development the Revised Plan will:**

- Deliver high quality design in new developments

We have used the Design Statement of our Neighbourhood Plan to ensure that developments are built in a way which comprehends and respects local character, traditions and materials. In the case of new developments, we have secured simplified roofscapes in the landscape; negotiated lower rooflines and a generally more

sympathetic appearance of building height; selected brick and tile mixes jointly with developers to ensure they blend well with local surroundings; stipulated specific native tree species for hedges and realised our preferred planting strategies; and negotiated flexibility in the use of green spaces in the developments. The Design Statement has been less effective in influencing the designs of infill developments and this revised version includes changes to address this.

- Safeguard the character and appearance of both the Benson Conservation Area and the Preston Crowmarsh Conservation Area

Our original Neighbourhood Plan has proved helpful in influencing design issues within these conservation areas, but the strength of the Preston Crowmarsh Conservation Area designation is diminished by lack of a formal appraisal and management plan. We have therefore appointed a consultant to perform an independent Conservation Area Appraisal for Preston Crowmarsh, to run loosely in parallel with work on this revision and inform revised character assessment and design principles. The appraisal has been undertaken and, at the time of writing, the consultant's draft report is with SODC for comment.

- Safeguard ecology and biodiversity assets in the Revised Plan area

It is too early to judge how successful our measures to safeguard ecology and biodiversity will be, but we have made a good start across a number of fronts – we have persuaded developers to install key biodiversity measures in their new developments; established a Green Spaces Working Group reporting to Benson PC to coordinate a wide network of specific green activities in the parish; secured transfer options for a large amount of green spaces from developers to the PC; developed management plans for all our important existing green spaces; and entered into a joint management group with Ewelme to safeguard and enhance our prized chalk stream. This last initiative has resulted recently in a community project funded by the Chilterns Conservation Board.

- Designate Local Green Spaces

We are incorporating protection for proportionate areas of local green space, in anticipation of future designation, on the allocated developments that have been granted planning permission in Benson. The land transfers from developers to Benson PC will be phased over the next 3-4 years. We have also designated important flood meadows north of the Waterfront.

- Maintain the separation between Benson and surrounding settlements

Our original Neighbourhood Plan included policies to help maintain separation and distinctiveness between Benson and neighbouring settlements. However, the threat of coalescence is clearly increasing and we have therefore chosen to place further policy emphasis on this issue, including clarifying separate settlement boundaries for Benson and Preston Crowmarsh and recognising significant gaps between these and other neighbouring settlements.

- Define the new edge of Benson with a landscape buffer

At the time of writing this revised version, a buffer has been secured in legal agreements across all three of our allocated sites. It should be possible, when all the developments are complete, to walk all the way through this buffer from the southwestern end of BEN1 to the eastern edge of BEN3/4 along a continuous path, interrupted only when crossing Hale Road.

- Give new emphasis to the importance of the riverside, to the amenity of residents and visitors, to landscape value and biodiversity and to managing flood risk and climate change impacts

Whereas our original Neighbourhood Plan relied on Design Principles in this respect, this Revised Plan introduces new policies to safeguard a riverside buffer and valued flood meadows.

## The Benson Relief Road

Benson has particular transportation issues. It is located at the junction of the A4074 (Oxford to Reading road) and the B4009 which links the village to the M40 in the east. During the development of the original Neighbourhood Plan, it became clear that significant developments outside Benson (e.g. at Chalgrove Airfield, Berinsfield & Culham) would have significant traffic flow implications for the existing road system in the centre of Benson. These developments, together with the increase in Benson housing numbers and the general increase in housing numbers across the District, made it clear that Benson needs a new transport infrastructure.

The Relief Road was the central piece of this new transport infrastructure for Benson and the 'golden thread' of our original Neighbourhood Plan. Very significant progress has been made towards realising our Relief Road since that plan's adoption. South Oxfordshire's Local Plan 2035 and the Oxfordshire Growth Strategy Board's "OxIS Infrastructure Strategy" document both include Benson's Relief Road and both safeguard its route; all the sections of the road and the 3 roundabouts that are required to link it up are committed and fully funded by the developers in legal agreements between all the parties; construction work has begun on the access roundabout to the David Wilson Homes site (BEN 3/4) on the B4009 near Braze Lane; and Oxfordshire CC has granted permission for its own works to create the Western Link to proceed. Detailed supporting material for the Relief Road is set out in the Plan (See Section 9 and Appendix F - Transport Assessment).

This transport infrastructure incorporates measures to encourage cycling and walking locally which have been designed in, so as to reduce car usage in the village and thereby lessen congestion, local emissions and adverse air quality. We also wish to promote a healthy lifestyle.

## Climate Statement

Since our existing Neighbourhood Plan was made, a much wider public discourse has taken place on the challenges facing us globally, nationally and locally as a result of climate change. Mitigating the impacts and adapting to the changes we face requires action not just by government and businesses - the choices we make as individuals and communities matter too, and we want to go further in this review than we did in our Original Plan.

There is a strong legal and policy context in the form of the Climate Change Act 2008, which was updated in 2019, committing the UK to a 100 percent reduction in carbon emissions or 'net zero' by 2050. In response SODC's Local Plan 2035 has introduced new policies (DES1 and DES 7-10) that set high expectations for making efficient use of resources, promoting sustainable design, encouraging production of renewable and low carbon energy, and reducing carbon. The requirements allow flexibility of means, but set precise and ambitious targets with regard to new development. All development within the Neighbourhood Plan Area will be subject to these policies. SODC has also signed off a Climate Action Plan in Feb 22 which outlines the steps it will take to achieve its aim of becoming carbon neutral within its own operations by 2025, alongside how it will support local efforts to tackle the climate emergency

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/tackling-the-climate-emergency/>

Examples of measures set out in the Climate Action Plan that relate to working with parish councils and Neighbourhood planning teams are:

- Supporting communities with their neighbourhood planning by providing up-to-date advice and guidance on climate measures and actions, encouraging climate considerations to be at the core of neighbourhood plans
- Building relationships with town and parish councils to support and encourage their climate action initiatives
- Working with town and parish councils to support their proposals for projects that reduce carbon emissions locally, providing advice and guidance for their projects to be a success
- Organising quarterly climate focused network meetings for town and parish councils, and voluntary and community organisations

Benson Parish Council has recognised the challenges presented by climate change and wishes to be a part of these local initiatives. We have established a Climate Emergency Working Group to consider action that can be taken in the parish, both directly by the parish council and indirectly, through prompting and supporting the community and individuals to take action. Initial scoping has begun, and this will be used to create a parish plan.

It is widely accepted that climate change and biodiversity decline are twin challenges. Nature-based solutions can help to address both, so we will bring our climate action plan together with our existing 'Benson People and Nature' plan to take advantage of the synergies.

There are a number of headline themes covering actions the Parish Council can take, policies it can set which influence others' behaviour, and measures that foster climate-wise choices by community and individuals. They are a mix of mitigation measures (i.e seeking to reduce emissions) and adaptation measures (i.e steps that address the issues associated with living in a climate characterised by drier, warmer summers and more unpredictable weather patterns with more frequent extreme weather events and increased risk of flash flooding). They require further assessment with the community but include:

- energy efficiency measures and consideration of options for energy generation
- locally reducing pollution (air, water, ground)
- reducing impact on and use of resources
- encouraging active travel (i.e cycling and walking)
- reducing use of plastics.

Much of what needs to be done in Benson lies outside the scope of this Neighbourhood Plan, but several policies in our existing plan have already influenced development in the village in the right way. Examples of this include:

- establishing footpaths and cycleways to encourage active transport
- requiring the use of SuDS to manage surface water, in light of the problems with Benson's sewage works capacity
- requiring new green spaces that are designed to be wildlife rich, with hedges, scrub and meadow, all of which play a carbon sequestration role
- providing a forum for connecting the community with nature, a step known to be important in fostering environmentally-aware personal action.

In this revision, we have taken further steps, setting further climate-aware policies around both mitigation and adaptation. Examples include:

- supporting provision of EV charging points
- requiring developers to demonstrate how they have considered provision of street trees on their developments to provide shade and cooling in increasingly hot summers
- expanding our SuDS policy to require provision of water butts and permeable surfaces within sites

- using Local Green Space designation to safeguard the Flood Meadows beside the River Thames for its beauty, biodiversity and its value for healthy exercise and enjoyment.
- The revised Design Statement also includes a new section on Climate Change measures.

There is considerable interest in opportunities for renewable energy generation as a mitigation measure to reduce emissions, and we have sought external advice on providing for this in the parish. The Parish Council sponsored a project in 2015 to implement a hydroelectric scheme on the River Thames by the weir footbridge, which reached quite an advanced stage, but was abandoned as economically not viable when Government halved the tariffs that could be charged by such community schemes.

Solar and wind schemes face different but equally significant challenges in Benson. The parish is constrained in its ability to allocate land for solar arrays and wind turbines by the requirements of the Ministry of Defence, the proximity of two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the general shortage of suitable sites. SODC's Local Plan 2035 provides policies in the area of Renewables and NP's cannot simply duplicate these, so any policy for renewable energy production in Benson's NP must relate to specific implementations on specific sites. At present there are no obvious candidates, but we will continue to explore all opportunities as they arise.

We are also actively considering opportunities for harnessing Ground Source Heat with landowners in the parish, but this exercise is at a very early stage.



## Foreword

Benson is a rural village in South Oxfordshire located approximately 12 miles from Oxford and 15 miles from Reading. The nearest town is Wallingford, located 3 miles to the south of Benson.

Benson Parish is made up of Benson village, the hamlet of Preston Crowmarsh and the small settlement of Oakley Wood. RAF Benson, a front-line helicopter support base within Joint Helicopter Command, is located on the southeastern edge of the village and is home to Chinook and Puma helicopters, 606 Squadron Royal Auxiliary Air Force and lodger units No 6 Air Experience Flight, Thames Valley Air Ambulance and National Police Air Service (Southeast).

The River Thames and Thames Path lie to the western edge of Benson as does the A4074, the main Oxford to Reading road. Benson Brook (also known as Ewelme Stream) a chalk stream running through the village, discharges into the River Thames.

The Parish affords a good range of facilities including two pubs, three cafes, three takeaway outlets, several shops (Co-op convenience store, Butcher, Chemist, two Hairdressers, a Charity Shop, two gift shops and a Clothes Boutique), a Doctors surgery, Dentist, a petrol station with an instore M&S, service garages, part-time Post Office and Primary School.

There are two Conservation Areas, one of the historic core of Benson extending to Littleworth Road and a second at the southern end of Preston Crowmarsh.

The village has a strong 'sense of place' with a distinctive array of green and blue (water) assets, many clubs and societies and a wide variety of events taking place, all of which makes Benson a highly desirable place to live.

In order to meet the Parish's housing need and to guide sustainable development, in early 2016 Benson Parish Council agreed to undertake a Neighbourhood Plan. A Neighbourhood Development Team (NPDT) was formed to develop the plan, in accordance with Government Guidelines for Neighbourhood Planning, and the resultant plan was passed by a large majority at referendum on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2018 and adopted by SODC on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2018. Neighbourhood Plans need to be kept up to date and, when SODC published its Local Plan 2035 in December 2020, the decision was taken to review the plan and produce this revised version.

## Our Vision

Our vision remains unaltered in this Revised Version. Benson will accommodate the level of growth required to meet our local housing needs, while respecting its history and protecting its rural setting beneath the Chiltern Hills and alongside the River Thames. Our Neighbourhood Plan will encourage a modern, thriving and self-confident village centre, together with the facilities and infrastructure necessary to meet the economic, social and environmental needs of the community. As part of this, the planning process will promote sensitive development that integrates well with the rest of the village and design standards that ensure Benson retains its distinctive character and is well prepared for the future

## 1. Introduction & Background

- 1.1 Benson Parish Council has prepared a Neighbourhood Plan for the area designated by the local planning authority, South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC), under the provisions of the Localism Act 2011 and the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012. The designated area (unchanged in this Revised Version) is shown in Figure 1 below. (The area was designated in 2013 when a Neighbourhood Plan was started but then halted due to a lack of volunteers).



**Figure 1 – Map of Benson Parish Designated Area**

- 1.2 The purpose of the Benson Neighbourhood Plan is to make planning policies that can be used to determine planning applications in the area in the period to 2035. Its policies aim to plan positively for growth of the village but to do so in ways that protect the special character of the Parish.
- 1.3 Neighbourhood Plans provide local communities with the chance to shape the future development of their areas. When Benson's Neighbourhood Plan was approved at

Referendum and adopted by SODC, it became part of the development plan for the area and carries full weight in the determination of planning applications.

- 1.4 Neighbourhood Plans can only employ land use policies for this purpose. Other important issues of interest to the local community that do not directly relate to planning and so cannot be addressed in a Neighbourhood Plan must be pursued through alternative means.
- 1.5 Although there is considerable scope for the local community to decide on its planning policies, Neighbourhood Plans must meet some 'basic conditions'. These are:
- Does the Plan have regard to National Planning Policy and guidance?
  - Is the Plan in general conformity with the strategic policies contained in the development plan?
  - Does the Plan contribute to the achievements of sustainable development?
  - The making of the Plan does not breach, or is otherwise compatible with, EU obligations?
  - Prescribed conditions are met in relation to the Plan and prescribed matters have been complied with.
- 1.6 In addition, the Parish Council must be able to show that it has properly consulted local people and other relevant organisations during the process of making or revising its Neighbourhood Plans and has followed the 2012 Neighbourhood Planning Regulations (as amended).
- 1.7 These requirements are tested by an independent examiner once a Neighbourhood Plan is finalised. If satisfied, the examiner may recommend that this Revised Plan is suitable to be adopted by SODC or he/she may recommend it should go to a referendum of the local electorate. If a simple majority votes for the Plan, then it becomes adopted as formal planning policy for the area.

## The Pre-Submission Plan

- 1.8 Between 9<sup>th</sup> May and 20<sup>th</sup> June 2022, this Revised Version underwent a very similar Pre-Submission consultation process to that employed for the original Plan in March 2017, with Statutory Bodies, Landowners, Developers, local businesses and local residents all invited to respond. The Revised Plan received very strong support for its policies and provisions – 96% of the 141 written responses received from members of the community supported the Plan without reservation. Full details of this consultation

process, and all the other activities undertaken to solicit views and feedback from all the stakeholder groups, are provided in the Consultation Statement document submitted with this Revised Plan.

- 1.9 In relation to the original Benson Neighbourhood Plan 2018-2033, the Parish Council received a Screening Statement from SODC which determined that the Plan required a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in accordance with the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 and European Directive 2001/42/EC. For this Plan Revision 2022-2035, SODC has conducted a further screening exercise and has determined that this Plan Revision does not require a SEA.

## 2. The Neighbourhood Area

- 2.1 Benson is located in the County of Oxfordshire and is approximately 3 miles from Wallingford and 12 miles from Oxford. The population of Benson Parish was 4,754 people at the time of the 2011 census, inclusive of RAF Benson personnel. The 2021 census details for parishes are unlikely to be published before mid-2023, but current estimates put the population now at over 6,150. The number of dwellings in Benson Parish at the time of the original Plan was 1,319, excluding 400 dwellings at RAF Benson that can only be occupied by RAF personnel. This figure has now increased to approximately 1,700.
- 2.2 Benson was once known as Bensington and developed east of the River Thames, which once formed the boundary between British tribes of the Anglo-Saxon era. Fighting at Bensington is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.
- 2.3 Bensington was a Royal manor for over 800 years from the days of Offa the Mercian, who built the first stone church in Benson, to 1628 when it was sold by King Charles I. Prosperity came to Benson with the growth of the stage-coach service from London to Oxford when Benson became an important stop on this route. There are still a number of former coaching inns in the village.
- 2.4 In 1937 work began on the construction of RAF Benson on fields on the outskirts of the village. During World War II it was home to the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit and later the Queen's Flight. It is now a front-line helicopter support base within Joint Helicopter Command and is home to Chinook and Puma helicopters as well as various Lodger units.
- 2.5 Benson is a rural community surrounded by agricultural land, with the exception of RAF Benson which lies to the East of the village. There are limited employment opportunities in the village with the majority of working people commuting to their place of work. This position, however, is changing as many residents have taken to working from home during the Covid pandemic.
- 2.6 Doctors Surgery, a Dentist, a Pharmacy and a petrol station. The Parish Council currently also maintains four play areas, two sets of

allotments and a large recreation ground used for football, general recreation and hosting community events. This list of recreation spaces is set to rise very significantly, as developers of our allocated sites transfer a number of green spaces and recreation amenities, under legal agreement, to Benson Parish Council.

- 2.7 The nearest train station is Cholsey, located approximately 5 miles from Benson, which provides links to Oxford, Reading and London Paddington. The X39/X40 provides a good bus service to Oxford and Reading and the 136 service provides a local service between RAF Benson and Cholsey via Benson and Wallingford.
- 2.8 There are two conservation areas in the Parish. The historic core of Benson extending to Littleworth Road, and another at the southern end of Preston Crowmarsh. There are also 74 listed buildings in Benson. For further detail see Section 7: Conservation and Heritage, and Appendices C Heritage and E Character Assessment.

## 3. Planning Policy Context

- 3.1 The Plan area lies within South Oxfordshire District in the County of Oxfordshire.
- 3.2 The Government's National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (latest version July 2021) provides a framework within which Local and Neighbourhood Plans are produced. The Benson Neighbourhood Plan must demonstrate that it has regard to the provisions of this latest version of the NPPF. The following sections and strategic paragraphs of the NPPF are particularly relevant to the Benson Neighbourhood Plan:
- Supporting a prosperous rural economy (Paragraph 84)
  - Promoting healthy and safe communities (paragraphs 92-93)
  - Open space and recreation (paragraph 98)
  - Promoting sustainable transport (paragraph 104)
  - Achieving well-designed places (paragraph 126)
  - Planning for Climate Change (paragraphs 153-154)
  - Planning and Flood Risk (paragraph 159)
  - Conserving and enhancing the natural environment (paragraph 174)
  - Conserving and enhancing the historic environment (paragraph 189)
  - Neighbourhood Planning (paragraph 28-30)
- 3.3 From December 2020, the development plan for the Parish has been provided by SODC's Local Plan 2035, which replaced the Core Strategy of 2012 ("Core Strategy") and Saved Policies of the previous SODC Local Plan 2011 ("Saved Policies") that were operative at the time of the original Neighbourhood Plan.
- 3.4 Unlike the original Benson Neighbourhood Plan, this Revision has been written to assure conformity solely with the strategic policies of the adopted Local Plan 2035.
- 3.5 The overall planning strategy defined in Local Plan 2035 is to:
- Focus development on Didcot and the Science Vale, including expansion to Didcot and the new Didcot Garden Town
  - Seven strategic allocations, including Culham, Chalgrove and Berinsfield
  - Enhancement and growth of the main towns of Henley, Thame and Wallingford



- Enhancing the roles of the larger villages of the District
- Whilst at the same time maintaining the rural character of the open countryside that makes up the majority of the area. See Figure 2 below.

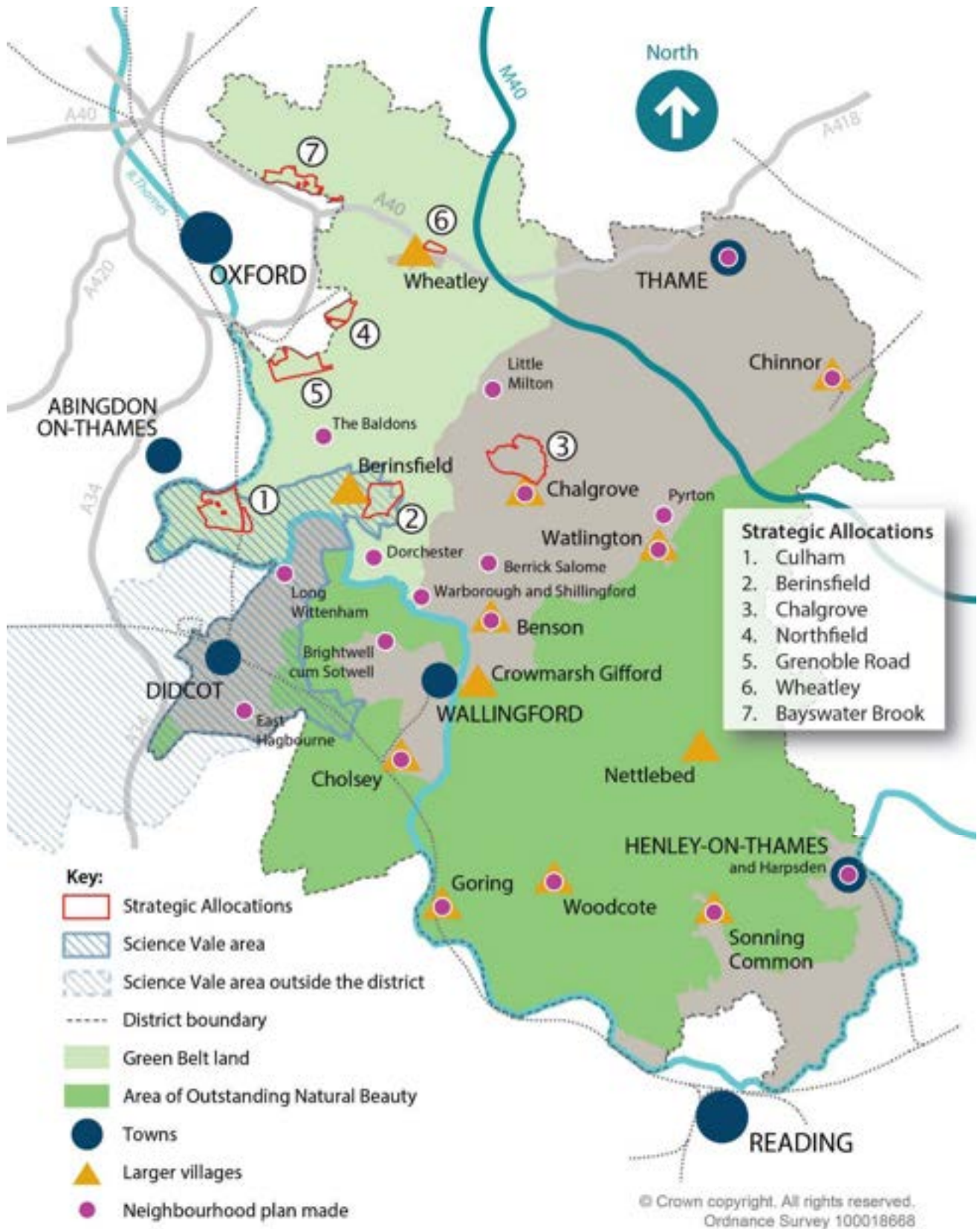


Figure 2 - South Oxfordshire District Map

(Source: SODC Local Plan 2035)

- 3.6 Local Plan 2035 Policy EMP10 (Development in Rural Areas) supports the growth and diversification of rural businesses, including agriculture and tourism, provided it is sustainable and respects the quality of its countryside location. EMP10 also promotes the retention and development of local services and community facilities in villages – shops, meeting places, sports venues, pubs, places of worship etc. The option to work from home is a further important success factor for our community and is supported by the provision of full fibre broadband in Local Plan 2035 INF2 (Electronic Communications). Our Plan Revision therefore includes enhanced policies to encourage appropriate proposals which support the growth of village facilities and services, create new local jobs in the Parish and support all our residents to work from home if they choose.
- 3.7 Policy H9 in the Local Plan 2035 sets out that 40% affordable housing is required on all sites with a net gain of 10 or more dwellings or where the site has an area of 0.5 hectares or more. In the AONB this is required on sites with a net gain of five or more dwellings.
- 3.8 Local Plan 2035 confirms the indicated values of the 2011 Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) – i.e. that Benson would be required to plan for an additional 383 dwellings in the period to 2035 (Core Strategy + 15% growth). In July 2016 SODC's Planning Committee delegated authority to grant outline planning permission to the Head of Planning for 241 dwellings on the BEN1 Phase 2 site opposite Littleworth Road, subject to the completion of a Section 106 agreement and various conditions. Full permission for this development was duly granted in August 2019 and, at the time of this revision, 132 of these houses have been completed. It is expected that the remaining 109 houses will be completed by the end of 2023.
- 3.9 This followed an earlier Appeal hearing which found in favour of the 159 dwellings on the same site at Littleworth Road (BEN1 Phase 1). This figure was then increased to 187 via an amended planning application. At the time of this revision, all these houses have been completed and occupied. Across the whole BEN1 site, 428 dwellings will be in occupation by the end of 2023.

- 3.10 This Revised Plan maintains the allocation policy for the BEN1 Phase 2 site, as not all the work is certain to be completed by the time these revisions are adopted. We wish to ensure that the site delivers all the infrastructure and other planning benefits promised by the development, precisely in accordance with both the Neighbourhood Plan policy and the planning permission. Clearly no further housing on this site beyond the allocated numbers is required, nor would any applications proposing additional houses be supported.
- 3.11 The Benson Neighbourhood Plan Team recognised from the outset that a combination of factors required us to be ambitious – the period covered by the plan was a lengthy one (15 years); significant development was inevitable, given the number of large sites coming forward; Benson clearly had all-round appeal as a nice place to live; and we needed to ensure that the developments that Benson received were accompanied by enough supporting infrastructure to mitigate their adverse impacts. The original Benson Neighbourhood Plan therefore allocated up to 565 dwellings, including the 241 already approved for BEN1 Phase 2. This was a very significant commitment to new residential developments that together could incorporate and fund a wide range of necessary infrastructure, most notably the construction of a Relief Road for Benson. This road, committed in legal agreements for each of the allocated sites (BEN1 Phase 2, BEN2 and BEN3/4) and now being constructed at points towards the eastern and western ends, will provide access to and through all the new developments themselves; reduce traffic on the B4009 passing through the village (and past the school); and bring significant relief to the historic centre of the village as a whole. This approach to the future development of the Plan area is set out in the Land Use Policies section of this document. Policies NP 2-4 set out the detailed policies for the each of the allocated sites and the development principles that apply to each.
- 3.12 The Local Plan 2035 requires the mix of housing types to reflect local circumstances. This Revision maintains its focus on promoting a housing mix that matches the needs of our community.
- 3.13 Local Plan 2035 provides measures to prevent the unnecessary loss of valued community facilities, both buildings (including ‘Assets of Community Value’) and green spaces, footpaths and cycleways. This Revised Plan has confirmed those community

facilities in the Parish that warrant protection from these policies and will be ensuring that the necessary actions to realise and maintain protection are completed.

- 3.14 There is a comprehensive framework of landscape protection policies in Local Plan 2035 (see particularly ENV1-3) that are relevant to the Plan area, given its proximity to the North Wessex Downs AONB, the Chiltern Hills AONB and the River Thames. The framework allows for appropriate development but reinforces the importance of ensuring all development proposals respect the landscape character. These policies have informed site selection and other policies in this Plan.
- 3.15 Local Plan 2035 Policies ENV7 (Listed Buildings) and ENV8 (Conservation Areas) reinforce the importance of proposals having full regard to heritage assets, whether formerly designated or not. The Parish contains a significant number of listed buildings as well as two Conservation Areas. These heritage assets have significantly shaped the Design and other policies of the Benson Neighbourhood Plan. The Benson Neighbourhood Plan defines the special character of the local Conservation Areas and provides design specific guidance that is appropriate to this character.
- 3.16 Local Plan 2035 Policies ENV8 and DES2 stress the need for developers to reflect Neighbourhood Plan character assessments and Conservation Area appraisals in their designs. We have enhanced our heritage and design advice in this revision to take advantage of this and to make the guidance more specific to the Parish and therefore to carry greater weight in decision making.
- 3.17 As a separate exercise to our Plan Revision but recommended by SODC, Benson Parish Council has commissioned an independent consultant to produce a Conservation Area Appraisal report for Preston Crowmarsh. An initial draft report has been produced and is under discussion with SODC. When the Planning Authority is satisfied with the report, it will be submitted to public consultation. Early indications suggest its findings accord well with the principles and policies advanced in this Revised Plan for settlement boundaries, the Riverside and landscape gaps and with the Plan's design guidance.
- 3.18 The Local Plan 2035 contains a variety of policies promoting the multi-functional benefits of green infrastructure assets; requiring their protection and enhancement; and achieving a net gain in biodiversity. Such assets are especially important in defining

the character and functioning of the village and wider Parish. The original Benson Neighbourhood Plan brought forward specific policy proposals to protect and improve existing green infrastructure assets and to create new assets through development proposals. These policy proposals have been maintained and enhanced in this revised version of the plan, and the context updated to reflect recent changes in environmental legislation, specifically the Environment Act 2021.

- 3.19 Since the 2018 Plan was made, the need for mitigation and adaptation in the face of climate change has become much more prominent, including preparing for the net zero future, so this has also been considered in revising the plan.

## 4. Community Views on Planning

- 4.1 The decision to prepare the original Neighbourhood Plan was taken by Benson Parish Council in January 2016 following a public meeting held in the Parish Hall on the 15<sup>th</sup> January 2016. A Steering Group for the Neighbourhood Plan, made up of residents and 3 Parish Councillors, was formed in February 2016.
- 4.2 A consultant, recommended and funded by SODC, was appointed in January 2016. With the assistance of the consultant, the pre-submission version of the Benson Neighbourhood Plan was developed over a period of 12 months, rather than the usual 2 or 3 years.
- 4.3 The Parish Council submitted an application to South Oxfordshire District Council to designate the area covered by the Benson Neighbourhood Plan in the first quarter of 2013. The agreed designated area is the same as the Parish boundary.
- 4.4 A Neighbourhood Plan is a community project and must derive its authority and policies from the community. Communication, consultation and feedback played a major part in the development of our Plan. The consultation process included:
- The Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group meeting at least monthly
  - Minutes of the meetings being posted on the Neighbourhood Plan website
  - Updates were provided in the Benson Bulletin (village magazine) and Neighbourhood Plan Facebook page
  - One to one meetings with land owners and developers
  - Updates to the Parish Council
  - Drop-In sessions for villagers throughout the development of the Plan
  - Attendance at Village Events (e.g. Benson Village Fayre)
  - Regular email updates to villagers
  - Village meetings open to all residents As the Neighbourhood Plan progressed, the frequency of meetings increased in order to gauge community response to site allocations and policies
- 4.5 In May 2016 an independent Housing Needs Survey was commissioned by the Neighbourhood Plan Team and undertaken by Community First Oxfordshire. The Housing Needs Survey allowed respondents to answer questions designed to help

establish priorities for the Plan and allowed them to make general comments. The results were independently collated and made available to the Neighbourhood Plan Team and Parish Council. A total of 595 questionnaires were returned, representing a 42.4% response rate.

- 4.6 In order to inform development of the Plan a traffic study was carried out by the Transport Team of the Neighbourhood Plan with traffic data also being obtained from Oxfordshire County Council Highways. The data was collected from various points within the village and used to assess the impact of developments on the current road infrastructure within the village and known traffic 'pinch points'.
- 4.7 A heritage study was undertaken in collaboration with members of the Bensington Society History Group with results set out in Appendix C. It looks at key areas of local heritage significance and identifies buildings within Benson and Preston Crowmarsh which are not designated as listed buildings but are of local note. The results of this study were also used, along with character assessments carried out by members of the Design Team, to inform the Design Policy and the Design Statement for Benson.
- 4.8 An independent planning consultant, Andrew Ashcroft, recommended by SODC was appointed to help with policy development. In addition, RCOH Ltd was appointed to undertake the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).
- 4.9 The same principles of community consultation have been followed in creating this Revised Plan. On 10<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the decision was taken to update the plan to ensure it remains current and in step with the planning context now provided by SODC's Local Plan 2035 and wider Government policies. Work was initially delayed, due primarily to Covid constraints, but has progressed well since then. During the process of review and revision, we have consulted with the community in the following ways:
- Regular meetings of the Neighbourhood Plan Delivery Team (NPDT) – open to the public and comprising 4 Parish Councillors, plus typically 4 to 6 resident members – initially reviewed which policies in the Original Plan require change, which new policies are required and which other parts of the original plan should be revised; then formalised this into a changes plan and timetable; took advice regularly from SODC as changes were defined; drafting of revision text started in earnest in Oct 2021



- Minutes of all these meetings published on Parish website
- Updates provided in the Benson Bulletin and Parish Council Facebook page
- One to one discussions and meetings with representatives of groups proposing candidate projects for CIL funding
- News updates on Parish Council website
- Monthly updates to the Parish Council
- Email updates to residents who have agreed to be added to Parish Council mail list
- Village Meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2022 open to all residents to brief them on proposed changes in the Revised Plan and to get their feedback – the meeting was attended by approximately 100 people and an online ‘rerun’ on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2022 attracted a further 20 people.
- Revised Plan Formal Pre-Submission Consultation for community, developers, landowners and other stakeholders – this consultation ran for the prescribed 6-week period between 3<sup>rd</sup> March and 14<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

4.10 Full details of all consultation activities for this Revised Plan are provided in the Revised Plan Consultation Statement document, which accompanies this Plan. (The document also provides a link to the Consultation Statement for the Original Neighbourhood Plan adopted in August 2018).

4.11 Both the revised and original versions of the Benson Neighbourhood Plan, plus all supporting evidence, are available on the Benson Parish Council website and Facebook page. To allow for access to those without the Internet, paper copies of this Revised Plan have been made available at the Parish Office and Library.

## 5. Vision, Objectives and Land Use Policies

### Vision

5.1 Benson will accommodate the level of growth required to meet our local housing needs, while conserving and enhancing its heritage and protecting its rural setting beneath the Chiltern Hills and alongside the River Thames. Our Neighbourhood Plan encourages a modern, thriving and self-confident village centre, together with the facilities and infrastructure necessary to meet the economic, social and environmental needs of the community. As part of this, the planning process will promote development that is:

- sustainable - recognising both the enormous benefits and the increasing risks of living alongside a powerful river
- sensitive - integrating well with the rest of the village
- well designed - setting standards that ensure Benson retains its distinctive character and is well prepared for the future.

### Objectives

5.2 In order to achieve the above Vision a number of objectives have been identified as follows:

- Provide sufficient housing to meet local needs
- Cater for growth in a manner that maintains the distinct and separate character of the village
- Cater for growth in a manner that conserves and enhances heritage within the Neighbourhood Plan area
- Cater for growth in a manner which respects Benson's setting in the rural landscape and its close association with the River Thames
- Ensure that Benson has a modern, vibrant village centre
- Ensure there are adequate facilities to serve our growing local population
- Ensure the sustainability of economic activity in the Neighbourhood Plan area
- Safeguard and enhance existing green infrastructure and secure the provision of additional green space connected to the wider countryside
- Ensure that new development is sited, planned and executed in a way that takes account of climate change

- Ensure that new development is sited, planned and executed in a way that takes account of the natural environment
- Ensure that new development contributes towards the free and safe flow of traffic and has a minimum impact on the existing highway infrastructure
- Encourage walking and cycling to get around the village by providing a network of safe pedestrian and cyclist routes, in particular to the centre
- Encourage sustainable modes of transport by all means available

## 6. Land Use Policies

### Introduction

6.1 Prior to development of the Neighbourhood Plan, Phase 1 of site BEN1 at Littleworth Road was approved for development following an Appeal Inquiry (See SODC Planning Application P14/S0673/O). The original outline application was for 159 dwellings however this was subsequently increased to 187 dwellings following the submission of an amended planning application.

### Housing Allocation Policy

6.2 An objective, criteria-based assessment of each of the 10 potential development sites put forward was undertaken as part of the early Neighbourhood Plan development programme. The sites were assessed against the following criteria:

- Landscape Character and setting
- Green Infrastructure
- Heritage
- Core Facilities
- Transport
- Other

The Sites Assessment report can be found at Appendix A. A Map of Sites Assessed is provided in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3 – Map of Sites Assessed for Original Neighbourhood Plan**

- 6.3 Following the assessments, three of these sites (BEN1 Phase 2, BEN2, BEN3/4) were allocated for housing development in this Neighbourhood Plan. At the time of writing this Revision, two of these three allocated sites are under construction and the third has recently received full approval for its Reserved Matters application. These developments will together deliver 559 additional homes. Policy H4 and accompanying text in the Local Plan 2035 clarify that this considerably exceeds the expectations of ‘Core Strategy plus 15%’ for additional housing in larger villages, and that there is no outstanding housing requirement for the Neighbourhood Plan to address in this plan period.
- 6.4 The three allocated sites above, plus BEN1 Phase 1 (approved earlier and now complete at the time of this revised version), will together deliver a Relief Road for Benson to the north of the village, linking the B4009 on the east side directly with the A4074 or B4009 on the west. This is the only feasible route for such a Relief Road, bounded as the village is by RAF Benson on the south and east and by the A4074 and River Thames to the south and west (see the Transport Assessment at Appendix F).

The Relief Road will provide appropriate transport capacity for the new homes, provide connectivity for the allocated sites to the services and facilities in the village and also provide relief to the existing road network within the village, thereby reducing congestion and traffic flow through the congested village centre. The proposals therefore provide sustainable development.

- 6.5 One of the three allocated sites, BEN3/4, has final planning permission for 240 dwellings, including delivery and funding of the Relief Road and construction of two roundabouts along its route. The developer David Wilson Homes (DWH) has started work and expects to complete all aspects of the development by the end of 2024. This will complete all the housing and infrastructure specified for this site in our allocation, without taking up the whole of the site originally allocated. We have therefore updated the allocations map to reflect the actual area covered by the planning consents. The map in Figure 4 below incorporates this change.
- 6.6 Part of the BEN7 site was formerly allocated as a burial ground, but it has not proved possible to acquire just a part of this site and we have therefore removed this allocation from our revised plan. Two further sites were considered for allocation in our original plan, though not with any formal policy outcomes - a small-scale site at The Meer (BEN10) was identified as a possible site for 100% Social Housing and a second site (BEN9 - Materials Store) was identified for a green space nature area with car parking. We have revisited both sites in preparation for this revision and are still hopeful that we may be able to secure them in the future, but given the uncertainties associated with both sites, we have decided not to allocate either site in this Plan Revision.
- 6.7 The remaining sites originally put forward for development are not allocated for housing for the reasons set out in the Site Assessment Report (Appendix A). The selected sites represent sustainable development and further less sustainable sites are not required as our local housing requirements will be met by the allocated sites. They would place additional load on infrastructure without contributing to securing delivery of the Relief Road and would introduce further change before the community has had time to assimilate the very major changes already agreed. Development levels beyond those proposed in this Neighbourhood Plan would represent excessive and unsustainable change to the village in both environmental and social terms.

6.8 The community recognises that the development of the various sites will take place throughout the Plan period. Nevertheless, each housing allocation sets out a requirement that the site's contribution towards the development of the Relief Road is completed during the construction period.

6.9 Three maps are provided immediately below to clarify the requirements of Policies NP1 to NP4 for our allocated sites BEN1 Phase 2, BEN2 and BEN3/4:

- Figure 4 shows the locations of the allocated sites, including the changes to BEN3/4 described above
- Figure 5 illustrates the approximate route of the Relief Road through the allocated sites (as permitted)
- Figure 6 illustrates the approximate location and proportionate scale of the green spaces of the allocated sites (as permitted)



Figure 4 – Map of Allocated Sites (with adjustment to BEN 3/4)



Figure 5 – Route of Relief Road through Allocated Sites



Figure 6 – Benson Indicative Concept Plan



6.10 This Revision Plan includes changes to the clauses of Neighbourhood Plan Policy NP1 that deal with development other than major allocations. These changes reflect Policy STRAT1 and the Housing Policies in SODC's Local Plan 2035, and seek to resolve uncertainty as to what constitutes the built-up area. Boundaries for Benson and Preston Crowmarsh are now provided to clarify the outer edges of the built area of each of the settlements. We have chosen to clarify separate boundaries for the two settlements, because they are very different in terms of historical development, scale, character and function. Benson is a large village with nearly 5,000 inhabitants and considerable commercial and social amenities. Preston Crowmarsh, on the other hand, is a small riverside hamlet of less than 200 inhabitants, strung out along a single narrow road and defined by its rural, riverside setting. Further details and the methodology for determining the settlement boundaries are set out in a new appendix to this revised plan (Appendix M) and maps showing the boundaries are provided in Figure 7 (Benson) and Figure 8 (Preston Crowmarsh) below.



**Figure 7 – Settlement Boundary for Benson**

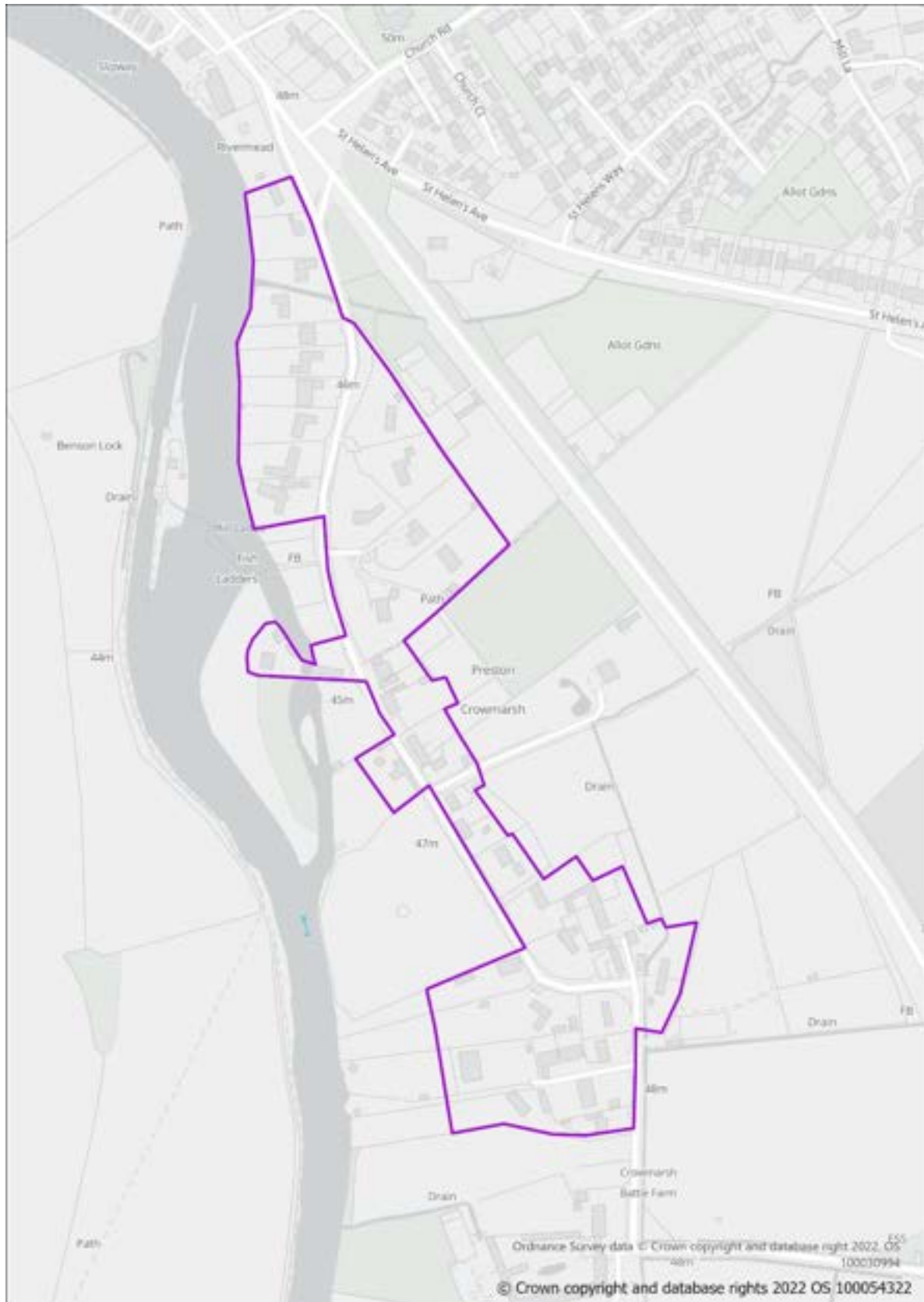


Figure 8 – Settlement Boundary for Preston Crowmarsh

## NP1 - Housing

New residential development in the neighbourhood will be focussed in the three proposed housing allocations (Policies NP2 – NP4) shown on the Map of Allocated Sites in Figure 4. The three large scale developments identified in Policies NP2 – NP4 will be supported where they:

- Together safeguard land for the whole route of a Relief Road to the north of the village, to a specification agreed by OCC Highways, that connects the B4009 at or near Braze Lane in the east to the A4074 at or near Elm Bridge roundabout in the west, as shown in the Benson Indicative Concept Plan at Figure 6 and illustrated in the Route of the Relief Road at Figure 5; and
- Provide for the construction of the Relief Road to a single consistent specification across their site and connecting with neighbouring sites; and
- Contribute proportionally to the financing and connecting of the Relief Road into the B4009 at or near Braze Lane in the east and into the A4074 at or near Elm Bridge roundabout to the west; and
- Conform to Policies NP2-4 and other policies in this Plan.

Development within the settlement boundary for Benson (as defined in Figure 7) will be supported where proposals accord with Local Plan 2035 and with other policies in this Revised Plan, and where they preserve the proportionate provision of green space and landscape buffers required by policies NP2-4, as shown on the Benson Indicative Concept Plan at Figure 6.

Development within the settlement boundary for Preston Crowmarsh (as defined in Figure 8) will be supported where proposals accord with the strategy and policies of Local Plan 2035 for “other villages”, and with other policies in this Revised Plan.

Proposals for development outside the settlement boundaries for Benson and Preston Crowmarsh will only be supported if they are consistent with Local Plan 2035 policies for management of the countryside, and with other policies in the Local Plan 2035 and this Plan Revision.

## Site Allocations

6.11 The Plan proposes the development of three sites throughout the Plan period. These allocations sit at the very heart of the Plan. All of the development sites are fundamentally associated with the construction of the proposed Relief Road.

The site allocations are as follows:

- NP2 Land to north of Littleworth Road (Site BEN1 Phase 2) - Residential development
- NP3 Land off Hale Road (Site BEN2) – Residential development
- NP4 Land to north and east of The Sands (Sites BEN3/4) – Residential development

### Land to the north of Littleworth Road (Site BEN1 Phase 2)

6.12 This parcel of land lies to the immediate north of a parcel of land off Littleworth Road which already has the benefit of planning permission. In effect the site promoted in this Plan represents the second phase of a wider development. The site sits on the western edge of the village adjacent both to Littleworth Road and to Oxford Road. When fully developed, it will provide an important gateway to the village. The western part of the site falls within Flood Zones 2 and 3 and is allocated as multifunctional green space. At the time of this Revision, development of this Phase 2 site is well under way and the earlier Phase 1 is complete.

6.13 The proposed Relief Road for the village will run through this site and link into the A4074 in the vicinity of Elm Bridge roundabout.

6.14 Other policies in this Plan set out the need for the delivery of recreational open space on new residential developments. This principle is applied directly to this site. In addition, this site was identified for the provision of a Community Hall, which has now been completed, a Skate Park (also now complete), Fitness Trail and other green infrastructure including space to meet wildlife needs (as set out in Policy NP23 of this Plan).

6.15 This site is on course to deliver 241 dwellings. Its development in accordance with the principles set out in this policy will contribute much to sustainable development – in particular it will bring an economic dimension through the housing; it will have a social

dimension through its community and open spaces contributions; and its part in delivering a Relief Road will have significant environmental benefits.

- 6.16 The land to the west of the Littleworth Road site is in Flood Zone 2 and 3, and in proposals seeking outline consent for development, the developer proposed the creation of a 5ha nature park/reserve on this section of land. This plan formally allocates that land for this purpose, ensuring that policies NP22 and NP23, which require the creation of new public green spaces and enhancement of biodiversity in the village, are met. Habitat creation on the reserve will be taken forward to achieve the locally specific priorities set out in Benson's People and Nature Strategy. This significant new green space for the village will contain footpaths aimed at encouraging public access/recreational use, including as a fitness trail. It will also connect via margins around the development with the new green buffer proposed to the north on BEN2, and BEN3/4.
- 6.17 There is an opportunity to enhance connectivity by creating a walking/cycling route between the new 5ha nature area/reserve and Warwick Spinney (a Benson community-owned green asset immediately adjacent to the western parish boundary). The Spinney is managed for its wildlife interest (as agreed with the Charities Commission) and the provision of green space for dog walking, but at present there is no safe pedestrian access from the village. We are exploring a new connection to address this shortcoming, but this will require a footbridge over Berrick Stream and Ladybrook and agreement of a permissive path, so this new connection will take time to realise.
- 6.18 This policy identifies a series of obligations on the landowner and/or developer concerned. These obligations reflect the overall strategy of the Plan and its ambition to secure high-quality, sustainable development in Benson. There are two principal obligations. The first is for the developer to construct the relevant section of the Relief Road as part of the development of the site. The second is for the provision of affordable housing to development plan standards.

## **NP2 – Land to North of Littleworth Road (BEN1 Phase2)**

Proposals for the residential development of land off Littleworth Road, shown as BEN1 on the Map of Allocated Sites in Figure 4, will be supported, taking into consideration the Benson Indicative Concept Plan in Figure 6 and subject to delivery of a comprehensive proposal addressing the following criteria:

- Provision of a new road across the full extent of the housing development on this site, to a specification agreed with OCC as adequate to serve as the completed Relief Road) and with an alignment broadly consistent with that illustrated in the Route of Relief Road in Figure 5. This new road must connect at its north-east edge to allocated site BEN2 (covered by Policy NP3). The route of the final western section of the Relief Road linking the western edge of the housing development with the junction on Oxford Road near Elm Bridge roundabout must be safeguarded, as specified in Schedule 6 of the S106 Agreement attached to planning permission P16/S1139/O, regardless of any alternative access routes provided to the site
- Provision of public open spaces at the indicative scale, with recreation and play facilities as required by Policies NP20 and NP22, including Skate Park and Fitness Trail, plus the provision of a Community Hall building with appropriate parking
- A housing mix to meet local needs as informed by the Oxfordshire SHMA 2014 or updated versions identifying housing need and the Community Questionnaire Report (Housing Needs Survey).
- Delivery of 40% of the total housing numbers to be Affordable Housing
- A (5 ha) nature reserve (as proposed in the P16/S1139/O planning application) must be provided on the area falling within Flood Zone 2 and 3. Detailed design of the nature area will reflect the locally specific aims and ambitions of Benson's strategy for People and Nature. The nature area will connect with the green buffer to be created along the edge of development on land off Hale Road (BEN2), and on land to the north and east of The Sands (BEN4)
- Development proposals must incorporate measures that avoid the risk of causing any deterioration in the ecological status of 'Berrick Stream and Ladybrook' (also known as Elm Brook)
- As far as possible, existing hedges and trees should be retained, and where removal is necessary, compensation for the loss of the biodiversity asset must be incorporated into plans.

## Land off Hale Road (BEN2)

- 6.19 This site is located adjacent to Hale Road and to the north of Sunnyside. It is the smallest of the strategic housing allocations proposed in the Plan. It is rectangular in shape and sits to the immediate west of Hale Road. It is one of three sites allocated both to provide new housing in the village to meet strategic housing needs and to provide a Relief Road to the village. The full planning permission for this site (P21/S4993/RM) specifies 78 dwellings and the provision of the Relief Road across the site, connecting with BEN1 Phase2 in the west and with BEN3/4 in the east. Its junction with Hale Road will need to be implemented in accordance with Highway Authority guidance.
- 6.20 The approved plan for this site provides a higher proportion of smaller housing units (2 or 3 bedroom) than the other allocated sites. This aligns well with the Community Questionnaire Report which identified a desire of 33% of current residents to downsize and a need for some bungalow accommodation.
- 6.21 Adequate play space for the size of development will be required, reflecting the need to secure a sustainable development in its own right and the stretched nature of existing facilities in the village. The approved plan includes a Local Area of Play to meet this need.
- 6.22 Residential development should allow for views out to Vale, Chiltern Hills and North Wessex Downs (Wittenham Clumps). It is important that new residential development reflects its position within the wider landscape. This matter is addressed more generally in policy NP28 of this Plan.
- 6.23 We seek retention of the existing hedge to the north of the site for the biodiversity value it provides in its own right. It will also serve to provide an important buffer between the new housing and the open countryside to the immediate north. Policy NP3 proposes that it is reinforced with a landscape buffer incorporating public access to its immediate south within the development site. The approved plan includes provision for such a landscape buffer with footpath incorporated along the whole northern edge of the proposed development.
- 6.24 Development of the site will be expected to respect and safeguard the residential amenities of the properties to the immediate south of the site (in Sunnyside).

6.25 Policy NP3 identifies a series of obligations on the landowner and/or developer concerned. These obligations reflect the overall strategy of the Plan and its ambition to secure high-quality, sustainable development in Benson. There are two principal obligations. The first is for the developer to construct the relevant section of the relief road as part of the development of the site. The second is for the provision of affordable housing to development plan standards.



### **NP3 – Land off Hale Road (BEN2)**

Proposals for residential development of land off Hale Road, shown as BEN2 on the Map of Allocated Sites (Figure 4) will be supported, taking into consideration the Benson Indicative Concept Plan in Figure 6 and subject to delivery of a comprehensive proposal which addresses the following criteria:

- Provision of a Relief Road, to a specification agreed with OCC, connecting land off Littleworth Road (NP2) to land north and east of The Sands (NP4), with alignment broadly consistent with that illustrated in the Route of Relief Road in Figure 5
- The Relief Road within the allocation site should be fully constructed and adopted before occupation of more than 50% of the total houses on the site
- Provision of open public open spaces, including Local Area of Play (LAP)
- The housing mix for this site should predominantly focus on 2 and 3 bedroom units
- Delivery of 40% of the total housing numbers to be Affordable Housing
- Delivery of a layout that safeguards residential amenities of the properties to the immediate south of the site in Sunnyside
- Retention of the existing hedge forming the northern boundary of the site and its consolidation with a 3-metre wide landscape buffer and footpath to its immediate south.

## Land North and East of The Sands (Sites BEN3 / BEN4)

- 6.26 This site is located to the north and east of The Sands. It is one of three sites allocated both to provide new housing in the village to meet strategic housing needs and to provide a Relief Road to the village. The Relief Road provision was central to the planning permission granted. Its junctions with Hale Road and the B4009 are to be implemented in accordance with Highway Authority guidance. The site will yield 240 dwellings.
- 6.27 A green/landscape buffer will need to be provided such that the settlement of Rokemarsh remains distinct and separate from Benson. The buffer must be designed such that it acts as a wildlife corridor and offers a safe route for pedestrians and cyclists, in particular providing improved access to the Local Green Space at Sunnyside.
- 6.28 Residential development should allow for views out to Vale, Chiltern Hills and North Wessex Downs (Wittenham Clumps). It is important that new residential development reflects its position within the wider landscape. This matter is addressed more generally in policy NP28 of this Plan.
- 6.29 A well-used public footpath cuts through the centre of the site. A pedestrian route to Rokemarsh through the site must be maintained, but with enhancements (widening, planting) such that the route performs as a wildlife corridor and as a dual-purpose footpath/cycleway. The policy requires the provision of allotments with parking and vehicle delivery access (at northern edge next to Port Hill). This is an important factor which reflects community feedback. There is a shortage of allotments in the Plan area with uptake consistently running effectively at 100%, with a waiting list in operation.
- 6.30 Adequate play space will also be required on the site to serve the number of dwellings proposed. This reflects both the need to secure a sustainable development in its own right and the stretched nature of existing facilities in the village. The approved application for this site includes a Local Equipped Area for Play (LEAP), allotments and a community orchard to meet this and the previous requirement for allotments.
- 6.31 The development of the site will be expected to respect and safeguard the residential amenities of the properties to the immediate south of the site (in Sands Way).

- 6.32 The existing hedge to the southeast of the site which forms its boundary with The Sands (B4009) is important in its own right. It will also serve to provide an important buffer between the new housing and the open countryside to the immediate south. Policy NP4 proposes that it is reinforced with a landscape buffer to its immediate south within the development site.
- 6.33 This policy identifies a series of obligations on the landowner and/or developer concerned. These obligations reflect the overall strategy of the Plan and its ambition to secure high-quality, sustainable development in Benson. There are two principal obligations. The first is for the developer to construct the relevant section of the relief road as part of the development of the site. The second is for the provision of affordable housing to development plan standards.

## **NP4 – Land to North and East of Sands Way (BEN3/4)**

Proposals for the residential development of land to the north and east of Sands Way, shown as BEN3/4 on the Map of Allocated Sites in Figure 4, will be supported, taking into consideration the Benson Indicative Concept Plan in Figure 6 and subject to the delivery of a comprehensive proposal that addresses the following criteria:

- Provision of a Relief Road across the site, to a specification agreed with OCC, connecting land off Hale Road (NP 3) and the B4009, with alignment broadly consistent with that illustrated in the Route of Relief Road in Figure 5
- The Relief Road should be fully constructed across the combined BEN3/4 site before occupation of more than 50% of the total housing permitted for the combined site
- A housing mix to meet local needs as informed by the Oxfordshire SHMA 2014 or updated versions identifying housing need and the Community Questionnaire Report (Housing Needs Survey) balanced against the need to protect local character and reflect prevailing market conditions
- Delivery of 40% of the total housing numbers to be Affordable Housing
- Provision through the site of a dedicated pedestrian route to Rokemarsh
- Provision of public open spaces, LEAP, allotments plus associated parking as per Policy NP19 and access adjacent to Port Hill Road
- Delivery of a layout that safeguards the residential amenities of the properties to the immediate south of the site in Sands Way
- Retention of the existing hedge forming the southeast boundary of the site and its consolidation with a 3metre wide landscape buffer to its immediate north subject to securing safe access and visibility
- Layout of green space within the site to provide a significant separation between Benson and Rokemarsh.

## The Riverside

- 6.34 The Thames Riverside is particularly distinctive within the Plan Area, and is highly valued as a place of natural beauty and biodiversity, important to the recreation and well-being of residents and visitors alike. The Thames Path National Trail makes it accessible to all on a national as well as a local basis, and it is very well used. The path was heavily walked by residents and visitors during the Covid pandemic, and the number of people using it has remained high as we have emerged from lockdown, clearly reflecting the increased appetite for exercise and the outdoors. The café, marina and holiday lodges/campsite at the Waterfront are popular attractions, encouraging use of and adding to the enjoyment of riverside activities and they contribute significantly to the vibrancy and economy of Benson. In the current context of climate change and severe weather events, the increased risk of flooding, and the value of the water meadows in containing and managing that risk, becomes increasingly important. Generation of hydro-electric power may also become a viable option.
- 6.35 It is part of the continuing Vision of this Plan that Benson will accommodate the growth required to meet local housing needs, while protecting the rural setting of the village alongside the River Thames. It is also one of the Plan's core objectives to respect the close association between the Benson, Preston Crowmarsh and the river. As part of this we have negotiated commitment from OCC to implement a controlled pedestrian and cycle "Toucan" crossing over the A4074, with funding allocated and delivery due late 2022, so as to provide better, safer access between Benson and the Riverside.
- 6.36 For the future, this Revised Plan places more focus on the riverside area and looks to promote its environmental, health, social and economic value in further ways, by:
- Welcoming local policy that supports tourism and leisure, but noting important factors that any development needs to consider
  - Noting the importance of updated national and local policy with regard to climate change and flooding, and the intended role of the Climate Emergency Working Group set up by the Parish Council
  - Providing new character assessment of the Thames Riverside landscape in Appendix E

- Designating the flood meadows north of the holiday lodges as Local Green Space (see Policy NP21)
- Introducing a Riverside Buffer to maintain openness where important to the character of the riverside and to local views.

## Tourism and leisure facilities at the Riverside

6.37 This Revised Plan welcomes the support offered in the Local Plan 2035 to encourage and retain tourism and leisure facilities, and defers to the relevant policies in that Plan and any future replacement. We note, however, that parking was a matter of local concern at the time of the Community Questionnaire in 2016, and remains so. Parking options on the road have been reduced since then by measures to protect the verges along the A4074, and proposals for a “no waiting” zone in Preston Crowmarsh Lane have been trialled. It is important that any future proposals for development at The Waterfront take account of this concern and cater on site for any new parking need.

## Climate Change and flooding along the Riverside



Figure 9 – The River Thames at Benson January 2003 (courtesy of John Dalton & Environment Agency)

- 6.38 Chapter 14 of the NPPF now heightens the emphasis on meeting the challenge of climate change and flooding. This issue is of particular concern to Benson, where much of the riverside area lies within Flood Zones 3 (High Risk) and 2 (Medium Risk). (See the extract from the Environment Agency Flood Map included at Figure 22). Although Zone 3 is identified as “Land having a 1 in 100 or greater annual probability of river flooding”, the photograph in Figure 9 above illustrates just one of a series of high-water events in the recent past. The South Oxfordshire Strategic Flood Risk Assessment of 2019 noted significant flood events affecting Benson in 2003, 2007, 2013-14, and predicted that flood events will become more frequent and more severe. The flood meadows north of the Waterfront lodges/campsite, along with other low-lying riverbanks at the Waterfront and Preston Crowmarsh, perform an essential function in holding flood water, including surface water collecting in the Elm Brook (Ladybrook). This Revised Plan looks to Policy EP4 of the Local Plan 2035 (or future equivalent) to have particular regard to these areas and to ensure that development affecting them is subject to sequential test, and directed away from areas at highest risk.
- 6.39 In terms of measures to mitigate climate change and the potential for hydro-electric power generation, we note that there is outstanding permission for development at Mill Cottage (also known as Crowmarsh Mill) to incorporate turbines for private generation. The possibility of a community scheme was investigated in detail just before the Neighbourhood Plan was first issued, but was not pursued on economic grounds. The Parish Council has now set up a Climate Emergency Working Group, to review and scope a parish plan for such matters. Any proposals, community or private, will need to take account of Policy DES9 of Local Plan 2035 (or future equivalent) and Design Principles for the Riverside and Climate Change in Appendix B.

### Local Green Space at the Riverside

- 6.40 The local amenity space at Rivermead, with its public benches and paddling pool, is already designated as a Local Green Space. Policy NP21 of this Revised Plan goes further in also designating the flood meadows to the north of the campsite. The value of these meadows in containing flood water is noted above, while their biodiversity value is set out in paragraph 11.13 of this Plan and in the revised Audit of Benson’s Green Infrastructure Assets in Appendix K.

## Riverside Buffer

- 6.41 The purpose of this new buffer is to protect a broad bank of primarily green landscape along the Preston Crowmarsh side of the river. This area has been little-developed and is particularly important to views and the experience of the Riverside as seen from both Preston Crowmarsh and the Thames Path National Trail across the river on the west bank. The west bank and the mill island form part of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), while the river and the Preston Crowmarsh bank contribute to the scenic beauty of the AONB as part of its setting.
- 6.42 National policy requires that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in AONBs, and the Local Plan 2035 allows for this with Policy ENV1. This sets similar requirements to conserve, and where possible enhance, the AONB setting, and to protect, and where possible enhance, the landscapes, waterscapes, cultural heritage and user enjoyment of the River Thames, its tributaries and flood plains.
- 6.43 The buffer proposed in this Revised Neighbourhood Plan accords with the above, and looks in particular to protect a broad landscape bank of countryside between the river and the built-up area at Preston Crowmarsh, and between the river and a small cluster of buildings around Crowmarsh Battle Farm. It is proposed in response to recent planning history and clear evidence of increasing threat to the riverside character, and consolidates a requirement in Policy NP28 of the original Plan for proposals to demonstrate conformity with Design Principles for this area. The new policy NP5 does not prejudice extension or ancillary structures as permitted by the General Permitted Development Order, or prohibit other development altogether. It does, however, require that development that requires permission avoids harm to riverside views and maintains the open green character of the buffer area.
- 6.44 The buffer is proposed because of the particular value and vulnerability of the riverside here. The value lies in the beauty and tranquillity of the natural environment that the area provides for residents of Preston Crowmarsh, residents of Benson, all walkers along the Thames Path National Trail, boaters, anglers and other users of the river. It relates to a high-quality experience that includes the drama of water rushing over the weir, the passing of boats through the lock, and the pastoral tranquillity of cattle grazing



on the water meadows of the Wallingford bank. Views from the river crossing take in the surviving structures of the historic mill, the rushes and green banks of the millstream, and the mill island with its mature trees and willows. Views from the path beyond are intermittent and seasonal at first, because of the self-seeded hedge and rushes, but glimpses through, and forays to the water's edge or to angling points, provide very appealing views of thatched cottages and traditional buildings set well back from the river beyond willows, deep green gardens and small fields. The emerging Conservation Area Appraisal for Preston Crowmarsh notes these views and the aesthetic value of the landscape setting, while the South Oxfordshire Landscape Character Assessment suggests that such scenes possess an "arcadian" quality. As views become more open, the depth of undeveloped open greenness between more recent buildings and the river becomes more crucial to the rural character and attractiveness of the scene.

- 6.45 The vulnerability of the area is shown by a recent change in the pattern of development. The breadth of green landscape bank at Preston Crowmarsh derives from the past wariness of the historic settlement to build too close to the river and its flood plain, and has endured for similar reasons. Whole fields have remained undeveloped, and while long gardens have encroached into former countryside to gain access to the riverbank, they are in the main kept as informal strips of grassland that read as part of the landscape. Certain recent redevelopments, however, demonstrate a desire to place houses and large outbuildings closer to the river, where they become more intrusive in the riverside landscape. The edge of the buffer reflects permitted change to the built settlement line, but looks to ensure that future controllable development respects the character and value of this special place.
- 6.46 The following map defines the buffer in the context of the riverside as a whole, with the AONB and Thames Path National Trail included for information, and notes main views of the buffer area. Photographs of some of these views, and further analysis of the landscape character, are included in Appendix E.



Figure 10 – Map of The Riverside

## **NP5 – Riverside Buffer**

Figure 10 identifies the Riverside Buffer area. Proposals for development that requires planning permission in this area should protect and where practicable enhance the physical and visual aspects of the character, quality and appearance of this landscape, including its open green character.

## 7. Conservation and Heritage<sup>1</sup>

- 7.1 This section summarises the principles that drive the following policies. More detailed information regarding the historic character and development of the village is to be found in Appendix E Character Assessment. More detailed information on heritage assets within the Plan Area is to be found in Appendix C: Heritage Study. Appendix C includes a Local List of Non-designated Heritage Assets, compiled for the first issue of this Plan as a “Schedule of Buildings of Local Heritage Note”, but now re-titled in line with Historic England guidance.
- 7.2 Part of the vision for Benson is that development will respect its history. The Benson Neighbourhood Plan Survey indicates that historic buildings are highly valued by the community for their attractive traditional appearance, with distinctive use of red and blue-grey brickwork, flint and chalky stone<sup>2</sup>. There is a very strong interest in local history. This recognises the way in which historic farmhouses and cottages tell of the original agricultural livelihood of the village, and the (former) inns, large houses and shops of the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century tell of prosperity in the coaching era. The history of the village is also evident in the surviving relationships with the fields, the brook and the River Thames and in the evolution of the winding road layout, diverted first around bogs and then around the airfield. The war memorial is an important focus for remembrance ceremonies shared by the village and RAF communities.
- 7.3 Earlier history is preserved in place names and in the records of archaeological discovery, and it is evident that the river gravels were particularly attractive to early settlers. Finds are widespread, but there is particularly significant evidence of a Neolithic cursus and other Prehistoric enclosures below the airfield, and of Prehistoric and Early Saxon settlement at Saxon Close, the latter likely to have been associated with Benson’s known importance as a Saxon royal vill. Investigations carried out in connection with recent applications for development continue to demonstrate the

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix C Heritage Study for details of the four local history publications by The Bensington Society

<sup>2</sup> See: The Benson Neighbourhood Plan Community Questionnaire Report 2016 at Appendix D. Q 26 asked whether there anything that respondents wished to highlight as particularly distinctive or valuable about the existing built environment of Benson. 140 respondents raised 178 themes, of which 139 related to the historic village character and its traditional building materials.

frequent incidence of Prehistoric, Roman, Saxon and medieval settlement within and around the perimeter of the present village.

- 7.4 Consultation<sup>3</sup> makes clear that there is strong support for policies to ensure that such heritage is preserved to allow future understanding and enjoyment, and that development is sensitive to its significance.
- 7.5 The Plan area has 74 listed buildings, and both Benson and Preston Crowmarsh have Conservation Areas. The policies below take account of the statutory obligation to preserve and enhance these assets, as set out in national and local policy. However, when the Original Neighbourhood Plan was made, it noted that the formal designations did not fully capture the historic character of the long linear settlements extending beyond the Conservation Areas, or elaborate on relationships with the fields, river or brook; and it was the view of the Neighbourhood Plan team that these matters should be given greater emphasis. A Conservation Area Appraisal for Preston Crowmarsh has been commissioned by Benson Parish Council and the consultant's draft report is currently with SODC.
- 7.6 Historic England's response to the SEA screening options in May/June 2016 expressed concern regarding the impact of development at Littleworth Road on the character of the Conservation Area and called for suitably detailed and robust policies to identify how development should respond to this key consideration as then set out within paragraph 58 of the NPPF. As previously noted, Phase 1 of this development had already been approved before the Plan was made in 2018, and is now complete.
- 7.7 Many historic buildings along Brook Street, Littleworth Road and elsewhere are not listed. Nevertheless, they are valued as having local interest because of their traditional construction and historic interest. The Local List of Non-designated Heritage Assets set out in Appendix C identifies those buildings considered by the community to merit inclusion on a local heritage list. There is a desire to ensure that the contribution of such buildings is recognised and respected, with significant buildings retained and only appropriate development permitted within their setting.

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<sup>3</sup> Draft policies displayed at "drop-in" sessions held on 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> June 2016 were strongly supported. See account of this session within the Consultation Statement.

- 7.8 No archaeological assets in the plan area are Scheduled Ancient Monuments, and protection relies on desk-based assessment as required by national policy, with field evaluation where required. On the basis of past and emerging evidence it is considered that there is high potential for finds of archaeological significance, and that it is highly likely that field evaluation will be critical in informing both proposals and the determination of applications. Furthermore, Historic England have noted that the public benefit of development may not outweigh the loss of important archaeological remains. This would occur where for instance the development might be accommodated less harmfully on an alternative site, and where there may therefore be a requirement to preserve such remains in-situ. Historic England have recommended that this Plan should include policies that require provision for flexibility and open space that would allow for this eventuality.
- 7.9 Since the first issue of this Plan, the need to mitigate and adapt to climate change is recognised nationally and locally as very much more urgent. Continued use or sensitive re-use of historic buildings will save on carbon-intensive new construction, as will use of traditional local materials and repair methods. Re-use of building materials will also help. This revised Plan therefore sees existing heritage policies as wholly consistent with the climate change agenda, as long as works to adapt historic buildings are carried out with regard to preserving their significant historic character. This matter is currently covered by Policies ENV6 (Historic Environment), DES8 (Promoting Sustainable Design) and DES9 (Renewable Energy) of the Local Plan.

## **NP6 – Conservation and Heritage**

Development should respect the history and heritage of Benson in accordance with national and local policy by:

- Conserving and enhancing the significant special architectural and historic interest of listed buildings and their settings;
- Conserving and enhancing the special interest, character and appearance of the two conservation areas at Benson and Preston Crowmarsh, with regard for their setting and context as parts of longer linear historic settlements, and for their wider relationships with the River Thames, the Ewelme Stream (Benson Brook), and the agricultural landscape. Development that would restore traditional design details and window styles or route cables and services underground, and that accords with other policies in this Plan and the Local Plan, will be supported;
- Conserving and respecting, in proportion to their importance, the significant character and setting of non-designated heritage assets that are of local note for their heritage value. This shall apply to buildings included in the Local List of Non-designated Heritage Assets set out in Appendix C and to buildings identified in any adopted Conservation Area Appraisal as having local interest. Developers should assess the significance of these buildings prior to application, and should provide a public record of any significance that is lost. Demolition of these buildings, or major alterations that would destroy or obscure their historic interest, will not be supported where it is judged that the significance of the building outweighs the scale of harm or loss;
- Where appropriate taking account of the high potential within the Plan area for discoveries of significant archaeological note and ensuring that proposals reflect the outcome of an appropriate range of prior investigations including field evaluation. Any impact on archaeological remains should be mitigated to reflect the significance of those remains, by maximising potential for preservation, recording any loss and including provision for the preservation in situ of important remains, where the loss is not outweighed by the public benefits of the development.

## 8. Design

- 8.1 The Vision underpinning this Plan requires sensitive development that integrates well with the rest of the village, and design standards that ensure that Benson retains its distinctive character. It also looks to respect Benson's rural setting beneath the Chiltern Hills and alongside the River Thames.
- 8.2 The community considers these matters to be important and places high value on Benson's character as a village. There is high regard for the local traditional character of the historic buildings and their distinctive use of local brick, tiles, flint and chalky stone, and for the green spaces, gardens and hedging. The extensive footpath network is also valued. There is a desire that new development should complement the existing surroundings and be of good design, practical and sustainable, whether traditional or modern. There is also an expectation that it should provide off-street parking and that it should allow for a sense of space and greenery. There is also a strong feeling that design should call for the use of sustainable materials and look to save energy<sup>4</sup>.
- 8.3 The South Oxfordshire District Council's Joint Design Guide outlines processes for assessing and responding to the character of the locality and the needs of development. Given the diversity of settlements within the District however, the Guidance does not offer advice on specific locations. This Plan therefore looks to identify particular requirements for Benson by reference to a specific Design Statement set out in Appendix B. The Design Statement is based on assessment of the distinctive qualities of different character areas in and around Benson and Preston Crowmarsh, and on assessment of the way in which Benson and its rural landscape setting are seen in different views. The assessments are set out in Appendix E Character Assessment.

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<sup>4</sup> See the Benson Neighbourhood Plan Community Questionnaire Report 2016 (Appendix D), Q 22-29. These priorities were also strongly supported at the Drop-in sessions held on 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> June 2016.



For this revised Plan the Statement also takes note of the emerging Conservation Area Appraisal for Preston Crowmarsh.

The Character Assessments set out in Appendix E will be relevant to the requirement in Local Plan Policy DES2 to demonstrate that the positive features identified in the assessment have been incorporated into the design of a development.

8.4 Some of the main considerations highlighted in the Assessments and the Design Statement are as follows:

- Benson's rural character as a low-lying village surrounded by and associated with the agricultural landscape;
- The close association with the River Thames and the Ewelme Stream (also known as the Benson Brook);
- The informality of Benson's character deriving from the historic evolution of the irregular street pattern and the changing styles of building, from the mix of housing types and from the relatively spacious layout of 20th century housing;
- The village scale;
- The predominance of two-storey buildings with low ridge height and modest mass;
- The highly distinctive use of local building materials;
- The contribution to the village character made by green spaces, gardens and trees, together with opportunities to enhance biodiversity;
- The lack of off-street parking in the historic core;
- The need to retain and improve on the existing footpath and cycle-way network as a means of connecting the growing population with more accessibility to village facilities and each other.

8.5 In the Design Statement these considerations are reflected in Principles regarding the layout, scale, height and mass of new development, the desirability of complementing existing materials, and the design of green spaces and paths. The Design Policy requires respect for those principles.

8.6 As elsewhere in this Revised Plan, the greater urgency of the response to climate change is noted. This revised Plan strongly supports the aims set out in Local Plan Policy DES1 and the Draft Joint Design Guide that development should be sustainable and resilient to climate change, minimise carbon emissions and mitigate water run-off and flood risks. The Design Statement therefore includes new Design Principles to encourage a holistic approach to mitigating and adapting for climate

change, albeit noting that special consideration will be needed in particular circumstances (e.g. for listed buildings, valued landscapes etc). In policy terms, the Plan notes the ambition of South Oxfordshire District Council to be a local leader in tackling climate change, and defers to Local Plan Policies DES7 (Efficient Use of Resources), DES8 (Promoting Sustainable Design), DES9 (Renewable Energy) and DES10 (Carbon Reduction), or future equivalent policies.

### **NP7 - Design**

All new development should be of a high-quality design that respects the distinctive character of the locality. Proposals should demonstrate that the design responds well to the positive features identified in the relevant Character Assessments in Appendix E of this Plan, and has regard to the Design Principles set out in the Design Statement set out in Appendix B.

## 9. Roads and Transport

9.1 This section of our Revised Plan covers all the Neighbourhood Plan policies relating to Roads and Transport. In doing this, it addresses three of the identified objectives of the Plan, namely:

- To ensure that new development contributes towards the free and safe flow of traffic whilst having a minimum impact on the existing roads system and on parking in the village.
- To ensure that new development encourages sustainable transport and specifically includes adequate walking and cycling routes to access the village centre
- To ensure that there are adequate facilities to serve our growing local population

To address these objectives, this section examines the up-to-date position with Benson's transport infrastructure, incorporating all the progress and changes that have occurred since the original Neighbourhood Plan was adopted. It then assesses the potential impacts of growth on existing and future infrastructure.

### Background

9.2 Benson is located in central south Oxfordshire with good road links to Oxford, Reading, Henley and the M40. Benson has two major roads within the parish, the A4074 and the B4009. The A4074 runs through the parish adjacent to the river and provides direct links with Oxford and Reading, whilst the B4009 cuts through the village and provides a link to Watlington and the M40 to the east.

9.3 Some of the village roads are historic whilst others are more modern. However, Benson has never benefited from a modern relief road. The result is that modern traffic flows have to be accommodated in an environment ill-suited to current circumstances. The provision of a Relief Road for Benson village is a key objective of this plan.

9.4 Alternative and more sustainable forms of transport are limited in Benson. These are covered in detail below, but in summary:

- The village is served by regular bus services to Oxford, Reading and the nearest town of Wallingford.

- Benson has no direct access to the rail network. The nearest stations are in Didcot, Oxford, Cholsey, Henley and Reading.
- The river provides a seasonal tourist service on an infrequent basis. There is only one company running river transport on the Thames through Benson – Salters Steamers. This service is limited and operates three days a week (Monday, Friday & Sunday) May to September. It is plainly designed for leisure use rather than regular transport.
- RAF Benson is an active operational flying airbase with no commercial services.

## Transport Policies

- 9.5 The policies set out in this section of the Plan are designed to ensure that new and existing residents of the Parish are not entirely reliant on the private car, have realistic sustainable transport options, and are provided for in terms of access & highways safety. This is a core pillar of sustainable development.

The following paragraphs deal first with the three main issues affecting Benson (Traffic Flow & Pinch Points; Parking; Road Safety) and then covers our plans for realising sustainability of transport in the near future

## Traffic Pinch Points

- 9.6 The following junctions have been identified as key points in the traffic flow through Benson. A supporting Transport Assessment can be found at Appendix F, data on traffic Pinch Points at Appendix F1 and Traffic Flow information at Appendix F2.

## Castle Square

- 9.7 Traffic from Watlington Road, High Street, Oxford Road and Church Road converge at Castle Square. Parked cars, a severe bend and a very narrow carriageway on the B4009 produce congestion at this point, especially at peak times, when LGV's and large vans are negotiating the junction onto and from the Watlington Road. It is possible that this junction may need a weight restriction in the future. This is a prime route for children accessing the Primary School. The new Relief Road (to be redesignated as the B4009) will provide a bypass route around Benson and through to the A4074, thereby helping to alleviate the congestion at this junction.

## Church Road

9.8 Church Road is an access route for traffic leaving Benson to join the main A4074 and for traffic entering Benson or transiting through the village. This causes severe congestion, especially whenever the church is in use. Traffic into and out of the public library further complicates the traffic flow. The southern end of Church Road has a severe pinch point at the junction with the A4074 where visibility for drivers turning onto the main road can be very limited. This is exacerbated by a number of factors - users of the A4074 bus stops parking on St Helens Avenue; the increasing popularity of the Riverside and the Waterfront Café and the limited parking available there; and school buses picking up and dropping off children.

## A4074 Highway

9.9 This is a busy main road with safety issues, several accidents having occurred at junctions into Preston Crowmarsh. Growth in traffic flow on the A4074 has increased congestion for traffic entering the main carriageway and tailbacks along Church Road and St Helen's Avenue. This situation is also exacerbated by the high incidence of casual parking by users of Riverside, the Church and bus stops. Visibility for traffic exiting the village on to the main road has been improved by fencing off the grass verge to reduce the inconsiderate parking in this area.

## St Helen's Ave

9.10 St Helen's Avenue, constructed in the 1930's as a route around Benson, is wide enough to allow cars to be parked on both sides of the road. As a result, entry/exit can be difficult at the junction with Church Road (see Figure 11 below). There is also a cycleway and footpath crossing point at this junction.



Figure 11 – St Helen's Avenue junction with Church Road

## Watlington Road

9.11 The two points that create hazards for users of Watlington Road are the entry/exit point into Castle Square (already covered above) and the blind bend near its junctions with Chapel Lane and Littleworth Road. The changes to Littleworth Road and Watlington Road junction associated with the new BEN1 Phase 2 development and a consequential sharp rise in traffic has worsened this position.

## Oxford Road

9.12 This road is a bottleneck, with cars permanently parked up, often on pavements, during school term times, obstructing the free flow of traffic. It is particularly hazardous when children are being dropped off or collected for nursery or school. Cars are also regularly parked outside the Three Horseshoes Public House nearby, which adds further to congestion. Parking space generally is limited, causing overspill into adjacent roads such as Horseshoes Lane. (See Figure 12 below).



Figure 12 - Oxford Road Benson

## High Street

- 9.13 Traffic enters from Brook Street, Castle Square, Oxford Road and Church Road. From the Brook Street direction, the road narrows, with road views restricted. This is the main village through road and is badly affected by parked cars and lorries delivering to shops. Pedestrian safety is an issue, with no official crossing point available (See Figure 13 below).



Figure 13 – High Street Benson



## Traffic Flow

9.14 Benson's location is supported by road links to the main district towns as well as to the cities of Oxford and Reading. These road links have to cater for a growing amount of through traffic as well as traffic generated by Benson.

Furthermore, Benson's road structure is historical and not designed to handle high volumes of traffic or large vehicles. Many roads have seen no significant improvement in their lifetime and lots of heavy traffic uses them now out of necessity (e.g 40-foot lorries delivering to the supermarket). Many of the issues raised would be addressed by the creation of a new through route for traffic avoiding the village centre and other pinch points. The Relief Route, now committed in the legal agreements of all our allocated sites and under construction at several points, will provide precisely this through route.

### NP8 – Traffic Flow

Major housing development which complies with the other policies in this Plan will be supported where it:

- Improves existing road links or provides new ones to the main district towns and cities
- Does not detrimentally increase traffic flow conditions at the pinch points described in paras 9.6 to 9.13 above

9.15 When considering future traffic flows, we have also considered planned local infrastructure improvements around Benson and taken them into account where possible. These have been identified as the proposed Park & Ride (P&R) at Sandford and the proposed Relief Road around Watlington.

9.16 The Oxfordshire County Council Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP5) anticipates more vehicle journeys to / from Oxford. The proposed P&R at Sandford (which will replace

the Redbridge P&R) will increase the number of parking places available, but quantifying the precise effect on Benson is not possible at this stage.

- 9.17 The original Neighbourhood Plan highlighted the potential impact on Benson of the strategic developments planned at Culham. Following OCC's recent proposal to improve the link between Culham and the 'Golden Balls' roundabout near Nuneham Courtney, we no longer expect the Culham development to have any significant impact on Benson's roads.
- 9.18 Traffic from Chalgrove intending to use a P&R facility now seems unlikely to route via the B4009 and Benson, as more direct routes are available.
- 9.19 Benson traffic wishing to use the new Sandford P&R facility will almost certainly continue to use the A4074 northbound, as they do currently to go to Redbridge.
- 9.20 The provision of the Relief Road (which will be re-designated as the B4009) through Benson village will improve the traffic flow. The traffic will no longer have to negotiate the narrow roads and junctions as they travel through the village. The Relief Road will also result in safer conditions for pedestrians and cyclists and better air quality in the centre of the village.
- 9.21 The Watlington Neighbourhood Plan has also proposed a Relief Road around their town designed to route traffic away from Watlington town centre. We judge that the main effect of this on Benson is likely to be an increase in car traffic on the B4009, with more drivers choosing to use this route once the congestion through Watlington is removed. However, we understand that the existing 7.5 ton weight limit on the B4009 between Benson and Watlington will remain, so we are not expecting significant increases in HGV traffic through Benson.

## Parking

- 9.22 Benson is a historic village, with old narrow roads, a Conservation Area at its centre and limited central parking as a result.

More recent infill developments and conversions of houses to flats have also contributed to parking issues in the village.

A strategy is therefore needed to alleviate existing problems and avoid making matters worse in the future. This strategy is defined in Appendix G and focusses on:

- Optimising existing parking capacity in the village centre
- Encouraging residents and visitors to walk or cycle to the village centre rather than use their cars, which brings health benefits too
- Discouraging on-street and on-pavement parking and exploring enforcement options if this proves necessary
- Reviewing all options to provide additional parking facilities
- Ensuring future developments always provide adequate on-site parking facilities to cater for residents and visitors

9.23 The Oxford / Reading bus service is well used and causes significant parking issues beside the A4074, as discussed in Paras 9.8 to 9.10 above. As more residents decide to use public transport to avoid city centre parking charges and the Oxford City's ultra-low emission zone, or simply to reduce their own carbon footprint, and as more people come to live in Benson, this problem will inevitably get worse. Benson seems likely to become an unofficial Park & Ride facility for commuters from Benson and the surrounding area heading into Oxford and Reading. The rapid growth in the number of cars parking on the B4009 at Lewknor, in order to use the Oxford Tube bus service to London, provides a graphic example of the sort of problems Benson could face in the years ahead. Clearly any increase of parking beside the A4074 will also have knock-on effects on both Benson's other parking sites and its traffic flows at the critical pinch points described above. Improvements to the Bus Stop facilities (Shelter and Secure Cycle Racks) should encourage residents to cycle/walk rather than using a car.

9.24 The Oxford Park & Ride (P&R) Future Strategy Development 2016, proposed in the Oxford Transport Strategy (OTS), could also add to the problem, as it would see the closure or reduction in the size of Oxford's three existing P&R sites (Redbridge, Seacourt and Pear Tree) and the introduction of new sites at Sandford on the A4074 and Lodge Hill on the A34. There are currently no similar P&R facilities to the North of Reading from the A4074, but this may be just a matter of time.

## Road Safety

- 9.25 The Community Survey in the original Neighbourhood Plan questionnaire indicated that a large proportion (95%) of the respondents had concerns over road related issues. This section of the Plan identifies the safety concerns reported and assesses them in the light of possible future development.
- 9.26 A high proportion (89%) of the respondents to that Community Survey Questionnaire said they had concerns over road safety issues in Benson, specifically in relation to Speeding, Busy Junctions, Heavy Lorries and Pedestrian/Cyclist hazards.
- 9.27 Several specific sites were mentioned by those reporting these safety issues, including Benson High Street, Oxford Road, Castle Square, Watlington Road, Littleworth Road, plus junctions at: Hale Road with the B4009 Watlington Road; Littleworth Road with Oxford Road; Littleworth Road/ Chapel Lane with Watlington Road; and Church Road with the A4074.

## Road Safety - Speeding

- 9.28 A significant number of the respondents on safety concerns commented on the dangers of speeding traffic. Clearly, the perception of high speed is to some degree subjective, but it is clear that speed limits are too high and unsafe in some places and/or at certain times. The original Neighbourhood Plan focussed on reducing speeds along the Watlington Road, Oxford Road, the Benson High Street, and on the A4074.

## Watlington Road

- 9.29 The Watlington Road speed survey (conducted by Glanville Group October 2020) shows this road has an above higher than average speed for the village. The new relief Road will see a reduction of traffic using this road and the introduction of the proposed 20mph zone should help reduce the speed of traffic. This will do much to improve safety of the pedestrian crossing near the tennis courts introduced as part of the BEN1 development.

## High Street

9.30 This road does not have a high average speed where measured (20 mph) nor a high 85% Quartile Speed (25 mph), but it has many other factors which combine to affect safety in the context of the current legal limit. The high numbers of vehicles parked or manoeuvring, the constant turning of vehicles onto and off the road, the need for pedestrians to cross the road without any official crossing point and the likelihood of them doing so in between parked vehicles - all these factors have a bearing on the safety of this area. Furthermore, the incidence of illegally parked vehicles, both on restricted yellow lines and in the immediate vicinity of junctions, compounds this issue.

For the above reasons and because it fits well with National & County Guidelines, our original Neighbourhood Plan suggested a 20mph speed limit for the High Street.

## Oxford Rd

9.31 Traffic Survey Data shows a different picture for Oxford Road alongside Benson CofE School. Average speeds are much higher, and parked/manoeuvring vehicles are a significant issue in the morning drop-off period (8.30 to 9.00am) and again in the afternoon at collection time (3.30 to 4.00pm). During these times, the road becomes essentially a single lane road with relatively high speeds. Future development in Benson is likely to exacerbate the problem, with more children and more parked cars.

9.32 It is common to find a part time lower speed limit operating outside schools, and indeed OCC Highways have endorsed a 20mph speed limit and 7.5T weight limit for the new Littleworth Road on the other side of the school. It was therefore suggested in our original Neighbourhood Plan that consideration be given to lowering the speed limit on Oxford Road in the vicinity of the school to 20mph whenever the school is active.

9.33 OCC has recently introduced a policy of reducing 30mph speed limits to 20mph in areas that meet certain eligibility criteria. Of these criteria, most apply well to Benson:

- Evidence of traffic incidents or potential dangers
- Visible homes, shops and businesses
- A school or a school route
- Cycling routes

9.34 OCC's aim for this initiative is to deliver 20mph zones to villages and towns to:

- Make streets safer
- Encourage residents to walk or cycle
- Reduce noise and pollution

9.35 The Neighbourhood Plan Team has been in discussion with OCC Highways Department and their consultants, Glanville Group, for the last two years about making Benson Village, as a whole, a 20mph Zone. Speed surveys have been carried out by Glanville at a number of the points recommended by the Highways Representative; a number of traffic calming measures have been suggested by Glanville and Benson Parish Council has now submitted an application to OCC to make Benson village a 20mph Zone. A recent online poll by the Parish Council shows that 85% of parishioners are in favour of this scheme. This change will require a Traffic Regulation Order to be raised by OCC, which will be published for public consultation.

Figure 14 below shows the Benson roads covered by the proposed 20mph Zone.

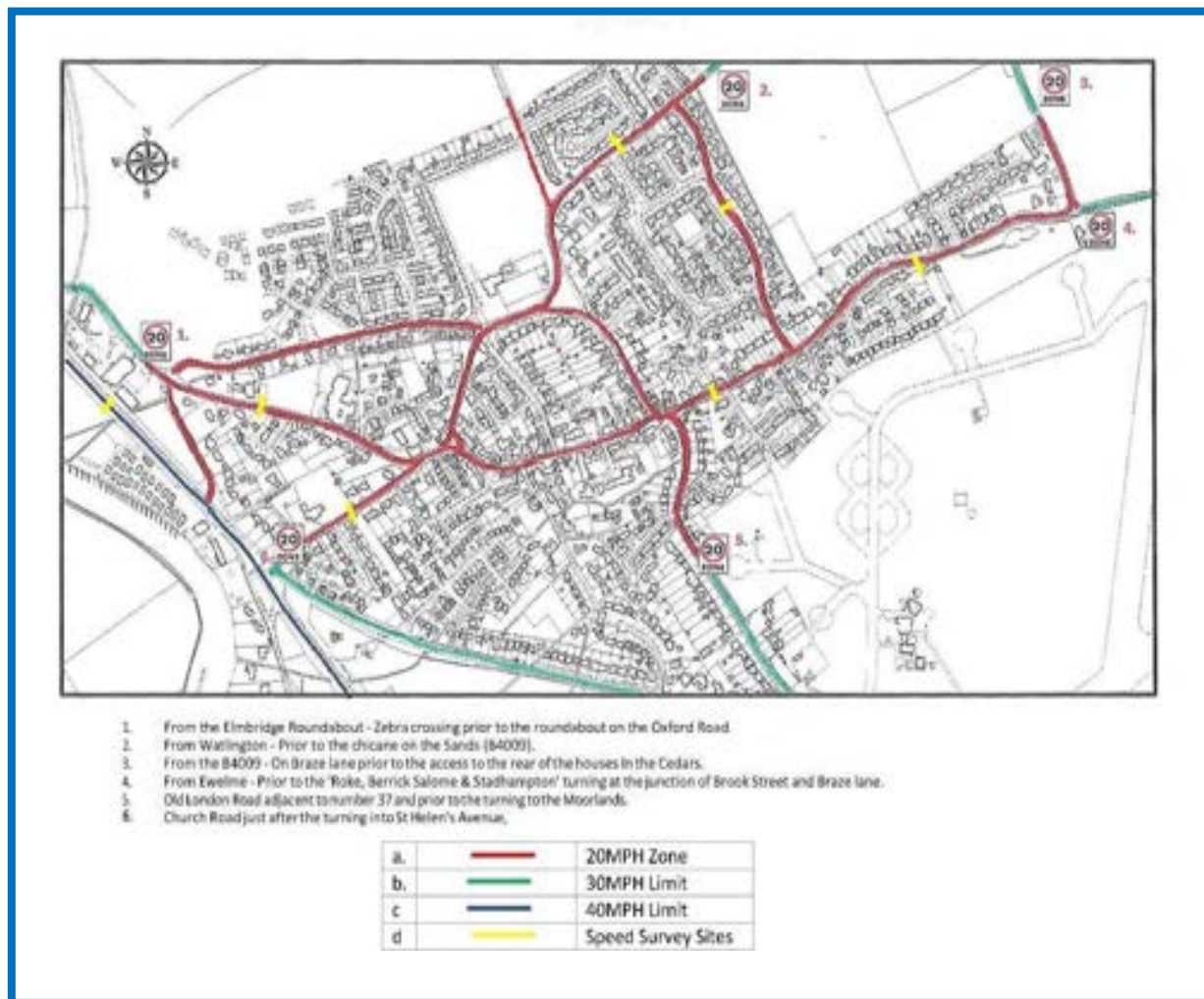


Figure 14 – Proposed Benson 20mph Zone

## A4074

9.36 The A4074 is a very busy road at peak traffic times, with a 40mph speed limit and a speed camera installed for eastbound traffic between the BP garage and the Church Road junction. Most of the traffic conforms to the speed limit, but excessive speeding occurs regularly. The introduction of the recently approved Toucan Crossing will make the crossing of the A4074 safer for pedestrians seeking to cross this busy highway to access Preston Crowmarsh, the riverside for recreation and the main Oxford bus service. This Toucan Crossing should be in place by end 2022.

## Road Safety – Busy Junctions

9.37 At the sites identified by survey respondents, the most common threat to road safety would seem to be in crossing highways with a high traffic count at certain times of day. The junctions at Church Road/A4074, along the Watlington Rd and in Castle Square all fall into this category.

### Watlington Road

9.38 A new crossing installed in 2017 on the Watlington Road near the tennis courts, as part of the BEN1 Phase 1 development, was criticised for its lack of any advance warning in either direction. This position has now been rectified by advance warning signs in both directions, but limited visibility remains an issue, encouraging traffic to drive faster than is safe, as they approach the crossing.

### Castle Square

9.39 This is a very busy junction at peak traffic times, and also another important point on the walk to school for parents and children. However, the problems of restricted visibility associated with all the roads in the square make safe crossing points very difficult to achieve.

The new Relief Road will help alleviate this problem as it will be redesignated as the B4009 and traffic will be routed along it away from the village centre.

### A4074 Junction

9.40 The junction of Church Rd/A4074 is a very busy junction in peak traffic times, and the A4074 has a higher speed limit (40mph). Pedestrians seek to cross the busy highway here to gain access to Preston Crowmarsh, the riverside for recreation or the main Oxford bus service.

9.41 Following public consultation Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) has approved the installation of a controlled 'Toucan' crossing. Funding is in place for this crossing and a detailed plan is to be drawn up by OCC Highways. Once in place, this will provide a safe crossing point for pedestrians looking to cross the busy highway, in order to



access Preston Crowmarsh, the riverside for recreation or the main Oxford bus service. The crossing will also result in traffic slowing as it approaches the junction.

## Road Safety - Heavy Lorries

9.42 Benson is subjected to a large number of heavy goods vehicles passing through, due in part to there being several major operators in the Parish. These vehicles will be re-routed away from the village centre and along the Relief Road when it comes into operation.

## Specific Issues – Pedestrians/Cycles

9.43 The issues raised in this space by the Community Survey centred on dangerously narrow footways, lack of crossing points and poor visibility for pedestrians; and a lack of safe, convenient cycle routes around the central area of the village for cyclists to use. We believe the combined effect of the Relief Road, the 20mph zone (with its associated calming measures) and the specific footways and cycleways committed by the developers should greatly improve conditions for pedestrians and cyclists alike.

### **NP9 – Pedestrians and Cyclists**

Major housing developments should provide on-site footways & pedestrian safety measures to facilitate pedestrian access to the village centre, to community facilities and to surrounding countryside and settlements. These footways should incorporate and link with existing footway networks and should be in accordance with principles H1-H6 of the Design Guidance.

New development should provide on-site cycle paths both in general, and specifically to facilitate access to the village centre, to community facilities, and to surrounding countryside and settlements. They should also contribute where relevant to improvements to existing cycle facilities.

## Sustainable Transport

- 9.44 The principle of sustainability is well established in national & local policies including the NPPF (Section 9 Paras 104-113) and SODC Local Plan 2035 (TRANS 2). Of particular importance are strategies that secure the provision of services that people can access easily without resorting to private car travel, and the provision of infrastructure which encourages and supports the use of sustainable transport modes including walking/cycling. Recently published guidance from Public Health England on air quality emphasises the importance of planning development that actively encourages walking and cycling. The guidance also encourages measures that provide separated routes for pedestrians and cyclists.
- 9.45 Pedestrians currently use a network of public footpaths that are a legacy from the past and are not necessarily relevant to today's needs. Whilst the number of paths in the outskirts of the village are generally adequate, this is not the case in the village centre, where footpaths are often non-existent or inadequate. It is vital that all future development includes adequate provision for walkers and cyclists from the outset.
- 9.46 Some of Benson's footpaths are not appealing to users because they are narrow and enclosed. However, other more open and attractive examples add greatly to the distinctive rural character of the village and provide valuable short cuts. They also give access to the surrounding countryside and help to preserve Benson's historic links with adjacent settlements. Following detailed discussions with the Neighbourhood Plan team, all the new developments (BEN1,2 & 3/4) in Benson now include new paths linking into the village and out to the green spaces newly created. A map showing these paths is provided in Appendix H.
- 9.47 Many of the roads in Benson village pre-date the motor car and, as a result, have no footways or only very narrow ones. Hale Road, part of Watlington Road and part of Brook Street have no footways at all. The footpaths on Watlington Road down to Castle Square, Castle Square itself, Crown Square and parts of Oxford Road and Church Road are extremely narrow (just 0.6 metres in some places), regularly obstructed by hedges and hazardous to use alongside fast-moving traffic. This is a long way short of what is expected by current standards.

- 9.48 As new developments are planned, it is important that inter-connectivity is prioritised as a design consideration. New paths need to connect both to the existing village centre wherever possible, but also to one another. They should take account of the existing paths and users' desire lines as much as possible to encourage pedestrian activity. They must also take into account the need to access public transport.
- 9.49 Circular routes, taking in valuable views and routed so as to allow users to enjoy areas rich in wildlife are particularly popular and encourage understanding and appreciation of the local environment. Other measures to address this objective are presented in Chapter 11 of this Plan (Environmental Policies).
- 9.50 Looking beyond the main settlements of Benson and Preston Crowmarsh to RAF Benson, we have received representations that there is a pressing need to address the broken public footpath route to the south of the RAF Benson airfield, in order to (i) provide for safer and shorter walking and cycling routes connecting the station with Wallingford and (ii) provide a more direct connection with Oxford to Reading bus services. The only current walking route measures 2.4 miles from the Station gates, and there is an opportunity to halve that by restoring a footpath severed in the late 1950s. The current situation is thought to be having a significant impact on RAF Benson's ability to recruit and retain civilian members of staff in posts that require evening and weekend working. We will work with OCC, the statutory body for public rights of way, and relevant landowners to consider how this might be achieved.

## Accessibility

- 9.51 Benson still has several sites where dropped kerbs are not provided, which creates difficulties for anyone with mobility issues. These issues will be improved by the introduction of the planned 20mph Zone, as it will include raised platforms providing a suitable alternative to dropped kerbs.
- 9.52 Current facilities for cyclists in Benson are not adequate. Many of Benson's roads are narrow and busy, with limited visibility at many points, which make them unsafe to cycle along. Installing cycle lanes on these roads is difficult, as it would seriously affect road capacity. There is currently only one officially designated cycle path in the parish – and that is a shared use path with pedestrians, which skirts the village alongside the A4074. The new Highway Code, with its prioritisation of cyclist safety, may help to make these roads a bit safer for cyclists to use.

- 9.53 Benson's new Relief Road has been designed with a 2-metre footway and a separate 1.5-metre cycleway and this should set the standard for new cycleways in all significant future development proposals. Cycle facilities such as storage and security points will also be expected, as will upgrades to existing cycle infrastructure, where applicable.
- 9.54 Other parts of this Plan comment on the need to encourage more people to walk or cycle rather than use their cars. In practical terms, this will require a managed programme combining improvement of physical facilities; promotion of the health benefits and the enjoyment that walking and cycling can bring; and the reassurance to remove concerns over safety. We expect that our climate action plan will consider how to promote and support active travel.
- 9.55 Paths also need to look attractive in order to encourage use. They should not make users feel threatened by enclosed surroundings, but should be sited so as to afford natural surveillance within developments and they should be regularly and properly maintained over the long term. Space for biodiversity should be designed in from the start, recognising the role that footpaths need to play as corridors for wildlife as well as for people.

## Public Transport

- 9.56 Public transport is important to the future of the Plan area. This section assesses distances to our existing transport stops, and options to reduce walking distances in the future.

Benson is served by the Oxford Bus Company's 'River Rapids' X39 and X40 services and by Thames Travel's 136 Service. Thames Travel also provides the X38 service which runs from Wallingford to Henley.

- 9.57 Benson benefits from being located on the main route between the two cities of Reading and Oxford and as a result enjoys a regular and frequent service in either direction. The service is split between the X39 that calls in at Wallingford and the X40 that calls in at both Wallingford and Woodcote. The most useful stop for Benson residents is at the Benson Marina, with a further stop at the end of Benson Lane, both on the A4074.

- 9.58 Thames Travel also runs a regular service between Cholsey, Wallingford and RAF Benson - the 136 service. This service runs through the centre of Benson with stops at Church Road, College Farm, Blacklands Road and The Cedars before heading off to Ewelme and the RAF Base. This is a much-used service as it delivers passengers to Wallingford, which serves as a hub allowing onward transfers to Reading, Oxford, Didcot and Abingdon. It does not however run after 6.30pm or on a Sunday. So public transport support for the community living at RAF Benson is not as good as it is in Benson Village, hence the emphasis in NP10 below on solutions to improve access to the regular bus services on the A4074. The company also runs the X38 daytime service between Wallingford and Henley-on-Thames, via Wallingford, Nuffield, Nettlebed and Henley railway station to the Henley superstore.
- 9.59 In summary, Benson is currently quite well served for public transport. However, much needs to be done to encourage residents to use the bus more. A recent limited community user survey showed the service to Wallingford was well used at certain times, especially by older members of the community taking advantage of bus pass travel and by younger people. However, the survey also suggested that none of these services run at anywhere near peak capacity.

## NP10 – Access to Public Transport

Major housing developments will be required to:

- Provide on-site footways to encourage access to public transport routes.
- Contribute towards measures designed to encourage access to strategic bus services.
- Set out in their Travel Plans measures to invest in existing and new bus services to enable commuters, school children and other users to access Oxford, Reading and Wallingford.

## Sustainable Travel

9.60 There is a local view that adequate provision is not being made for future sustainable modes of transport, particularly electric vehicles. As with many other parishes, securing enough charging points in the village to support residents wishing to reduce their carbon footprint has become a priority for Benson. SODC's Local Development Plan 2035 Policy TRANS 5 - Consideration of Development Proposals states that "Proposals for all types of development will, where appropriate ...be designed to enable charging of plug-in and other low emission vehicles in safe, accessible and convenient locations .... and ... provide facilities to support the take up of electric and/or low emission vehicles."

9.61 This Revised Neighbourhood Plan seeks to support this by supporting the provision and installation of charging points in all new residential developments in the village. Policy NP11 also takes account of the recent government decision to phase out the production of fossil fuel cars and vans by 2030 and all heavy goods vehicles by 2040. Looking beyond the Neighbourhood Plan, Benson's climate action plan will consider other measures such as catering for EV charging in public places.

## **NP11 – Electric Vehicle Charging**

Proposals for new residential developments which include the facility for dedicated EV charging points will be supported, subject to their compliance with other policies in this Plan.

## 10. Community Facilities' Policies

10.1 This section addresses three of our identified objectives, namely:

- Ensure Benson has a modern, vibrant village centre.
- Ensure there are adequate facilities to serve our growing local population.
- Ensure sustainability of economic activity in the Neighbourhood Plan area.

10.2 Benson is fortunate in having an extensive range of local infrastructure facilities that help make the village both an attractive place to live and one that supports its residents. The key facilities that currently support the Benson community are shown in the simple table below. The locations of these facilities are shown in Figure 17 (Village Centre Services) and Figure 18 (Wider Community Services). In addition to these facilities, the allotments and outdoor play facilities are an important part of the community infrastructure of Benson. These are described in this chapter, but the benefits are also considered in the Green Infrastructure chapter of this Plan.

LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURE FACILITIES (2021)			
1 RETAIL OUTLETS	2 HEALTH SERVICES	3 COMMUNITY MEETING PLACES	4 SERVICE PROVIDERS
Co-operative convenience store	Millstream GP Surgery	Parish Church & Canons' Room multi-purpose hall	Outreach post office
Butcher	Dentist	Parish Hall	2 Pubs
Ladies fashion	Veterinary surgery	Youth hall	2 Hairdressers / Barber
Cards, stationery & gift shop	Osteopath	Scout hut	2 garage/car repair facilities
Pharmacy and chemist	Day Centre for elderly	Library	Builder
M&S convenience store (at Elm Bridge roundabout site)	Care Home (at Elm Bridge roundabout)	Community Hall in BEN1	3 take-away food outlets
Gifts and Home decor			Café in village centre
Charity shop			Café beside River Thames
Fishing tackle & outdoor clothing shop (at Waterfront)			Café at Battle Barns
			Fuel station





Figures 15 & 16 – Retail and service facilities in Village Centre - note the number of parked cars



Figure 17 - Village Centre Services

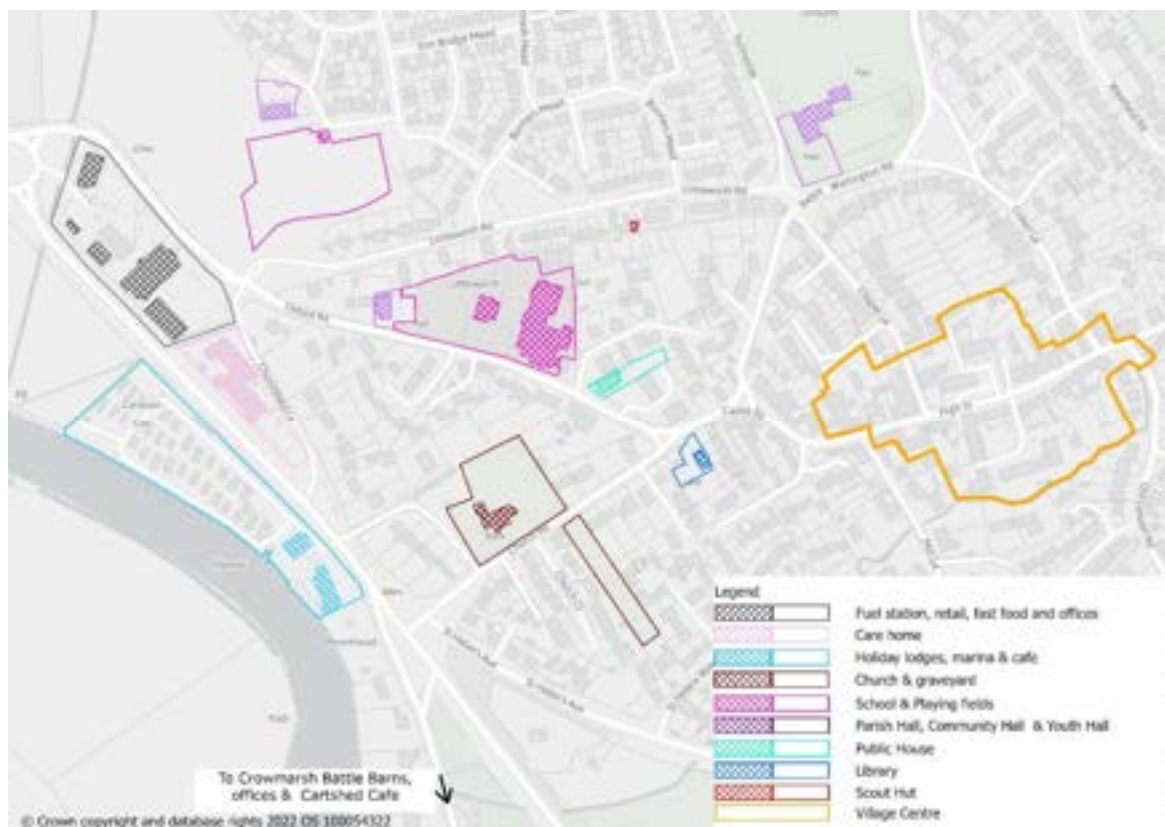


Figure 18 - Wider Community Services

- 10.3 With the exception of the post office (which is located within the Parish Hall, some 300 metres from the High Street) and the new Community Hall (which is located on the new BEN1 development), all the above facilities are located either in or close to the village centre, the Elm Bridge roundabout, the Riverside, or the Battle Farm commercial estate. They are important assets that are used by Benson residents, staff and families from RAF Benson, residents of the smaller outlying villages and visitors and tourists using the river.
- 10.4 However, because of the compact nature of the village centre, parking can be difficult, especially at peak times such as lunch time and early evenings (see Para 9.22 above and Appendix G).
- 10.5 On the outskirts of the village at the Elm Bridge roundabout site there is a fuel station with attached convenience store, a fast-food outlet, a commercial office facility and a care home. The complex adjacent to the River Thames has a café/restaurant, a fishing tackle shop and a boat hire and holiday chalet facility. The commercial complex at Battle Farm in Preston Crowmarsh has a café and commercial office facilities.
- 10.6 More extensive retail and other service facilities, for example banks, solicitors, opticians etc. are located in surrounding towns (Wallingford, Abingdon and Didcot, as well as Oxford and Reading somewhat further away) that are accessible by car or via current bus services.
- 10.7 A community survey was undertaken in Benson in May 2016 as part of the preparation for the Benson Neighbourhood Plan. The village survey showed that the retail facilities were well supported with 80% of 584 respondents using the local supermarket/convenience stores either daily or several times a week and 93% using the pharmacy. At least once a week 63% of respondents used the greengrocers (subsequently closed) and butchers and 71% used the outreach post office. Village cafes/restaurants were used at least once a week by 19% of respondents and over 70% of respondents used them sometimes. Pubs were used at least once or twice a month by 37% of respondents. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the recent additions to the High Street, including the new café and the Barber are very well patronised.

- 10.8 The Millstream Surgery was used by 89.5% of 579 respondents, the dentist by 48%, the veterinary surgery by 42% and the various garages and fuel station by 87% of respondents. These figures indicate that the existing retail and services facilities in the village are all well supported and contribute to a vibrant and economically dynamic village centre.
- 10.9 The village has a well-supported Parish Church and a recently upgraded, well-appointed Parish Hall, with sports changing rooms that are well used by a number of sports clubs, groups and societies. A new Community Hall has recently been built on the BEN1 development. There is also a Youth Hall and a Scout Hut within the village, though both of these buildings are outdated and need new investment to enable them to be upgraded or relocated. The library is well-used and the Millstream Centre caters for the elderly residents of Benson and neighbouring villages.
- 10.10 Benson residents welcome and make good use of the range of facilities that are available to them within the village and are keen that they are both continued and where necessary enhanced. However, given the significant planned growth of the village population, there is a pressing need to improve/increase facilities particularly in respect of the primary school, post office, library, Millstream Centre, Mill Stream Surgery, dentist, Youth Hall and Scout Hut.
- 10.11 Large scale development requires improved community facilities in many areas of Benson. Some of these facilities will not directly be associated with particular developments. A number of such improvements have been identified and listed for action in Appendix I – Community Facilities. Implementation of these will be heavily dependent on identifying suitable funding sources and some projects may be beyond the remit of the Parish Council and require other public bodies to fulfil them.

## **NP12 – Community Facilities**

Proposals which assist with the delivery of new or extended community facilities or infrastructure improvements will be supported. Delivery of community facilities listed in Appendix I (Community Facilities) will be particularly supported.

## Education

10.12 The provision of education for children in Benson Parish is important to its community function and sustainability.

10.13 Pre-school and Primary School provision is offered by Benson Church of England School and RAF Benson School. Scamps provides Nursery and before/after school care services. Within 5 miles of Benson there are approximately 20 nurseries, along with 28 registered childminders ([fisd.oxfordshire.gov.uk](https://fisd.oxfordshire.gov.uk)).

10.14 General school provision and the allocation of school places is the responsibility of the County Council. There are two state primary schools within Benson Parish – Benson CofE School and the RAF Benson School. There are another seven Primary Schools within three miles of Benson. In 2021, the capacities of the two schools within the Parish were:

	Physical Capacity	Current Teaching Capacity	On Roll
Benson CofE	315	255	243
RAF Benson	240	240	177
Combined	555	501	420

10.15 Benson CofE School was extended in 2020 on the old school playing fields, whilst a new playing field and facilities for formal games and PE off site were provided on Littleworth Road BEN1 development across the road from the school. The school was expanded to a physical capacity of 315 and is gradually growing to this size as the local population increases.

10.16 In 2021, Year 2, Year 1 and Reception expanded to a teaching capacity of 45 pupils each whilst the remainder of the school remains at a capacity of 30. These year groups of 45 pupils will go up through the school so by the intake for academic year 2025/26, the full capacity of 315 pupils will be reached. Noting the likely need to expand the school further, we have also noted the importance of retaining sufficient green space directly adjacent to the school to allow the children to play during break times.

10.17 RAF Benson School is in the catchment area of Watlington, and many pupils go to Icknield Community College. Benson CofE School is in the Wallingford catchment area and is a Partner school of Wallingford School, hence most pupils go there for secondary schooling.

10.18 In 2021 Wallingford School was operating close to its capacity with a Pupil Allocation Number (PAN) of 216 in years 7 to 9, 195 in year 10 and 211 in year 11.

Current enrolment (2021) is made up as follows:

Year	Yr7	Yr8	Yr9	Yr10	Yr11	Yr12	Yr13	Total
Actual	208	215	228	196	206	109	143	1305
PAN	216	216	216	195	211	268		1322

10.19 As part of the expansion of the school the PAN for Year 7 will be increasing to 242 from September 2022 with capacity growing to 1452 on completion of the capital project, which is planned for the academic year 2026 – 2027.

10.20 Icknield Community College is a Years 7-11 school, with no sixth form currently, and an admission number at present of 170 pupils per year with a total PAN of 758. OCC has advised that the current PAN for year 7 could increase beyond the current figure of 170 from September 2024 They also advised the possibility of building a new school completely if the possible substantial new housing development in the area goes ahead.

10.21 The school has been expanding in the first instance using temporary accommodation and now has physical capacity of 850 places. 2021 figures for pupils are:

Year	Yr7	Yr8	Yr9	Yr10	Yr11	Total
2021	160	141	151	139	163	754
PAN	170	140	140	140	168	758

10.22 The situation regarding secondary education is clearly difficult to predict. To take Icknield Community College as an example, potential housing growth in Chinnor, Chalgrove, Watlington and Stadhampton means that the future demand for places will undoubtedly be high but the detail is unknown, and the future is therefore uncertain.

10.23 As there is no secondary school within Benson, transporting children to school is a necessity. The challenge is to find the safest and most sustainable practical method to transport the children to a school with the capacity to accept them.

10.24 The exact number of children resident in Benson requiring a school place will depend on the mix, numbers and timings of dwellings built. Previous figures from OCC suggest the following projected requirement:

Dwellings	Primary Places Needed	Secondary Places Needed
175	35	25
240	65	50
400	100	75
600	150	105
800	200	150

- 10.25 It has been confirmed by OCC that there is a limit to expansion of capability of Benson CofE School, and that the school can only support a maximum of 750 to 800 new houses. This figure must take account of infill houses (approx 25) as well as the large developments allocated/approved for sites BEN1 (approx 428), BEN2 (approx 80) and BEN3/4 (approx 240).
- 10.26 With the existing housing allocations, the school may not be able to manage with the anticipated increase in pupil numbers. There is considerable concern already that there will not be sufficient places for all future children in the village. Whilst all applications from within the area for intake into Reception have been satisfied up to and including the current year intake (2022), there was no spare capacity in the current year intake. It is likely therefore that by the time the remaining new houses have been built and occupied, or quite possibly before then, there will not be adequate capacity.
- 10.27 It is known that some children are admitted to the school from outside the village and some older children who have moved into the village recently have been unable to obtain places in the school in the higher years and are having to be transported to other schools such as Ewelme. Whilst it is understood that it is not possible to create space for just a few extra pupils in the higher years, these numbers may well grow in the future and it is therefore very likely that over the next few years we will have a situation where a significant number of children in Benson are unable to get a place at Benson School. The NPDT and Parish Council have therefore initiated a dialogue with OCC to discuss this situation further with a view to getting them to look again at further expansion of the school.
- 10.28 Also under discussion with OCC is the situation regarding capacity for secondary education. Although both Wallingford School and Icknield Community College are being expanded, the NDPT feels that the currently planned expansion will not be adequate for all the likely new residents in their catchment areas.



## Key Issues

- 10.29 Most Benson parents want their children to be educated to an acceptable standard in a local school without the need for excessive travelling. In this respect, there are two key issues involved - school capacity and transport.
- 10.30 The new Relief Road will help reduce the current congestion on Oxford Road where the Benson CofE school is located. However, given that the traffic on some of Benson's roads will increase with the new development, it is important that the Plan supports measures that minimise the use of vehicles to transport children to school.
- 10.31 Hence this Plan acknowledges and supports the need for school expansion on sustainability grounds and requires all residential developers to consider the impact on primary and secondary schools.
- 10.32 The original plan noted the importance of timely provision of school capacity and facilities. The physical capacity has now been expanded and the new playing field has been provided on the BEN1 site and handed over to OCC. However, it looks likely that more will need to be done to accommodate the increased population.

## Benson Library

- 10.33 Benson Library is a modestly sized building (approx. 128m<sup>2</sup>) on a small plot near the centre of Benson village. It currently has limited car parking facilities, with difficult access and limited prospects of improvement. OCC will shortly be undertaking a parking improvement plan that should partly address the parking problem, but the situation will have to be monitored. The property also includes the "Incredible Edible" community garden that grows fruit and vegetables, freely available to all. The library is run by Oxfordshire County Library Services (OCLS) in a Partnership Working Agreement with the Friends of Benson Library (FOBL)
- 10.34 In their submission to a major successful planning application, the County stated that the library is "significantly undersized in relation to its catchment area" and this development will fund an increase in size to cater for the increased population generated. It is understood that the County Council has no current plans to move the library from its present site.

- 10.35 It is unlikely that the current library site can accommodate a large increase in building size, particularly if this resulted in a significant loss of car parking. Such car parking is regarded by FOBL as important for the future of the library given that a large proportion of library customers (over 40%) live outside Benson village. It is possible that a larger library building will be required in the village to accommodate the level of growth promoted in this Plan.
- 10.36 One possible way forward would be to locate the library with or alongside a Community Facility such as a Heritage or Local History Centre. Benson is a village with a rich history, both in its own right and in the national role played by RAF Benson.
- 10.37 FOBL currently have a plan for a limited improvement to facilities on the existing site. This would include development of the remaining library garden areas, as well as the provision of seating and a new bike shed and buggy port.
- 10.38 Given all the uncertainties covered above, it is not possible at the moment to draft a detailed policy for the Library in this Revised Plan. Nevertheless, a general policy is set out in NP13 below.

### **NP13 – Benson Library**

Proposals to extend the existing library or to provide a new library elsewhere in the village will be supported where they comply with other policies in this Plan and the wider development Plan.

### **Village Centre**

- 10.39 The maintenance and ongoing development of Benson Village Centre (see Figure 17 above for exact location), based around the present retail properties in the immediate vicinity of the High Street, is a prime requirement of the Plan. Earlier sections of this chapter have set out the use of the local facilities in the Village Centre. They are a critical part of the character and function of the Plan area. The retention of a strong and vital Village Centre lies at the heart of sustainable development in Benson and depends in large part on the attractiveness of its shops.

10.40 Our original Neighbourhood Plan based its change of use policies for buildings in Benson's Village Centre on the Government's 'Use Classes' at the time. This classification was radically updated in Sept 2020, so this Revised Version adjusts our policies to conform. Under the updated Use Classes, most retail, commercial and service businesses are now all grouped in a single Use Class E, such that change of use between one Class E use (e.g. a food shop) to another Class E use (e.g. an office or gym) may not need planning permission.

10.41 It is no longer possible therefore, under the new Use Classes, to restrict change of use in "primary shopping areas" away from retail use, if the intended use is another activity within Class E. However, NPPF and SODC's Local Plan 2035 both promote the importance of creating and maintaining vital and viable Town Centres. SODC's Local Plan 2035 (Policies TC2 and TC5) refers to a Town Centre hierarchy, under which Benson is listed as a "Local Centre" and stresses the importance of a "Town Centre First" approach to planning applications that might reduce the viability of Retail Centres. Building on this, Policy NP14 has been designed to retain retail, commercial and business services in our Village Centre, unless it can be demonstrated that for viability reasons it would be unreasonable to do so and the new use meets a community need. It also encourages new businesses to consider operating a Post Office facility in the Village Centre.

### **NP14 – Village Centre - Changes from Business Use**

Where planning permission is required, proposals that result in the loss of Class E (Commercial, Business and Service) uses at ground floor level within the Village Centre, as identified in Figure 17, should, to be supported:

- not undermine the vitality and viability of the village centre, **and either**
- ensure the new use meets an evidenced community need, **or**
- evidence that there is no market interest in the premises concerned for Class E uses following one year of active and effective marketing.

## Other Business and Services Areas

10.42 In addition to the Village Centre, there are three other areas that provide valuable commercial businesses and services for both the local community and visitors. These are:

- Riverside: the stretch adjacent to the River Thames running north from the north end of Preston Crowmarsh, encompassing the Riverside recreational area, the Waterfront café, the marina together with its boat yard and related shops, and the camp site which includes holiday lodges. These facilities are covered under NP6.
- Elm Bridge Roundabout: the area south of the Elm Bridge roundabout on the A4074 which accommodates a fuel station with convenience store, a fast-food restaurant and take-away, an office building and a care home.
- Crowmarsh Battle Barns: at the southern end of Preston Crowmarsh that consists of a small business park and a café.

### **NP15 – Village Centre – Changes to Business Use**

Proposals for the change of use of residential buildings within the identified village centre (see Figure 17) to commercial, business and service (Class E) will be supported subject to the following criteria:

- The proposal respects the character and appearance of the Benson conservation area and conforms with the principles E1-3 and K1-7 in the Benson Design Statement;
- The proposal does not cause an unacceptable impact on the amenities of nearby residential properties;
- The proposal provides adequate parking, servicing and access arrangements in accordance with Policy TRANS5 of SODC's Local Plan.

Applications in the village centre that comply with other policies in this Revised Plan and which integrate a post office facility in their business plan are particularly encouraged.

## Assets of Community Value (ACVs)

10.43 A register of Assets of Community Value has been set up and maintained by SODC and the Parish Council. The register currently only includes the Youth Hall. The listing lasts for five years. The Crown Public House, the Three Horseshoes Public House and the Benson Library have been previously registered, but their registration has lapsed. Whilst there is a desire to get them re-registered, it appears that the task of doing so has become more complicated and less likely to succeed than previously due to new procedures issued by SODC. Nevertheless, the PC is endeavouring to get more assets on the ACV Register. An ACV listing generally obliges the property owner to notify the local authority if they wish to sell the property or let it on a long lease. The Parish Council or a local community group then has six weeks to let the authority know if it wishes to make a bid for the property. If it does so, then the owner cannot sell to anyone other than a community group for six months. After the six months has expired, the owner is free to sell to whomever they like for the next year. They are however not obliged to sell or even engage with any community organization.

### **NP16 – Assets of Community Value**

Any proposal that will result in either the loss of an Asset of Community Value or in significant harm to an Asset of Community Value will not be supported.

## Burial Ground

10.44 The existing burial ground opposite the Parish Church is already full and the historic churchyard is expected to be full within 10-20 years. The Church and the Parish Council had established that the best site for this would be on the southern side of St Helens Avenue because of proximity to the Church, availability of good parking and where there is no risk of flooding. However, the owners of this land are not interested to sell the land. Whilst the need for a new burial ground may only come towards or after the end of this planning period it would be beneficial to continue looking for suitable land for a new burial ground. There is however no legal compulsion on the church or the Parish Council to provide land for burial once existing burial grounds are full.

## Mill Stream Surgery

10.45 Existing healthcare facilities in the village may not be able to meet the needs of an enlarged population. Based in the village centre, the existing GP practice is an integral part of the community. The practice has already grown in recent years from 4,800 patients in 2018 to 5,800 currently. The doctors believe their existing premises should be able to handle up to 7,000 patients. Should the village population grow beyond this figure there would be a need to expand the building and staff. The surgery has recently closed its patients' list for a period of six months, though this is due to a shortage of clinical staff rather than physical capacity. Nevertheless, there is considerable concern in the village that newcomers may not be able to get registered with the local surgery and that there may be a need in the future to physically expand the surgery premises. The PC and the NPDT have therefore initiated a dialogue with both the surgery and with the Oxfordshire Clinical Consulting Group (OCCG) to look further into potential capacity constraints.

## Economic Activity

10.46 Economic activity within the Neighbourhood Plan area is primarily linked to the retail and service facilities within the village, although the RAF base also employs many people who use village facilities. There may also be under-publicised civilian employment opportunities at RAF Benson that the Parish Council could promote. Some of the barns at Crowmarsh Battle Farm have been converted into office units and a conference centre with parking. Some limited local employment opportunities exist within the Elm Bridge roundabout complex and at the riverside. Many residents travel out of the village to places of employment, some of which are local within Wallingford and environs or at Abingdon, Didcot, Reading and Oxford. As there is reasonable access to the M4 and M40 motorways and to Didcot and Oxford railway stations, there is plenty of access to employment beyond the local area.

## Phone and Broadband Provision

10.47 There are a number of farms and small commercial operations throughout the Plan area. Some local residents work from home, assisted by the recent introduction of improved fast fibre-optic broadband connections to the village. The benefits to the community of homeworking are considerable as it reduces traffic and enhances support of village facilities. The number of people working from home (both full- and part-time) has dramatically increased of late due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

10.48 Although current mobile phone signal strength within the Neighbourhood Plan area is generally adequate there is a risk that increased demand from new homes may overload existing facilities. The Parish Council should monitor the situation and put pressure on service providers should residents report deteriorations in the system.

10.49 The policies NP17 and NP18 have been developed to deliver the sustainable economic activity objective:

### **NP17 – Phone and Broadband Provision**

Developers should provide appropriate telecommunication infrastructure to all new dwellings within the Plan area. All applications for residential development must demonstrate how they will provide suitable ducting and infrastructure to enable more than one service provider to provide a full fibre connection to individual properties from connection chambers located on the public highway.

Developers will be encouraged to demonstrate that there is adequate enabling provision of mobile phone coverage.

### **NP18 – Telecoms Infrastructure**

Proposals that deliver the expansion of electronic communication networks, high-speed broadband and improvements to connectivity will be supported where:

- The applicant has fully explored the opportunities to erect apparatus on existing buildings, masts or other structures; and
- The number of radio and telecommunication masts are kept to a minimum consistent with the efficient operation of the network; and
- The development has been sited and designed to minimise the impact on the character and appearance of the Benson and Preston Crowmarsh Conservation Areas.



## Allotments

- 10.50 Allotments are an important element of the infrastructure serving Benson's community. This plan has formally designated the existing and new allotments as Local Green Spaces so that they are protected. Their positions are shown on the Green Infrastructure maps in the next chapter. Benson currently has 109 allotment plots (2.43 ha for approximately 5,500 people currently), and Parish Council usage data (see Appendix J) confirms high uptake (between 94% and 100%). There is currently a waiting list. Demand has increased since the Covid pandemic. Development in the parish is expected to further increase demand, so this Plan provides for additional allotments in NP4 to complement the existing provision on the south-western edge of the village. It is also envisaged that more allotments could be developed on the redeveloped Cuckoo Pen site. SODC standards require 0.4 ha of allotment space per 1000 people. This is less than the current scale of provision in Benson, which is calculated as 0.44ha per 1000 people - down from the 0.51ha per 1000 people as at the time of the original Neighbourhood Plan. This is a result of the population growing more quickly than the additional allotment space envisaged in the original Neighbourhood Plan. This current level of provision is also less than the national allotment standard suggested by The National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG).
- 10.51 With the planned growth in Benson's population, the scale of provision of allotment space will be further reduced and may well drop below the SODC standard unless further measures are taken to increase the number of allotments. The BEN3/4 development includes an area of 750m<sup>2</sup> for new allotments which will increase the total allotment space in Benson to 2.50 ha. However, if Benson's population grows to 7,000, there will still be a shortfall of 0.3ha of allotment space in order to meet the SODC standard. Furthermore, it would take 1ha more than is currently available or committed in order to meet the Benson desired level of 0.5ha per 1,000 people. Other opportunities should therefore be explored on the village's green spaces to increase allotment numbers. Given that the Parish Council will be taking over responsibility for all green spaces in the new developments, there will be opportunities to consider converting further space for allotments. In developing new allotments consideration will be given to accessibility issues such as development of raised beds. In this regard the Benson Community Gardens allotment is in the process of installing high-level trugs to enable people in wheelchairs to undertake gardening.

## NP19 - Allotments

Proposals for the allocated sites and elsewhere that provide allotment spaces at a level of 0.5 ha per 1,000 people (the level at the time of the original NP and the desired level for Benson) will be supported, provided they also conform to the other policies in this Plan.

### Outdoor Recreation

- 10.52 There are currently four formal recreation grounds in Benson, although new recreation areas will be created by the developers in each of the approved residential development sites. The primary site is Sunnyside which provides a newly built and very popular playground, tennis courts (currently restricted to club use but discussions are underway to offer some availability to non-members), a sports pavilion, an outdoor gym and amenity grassland put to a variety of uses including football. There are two smaller playgrounds at Green Close (needing significant refurbishment) and St Helen's Avenue, whilst Rivermead (adjacent to the River Thames) provides a small paddling pool (also in need of renovation).
- 10.53 Given the growing pressure on the leisure facilities at the river and inadequate sanitation facilities, it is recommended that provision of new toilet facilities be properly investigated at Rivermead. This important village asset is also on the Thames Path National Trail, so the provision of toilets would no doubt be welcomed by walkers as well as by users of the Rivermead facilities.
- 10.54 Benson Brook runs through the village and along the north side of the St Helen's Allotment. The area known as the Cuckoo Pen runs along the brook and has now become available for upgrading to become a community recreational area and potentially provide further land for allotments and/or a community orchard. This Plan will support the development of the Cuckoo Pen land to become a beneficial community asset.
- 10.55 The Plan area also benefits from the recreational opportunities offered by good access to the wider countryside and its network of footpaths and bridleways including the Thames Path National Trail. Safe pedestrian crossings where public footpaths

intersect with busy roads around the village are particularly important, a fact that has been keenly discussed with the developers. New cycle ways have also been planned in connection with the new residential developments and the Relief Road.

- 10.56 Community views on provision of children and youth facilities were assessed by the Parish Council in February 2015. With respect to play facilities, that survey indicated that the community wanted a greater variety of equipment at the existing playgrounds, updating of current play facilities; and provision of facilities for older children and teenagers. Since then, the state-of-the-art Faye Elizabeth Play Park has been built using CIL funds and the zip line at the St Helen's playground has been installed.
- 10.57 The lack of informal recreational facilities for older children and the youth in Benson is a gap in provision and some Benson families travel elsewhere to access these facilities. The new residential development is only increasing this demand. A skate park has recently been built on the BEN1 development, in accordance with Policy NP2, which is proving very popular, and an outdoor gym built at Sunnyside. Provision of a specific space for young people to congregate has been made in the design of the new green space at BEN3/4 but facilities are still limited. In this Play Park, some accessible equipment has been installed, including a wheelchair friendly roadway and sensory equipment such as chimes
- 10.58 In terms of formal sport, Benson United Football Club provides boys' and girls' football training for a range of ages. The club has 80 members. It operates on a Sunday morning, running up to four matches concurrently at Sunnyside. The adult section of the club is not currently active but, as the village grows, the club expects to expand to serve the needs of a larger community. Sunnyside cannot be expected to provide sufficient capacity, given the diverse range of purposes it currently meets, so additional playing field capacity was proposed through this Plan. However, this additional playing field, on the BEN1 site, compensated the School for the loss of recreational space at the School Field, part of which was built on to enable essential primary school expansion. The BEN1 playing field is for the exclusive use of the school, unless the school chooses to offer to make it available to other organisations. Consequently, there is still a need for an additional playing field for community use.
- 10.59 There is an active running club, Benson Striders, membership of which contracted substantially during the pandemic but is now rebuilding. The club has a qualified coach and meets three times per week. In an assessment of its current and future needs, the club anticipates continued expansion as the village grows, given the popularity of

running. It notes that facilities for mid-week winter training are particularly limited and seeks the provision of a Fitness Trail with safe, established and level paths to meet that need. It is hoped that the fitness trail being built on the large green space on BEN1 will meet this requirement.

### **NP20 – Outdoor Recreation**

New residential development must make provision for play facilities in accordance with South Oxfordshire District Council standards in place at the time of the determination of the application concerned.

### **Facilities for the Youth**

10.60 There currently is a Youth Hall in the village that is well used, but it is in urgent need of either replacement or renovation. As it is located on land leased to the Parish Council by the Benson CofE School Trustees, it is important that these parties jointly develop a plan that will realise such replacement or renovation.

### **Facilities for the Elderly**

10.61 The Millstream Centre, located in the village centre, provides a valuable resource for the elderly. Their mission is to help reduce the need for intervention from Social Services, and to provide respite for families and carers. They currently have approximately thirty people coming for lunch three days a week. They run various activities such as craft sessions and have speakers come from time to time. They also have a small garden. They are very aware of the growing needs for their services as the village population expands.

10.62 The Millstream Centre has plans for expansion to be able to cater for more people and are currently looking for the funding to enable this expansion to take place. Proposals to extend the Millstream Centre will be supported where they comply with other policies in this Plan and the wider development Plan.

## Benson Community Shed

10.63 A recent initiative has been the launching of the Benson Community Shed, part of the Men's Shed Association. Their objective is to provide a place where people, particularly those who feel lonely or isolated, can pursue practical interests, learn and practise skills and enjoy making and mending. They are about making social connections and building friendships, sharing skills and knowledge.

## Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

10.64 Appendix I contains a list of projects of benefit to the local community as identified by the Parish Council in consultation with the local community. The list in the original Neighbourhood Plan has been reviewed, with some projects being removed as either implemented or under implementation, or as no longer possible. New potential projects have been added following recent consultations with community organisations. Local community organisations can submit further projects as long as their primary purpose is for the benefit of the Benson community. All projects need to be fully costed. A process is being developed, including community consultations, to assess and prioritise each project and to identify potential funding sources. Funding will be sought for the approved projects either through grants, CIL or matched funding.

## 11. Environmental Policies

- 11.1 The policy and legislative context for this section has been strengthened at a national level since the Plan was made, with the publication of the government's 25 Year Environment Plan in 2018 and the passing of the Environment Act in 2021. On the back of the 25 Year Environment Plan, there is a much stronger appreciation of the role that nature-based solutions will play in addressing the twin challenges of climate change and the decline in biodiversity. They are also recognised to play a significant role in fostering individual, community and societal well-being.
- 11.2 The Environment Act mandates a number of actions (like Biodiversity Net Gain) by central & local government and business & developers, and will impose legally binding targets for the government in the fields of biodiversity, air quality, water quality and waste. The Act provides for the preparation of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), expected to be one per county; it places a strengthened duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity on Local Authorities, and obliges them to report every 5 years on actions taken. The government has indicated that it expects that public authorities will wish to use the process of creating their LNRS to also identify opportunities to increase access to nature whilst supporting its recovery. The work introduced below on expanding and managing Benson's network for people and nature will make a community level contribution to the LNRS for our area.

These measures strengthen the statutory underpinning for the policies that follow. In this update, a small number of amendments are made to:

- Update expired links in footnotes to supporting evidence.
- Note the expected addition, in due course, of three new green spaces to our list of designated Local Green Spaces, that will be delivered in Benson as a result of consented development.
- Identify (and where appropriate designate) other specific areas of land because of their value as important natural capital assets (e.g. as flood retention capacity or as space for nature).
- Take greater account of the important role of trees in mitigating and adapting to climate change, in particular to offer shade as summers get hotter. This will include

supporting any OCC and SODC initiatives that aim to increase tree planting along our roads and elsewhere in the settlement.

- Strengthen policies relating to managing the risk of surface water flooding as a climate adaptation measure.

## Introduction to Green and Blue Infrastructure

11.3 Green Infrastructure is the natural physical environment that lies both within and between built areas. It takes the form of a network of multifunctional green (and blue) spaces, providing a wide array of benefits to society, wildlife and the economy. In particular Green Infrastructure:

- Contributes to physical and mental well-being in the community through both its intrinsic value and aesthetic appeal and by meeting recreational needs.
- Provides 'space for nature' and ecological networks that act as nature's highways.
- Forms part of a healthy natural environment, providing valuable services to society, such as flood capacity, water purification, space to grow food, and climate regulation.

11.4 In built areas, Green Infrastructure such as private gardens, public green spaces, watercourses, hedgerows and trees, paths and bridleways and verges can all help wildlife and nature to survive and thrive. Green infrastructure is important in all of our lives, and in the context of development, paying close attention to it helps to create sustainable and beautiful places in which people want to live. There is a growing evidence base demonstrating tangible economic, social and health benefits from investment in the Environment<sup>5</sup> including the landmark government review on the Economics of Biodiversity by Prof Dasgupta in 2021<sup>6</sup>.

11.5 The NPPF (Section 15) expects that the planning system recognises ecological networks, green and blue assets, their maintenance and protection, and opportunities for enhancement. Enhancement can involve improving the management of existing sites and creating new ones, particularly where they connect up existing green spaces.

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<sup>5</sup>[NER057 - Microeconomic Evidence for the Benefits of Investment in the Environment 2](#)

<sup>6</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review>

- 11.6 These general principles are addressed in the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 (Policy DES5) and associated South and Vale Green Infrastructure Strategy 2017, published as part of the evidence base for the Local Plan<sup>7</sup>.
- 11.7 Benson has much to celebrate in the green spaces and wildlife interest in the parish and there is scope for enhancements that will play a part in meeting government targets for biodiversity. This section of the plan explains how development will make a meaningful contribution to the delivery of objectives for the natural environment in Benson, and sets policies accordingly.

### **Benson Community Views on Green Infrastructure**

- 11.8 The community expressed support for a vision and objectives that included the following commitments:
- to safeguard and enhance existing green infrastructure and secure the provision of additional green space connected to the wider countryside, and
  - to ensure that new development is sited, planned and executed in a way that takes account of the needs and challenges of the natural environment.
- 11.9 Through consultation, community views were further tested in Benson, asking respondents to rate how valuable or important the four aspects of green infrastructure below were to them, on a scale of 1 to 5. An overwhelming majority stated that the following matters were of 4 or 5 (high or very high) importance or value to them (percentages of those scoring 4 or 5 in brackets):
- The village's ability to sustain wildlife and nature within its boundaries through retaining green infrastructure (88%).
  - The ability to access the countryside surrounding the village easily on foot or bicycle (93%).

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<sup>7</sup> [South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2011 - 2035](#)



- Benson's setting in the rural landscape (between the Chilterns, Wittenham Clumps and the River Thames) including the long open views around the village and out to the surrounding countryside (91%).
- Public parks and open green areas within the village (88%).

## Benson's Approach to Green Infrastructure

11.10 The Plan sets policies so that development is undertaken in a way that safeguards existing green assets. It sets out to create multifunctional green spaces that deliver multiple benefits for wildlife and people in line with the locally specific objectives set out in Benson's Strategy for People and Nature (see below for key points).

11.11 The plan further requires the maintenance and enhancement of onsite biodiversity assets and the creation of multifunctional wildlife corridors. It also requires developers to provide Green Infrastructure management plans and the funding to deliver appropriate maintenance.

## Strategy for People and Nature in Benson

11.12 Benson has developed a Strategy for People and Nature<sup>8</sup>. The document recognises the Parish's existing green assets, and sets out management, enhancement and creation actions (by a range of parties) to deliver local, regional and national priorities for the natural environment. The strategy follows the well-established principles of 'Protect, Maintain, and Enhance', seeking a net gain or increase in biodiversity value from development in line with SODC requirements. It seeks to build and celebrate Benson's Ecological Network, making the most of opportunities to enable people to experience nature and reap the benefits of good green space. This Strategy represents the parish's effort to contribute to the Nature Recovery Network envisaged in the government's 25 Year Environment Plan.

11.13 The Strategy has a scope beyond this Revised Plan's remit, but the policies in our Neighbourhood Plan aim to ensure that development contributes positively to the aims of that Strategy. The key focal points which have informed our policies are:

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix L - Benson's Strategy for People and Nature

- Action for Pollinators - undertaking habitat management, creation and enhancement to encourage butterflies, moths and bees, focusing particularly on meeting the needs of countryside species in decline as their habitats are replaced by gardens or intensive agriculture. The Plan aims to provide a diversity of habitats, including the addition of nectar sources for specific species, through the creation of wildflower margins and other habitats in suitable places. This will result in a wildflower highway around the parish creating a network of connections and 'stepping stones'.
- Maintenance and creation of high-quality access opportunities so the community benefits from engagement with their local natural environment, including through associated recreation. This has a strong synergy with planning measures to support active travel by the community.
- Creation of built settlements that are 'permeable' to wildlife, connecting up green spaces where possible and maximising the chances for nature to thrive and move around.
- Safeguarding 'Benson Brook' (Ewelme Stream) for its interest as a globally important chalk stream habitat supporting a range of wildlife, as a natural capital asset, and for its cultural value and aesthetic appeal, while maintaining and enhancing its role in flood protection.

## Green Spaces and Connections to the Wider Countryside

11.14 Public green spaces are vital community assets as recognised in para 98 of the NPPF. They provide a wide range of recreational benefits, including formal sports and natural play facilities and deliver many associated health benefits. They afford space for hosting community activities, for growing food in allotments and for meeting the needs of wildlife. And increasingly, they provide for services such as flood attenuation, water purification, urban cooling and carbon capture.

## Protecting Existing Green Spaces

11.15 The Plan protects Benson's existing green spaces of particular local significance from development (other than for needs that are key to their function) by designating them as Local Green Spaces. Appendix K1 provides an assessment against the criteria in the NPPF (para 102) for each of the proposed local green spaces. The list includes Benson's allotments - which now encompasses the Cuckoo Pen, formerly leased as a nursery. (Details on Allotments are provided in Community Facilities 10.45-10.46 and NP19 above.)

In this revision of the plan, we have proposed the following changes:

- 11.16 We propose to designate as Local Green Spaces the two flood meadows to the north of the marina campsite, following careful consideration of them against the criteria in the NPPF. The meadows provide a wide array of benefits to the people of Benson. They are an important remnant of Benson's landscape and cultural heritage, recalling its position as a historic riverside village. (The Landscape Character Assessments in Appendix E expand further on this dimension.) The fields are important to the character and natural beauty of the river landscape, particularly because their position adjacent to the Thames Path National Trail makes them readily accessible for residents and visitors. Crossed by a well-used public right of way, the meadows provide an opportunity for the community to engage with wildlife, seen as an important enabler in the 25 Year Environment Plan. The meadows are the last remaining flood meadows in Benson that are publicly accessible. Note that it is not intended that the Local Green Space designation will change the access rules /rights to the fields. The purpose of the designation is to ensure that their value is retained.
- 11.17 The flood meadows are also an important place for nature, with sedge, hedgerows, scrub and brook providing habitat for a wide variety of breeding birds – Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler, Grasshopper Warbler, Whitethroat, Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Reed Bunting – plus visiting Cetti's Warbler, Snipe and Water Rail. This list is not exhaustive and includes red list and priority species for whom conservation action is a priority. Surveys commissioned during spring / summer 2022 (detailed references in Appendix K) confirm the importance of the fields for breeding birds. These flood meadows are identified by the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre as 'potential priority habitat, Flood and Coastal Grazing Marsh', as defined by the NERC Act 2006. Given this very high local value, the revised Plan looks to preserve these meadows.
- 11.18 The natural capital value of the fields also includes their role in providing flood attenuation locally and, as floodplain meadows, they also provide a carbon store. The Elmbrook watercourse, also known as 'Berrick Stream' and 'Ladybrook', flows between these two riverside meadows to join the Thames. Nitrate and phosphate levels are monitored twice a year as part of Earthwatch UK's Thames WaterBlitz, a citizen science project. Recent records suggest a deterioration in water quality, and it is important that future management does not cause further deterioration.

11.19 We have noted above that we expect to add three new ‘sets’ of green spaces (one for each of Benson’s three major developments) to our Local Green Spaces list. All three green space ‘sets’ are committed in the legal agreements for the allocated sites, with the areas identified as public open space on each of the developers’ agreed masterplans and captured for policy purposes in the Benson Indicative Concept Plan in Figure 6. For two of the sites (BEN2 and BEN3/4), transfer of ownership of all the specified green spaces to Benson Parish Council is enshrined in the development contracts, together with commuted sums for their maintenance. Discussions on similar arrangements for the third set of green spaces on the BEN1 Phase 2 Cala site are ongoing at the time of writing. As establishment has yet to be completed, the individual green spaces cannot be formally designated yet, so in the meantime the location and agreed extent of the sites are shown in the Benson Indicative Concept Plan in Figure 6 and referenced in Policy NP21 below.

## **NP21– Protection of Local Green Spaces**

The following areas as shown in Figure 19 are designated as local green space. Built development will not be permitted on these local green spaces unless that built development is of a limited nature and provides facilities that support the function and the use of the local green space concerned:

1. Sunnyside
2. Aldridge Triangle – a Diamond Jubilee Meadow
3. Green Close Play Area
4. Bertie West's Field
5. Mill Lane Allotments
6. St Helen's Adventure Play Area
7. St Helen's Allotments
8. Cuckoo Pen
9. Millbrook Mead
10. Rivermead
11. Flood Meadows



Figure 19 – Designated Local Green Spaces in Benson

## Creating New Green Spaces

11.20 The District Council's Green Infrastructure Strategy (published March 2013 and updated July 2013) identified a deficiency in Benson's area of public parks and gardens of 1.2 hectares for the size of population at 2011<sup>9</sup>. A significant increase in population will follow with the development of the strategic housing sites identified earlier in this Plan. The District Council's adopted standard of provision for public green space in large villages is 1ha per 1000 people within 1000m of all homes in the settlement.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/services-and-advice/planning-and-building/planning-policy/evidence-studies/evidence-base-revisions-j>

- 11.21 Within this strategic context, the Plan requires the provision of adequate additional green space to take account of the increase in population resulting from development. This deficiency has been addressed with the allocation of new green spaces in accordance with this plan.
- 11.22 Community consultation showed that access to local open countryside is important to residents of this parish both for recreation purposes and for pedestrian/cyclist access to other settlements. It also demonstrated that the community values its connection with the River Thames. This Plan promotes the use and enjoyment of the countryside both for its well-being benefits and to encourage sustainable means of transport. New green spaces must connect with existing green spaces and with the wider countryside.
- 11.23 New green space in the village is also proposed, as mitigation for the additional recreational disturbance that will be generated by development in Benson, reducing the scope for harm to the nearby 'honeypot' European designated site at Little Wittenham Special Area of Conservation (as identified in initial screening against the 'Habitats Regulations' by SODC). The green space needs to be of adequate scale and interest to offer a reasonable alternative in order to serve as suitable mitigation. Therefore two substantial new areas of green space with suitable connections to wider countryside are proposed to the north of the village as part of a new vegetated edge (see Para 11.44 and map at Figure 21).
- 11.24 Public green spaces are often multifunctional and it is not always possible to achieve all aims in the same green space. For example, allotments, whilst often offering wildlife benefits if managed correctly, tend not to be suitable for other community uses. In addition, recreation is sometimes incompatible with the needs of certain wildlife or with meeting people's needs for space for quiet reflection. The new green spaces in Benson should be designed to meet a range of distinct uses that are appropriate for the topography, the ecological significance of each site and the fact that people connect with the outside world in a variety of ways.

## NP22 – Creation of New Green Spaces

New development should make appropriate provision of green space in accordance with South Oxfordshire District Council standards in place at the time of the determination of the application. The design of green spaces shall take account of the needs identified in Benson's 'People and Nature Strategy' and this plan's biodiversity policies and must link where practicable via public footpaths to other public footpaths/bridleways connecting to the rest of the village and the wider countryside. Where possible, pedestrian links should be positioned to provide separation from road traffic.

## Biodiversity – Nature in Benson

### Context

11.25 Benson has much to cherish in its nature conservation assets. It is a parish with a rural setting, and the presence of wildlife is a notable feature both within and around the village. Herons and Kingfishers fish along the chalk stream that forms the spine of the village, Tawny Owls hoot in the evenings, swifts scream and career over rooftops and pockets of natural green space support a surprising diversity of butterflies and moths. Red Kites soar overhead in significant numbers, orchids appear in abundance in the village nature reserve at Millbrook Mead and the fields surrounding the built settlements are important for populations of farmland birds, like Corn Bunting and Yellowhammer. Many of Benson's residents take joy from their day-to-day contact with wildlife.

11.26 Oxfordshire County Council's 'Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study' (2014) makes specific recommendations for Benson. This plan takes account of those that are relevant to planning, in shaping the green infrastructure commitments required where development is proposed:



- Ensure that all surviving 'priority habitats' (i.e. those identified by the government as being a priority for conservation action) are safeguarded, properly maintained and managed, and enhanced to satisfy the actions and targets identified within the relevant habitat and species action plans.
- Safeguard, maintain and enhance all locally important habitats in a way that is appropriate to the landscape character of the area.
- Strengthen and enhance the pattern of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and tree-lined watercourses.

## Summary of Assets

- 11.27 A comprehensive study of the natural environment assets in the parish, 'Conservation Plan for the Parish of Benson, Oxfordshire<sup>10</sup>', was compiled and published in 2001 by the Benson Ecological Survey Team, (now known as Benson Nature Group). A summary audit at Appendix K identifies the key biodiversity assets in Benson and important features in the wider landscape setting. The latter represent an important part of the wider green infrastructure network, particularly when considering local recreation and wildlife needs.
- 11.28 The parish has no Sites of Special Scientific Interest or European Sites designated for wildlife interest. Nevertheless, there are several specific areas of habitat, within or adjacent to the main built settlements, that are of conservation interest. The last remaining flood meadows to the north of Benson Marina have been identified by the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre as potential 'priority habitat', as defined by the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. Ewelme Stream (also known as Benson Brook), which forms the 'spine' of Benson village, is a chalk stream, a globally endangered habitat, and a biodiversity and aesthetic highlight. Populations of butterflies, including countryside species (as opposed to garden species), are thriving (See Appendix K Part 4)
- 11.29 The Plan recognises Benson's biodiversity assets. As the village grows, the Plan policies seek to expand its ecological network, such that wildlife has the opportunity to thrive and people have the opportunity to enjoy it. The plan aims to secure built

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<sup>10</sup> <http://best.bensonbulletin.com/report/introduction.htm>

settlements that are 'permeable' to wildlife, connecting up green spaces where possible, creating space for nature and enabling it to move around.

11.30 This Revised Plan also welcomes emerging changes to national and county policies for encouraging more street trees in the built environment and emphasises the role that street trees should play in Benson – enhancing the streetscape, encouraging people to use the footpaths and cycleways provided, attracting more wildlife, removing carbon from the atmosphere and providing shade in a warming climate.

11.31 The Plan policies will:

- Protect existing assets, particularly trees, hedges and associated margins
- Influence the location and type of planting required of the green spaces secured through development (See the Benson Design Statement at Appendix B Section P)
- Require developers to build biodiversity enhancements into their developments - in particular, the Plan seeks to provide wildlife corridors and habitat for pollinators including butterflies and moths
- Maximise the number of street trees along roads, consistent with good visibility and road safety principles

11.32 In support of biodiversity objectives, the Plan requires new paths to be designed to perform as wildlife corridors as well as routes providing pedestrian access. The Plan also requires contributions from developers to fund the maintenance of green infrastructure within developments.

### **NP23 - Biodiversity**

Development proposals should maintain and enhance existing on-site biodiversity assets, and provide for wildlife needs on-site, wherever possible. Where appropriate on-site biodiversity enhancements such as new roosting features for bats or nesting features for birds should be incorporated into the fabric of the development (See Appendix L – Benson’s Strategy for People and Nature).

Development proposals should demonstrate the appropriate use of street tree planting to provide space for nature throughout the village and shade in a warming climate.

### **NP24 – Wildlife Corridors**

Proposals for new residential development as proposed by Policies NP2, NP3 and NP4 should provide wildlife corridors that allow wildlife to move from one area of habitat to another.

The green space and landscape buffers provided through development, and related planting schemes should, where ecologically appropriate to do so, reflect the specific local aims of “creating space for nature”, as set out in Benson’s Strategy for People and Nature (see Appendix L). Where ecologically relevant, proposals are encouraged to incorporate features into fences and walls that allow dispersal of wildlife through areas of green space and gardens.

### **NP25 - Green Infrastructure Management Plans**

Development proposals required to provide on-site green infrastructure must provide Green Infrastructure management plans, with proposals including funding for the long-term

## **NP26 – Benson Brook**

Development proposals should be planned so as to avoid deterioration in the ecological status of the main watercourses of the River Thames, Ewelme Stream (Benson Brook) and Elm Brook (also known as Berrick Stream and Ladybrook).

Development should retain or provide a 10m buffer adjacent to the watercourse of natural or semi-natural habitat, free from built development, parking areas, private gardens and formal landscaping, in line with SODC requirements.

## Landscape and Distinctiveness of Settlements

- 11.33 Benson has a varied rural landscape. To the west, the parish borders the Thames with low lying meadows. Further meadows, visible beyond the far bank, draw the eye into the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. North of the village, the land is flat and open, with fields extending towards Warborough and paths providing very wide landscape views, while to the south east, fields slope upwards into the chalk foothills of the Chilterns, with small patches of Ancient Woodland on the tops. This south-eastern part of the parish lies within the Chiltern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Within this landscape the main settlements appear distinct and separate in their rural setting, Benson connecting with the wider landscape, Preston Crowmarsh more intimately associated with the meadows and the river.
- 11.34 The Plan Area reflects the historic shape of the parish across this landscape, laid out to provide the necessary variety of agricultural resources for the settlements. Agriculture continues to be the primary use of the undeveloped land and residents still consider the settlements in the parish to be rural. Modern change has, however, taken a toll. RAF Benson arrived in 1936-7 and remains an operational military RAF station, with its airfield cutting almost completely across the centre of the Plan Area, and quarters extending into Ewelme parish. The airfield is predominantly lightly managed semi-improved grassland, of some conservation and aesthetic value, and it does allow open views across the landscape. However, it severs the Old London Road and the access between the village and the rising farmland to the southeast. Small areas on the south-eastern heights have been subject to gravel extraction, landfill and reclamation, while a scrapyard hides in the trees by Mogpits Wood, one of the remnants of the parish's ancient woodland. To the north, the allocated housing sites are consuming the fields between Benson and Hale Farm and extending towards Rokemarsh. In this broad context the agricultural landscape that survives is becoming increasingly important as a means of sustaining the rural character and the setting for the village, and providing means of access to the countryside.
- 11.35 The original Plan took note of the high value that local residents accorded to Benson's setting in the rural landscape, and to the identity of Benson as a rural village. (See details of original survey responses in Section C of the Design Guide in Appendix B).

This Revised Plan retains the original vision of accommodating growth while protecting the rural setting beneath the Chiltern Hills and alongside the River Thames, along with the objective of maintaining the distinct and separate character of the village. The separate identity and setting of Preston Crowmarsh is now considered more closely.

- 11.36 The revision also takes account of the original importance given to access to the surrounding countryside on foot or by bicycle, and of how this has been magnified by the Covid pandemic. The value of accessible local countryside for exercise, and for the other well-being benefits that people get from being in contact with natural beauty, are now well recognised: the government's official People and Nature Survey reported that 73% of adults in the UK cited nature as crucial to their well-being through the pandemic. The pressure exerted, however, by the huge additional numbers of residents and visitors was apparent in the impact on the riverside and the footpaths across the fields, to such an extent that the path to Warborough widened into a complete mud bath in the winter of 2020-2021, and local farmers were forced to bar alternative informal routes. While we trust that the strictures of Covid will become a thing of the past, the legacy of changed lifestyles will remain, and the climate change agenda will reinforce the benefits of staying local, and walking/cycling to local destinations. Public access to the countryside is needed more than ever.
- 11.37 This Revised Plan therefore looks more carefully at the landscape, the way it provides the countryside setting and amenity for the settlements, the framework of national and local policies that apply, and the appropriate means of reflecting local concerns.
- 11.38 National policy has long required that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Amendments to paragraph 176 of the NPPF in July 2021 now also require that development within the setting of an AONB should be sensitively located and designed to avoid or minimise adverse impacts. These considerations will apply to the higher land within the Chilterns AONB to the south east (including the landfill and scrapyards sites), and to any development that will be visible from, or otherwise affect the setting of either the Chilterns AONB or the North Wessex Downs AONB beyond the Thames. It should be noted that the latter AONB designation includes the mill island below the weir, which lies within Benson Parish, and land immediately beyond the Thames.

11.39 Policies ENV1 v and STRAT1 ix of the Local Plan 2035 look respectively to protect the landscape setting of settlements against harmful development, and to protect and enhance the countryside. Various categories of rural development are supported in Policies H19 and EMP10, but there is also allowance, under Policies H1 and CF2, for specialist housing for older people in locations where there is good access to public transport and local facilities, and for community facilities adjacent to the built-up area.

11.40 This revised Neighbourhood Plan supports such development where appropriate but looks to ensure that it is relevant to need and delivered in a manner that avoids or minimises harm to the rural character of the increasingly scarce and locally regarded landscape setting, and to the openness of important local gaps between settlements.

11.41 To this end the Revised Plan now includes:

- Settlement boundaries to clarify the distinction between built-up area and countryside (see NP1).
- A new Policy NP5 to cover the value of the riverside landscapes adjacent to the River Thames.
- New assessment of landscape character areas and the gaps between settlements in Appendix E Parts 2 and 4, to inform proposals, support policies NP27 and NP28 which follow, and support relevant Design Principles in Appendix B. These assessments are based on the South Oxfordshire Landscape Character Assessment 2017 but expand on more specific local details, the relationships between settlements, landscapes and dispersed farmsteads, and the local amenity value for residents.
- A revised Policy NP27 regarding the distinctiveness of settlements. As before this requires that development should maintain open landscape space between Benson, Preston Crowmarsh and other neighbouring settlements in order to respect their identity as distinct rural settlements. It now specifies where this policy should apply.

- It should be noted that the desirability of maintaining the gap between Benson and Rokemarsh echoes Policy BER1 of the Berrick Salome Neighbourhood Plan, which requires proposals to conserve the open and tranquil character of the intervening landscape and its views. Details of the gaps and other spaces, and why they matter, are set out in Appendix E.
- A revised Policy NP28. This relates more comprehensively to all development within the Plan area, including within the countryside and requires consideration of a greater number of views, important local gaps and the new Landscape Character Assessments in Appendix E. The views and important local gaps are shown in Figure 20 below together with a short description of each view. Illustrations are included in Appendix E Part 3. Views from outside the Plan area are taken into account, particularly where affecting views into and out of the AONBs, but only with regard to development within the Plan area.
- Policy NP28 also calls for respect for the rural setting of settlements and the farmsteads outside them, and looks for opportunities to improve public access to the countryside where this is possible.

### **NP27 – Distinctiveness of Settlements**

Development proposals that accord with local and national policies for the countryside will be supported where proposals, singly and cumulatively, maintain open rural space between the settlements sufficient to ensure that the settlements appear distinct and separate in their rural landscape setting. This policy will apply to development that takes place within the neighbourhood area:

- Between Benson and Rokemarsh
- Between Benson and Preston Crowmarsh
- Between Preston Crowmarsh and Howbery Park



## **NP28 – Landscape and Views**

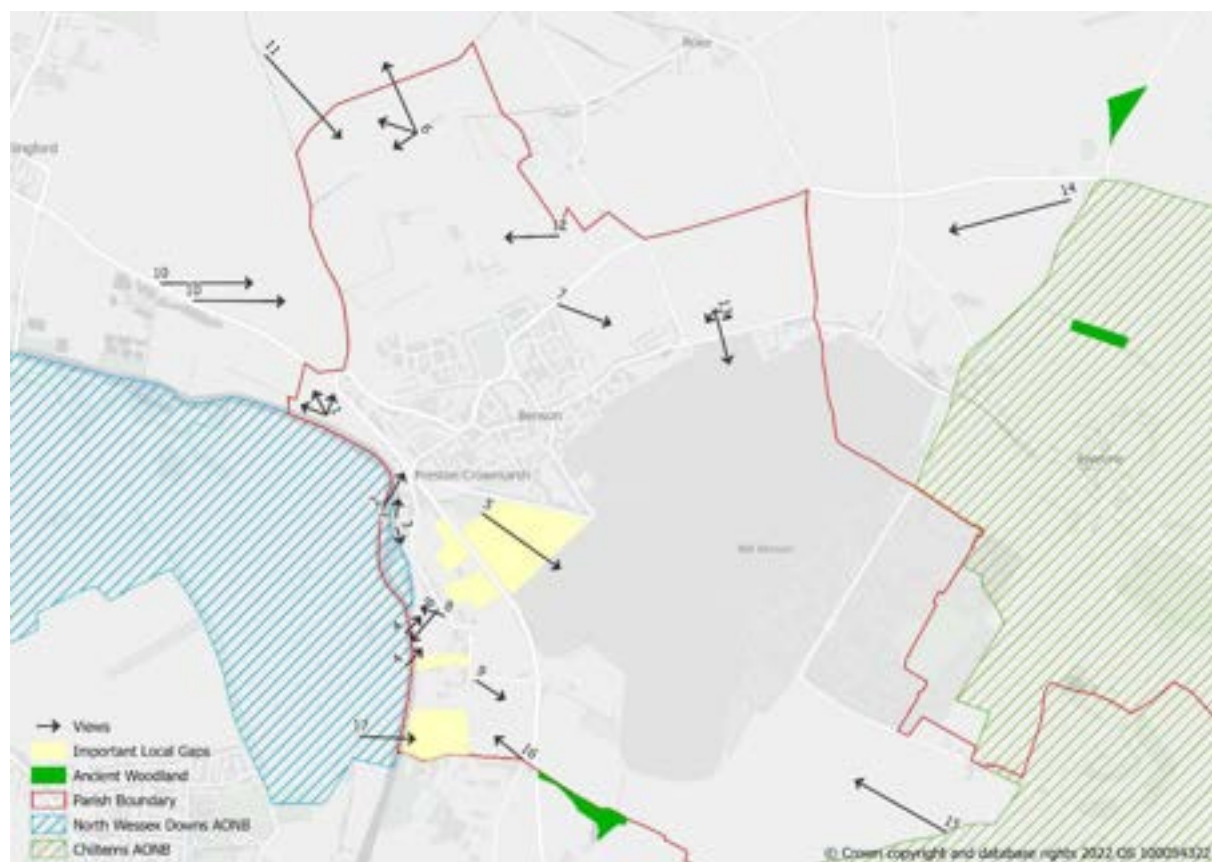
Development proposals should preserve, or where practicable enhance, the local character of the landscape in general and as assessed in Appendix E, and should take particular account of the viewpoints and important local gaps identified in Figure 20 (insofar as the proposals are for development within the Benson Neighbourhood Area).

Development proposals which would have an unacceptable impact on the local character of the landscape, including the rural setting of settlements and of farmsteads outside the built-up settlements, will not be supported.

Where possible, development proposals should improve public access to and enjoyment of the countryside.

### **Views**

11.42 These are grouped according to their relevance to the plan and numbered as shown on the map below. Indicative photographs are included in Appendix E Part 3.



**Figure 20 - Important Local Gaps and Views**

**Group A** - The association between Benson, Preston Crowmarsh and the River Thames, as relevant to design principles for any future development of the riverside.

- View 1. Views from the footbridge over the Elm Brook (Ladybrook), taking in the River Thames, the Thames Path National Trail, the willow-lined brook and the flood meadows.
- View 2. View from Benson Lock towards St Helen's Church
- View 3. Views from the crossing over the river looking both north towards the Waterfront and south towards the former mill at Preston Crowmarsh
- View 4. Seasonal views from the Thames Path towards the historic settlement at Preston Crowmarsh.

**Group B** - Views out from the settlements showing their connection with the wider landscape

- View 5. Views from the allotments and the public footpaths that cross between St Helen's Avenue and the A4074, looking out across the airfield towards the Chiltern Hills
- View 6. Views from the end of Hale Road/Lane towards the North Wessex Downs AONB, specifically the Sinodun Hills (including the Wittenham Clumps) and beyond towards Warborough
- View 7. View from the footpath behind Blacklands Road, south east towards Brook Street and the Chiltern Hills beyond
- View 8. Views from Preston Crowmarsh across the river, towards the river meadows and the North Wessex Downs AONB
- View 9. View from Crowmarsh Battle out across the field with willow-lined ditches towards the Chiltern Hills

**Group C** - Views showing the distinctive character of the settlements as low-lying and partially screened in their landscape setting, a characteristic this plan seeks to safeguard:

- View 10. The views towards the village from Shillingford from the A4074 with the backdrop of the Chiltern Hills
- View 11. The views from the footpath from Warborough towards Hale Farm and surrounding fields, with the Chilterns rising behind
- View 12. Views looking towards the village in the foreground of the Chiltern Hills and North Wessex Downs AONBs as seen from the footpath to Rokemarsh
- View 13. Views from the informal path leading east from Braze Lane, out across the airfield with Benson to the right and the Chiltern Hills rising behind the base
- View 14. The view west towards the village from the B4009 and Eyres Lane, looking towards the North Wessex Downs AONB
- View 15. The view from the footpath near the top of Clack's Lane looking across the airfield towards Benson, with the church tower rising behind trees and fields

- View 16 The view of Crowmarsh Battle from Benson Lane, with the roof of the historic barn seen through the willows.
- View 17 Views from footpath 141/28/10 (running parallel with and then converging with the Thames Path on the Wallingford bank) across the gap between Crowmarsh Battle and Howbery Park, through to the Chiltern Hills beyond.

## Landscape Buffers

11.43 The Landscape Capacity Assessment<sup>11</sup> for sites on the edge of the larger villages in South Oxfordshire (conducted on behalf of the District Council in 2014) considered the landscape impacts of the then eight potential development sites around Benson. Although the parish's main settlements (Benson and Preston Crowmarsh) lie outside the AONB boundaries, the assessment noted their proximity and thus the potential for harm through 'unsympathetic incremental expansion of the settlements of and adjacent to the North Wessex Downs AONB, detracting from the surrounding countryside'. (Appendix E to this Revised Plan now also notes the intervisibility with higher ground within the Chiltern AONB). This Landscape Capacity Assessment ruled out development of the site to the north east of the village due to the risk of coalescence with Rokemarsh, but concluded that some development would be possible on some of the other seven sites considered at the time, subject to mitigation to take account of landscape and visual constraints. The housing allocation described in Section 6 however recognises the importance of a relief road in order to support sustainable development in Benson, the only feasible route for which involves development to the north east of the village. The Plan therefore addresses the need for landscape mitigation to offset the impacts of development.

11.44 Taking into account all of the needs outlined in the Green Space and Landscape Character sections above, and in the light of more recent planning permissions, this plan prioritises the creation of a substantial new multifunctional vegetated edge, to

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<sup>11</sup> [https://consult.southandvale.gov.uk/portal/south/planning/pol/lp2031/ro/south\\_oxfordshire\\_land\\_cape\\_assessment\\_part\\_one](https://consult.southandvale.gov.uk/portal/south/planning/pol/lp2031/ro/south_oxfordshire_land_cape_assessment_part_one)

include local native trees and hedging, around the extended settlement. This meets multiple aims including:

- maintaining the distinction between Benson, Rokemarsh and Preston Crowmarsh, guarding against coalescence of settlements by providing open rural landscape between them to ensure they remain separate
- providing a permeable green vegetated buffer between development and the wider landscape, one that allows for a connection between the two but softening hard edges and breaking up the visual impact of new built mass on the fringes of the village so as to respect the setting and the context of the two AONBs
- contributing to reducing the identified shortfall in open accessible public green space, providing for the community's needs for recreation and space for nature, whilst also mitigating visitor pressure on European protected sites in the vicinity
- providing new public rights of way, linking to the wider footpath network;
- creating links to existing Green Infrastructure features e.g. the Thames Path National Trail.

This will align with our built design policies which seek to avoid harmful impacts of development on important views. It also reflects the Chiltern Conservation Board's Position Statement on Development affecting the Setting of the Chilterns AONB, 2011.

## **NP29 – Landscape Buffers**

Major residential development on the fringe of Benson village should respect the rural character and setting of the village by incorporating a vegetated landscape buffer - of an appropriate depth to take account of the topography of the site and its location within the village - around the outer edge where development meets and connects with the rural landscape. This buffer to include local nature – trees and hedging.

The landscape buffer concerned should be designed so as to accommodate appropriate habitats for wildlife (as guided by the Benson Strategy for People and Nature and the principles in the Benson Design Statement) and suitable pedestrian access connected to the wider footpath network, and maintaining separation where possible between traffic and pedestrians / cyclists.

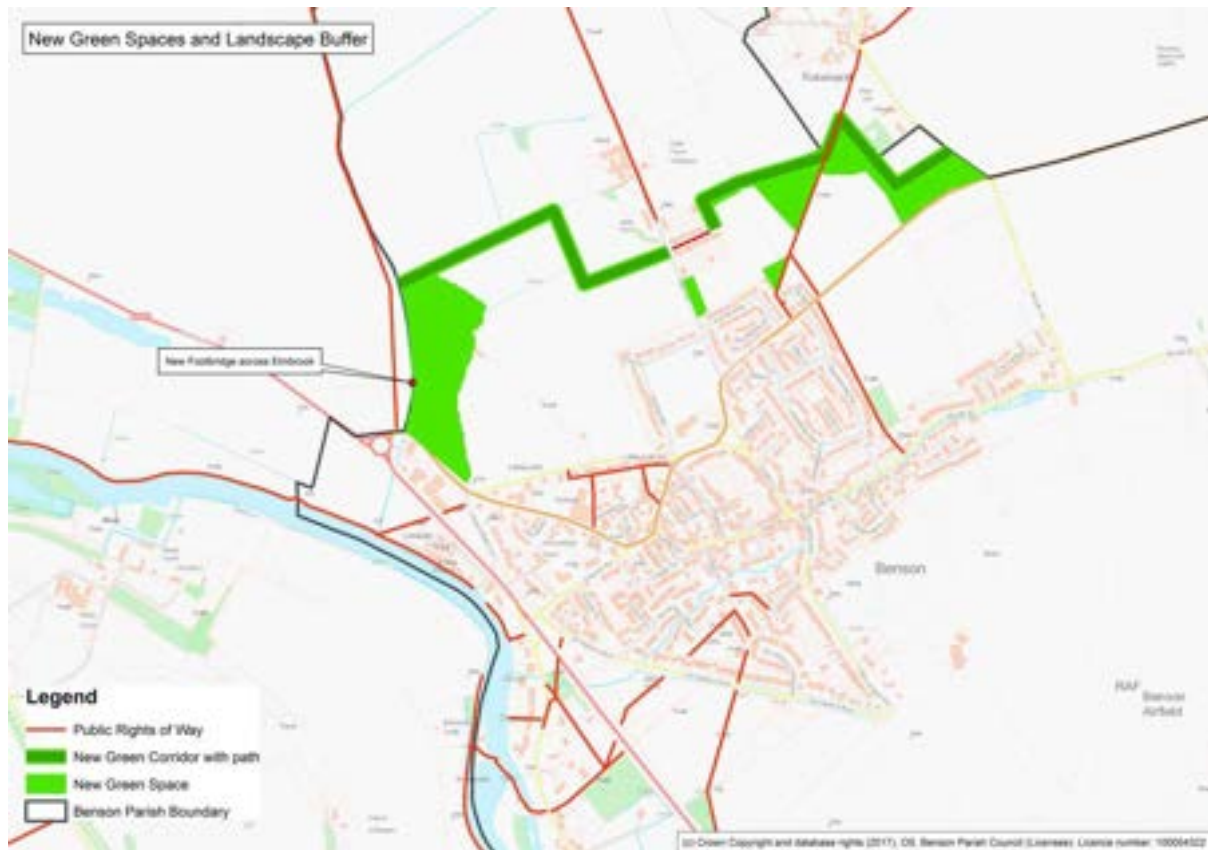


Figure 21 - Indicative Position of New Green Spaces and Buffers

## Drainage and Flood Risk Management

- 11.45 Thames Water's Benson Drainage Strategy (2013 and updated for 2015-2020) indicates that Benson has a significant problem with the foul sewerage system being overloaded by both surface water and groundwater infiltration. The Strategy states that both urban creep (more building and loss of permeable surfaces) and climate change (which is projected to increase the number and/or severity of adverse weather events) are expected to exacerbate the problem. Thames Water quantified the rate of urban creep in Benson as 'average' in 2013 at 0.0879%, but flagged their intention to escalate with the County Council if that figure increased. Furthermore, the Water Cycle Study for South Oxfordshire District Council (2016) confirmed that there is minimal or no Wastewater treatment works capacity at Benson. In its response to the first (Regulation 14) Public Consultation for this revision of the Benson Plan, Thames Water has confirmed that it is committed to upgrading its Wastewater Treatment Works at Benson.
- 11.46 The extent of river flooding in the future could increase as well as flood events becoming more frequent. Surface water flooding risk increases with the introduction of impermeable surfaces associated with housing development as well. Developers must work with statutory bodies to plan for the necessary surface and wastewater management infrastructure to accommodate growth in Benson without causing deterioration of water quality in parish watercourses and thereby impacting the health of residents.
- 11.47 Flows in Benson Brook are influenced by the level of winter rainfall infiltrating down into the chalk aquifer and flowing out from late winter onwards, mainly entering the brook in a series of springs in Ewelme. During periods of peak flow, some residents along Brook Street report water rising up through their floors.
- 11.48 Developers must take account of these specific flood risks in Benson and avoid exacerbating the issue by providing adequate on-site drainage proposals, including Sustainable Drainage Systems, permeable surfaces, soakaways and water butts. The detail of Sustainable Drainage System proposals must take account of advice from RAF Benson on the need to manage the risk of bird strike.

## NP30 – Flood Risk and SuDS

Where it is appropriate, development proposals should include Sustainable Drainage Systems and other measures such as permeable surfaces and water butts within their boundaries designed to manage the risk of surface water flooding and foul water sewer overload, and to avoid increasing flood risk elsewhere in Benson. Sustainable Drainage Systems should be designed to maximise the benefits offered by these systems, taking account where possible of Benson’s Strategy for Nature and People (see Appendix L).

11.49 The settlements of Benson and Preston Crowmarsh lie low in the valley, adjacent to the River Thames and its tributaries. Several areas are classified by the Environment Agency as subject to medium or high risk of flooding, notably the remaining meadows adjacent to the Thames to the north of Benson Marina. These represent critical natural capital infrastructure for Benson for several reasons:

- They hold water during flooding events, events that are predicted to increase in the future.
- They are important to the character and natural beauty of the village, representing the last remnants of the flood meadows that would once have been common in the parish along this stretch of river. This is particularly significant given their position adjacent to the Thames Path National Trail where it approaches the village.
- The meadows are also an important place for nature at a local level, with sedge, hedgerows and brook providing habitat for a wide variety of breeding birds - Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler, Grasshopper Warbler, Whitethroat, Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Reed Bunting - plus visiting Cetti’s Warbler, Snipe and Water Rail. They are identified by the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre as “Potential Priority Habitat, Flood and Coastal Grazing Marsh”, as identified by the NERC Act 2006.
- South and Vale’s 2017 Green Infrastructure Strategy, in its recommendations for action in Benson, explicitly identifies a need to improve sensitive management of low land meadows.



As noted in Para 11.13 and NP21, it is proposed that these meadows be designated as Local Green Space.



Figure 22 – Map of Flood Zones for Benson Area – Source: Environment Agency & Ordnance Survey

## Note on Agriculture

11.50 Benson is a rural parish and agriculture plays a significant part in its land use. There is a strong link between agriculture practices and the achievement of good environmental outcomes - how we produce food has consequences for the health of our soils and watercourses, the air we breathe, the degree of risk we face through flooding, and the ability of nature to survive and thrive. We need to think holistically if we are to improve the health of our environment and continue to benefit from what it provides.

Traditionally, decisions about planning in built settlements and how farmland is managed have been handled through separate regimes. Now however, Local Nature

Recovery Strategies (LNRS), the new spatial planning tool created by the Environment Act, will play a critical role in identifying the locations and prioritising the activities that will be eligible for funding under new agri-environmental schemes that will reward the delivery of environmental benefits. As the LNRS for our area is developed, the parish-level objectives and priorities set out for our green infrastructure in Benson's Strategy for People and Nature (as summarised in Paras 11.10 and 11.11 above) will be extremely relevant. For example, the success of efforts to restore the ecosystem health of our chalk stream (Benson Brook/Ewelme Stream) will be dependent on decisions about land use and farming practice in the whole catchment. Creating our LNRS will surface new opportunities to work with local farmers to further shared ambitions, aims and objectives.