

'Save Our Gap'

Latest developments at Houghton Grange and next stages during 2020 from Houghton & Wyton Parish Council

1. Background:

Homes England¹ have confirmed they are developing proposals for what they call Phase II development on land east of the Houghton Grange estate, which would result in 120 homes, open space and supporting infrastructure.

This builds on Phase I, the development of Houghton Grange itself, which was already approved for development by Morris Homes, and consisting of 107 homes including conversion of the main house to 5 flats.

The Phase II development is particularly sensitive and needs very careful planning as it will inevitably reduce the extent of the 'gap' between the village and St. Ives and which is protected in law through the District Council's Local Plan, and our very own Neighbourhood Plan.

The next steps involve engagement with local councils to consider what would be acceptable prior to the submission of a planning application at the end of this year.

This will obviously kindle interest and set alarms ringing for many residents in Houghton & Wyton.

Hence the aim of this note is to put the proposal into a local planning context for everybody's information, both in terms of what has already been achieved, the resulting planning guidance and to outline how your Parish Council responds.

As part of this, we would welcome comments and views from residents which we will take forward into discussions with the District Council and Homes England.

¹ Homes England is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government.

2. The Gap - A brief History of Time

Figure 3 Houghton and Wyton built up area

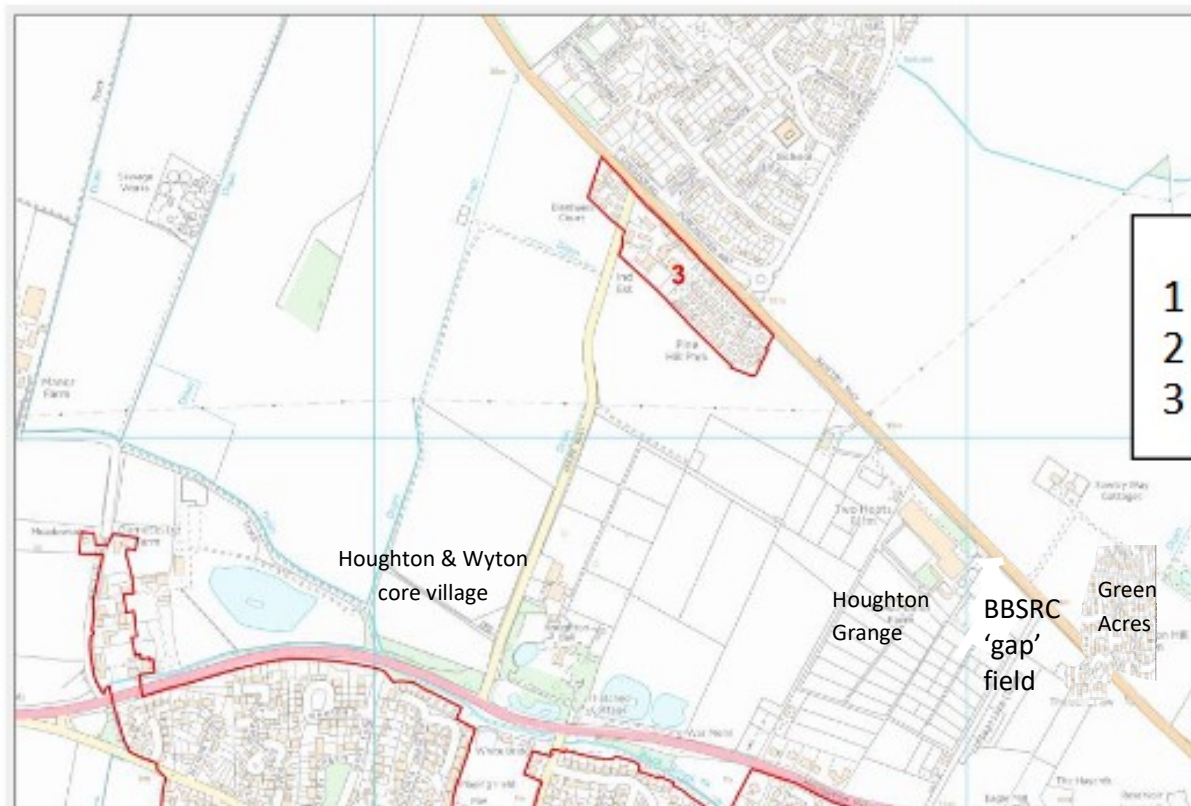


Fig 1: Extract from The Houghton & Wyton Neighbourhood Plan 2018 adapted to show the gap field.

2.1 Where is the gap?

The character of village and market town is very different – one more rural and related to the countryside, the other more urban. Houghton & Wyton has always been separated from St.Ives by what is locally known as ‘the gap’.

This area is defined in planning, and comprised mainly of a field owned by a government body called *The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)* which is part of UK Research and Innovation, a non-departmental public body funded by a grant-in-aid from the government. The BBSRC field being a carryover part of the Houghton Grange estate when taken over as a poultry research laboratory in the 1960's.

2.2 How is it protected by the planning system?

Recognition of the need for a gap existed for decades until new district planning guidance was produced by way of a suite of documents called Local Development Documents in 2009. Sadly and for spurious reasons, production of this set of strategic planning documents was never finished but has left a lasting legacy.

One of the set that was completed was a document called the Core Strategy 2009 – a pure policy document but again with lots of controversy surround it. As a document it only covered half of what proper Local Development Documents should do and importantly didn't include any site allocations for where housing in the district should be built.

Hence it could only go so far and whilst establishing that approximately 500 homes could be built somewhere west of St.Ives, it couldn't say where. It didn't include a gap or green wedge policy either which would help protect settlements from merging, and through a vague direction of growth arrow on a map pointing westwards, left confused messages regards building on the BBSRC field (previously protected as our 'gap' field). Not completing the Development Framework properly led to years of problems, confusion, fighting battles, complaints and arguably mistakes.

During this period and in an attempt to fill the document gap a Supplementary Planning Document was put forward by HDC called the St.Ives Urban Design Framework (UDF). This supposedly justified building across the entirety of the hillside between St.Ives and Houghton Grange.

In 2013, the Parish Council and community pressure group SHED raised the funds for and won a judicial review to challenge this approach in the High Court. The judge decided that with an incomplete Development Document the process used to push through this proposal was illegal – there was no strategic planning policy justification to support it, and fearing it would be misused ordered it quashed immediately.

Several attempts by HDC/ developers to rekindle the St.Ives UDF and to have the so called gap moved westwards from the BBSRC field, to be made up of peoples gardens between Houghton Grange and the village, were all successfully dismissed.

Meanwhile without a robust Development Framework to fall back on and in order to protect and shape development in our own area, the H&W Neighbourhood Plan (HWNP) was developed.

HDC were slowly persuaded to give up trying to move and relocate the main gap away from the BBSRC field west of Houghton Grange. Likewise, Houghton Grange (excluding the BBSRC field) had already been approved for outline planning permission back in 2014, and given this, HDC slowly started to show support for its development to be seen as an extension of the village, thereby helping satisfy our own housing needs as well as that of St.Ives.

Many attempts to define the gap more precisely by mapping and even achieving a high level of protection by defining it in law as 'local green space' were tried, but rejected by the first examination of our plans.

We subsequently made changes and exercised our right to have our plan re-examined, this time by a different examiner. Whilst still not achieving a 'mapped', rigid definition, through

this approach we were able to gain acceptance for an anti-coalition policy (something rejected by the first examiner) along with a lengthy description of what constitutes the gap and where it must be located. The re-examination was successful, our plan was supported in a referendum by over 96% of the voting public and approved, attaining full legal planning status in 2018.

The policy is particularly strong as, rather than state as is usual in planning policy that that given certain circumstances, development could not be 'supported', in recognition of its importance, our policy goes further to state simply that development will not be 'permitted'.

Policy

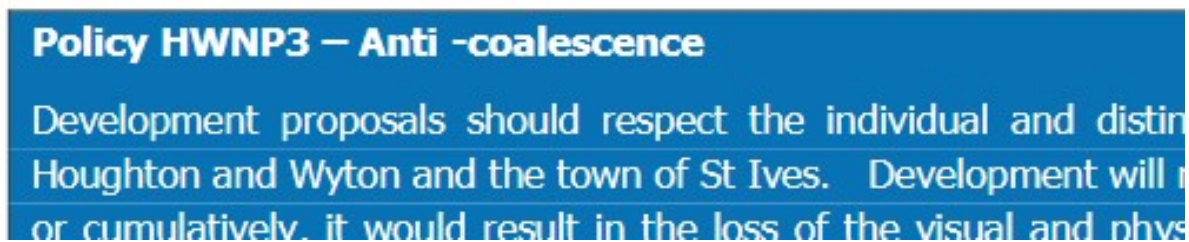


Fig 2: Taken from Houghton & Wyton Neighbourhood Plan 2018.

Whilst this was going on, HDC were also busy producing a new, and this time complete, Development Framework for the district (the new name for Local Development Plans). The most important part of this is the so called Local Plan document which the Parish Council were heavily engaged with, providing the built up area criteria from development of our Neighbourhood Plan work and even taking an active part in a 3 day inspection hearing last year.

Hard fought battles were fought to reduce the number of houses to be built between village and town and to ensure it reflected the position taken in the Houghton & Wyton Neighbourhood Plan in terms of where the gap should be. This was achieved by the inclusion of an illustrative drawing of the area and gap or open, non-developed space within the site allocations section of the Local Plan and clearly stating '*A substantial band of greenspace should be retained through the portion of the BBSRC field to the east of the derelict buildings (old chicken sheds belonging to Houghton Grange) and up to the western edge of the residential development at 'The Spires'.*

Whilst the term 'substantial band' isn't defined as an measurement of area and therefore open to interpretation, combined with the illustration and backed up by our own legally binding Neighbourhood Plan, we are satisfied that this offers as much protection as we could reasonably expect.



Fig 3: Extract from Huntingdon District Council Local Plan 2019.

3. What happens next?

Moving to present day, we are now aware that an application is due to come forward by Homes England. This is not a surprise, but whilst respecting the need to maintain a separation of village and town, we do expect their application will try to push the number of houses beyond the limits of what might be acceptable to us and justified by the Neighbourhood and Local Plans (The Development Framework).

We need to ensure it is compliant with planning policy, that the remaining gap is meaningful and relevant. Hence we now need to focus primarily on influencing and negotiating the size of the gap and what it looks like.

This involves agreeing the numbers of houses that can be accommodated; where they sit; their density; aspects of design; how this new extension to our community is connected to existing and new infrastructure requirements; how the impact on climate change and any increased risk of flooding can be mitigated; how we minimise the visual impacts from the meadows, the Hemingford's and when viewed upstream from St.Ives; how it can deliver real public benefit and a biodiversity net gain (now a key legal requirement); and establishing

how the remaining gap will be managed and used (e.g. extending tree cover in the area). It also means negotiating a position whereby the remaining gap is protected thereafter.

Homes England are expected to reflect on our discussions and submit a full planning application towards the end of this year followed by a period of public consultation.

4. How to get in touch and express your opinions?

Complete the questionnaire enclosed in this magazine or follow the link to the on-line version on Facebook.

This proposal will form the basis of a special Parish Council meeting which at the time of writing is still to be arranged for October, when we can share the responses (keep a look out for details).

In the meantime please submit any other views, comments or questions to the Parish Clerk (Lois Dale) by emailing clerk@houghtonwytonpc.co.uk; or by letter to St. Mary's Centre Chapel Lane Houghton.

We knew this day would come and look forward to your input as well as your continued support for what we all as residents agree to accept.