

UPPER MEON VALLEY WARD – PARISH UPDATE – JANUARY 2025

Firstly, a very Happy New Year to all in Upper Meon Valley!

The weeks before Christmas saw a flurry of documents being issued by the Government that will, in some way, affect us all. On top of those, we saw the announcement of a new conservation status for the River Meon, the sign-off of the South Downs Local Plan Review, leading to its consultation phase later this month, and submission of a new planning application for Boomtown. Giving full detail on all of these is beyond the scope of our report, and the full local implications are likely only to become clear as we move further through year. For now, some ‘headlines’ and links for those who might want to read further in to any of them; we will likely revise this update as we learn more through the month.

Devolution

The Government published its [Devolution White Paper](#) on 16 Dec. There seems to be a broad consensus that local government in England is ‘broken’, not least as its funding support from central government has steadily declined over many years whilst local demands for, for example, adult social care and special educational needs have spiralled in the opposite direction. We also have the local example of our inability to recycle more as whilst Winchester collects the rubbish it is dependent on Hampshire to dispose of it. But whilst we might agree on at least some of the problems, there is less consensus on how best to fix them. The Government’s intent is both to devolve powers to strategic Mayors (covering populations of around 1.5 million) and to collapse the current two-tier system, such as we have in Winchester, into single authorities, each serving a population of around 500 000. Some areas already have a single authority, Southampton, Portsmouth and Wiltshire being near examples. How we get from where we are today to deliver the Government’s new vision is not yet clear; existing authorities are being consulted but the vision itself is not for discussion. Many questions, few answers. Existing authorities can, however, volunteer to be ‘early adopters’ in the hope of earlier financial relief - Hampshire County Council will be considering whether to do this in a session on 9 January. As a result, it is therefore not yet clear whether the County Council elections scheduled for May this year will go ahead.

Planning

The revised [National Planning Policy Framework](#) and other supporting guidance documents were published on 12 Dec, following a consultation that ran through the Autumn. A key point of contention for authorities such as Winchester was the methodology for determining housing targets where a significant part of their area falls within a National Park. This has been recognised and addressed in [para 14 of the revised guidance for determining housing and economic needs](#). This allows for a “locally determined system” to be used that should include consideration of the proportion of the Authority’s area that falls within a National Park. How this will work in practice is, of course, yet to be tested.

Section 245 Guidance – an Authority’s duty to further National Park purposes

Parishes may recall that the last Government’s 2023 Levelling Up and Regeneration Act included the strengthening of Local Authorities’ duty towards National Parks’ purposes from being required to “have regard to” to “to promote”. The long awaited guidance on how this should apply in practice has now been published by DEFRA as the [Protected Landscapes Duty](#). This may have quite some impact on decision making in Winchester City Council but its implications are yet to be fully digested. Again, we will follow up with further detail when it is known.

Special Area of Conservation (SAC) status for the River Meon

Natural England has designated the Meon as a “compensatory habitat” to mitigate the effects of Southern Water’s need to increase its abstraction from the Itchen in times of drought. Given that these periods of drought cannot be accurately predicted, Natural England has to assume the worst case: that they will occur. It is therefore their intent that Southern Water should enable work on the Meon to bring it up to a similar standard of habitat to that currently required on the Itchen. By doing so, should the quality of the Itchen’s habitat be compromised, a compensatory habitat will be found in the Meon. This should see significant benefit to the quality of both the water in the Meon and its surrounding habitats.

South Downs Local Plan Review Consultation

The draft Local Plan Review having been voted through by the South Downs National Park Authority on 10 Dec, the consultation on the “Regulation 18 Draft” should go live on Mon 20 Jan. It is not a total revision but rather an opportunity to update and improve some of the existing plan’s policies and identify some further candidate development sites. Many of the changes are welcome tightening of policies to further the Park’s purposes but the plan does not include specific housing targets. Rather the Authority is encouraging consultees to suggest required levels of development in their areas and identify other sites that could be included in a later draft. Given the strong need for more affordable housing locally this seems a missed opportunity to set clear targets, whatever those targets might be, for the new homes that are needed in our communities. As a consequence, Cllr Pett, together with another member of the Authority of similar view, was unable to support the draft in its current form. There will be further meetings between Winchester City Council and the NPA during the consultation period and beyond to determine the approach to housing targets in the next iteration of the draft.

Boomtown

Whilst it is understood that a new planning application has been submitted it is yet to be validated and placed on the SDNPA website. Meanwhile, Boomtown has submitted, and had accepted, an [Ecological Management Plan Implementation Report](#) showing the outcome of their previously planned ecological mitigations.

Neil Bolton
Jerry Pett