A response to Tasley Garden Village

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Introduction

This note analyses how the proposals at 'Tasley Garden Village' meet the Garden City principles that the consultation material claims.

The location, to the western edge of Bridgnorth further extends the settlement in an unsustainable direction, away from the main employment areas of the town and the region, (being at Stanmore Business Park, Wolverhampton/Black Country or Telford). Whilst some employment may be provided on site (though not by Taylor Wimpey as a pure housing developer) there are doubts about the demand (if any) for employment space in this location and it is unlikely that this would provide jobs for many residents.

The promoter's own consultant estimates that 75% of peak time (i.e. workers) traffic generation would travel to remote destinations – mainly on the single route east, across the river Severn. It therefore presents poor land use planning, were this site to come forward as the preferred location in the Local Plan as it is far less sustainable than the alternative location at Stanmore Garden Village.

Assessment of Tasley Garden Village based on Garden Village Principles

Garden Village Principles

The Tasley promotion by Taylor Wimpey promotes itself as a Garden Village. This is a statement of intent that is based on nine core principles that need to be delivered to achieve a settlement worthy of Garden City status. These nine principles have been updated from the original principles by the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) for use in a 21st century context.

A Garden City is a holistically planned new settlement which enhances the natural environment and offers high-quality affordable housing and locally accessible work in beautiful, healthy and sociable communities. The Garden City Principles are an indivisible and interlocking framework for their delivery, and include:

1. Land value capture for the benefit of the community

There is no mention of land value capture in any of the marketing materials. This is a key commitment to the place being 'owned' in part by its community and the promoter needs to commit to community investment to ensure the right mix of housing, affordability and the long term stewardship of the landscape and parkland . Without it embedded in the approach to the development, volume housebuilders invariably construct the buildings and landscape then move away without taking a long-term view in the settlement.

2. Strong vision, leadership and community engagement

As evidenced by the recent 'consultation', the standard approach to development will likely be undertaken. Strong Council leadership will be needed to require the promoter to include the community through the design of the scheme to ensure it meets the needs of the local residents.

3. Community ownership of land and long-term stewardship of assets

This sits alongside principle 1 with LVC creating the framework for community ownership of its certain assets. No mention of this has been provided in the marketing material

4. Mixed-tenure homes and housing types that are genuinely affordable

The affordability of the majority of Taylor Wimpey homes is questioned given the need to deliver increased shareholder returns year on year. There should be a commitment to real affordability for local residents based on evidence of average local wages. Providing affordable housing tied to local employment or key worker status is desirable but houses in this location will be remote from jobs.

5. A wide range of local jobs in the Garden City within easy commuting distance of homes

The scheme does include an area of employment although an allocation is already in place at Tasley next to the relocation site for the Livestock Market and growth at Stanmore (with release of land from Green Belt) is envisaged for B2 use. The Tasley allocation should be completed before more employment is brought forward further out from the town. The Consortium's surveyors however cast doubt upon the existence of any real demand for employment land in this remote location whereas demand is known to be strong at Stanmore. In order not to flood the market with too much similar employment, different models of working need to be embraced complementary to the these.

6. Beautifully and imaginatively designed homes with gardens, combining the best of town and country to create healthy communities, and including opportunities to grow food

As currently envisaged, only standard house types are planned at Tasley Garden Village. These boxes are neither beautiful, imaginative nor reflect the character of Bridgnorth. There appears to be good access to open space although food growing and community activity around this is not indicated, or any network connection of open space that makes it a place you would plan to go to.

7. Development that enhances the natural environment, providing a comprehensive green infrastructure network and net biodiversity gains, and that uses zero-carbon and energy-positive technology to ensure climate resilience

As mentioned in principle 6, there is a positive response to the quantum of public open space. There is however little to distinguish it from standard suburban amenity space, any network connection nor any commitment to achieving a net carbon zero settlement. Shropshire has declared a climate emergency and therefore this should be required for such an aspirational place. Strong cultural, recreational and shopping facilities in walkable, vibrant, sociable neighbourhoods

A local centre has been provided. There is little detail about it apart from standard urban block forms. It is unclear how this would compete with the planned local Neighbourhood Centre in the existing allocation at Tasley. Importantly it is phased late in the programme thereby leaving early residents with the arduous task of crossing the bypass to access any form of facility for several years and will create habits of going 'elsewhere'.. This does not create strong cultural or social neighbourhoods.

8. Integrated and accessible transport systems, with walking, cycling and public transport designed to be the most attractive forms of local transport

The proposals state claim easy access into Bridgnorth whereas there is little evidence to show how such access is to be achieved. Only one location for crossing the Bypass is shown and no details of how residents would avoid traffic on the busy A458.

It is clear that the development is a Garden Village in name only and a standard suburban layout in practice.

Further assessment of Tasley Garden Village

Visibility of the settlement

Comments will be made by Landscape Consultants but we would contest the assertion that the development at Tasley Garden Village is 'well' or 'self-contained'. Bridgnorth sits on a ridge that extends westwards. The site therefore open to the southern slopes of the Mor valley and in fact is exposed to the south over long distances, beyond Harpswood. This has the effect of extending the unbroken settlement of Bridgnorth westwards towards Morville.

Whereas the already-committed development in Tasley would complete the settlement of Bridgnorth to the west, it is believed that allocating the "Garden Village" site will create potential suburban expansion sprawl across the whole of the northern half of the valley, particularly given that once the Bridgwalton Quarry works are completed to Telegraph Lane then this becomes the next logical location for settlement expansion.

It is noteworthy that the Council's SLAA referred to part of this site (originally identified as BRD023) "being 'separated' from the residential built form by the A458…." And there is nothing in the (now enlarged) proposal which improves that position.

Placemaking

Fundamental to the success of a garden village is the provision of suitable community facilities at its heart. Taylor Wimpey in its marketing documents quote Ebenezer Howard -

"The advantages of the most energetic and active town life, with all the beauty and delight of the country, may be secured in perfect combination".

Further, more recent guidance is quoted from the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) –

New garden villages may be developed as 'distinct settlements' only where there are sufficient employment and community facilities provided within the development to support the population and where there is an affordable and easily accessible public transport system linking the new garden village with its 'parent' town or city."

The development is located to the southern side of the busy A458 road that bypasses Bridgnorth. As part of the proposed development (adopted allocation) of Tasley on the north side of the A458 and north of the connecting Wenlock Road, there is the allocation of a new local centre, incorporating convenience retail, day care, health and fitness and petrol station. This would service the existing settlement that it directly connects into and the new community of some 500 homes as well as recently built housing. The local centre would present to the main road and therefore be a service for attract passing trade also. Given the proximity of this proposed local centre to the Tasley 'Garden Village' there would be competition between these two facilities for viable uses which the Centre on Wenlock Road would almost certainly win. Whilst the Garden Village in its completed entirety of 1750 homes could possibly accommodate a local centre, the early release of 1050 is unlikely to be enough for one to be viable. In addition, the difficulty in accessing the rest of Bridgnorth, including the intended Tasley neighbourhood centre, increases the likelihood of use of private transport to access daily services.

Taylor Wimpey acknowledge that a primary school 'may' be provided as part of a later phase but the proximity of Castlefields Primary school and its apparent ability for enlargement makes this very unlikely. As the NHS Clinical Commissioning Group has advised that it would not support a doctors' surgery outside Bridgnorth town centre, the elements of Shops, School and Surgery will all be absent from the 'Local Centre' leaving an open space which may eventually be filled with more housing. This is at odds with the concept of a Garden Village having 'a heart'.

Delivering a local centre will be key to creating the genus loci of the 'garden village'. Without it, the settlement will only become a suburban expansion with little benefit other than space. With such poor connectivity to the proposed local centre, as it stands, the likelihood will be the 'garden village' will simply become a very large housing estate for all time.

Furthermore there will be an expectation that Taylor Wimpey will use its standard national house types rather than creating characterful homes based on

the Bridgnorth vernacular. We would advise that the recommendations of the report Living with beauty, the report of the Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission should be followed.

Phasing of the development

The proposed phasing of the development is important to ensure the successful creation of a community. Currently, the school and local centre are 'phased' from years 9 to 16 of the development, therefore focussing on entirely residential development in the early years. This approach to phasing, whilst delivering housing, does not enable healthy nor integrated communities nor does it contribute to quality placemaking. The essence of a garden village is its focus on community. Places to meet are important to build community resilience. Leaving such places until late in the programme causes the community to seek alternative off-site facilities creating habits that become embedded. And the entire viability of provision of any 'local centre' facilities remains in considerable doubt.

In addition, the delivery of the Country Park is phased to very late in the process; this will put pressure on other open spaces around the town. The Country Park, like the community facilities should be brought forward to provide access to immediate high-quality amenity space for use by the residents. It currently looks like an uninspiring grassed area with boundary planting. It should also be designed to create a rich variety of spaces and environments for public and wildlife.

Connectivity

Given the current phasing of development, it is even more important that the new community could easily access existing facilities by walking and cycling. The publicised proposals suggest provision of a grade separated bridge over the A458. This isn't however indicated on the masterplan and it is notable that the promoter's Transportation consultant maintains that a high-level crossing 'isn't necessary'. Notwithstanding this, a single point of access via a bridge across the road is an unattractive method of moving between the site, the local centre and Bridgnorth town centre. It is felt that such a structure would create a psychological barrier to movement encouraging the community to use private cars instead or to cross roads on foot in potentially unsafe places.

Land use areas

The local centre is stated to include a primary school. The marketing information states an area of 1.2ha for this. This is very small and based only on a 1 Form Entry school. This area would need to be increased to 2ha to accommodate flexibility for a 2 Form Entry primary School – but as noted earlier it seems far more logical (and financially viable) to extend Castlefields Primary school. The loss of a school in a Garden Village is the loss of its heart and soul.

Access to affordable housing

Taylor Wimpey is a national housebuilder, listed on the stockmarket and, as the country's largest volume housebuilder, has a current unbuilt land bank of well over 140,000 units excluding sites such as this without planning consent. Their approach is driven by numbers and the need to maintain/increase profits for the City and dividends for shareholders. This quest to maximise profits combined with a monopoly of house delivery in the Bridgnorth area gives the developer the ability to set the price of new housing – and the likelihood of the developer pricing the local community out of the market is high.

Even the 'affordable' homes, presented to market at 80% of normal costs may well be out of reach of local incomes. Bridgnorth already has elevated house prices as a desirable place to live. Allowing Taylor Wimpey to control the local market in new housing for 25+ years will only exacerbate this situation.