

EAST HERTS DISTRICT PLAN

VILLAGE POLICY – DISCUSSION PAPER

Introduction

1. This discussion paper has been produced to seek comments on a potential change to the proposed development strategy for the villages and rural area as set out in the draft District Plan, published in 2014.

Current position

2. The draft policy approach to development in the villages, as set out in the draft District Plan, follows a similar methodology to the existing policy contained in the Local Plan 2007. This methodology seeks to rank the villages in a hierarchy, based on an assessment of their sustainability and ability to accommodate development. Each village is assigned into a group with Group 1 villages, assessed as being the most sustainable locations for development, expected to accommodate at least a 10% growth in dwellings from a 2011 base through small scale and infill development. Parish Councils are encouraged to develop Neighbourhood Plans to accommodate at least this level of growth.
3. The approach to development in the Group 2 and Group 3 villages is more restrictive, with only infill development being permitted within the built up area of Group 2 villages. Development in Group 3 villages is considered to be inappropriate except in a limited number of specific circumstances.

Issues with the Council's current position

4. There has been much discussion surrounding the recently published Village Hierarchy Study, which forms the basis for the categorisation of villages. The methodology used has resulted in just six Group 1 villages being identified; therefore these six villages will be expected to accommodate the vast majority of the housing growth allocated to villages in the District Plan over the next 20 years. Whilst these villages have been identified as being the most sustainable locations with the ability to accommodate development, the Council is now considering whether there is a more equitable way to distribute development across the villages and rural area, which could contribute to sustaining the vitality of the smaller villages in the district.
5. There is also an issue to be considered with regard to the restrictive policy approach to development in Group 2 and 3 villages and whether this is in accordance with both existing and emerging national policy. This is addressed further below.

National Context

6. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) promotes sustainable development in rural areas where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. The associated Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) on Rural Housing is clear that ‘all settlements can play a role in delivering sustainable development in rural areas’. Particular reference is made to the concept of development in one village supporting services in a nearby village, where a group of small villages have a functional relationship with each other. The guidance goes on to state that ‘blanket policies restricting housing development in some settlements and preventing other settlements from expanding should be avoided unless their use can be supported by robust evidence’. This raises an issue with the Council’s proposed approach to development proposals in Group 3 villages and consideration needs to be given as to whether more villages are capable of accommodating a limited amount of development.
7. In terms of restricting development within the rural area, the NPPF only seeks to restrict the development of isolated dwellings in the countryside. The inference here is that development of sites adjacent to the built up area of a village should not automatically be resisted, if the development, on balance, is deemed to be sustainable.
8. It is clear from national policy that villages are expected to play their part in ‘significantly boosting the supply of housing’ – the key aim of the NPPF. The NPPF and recent appeal decisions received by the Council indicate that villages are considered to be sustainable locations for development. The Council needs to consider whether the proposed policy approach to development in villages and the rural area is consistent with national policy, particularly with regard to the development potential of smaller villages.

Alternative policy approach

9. The alternative policy approach that the Council is considering would be to permit small scale and infill development across a wider number of named villages in the district and the removal of the current process of village categorisation. The village policy approach will also need to have regard to the district’s Green Belt. There are four villages in the district that are inset from the Green Belt and many more that are washed over by the Green Belt. The NPPF continues to afford a high degree of protection to the Green Belt and this will need to be reflected in the policy approach taken forward.

10. It is proposed that small scale and infill development within the confines of the four villages that are inset from the Green Belt (Hertford Heath, Tewin, Stanstead Abbots & St Margarets, Watton-at-Stone) will continue to be permitted. However, these villages will be encouraged to consider whether it is appropriate to amend their Green Belt boundary through the formulation of a Neighbourhood Plan, to accommodate additional development especially where it contributes to wider sustainability objectives and the delivery of community benefits.
11. It is proposed that infill development only is permitted in villages that are washed over by the Green Belt. This is in accordance with national policy.
12. The approach to development for the villages that do not lie within the Green Belt will be slightly different. It is not proposed that these villages continue to have fixed 'development boundaries' as their removal allows the Council the flexibility to consider each planning application on its own merits, both within or adjacent to the main built up area of a village. A fixed 'development boundary' seeks to unduly restrict development and it is not considered that this approach is in accordance with a national policy approach that has at its heart a presumption in favour of sustainable development.
13. The Council will adopt a criteria based approach to assess new proposals for development in all the villages, which is commensurate with the size and relative sustainability of the village, as identified by the Village Hierarchy Study. It should be emphasised that the Council will continue to seek to protect the open countryside from inappropriate development in line with the NPPF; however, it is clear from national policy and the consideration of recent appeal decisions that development adjacent to a village cannot automatically be deemed to be inappropriate. Therefore it is proposed that small scale and infill development within, and adjacent to the existing main built-up area of the village will be permitted, subject to the relevant criteria detailed within the policy being satisfied.
14. In determining what constitutes small scale and infill development, the Council will not attempt to impose arbitrary upper limits on the number of dwellings included in any application. The number of dwellings considered appropriate will vary from village to village and each application will be considered on its merits with regard to the stated criteria.

Pros of current policy approach

- Provides a degree of certainty to communities as to where development is to take place, with site allocations being made within Neighbourhood Plans.

- Is a recognised approach and communities have commenced work on their Neighbourhood Plans on the basis of the current policy approach. The Council would not wish to see communities lose the momentum that has been established in this area.
- Greater potential for delivery of larger sites (over 10 dwellings) with associated benefits of affordable housing delivery, funds for enhancements to infrastructure etc.

Cons of current policy approach

- Vast majority of development is concentrated in six villages whilst smaller villages, which may wish to accommodate some development, face a more restrictive policy position.
- Proposed fixed development boundaries and restrictive policy approach to development outside of these boundaries does not accord with national policy.

Pros of amended policy approach

- Wider distribution of development across the villages and rural area, with development helping to support existing services, particularly those in smaller settlements.
- Greater potential for incremental growth of villages; development is more likely to come forward on small sites under this policy approach rather than the allocation of large sites.
- Better fit with existing and emerging national policy on development in smaller villages.
- Greater potential for sites to become available for development by small local builders or self-build opportunities.

Cons of amended policy approach

- Lack of certainty over delivery rates. If Parish Council's choose not to allocate specific sites for development through Neighbourhood Plans, development will just come forward as windfall development. There will be the need for a review mechanism within the policy (as there is now) whereby if the housing target for the villages and rural area is not being met, the District Council will need to review the policy and potentially allocate specific sites for development.
- Difficulty of assessing cumulative impacts of small scale and infill development proposals across the rural area.
- Incremental growth on small sites (under 10 dwellings) may not provide delivery of affordable housing or any funds for enhancements to infrastructure etc.

Historical Rates of Delivery in Villages and Rural Area

15. It is also appropriate to consider historical rates of housing delivery in the districts villages and rural area. The Local Plan 2007 adopted a fairly restrictive approach to development outside of the Category 1 villages, similar to that proposed within the draft District Plan. Notwithstanding this, significant development has occurred on windfall sites across the rural area.
16. Between 1st April 2007 and 31st March 2015, there were 793 dwellings completed in Rural Parishes. Of these, 446 dwellings (56%) were completed on allocated sites in Category 1 Villages and 347 dwellings (44%) were completed on windfall sites across the whole rural area, such as infill sites within the Category 1 and 2 Villages and dwellings approved in Category 3 Villages and open countryside. This equates to an average windfall development rate of 43 dwellings per year across the rural area. If this rate of windfall development were to continue over the next 15 years, approximately 650 dwellings would be delivered.

Conclusion

17. At this stage, the Council has not made a decision as to its preferred approach. The amended policy approach has been proposed following feedback concerning the Village Hierarchy Study and further consideration of current and emerging national policy regarding development in villages and the rural area.
18. It is not envisaged that the alternative policy approach proposed will result in a significant increase in the number of dwellings being delivered in the villages and the rural area from the historical rate of delivery seen in these areas over the past few years. Whilst there may be an increase in the number of small sites coming forward for development, this would be countered by a reduction in the number of larger site allocations. It is acknowledged that there may be some concern about the removal of fixed 'development boundaries' but it is felt that the criteria based approach to assessing planning applications will be sufficiently robust to resist inappropriate development in these villages.
19. Any comments regarding the policy approach to be taken to development in the villages and rural area should be directed to Planning Policy at planningpolicy@eastherts.gov.uk.
20. There will be the opportunity for further discussion of the issue at the EHAPTC meeting at 10am on Thursday May 5th 2016. Following this meeting the Council will finalise its policy approach to development in the villages and rural area for inclusion in the District Plan.