

EAST HERTS DISTRICT PLAN

VILLAGE POLICY - DISCUSSION PAPER

RESPONSE BY JED GRIFFITHS MA DipTP FRTPI Past President RTPI

Introduction

1. This note has been compiled in response to a discussion paper on village planning policy, issued by East Herts District Council in March 2016. The Council produced the discussion paper following reaction to an earlier Village Hierarchy Study, which was published for consultation in the autumn of 2015.
2. The Village Hierarchy Study was undertaken in order to provide the evidence base for the District Council's policy approach to development in villages. The policy framework was set out in the draft District Plan, which was published for consultation in early 2014. It uses a tried and tested methodology, which in the past has generated a set of robust and successful policies, as set out in the East Herts Local Plan Second Review April 2007.
3. The basis of the current and proposed policy is to rank each village into a hierarchy, based on sustainability criteria, and the assessed capacity of settlements to absorb future development. Thus, Group 1 villages in the draft District Plan are considered to be the most suitable locations for development, and are expected to accommodate at least a 10% growth in dwellings from a 2011 base line. Town and Parish Councils have been encouraged by the District Council to prepare Neighbourhood Plans to provide sufficient land for the proposed level of housing growth. Standon Parish Council has accepted this invitation, which is the basis for the Neighbourhood Plan now under preparation. Under these arrangements, future development in the Parish would be concentrated on Standon and Puckeridge.
4. Outside of the Group 1 villages, the proposed approach to development is more restrictive, with only limited infill development being permitted within the defined boundaries Group 2 villages. Colliers End is the only Group 2 village in Standon Parish. Elsewhere, development in Group 3 villages is considered to be inappropriate except in a limited number of specific exceptions.

Policy Development

5. The use of a village hierarchy as the basis for rural settlements policy has an established history in Hertfordshire, dating originally from the Hertfordshire County Structure Plan, approved by the Secretary of State for the Environment in 1979. In the same year, the County Council, supported by the ten District Councils and rural organisations, published a detailed Rural Settlements Study. The report examined the role and status of Hertfordshire's villages and their changing needs.
6. As a result of the Rural Settlements Study, a new set of policies were included in the Hertfordshire County Structure Plan Alterations 1980. Although the details were changed, the principle of the village hierarchy was retained. The policy, formally approved in 1984, formed the basis of subsequent village policies in the emerging District Local Plans, including East Hertfordshire.
7. In the early 1990s, the scope of planning nationally was extended to embrace the principles of sustainable development, to take account of social and economic factors as well as the environment. In Hertfordshire, the County Structure Plan review was linked explicitly to a set of sustainability aims, one of which was to support the rural economy and rural life. More flexibility was given to District Councils, in their local plans, to create more sustainable rural communities.
8. In March 1999, East Herts Council published a consultation report to support the East Hertfordshire Local Plan Review. It was this report which proposed a Village Development Strategy, containing the three tier approach to settlement policy. The approach was underpinned by the results of a Housing Needs Study 1996, which demonstrated the clear need for affordable housing in rural areas. Compared to previous policies, the East Herts approach showed a positive attitude to encourage development appropriate to villages and rural communities. These principles were later incorporated into the East Herts Local Plan Second Review April 2007.
9. As explained in the East Herts Council discussion paper, the results of the current Village Hierarchy Study indicate that six Group 1 villages have been identified, including Standon and Puckeridge. The Council state that these six Group 1 villages would accommodate the "vast majority" of the housing growth allocated to villages over the next 20 years.

The National Context

10. Reference is made to the national context, and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which promotes sustainable development in rural areas. In addition, the associated on-line Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) states that “all settlements can play a part in delivering sustainable development in rural areas.” Reference is made to the principle 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 PPG also states that “blanket policies restricting development in some settlements and preventing other settlements from expanding should be avoided unless their use can be supported by robust evidence.” As a result, East Herts Council is questioning whether its proposed approach to development in Group 3 villages is sound and whether more villages are capable of accommodating “a limited amount” of development.
11. In their interpretation of the NPPF, East Herts Council consider that villages are expected to play their part in “significantly boosting the supply of housing” – a key aim of the NPPF. This view is open to challenge. The NPPF (paragraph 54) states that local planning authorities should be responsive to local circumstances. They should plan housing development to reflect local housing needs, particularly for affordable housing, including through rural exception sites where appropriate. In particular they should also consider “whether allowing some market housing would facilitate the provision of significant additional affordable housing to meet local needs.”
12. The NPPF (paragraph 55) also states that housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. Where there are groupings of smaller settlements, development in one village may support services in other villages nearby.
13. Contrary to the view expressed by East Herts Council, it is clear that the NPPF does allow and expect local planning authorities to plan according to local circumstances. This is the very foundation of both the current and proposed rural settlement policies, where housing and service provision is focused on key settlements. In East Hertfordshire, there are several functional groupings of villages, which are inter-dependent in terms of facilities and services.

Comment on Proposed Changes

14. The main proposed change to policy would be to the villages in the rural area beyond the Green Belt. It is suggested that fixed “development boundaries” should be removed, as this would give Council the flexibility to consider each planning application on its own merits, both within or adjacent to the main built-up area. The Council’s view is that a fixed boundary seeks unduly to restrict development. This argument is flawed. In order to operate the proposed policy, it would be necessary for planning purposes to identify the “main built-up area”. In previous iterations of policy, the village boundaries are not fixed in perpetuity – they have been drawn in accordance with the required housing needs for the plan period.
15. The Council state that they will adopt a criteria-based approach to assess new proposals for development in all the villages, commensurate with size and “relative sustainability” as identified by the Village Hierarchy Study. It is proposed that small-scale and infill development within and adjacent to the existing main built-up area will be permitted, subject to the criteria within the policy being satisfied. Again, there is the question of what is the boundary of the “main built-up area”? What does the Council mean by “small-scale” development? Paragraph 14 of the discussion paper does not help in that respect.
16. The “pros” and “cons” discussion of the respective approaches does help to illuminate the Council’s dilemma, but it also reinforces the argument to retain the policy as set out in the District Plan consultation draft of 2014. Local Plans should provide certainty as to where development is to take place – this has been the strength of previous development plans in East Herts. In the 2014 draft District Plan, East Herts Council clearly stated its intention to continue with the village hierarchy, as expressed in policies VILL1 and VILL2. In the selected villages, Parish Councils are invited to deliver allocated sites for housing by means of Neighbourhood Plans. This process is well under way. In its paper, the Council states that “it would not wish to see communities lose the momentum that has been established.” If that is the case, why has the Council introduced this degree of uncertainty and confusion?
17. Most of the town and parish councils in East Hertfordshire are now at an advanced stage in the preparation of their Neighbourhood Plans. In Standon Parish, the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group is confident that it can deliver sites for “at least” 150 dwellings over the plan period to 2031. The choices are about to be made, which will give the Parish Council and the community a degree of local control over not only the quantity, but also the type and mix of housing appropriate for the needs of the area.

18. The discussion paper sets out details of housing completions in the villages and rural areas during the period 2007 and 2015. Figures show that the amount of housing development on windfall sites has exceeded expectations, at a rate of 43 dwellings per annum. If this rate of development were to continue over the next 15 years, windfall sites alone could produce 645 dwellings. This figure is questionable, however, as many of the windfall sites have been on “brown field” land, such as former petrol fillings stations or redundant farm or industrial buildings.
19. These figures do not include the anticipated completions on sites at Buntingford and elsewhere which have been permitted, or allowed on appeal, in the past two to three years. Once these developments are completed, the result will be an upsurge of development in the rural area beyond the Green Belt, far in excess of the 500 dwellings set out in the draft District Plan.
20. Recent experiences have reinforced the need for the District Council to retain a strong rural settlements policy. The lack of a five year housing land supply and an up-to-date development plan has meant that decisions on planning applications and appeals are being made by reference to the NPPF and its presumption in favour of sustainable development. Local policy has been over-ridden by the national drive to boost the supply of housing.
21. These issues can only be resolved by the adoption of an up-to-date District Plan and the allocation of sufficient sites to provide for the “objectively-assessed needs” of East Hertfordshire as a whole. The majority of these sites will occur in the southern part of the District, as urban extensions or in major development sites released from the Green Belt. In terms of sustainability, this is the most effective strategy. The south is where public transport, major infrastructure and services are concentrated. To adopt a more permissive policy framework in the rural area beyond the Green Belt would neither be sustainable nor cost-effective. Judged on recent experience, it would amount to an open door for speculative developers and the volume house-builders.
22. In its conclusion, the Council state that “it is not envisaged that the alternative policy approach will result in a significant increase in the number of dwellings being delivered in the villages and the rural area.” This statement is rejected. Retention of the village policies as proposed would give both the District Council and Local Councils a degree of control and influence over the rate of development in rural areas. Further, it would ensure that the type and mix of development would be appropriate to the needs of the local communities.

Conclusion

23. Planning is more than housing numbers. For East Hertfordshire, the District Plan should embrace a rural strategy which contains four elements:

- Controlling and locating development;
- Conserving the rural environment;
- Sustaining rural communities, and;
- Co-ordinating facilities and services.

24. The first two of these elements are linked. Only by controlling the rate and location of development can the local planning authority ensure the protection and enhancement of the local environment. The District Council is urged to reject the proposed changes in the District Plan policies on villages and to retain the approach set out in the 2014 consultation draft. This is the most sustainable approach, and is in line with the aims of the NPPF.

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Hertford

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