

# Local Development Framework Core Strategy

*Examination - 24 June to 11 July, 2008*



Hearing Statement in respect of Matter 4

Essex County Council



## **MATTER 4**

### **RURAL COMMUNITIES**

**Whether the strategy and policies will encourage thriving and sustainable rural communities and improve access to jobs and services in rural areas.**

**Tests:** 4-9

**Policies:** NE2, H2, H3, H4, CE1

#### **ISSUES**

- (a) Does policy CE1 adequately provide for future employment to help sustain the economic base of rural areas?

Policy CE1 provides overall guidance for the identification of employment land and support for economic development. It provides sufficient guidance at the strategic level to guide rural economic development when combined with national guidance in PPS7 (CBC/NAT/004).

The evidence base for Core Strategy rural employment policies includes the Employment Land Review 2007 (CBC/EB/030) which was prepared according to employment land review guidance (CBC/NAT/040). The study included the assessment of rural employment sites identified under Local Plan policy EMP5. The study found a low 3% vacancy rate of rural employment premises indicating a strong demand for rural premises; however it is also noted that care needs to be taken to ensure that traffic generated by rural employment sites does not detrimentally affect the local environment and the road network. The employment land review found that 70.1% of all new employment floor space required in the Borough will be within use class B1a, whilst 13% will be within B1c and B2 and 16.9% within B8. Although it is noted that rural locations can prove attractive locations for offices, town centre or mixed use centre locations are more appropriate given the higher levels of accessibility particularly by public transport.

Existing rural employment sites, however, do have the potential to provide other B use class employment as recognised within policy CE3 (Employment Zones) which will help sustain the economic base of rural areas. Policy CE1 also recognises that small scale employment related development in the countryside may be acceptable if they have low travel needs and low impacts. Policy ENV2 provides for favourable consideration for small-scale rural business schemes that are appropriate to local employment needs, minimize negative environmental impacts and harmonise with the local character and

surrounding natural environment. More detailed guidance on rural employment will be developed through the Site Allocations and Development Policies DPD process and through the preparation of Parish Plans, which can identify particular employment opportunities in rural areas. Further evidence to support this approach is contained within the Countryside Agency's report entitled 'Are Villages Sustainable' (ref. CBC/NAT/049).

- (b) Is it appropriate to continue to use the Local Plan village boundaries to limit rural housing development?

Local Plan village settlement boundaries provide an easily-understood and long standing basis for assessing the appropriateness of new village development. 42 village envelope boundaries were mapped in the Local Plan as 'Principal' and 'Small' Villages. They were defined on the basis of the principles that they safeguarded the form and character of the village; they defined the main nucleus of the settlement; and they excluded ribbons or loose scatters of housing which it would be undesirable to consolidate. (Local Plan para 13.43, CBC/EB/011). The Local Plan Inspector in his 2003 report (CBC/EB/066 para. 13.6.1) supported the focus of the limited development in villages on Principal Villages and largely rejected changes to village envelopes on the basis that they prevented expansion into more open areas, which would bring about undesirable sprawl (CBC/EB/066 para. 2.4.1). The Inspector noted that by definition, sites for rural exception affordable housing needed to be outside the village envelopes and not identified in local plans (CBC/EB/066 para. 2.4.1).

The Local Plan principles are considered to remain appropriate and it is proposed to carry current village settlement boundaries forward for consultation in the new Proposals Map that is being prepared as part of the Site Allocations DPD development process. Parishes or other interested parties could seek to modify the boundaries through this process, but it would be expected that the status quo will largely be maintained. This reflects the fact that the Core Strategy does not propose any extensions to settlement boundaries and instead provides for a limited amount of new development within settlement boundaries on infill sites and previously developed land. Provision for specific forms of development outside settlement boundaries further to national guidance in PPS3 (CBC/NAT/002) and PPS7 (CBC/NAT/004) is made for appropriate small-scale rural business schemes and local affordable housing schemes, thus minimising future need to modify settlement boundaries. Any reviews made to rural settlement boundaries would accordingly be of a minor nature and inappropriate at the strategic Core Strategy level.

- (c) Given that most of the allocation to villages already has permission, would the strategy in effect place an embargo on new housing in villages? Would this be harmful to rural vitality?

The Core Strategy seeks to provide a balance between protecting village character and supporting continued rural vitality. As noted in Section 5.7.1 of the Sustainability Appraisal (CBC/SUB/002), the Core Strategy rural policy is compatible with regional policy SS4 (CBC/REG/014A), which provide that 'for other rural settlements they (LDDs) should seek to support the continued viability of agriculture and other economic activities such as tourism, the diversification of the economy, the provision of housing for local needs and the sustainability of local services.'

This regional policy direction takes account of the dominance of larger towns on the surrounding rural hinterland and the consequent need for a carefully tailored approach to the issues of particular villages:

Many villages have very limited local services and are dependent on key service centres, market towns and main urban areas for everyday needs....The growth of villages has been unable to halt the closure of village services and commuting has increased dramatically. Careful examination of how a settlement or groups of settlements function is required, as well as analysis of the service base, to determine the best solutions for each area. (Paras 3.19, 3.20 East of England Plan CBC/REG/014A).

New housing development in villages is very constrained due to the Core Strategy's Town Centre focus, but it is not considered to constitute a total embargo, given the support for the appropriate development of infill sites and previously developed land within the settlement development boundaries of villages. The process of sustainability appraisal of the Core Strategy included consideration of the level of development appropriate to villages. Two options covered village housing at the Issues and Options stage – Option C, development in selected small towns and larger villages, and Option G, village infill and edge of village development. These options were discounted at that stage due to the availability of more sustainable sites in urban areas compatible with national policy guidance (Issues and Options Report CBC/EB/017 and Preferred Options Report CBC/EB/018).

The Core Strategy approach to very limited new development in villages thus continues the incremental small scale growth pattern that has characterised their historic development. The Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (CBC/EB/031) provided an adjusted 15 year projection for small sites in villages of approximately 10 units per year for all the villages outside Colchester, Stanway, Tiptree, West Mersea and Wivenhoe. This low number reflects that the SHLAA found that

'outside Colchester the opportunities to make residential allocations on PDL would appear to be very limited' Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (para 8.26, CBC/EB/031). The key area for growth in village housing is thus intended to be for affordable housing, primarily outside village envelope boundaries where it constitutes an exception to meet identified local affordable housing needs. The Sustainability Appraisal (Appendix C) (CBC/SUB/002) notes that 'Policy ENV1 restricts the delivery of significant levels of new housing in villages, but the policy addresses the need for affordable housing by making it the main focus for exceptions.' PPS3 recognises that a key mechanism for addressing the need for affordable housing in rural mechanisms is to allocate sites outside village envelopes solely for affordable housing including using a Rural Exception Site Policy (para. 30, CBC/NAT/02). Policy ENV2 provides the basis to provide such a detailed policy in the Development Policies DPD, if appropriate, and to allocate exception sites in the Site Allocations DPD. An example of a successful rural affordable housing exception site development is an eleven unit development in Fordham opened in 2007 which was carried out in a partnership by the Rural Housing Trust and Fordham Parish Council, with support from Colchester Borough Council.

Parish Plans and Village Design Statements (VDS) are key to the Core Strategy approach to planning for villages. 18 out of 32 parishes in Colchester are currently in the process of developing either a Parish Plan or a VDS, which will then be used as part of the LDF evidence base and as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications. The Council works closely with parishes and the Rural Community Council of Essex to ensure that parish work takes on board the wider planning context in its consideration of local needs.

- (d) Should a significant element of affordable housing in villages be expected to come forward as part of market housing schemes within village boundaries rather than exception sites outside village boundaries?

As noted in the response to c) above, given the limited number of larger sites in villages, it would be expected that the provision of affordable housing will primarily need to be addressed through a policy in the Development Policies DPD providing for exception sites outside the village settlement boundaries defined on the Site allocations Proposals Map. The lower land costs of exception sites increases the viability of affordable housing schemes.

Policy H4 has been specifically worded to acknowledge the particular requirements of rural areas. As noted in the response to Matter 3.2c, since very few large sites come forward in villages it is proposed to lower the threshold to three units to maximise the potential for market housing to contribute to affordable housing.

- (e) If so, are there enough opportunities for infill and redevelopment of previously developed land in villages in line with policy NE2 (renamed ENV2)?

See answer to (c) above.

- (f) Are the density and housing mix guidelines in Tables H2a and H3a appropriate for villages?

The guidelines in Tables H2a and H3a are considered generally appropriate to the low density, small scale nature of most villages. The tables are, however, indicative only and there could be instances in the heart of a village where a higher density scheme providing flats could be appropriate, particularly in larger villages. This could be determined through several means, including Village Design Statements, Parish Plans, Supplementary Planning Documents and design and access statements; the development of master plans/development briefs; and in the consideration of particular planning applications. Examples of this approach include the Tile House Farm development in Great Horkesley and a development in East Road, West Mersea.

- (g) Is there a conflict between growth and the natural or historic environment in the rural areas?

Planning seeks to mediate conflicts between growth and protection of the natural and historic environment. In the rural areas of Colchester, that balance is considered to lie with a focus on the restriction of growth due to the particularly sensitive character of rural areas and the greater sustainability of development in urban areas.

See also the response to Matter 7(b).

- (h) How will transport in rural areas be improved?

The Second Local Transport Plan (CBC/EB/006) outlines Essex County Council's continuing commitments to improve accessibility, tackle social exclusion and encourage sustainable transport in rural areas. Where additional housing is provided in rural areas, funding will be sought through planning obligations to ensure connectivity by sustainable modes of transport, including enhancing and promoting public transport services and providing safe pedestrian and cycle links.

- (i) Should policy NE2 (renamed ENV2) include encouragement for tourism and leisure activities in rural areas?

Tourism and leisure activities are considered to fall within the scope of ENV2's support for 'small scale rural business schemes that are appropriate to local employment needs, minimise negative environmental impacts, and harmonise with local character and surrounding natural environment'. Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS7): Sustainable Development in Rural Areas (CBC/NAT/004) sets out specific national planning policies on tourism and leisure in rural areas. It is not appropriate to repeat this in Policy ENV1.

As with the response to Matter 5 (a) on CE1, general guidance is considered to be sufficient at the Core Strategy level given the existence of national and regional policy. More detailed guidance on tourist and leisure facilities will be provided through the Development Policies and Site Allocations DPD.

A Guidance Note is also being prepared by the Council for farmers and developers concerning farm diversification in the countryside, including the re-use of existing buildings.