Growing Villages:
How should village growth be shaped in rural areas?

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THE CURRENT SYSTEM
In the current plan-making process at a district level, potential sites for new housing ‘allocations’ are assessed against a range of criteria as part of the Strategic Housing and Employment Land Availability Assessment (SHELAA) process. In rural areas a key criterion is the village classification within the Local Plan, where those villages classified as more sustainable based on their existing services are allocated a greater proportion of housing growth than small villages deemed less sustainable. Often, very little in the allocations process is based on design or landscape character. Green Belt policy, and other local planning designations, such as Important Countryside Frontages, Green Gaps or similar – as well as the national designation and protection of historic landscapes, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and similar – are considered. However, this is typically an ‘all or nothing’ approach where development is either permitted or proscribed in the designated areas. There is often very little involvement of local communities in the SHELAA assessment.

Where Authorities work with communities on site allocations it tends to be in reaction to sites proposed by landowners and agents, rather than proactively assessing which parts of villages and their surrounding landscapes might be best suited to accommodate additional homes, or where communities feel new development might sit most comfortably. When sites are translated into Local Plans and their site-specific or allocations policies, planners typically rely on general design policies, rather than site-specific policies to control the quality of design. These often require development to be ‘appropriate’, ‘high quality’ or designed with regard to ‘local context’ but provide little guidance to what this means in locally specific terms.

Design considerations are in reality spread between a number of different, often overlapping, policies, dealing with landscape, heritage, sustainability, transport and the technical standards for housing and amenity space. Standalone design guidance documents – of which the Essex Design Guide is probably the best known example – supplement Local Plan design policies but are typically generic with regard to the whole district or county area to which they apply. This can, inadvertently, lead to more ‘anyplace’ development proposals and reinforce the perception that growth erodes, rather than reinforces, the specific character of village communities.

Previous models of more locally specific design guidance, such as the Village Design Statement approach promoted by the Countryside Commission and Historic England in the early 2000s, tended to be descriptive of the existing fabric of the village, rather than propositional about how new development should extend and enhance its character. These were also, with some exceptions, developed by communities themselves with little consultation with their end-users: development management officers and developer design teams. While some were adopted as Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) or Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPGs), and have had success in being used to push for higher quality or defend the refusal of poor quality development, many were never taken seriously by their intended end-users.

The introduction of Neighbourhood Plans was intended as a mechanism for creating more locally specific plans and policy, including policy towards design. However, the intense volunteer effort and long time – up to 5 years is not uncommon – required to create a Neighbourhood Plan, with relatively little professional support, has led to challenges, and some plans have been found weak when tested against development proposals at appeal. Neighbourhood Plans have frequently been ‘beaten’ in timescale terms by developers, so that by the time they have been ‘made’ (adopted), their window to influence has passed and they are already out of date.

With the planning system having shifted considerably through the introduction of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the presumption in favour of sustainable development, it has become easier to gain planning permission for developments in the face of local opposition and even against the advice of specialist design officers within local authorities. Involvement of local communities is too often minimal; consultation when proposals are already well-developed, rather than dialogue throughout the design process. Planning officers need new ways to work with landowners and developers to site and design new developments that can earn broad support from both elected members and local communities. This needs to work with the requirements of viability and delivery to speed up the process of building much-needed new homes, not to slow it up. This research shows that this is what communities want as, in the main, they are not anti-growth in principle.

THE CASE FOR RURAL GROWTH
Rural areas offer a range of advantages over urban locations, from the perspectives of both residents and developers. For residents, rural homes offer:

- Larger house sizes and gardens for the price point, particularly relevant to families.
- Self-contained single-family dwellings bought freehold, with the ability to adapt and extend the home over time.
- A peaceful rural environment, with good air quality, quiet streets, and access to large green amenity spaces and the countryside for recreation.
- A perception of a safer environment particularly for children, with the ability to walk and cycle unaccompanied, and a lack of ‘bad neighbour’ uses.
- A perception of a more stable and close-knit community, with neighbours knowing each other, long-term residents, involvement in village activities, and social integration due to the smaller size of community.
- Relatively small, relatively good state schools.
- A lack of congestion, dedicated car parking within the curtilage of the home, with easy and convenient access to surrounding centres and attractions using car transport.
- A more ‘beautiful’ environment, typically shaped by the historic parts of a village and its distinctive features, whether landscape or built.

From the perspective of developers, rural locations offer:

- Land values that are relatively low compared to urban sites.
- Sites that are relatively unconstrained by contamination, utilities, existing development patterns and built context.
- Sites that are easy to build out in terms of construction logistics and access.
- Sites that can be built in phases and released gradually onto the market, due to the scale and nature of the homes (single family dwellings rather than multi-unit apartment buildings).
- A way of tapping into the large market for family homes which command a premium price.
- A more straightforward way of including affordable housing due to the single family dwelling typology (without issues around the design and management of shared common parts, for example).
- The ability to use standardised house designs, typically requiring only cosmetic variations.
- Less complexities from needing to accommodate a mix of uses.
Over, one of eight villages that South Cambridgeshire District Council are working with to develop locally specific Village Design Guides.

APPROACH

The findings and recommendations in this Practice Note draw on work with eight South Cambridgeshire communities: Caldecote; Fulbourn; Gamlingay; Histon and Impington; Over; Papworth Everard; Sawston; and Swavesey. This was carried out as part of work on a series of Village Design Guides that South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) are developing with funding from MHCLG’s Design Quality Fund. The Village Design Guides have been developed by external design consultants working in collaboration with village communities. The consultants were appointed through an open procurement process, and are practices working within urban design, masterplanning and architecture as well as policy, with experience designing projects in rural communities. The village input has been led by a ‘project champion’ nominated by each village and a steering group of village representatives drawn from a wide range of backgrounds.

Each consultant tailored the participatory process to both their own perspective and expertise, and the requirements and interests of the community steering group. This has led to a deliberately diverse range of approaches - for example, developing a village ‘fanzine’ with community members. Different methodologies have been tested with a view to understanding what works best to tease out the priorities and perceptions of the village community, produce robust and useable guidance documents, and make effective use of the resources available. Common approaches included a walking mapping workshop with the village steering group, other participatory workshops with groups such as children, elderly residents or village
societies, and taking part in community events already planned such as Apple Day. Characterisation and evidence gathering was typically followed by several workshops with the village steering group to develop draft guidance principles. Some of the Village Design Guides have also been dovetailed with concurrent Neighbourhood Plan development processes, and have been particularly useful at the early stages of the Neighbourhood Plan to give communities a backbone of analysis.

During the development of the new SPDs, their fitness for purpose has been tested and this has provided valuable insights. Draft guidance and findings from the villages have been used to inform live pre-application discussions with developers in those areas, as well as formal pre-application and application stage responses. The draft documents have also been reviewed by development management officers to test how useful and robust they are in the pressured environment of a live caseload. At the time of writing, most of the Village Design Guides are in statutory public consultation prior to adoption as Supplementary Planning Documents.
FINDINGS
The work on the Village Design Guides shows that while there are specific issues that are highly localised, there are common themes and perceptions that emerge across the board from local communities. These can be divided into concerns about the planning and development process; and concerns about the design of developments themselves.

1. Communities are not anti-growth

The common perception is that rural communities are firmly and implacably opposed to housing growth. Yet, recent findings show that this is far from universally the case.\(^5\) In this case study nearly 20% of the villages in South Cambridgeshire formally applied to be supported in producing new village design guidance, which was explicitly framed in the prospectus as an initiative that would support, rather than resist, housing growth. Of these, many were small villages classified at the lower end of sustainability (Group or Infill Villages, in the SCDC classification) and their expressions of interest focused specifically on their desire to accommodate more housing in order to sustain and renew their communities, while controlling how this would be designed.

Since starting the Village Design Guides initiative, further villages in the district have expressed a desire to become involved with planning for appropriate growth. In many cases, they view the Local Plan framework as placing too much constraint on development (such as through the village classification and Green Belt policies) while retaining a strong opposition to ‘typical’ housebuilder design.

approaches. It is clear that the demand for appropriate and affordable new homes in rural areas is not simply a statistical requirement but also a community priority. Villages also want to see more effective capture of planning gain from piecemeal infill developments to benefit village services.

“We wish to secure a range of housing to meet the needs of all ages... We need to be ambitious about these and ensure delivery.” Village resident, Fulbourn.

2. Communities want to be more involved in the early stages of developing proposals

Rural communities, through their parish councils, have a formal role as consultees, but it is clear that the relationship between parishes and planning teams often needs work. In particular, the pre-application process can be a source of frustration. Communities can feel that by the time they are consulted – either by developers or as a statutory consultee once an application is submitted – the proposals have been ‘stitched up’ between planners and developers and their feedback is unlikely to have any impact in shaping the scheme. This criticism also applies to Design Review Panels, which can be perceived as part of gaining ‘consent before consent’.

Communities frequently feel that Design Review Panels, urban design officers and other specialist advisors to development management teams submit favourable comments on the design and layout of proposals without genuinely understanding the local context. They do not understand why community representatives are not involved in the pre-application or Design Review process in order to ensure a ‘joined-up’ response where planners can take village views into account. The perception is that this plays to the advantage of developers who can ‘divide and rule’ between the views of the community and those of planning officers.

“Had the developers come and spoken to the community, lots of the antipathy would have gone.” Village resident, Papworth Everard.

3. Communities find the planning system confusing

From basic principles of national policy through to the rationale behind Local Plans and site allocations, communities find it difficult to understand how places are shaped. They do not understand the relationship and division of responsibility between district and county councils, and other statutory bodies such as utility providers; nor mechanisms such as Community Infrastructure Levy and Section

6 See ‘Planning Ahead: What are the best ways to deliver a design-led pre-application service?’ publicpractice.org.uk/resources/planning-ahead
106. This makes it very difficult for communities – both through vehicles such as parish councils, and as individuals commenting on applications – to phrase their responses to proposals in ways that hold weight in planning terms.

While parish councils are the statutory planning consultee, many parishes struggle to recruit and retain councillors, and training for parish councillors is patchy. The Village Design Guides project suggests that parish clerks should be the focus for training as they frequently serve more than one parish, continue in their role for many years providing valuable continuity, and are in regular contact with a whole range of other organisations and groups in the village, from schools to Neighbourhood Forums and more.

4. Developments are perceived to turn their backs on the existing village fabric

This is one of the key criticisms offered by local communities about new development, and manifests itself in a number of ways:

- New residents are physically isolated from the wider community – this impacts on the sustainability of the very shops and services that have provided the logic for siting development in that community to start with.
- Pedestrian and cycle connections are often inadequate, and where they do exist they are frequently an afterthought, not designed to be genuinely useful routes that integrate new with old. New residents become heavily car-dependent as a result, impacting congestion and safety issues in the wider community.
- New developments lack views out to anything that is locally specific – to adjacent homes or streets, or out to the rural landscape itself. This contributes to the sense of ‘placelessness’ and disconnection to the rural setting.
- The edges of developments, to both the countryside and neighbouring built-up areas, are abrupt and uncared for. Poor boundary treatments to back gardens – such as close-boarded fencing – predominate, while the ‘fronts’ of new homes – facing the centre of the development – have higher quality hedging, fencing or walls. Landscape buffer strips frequently end up poorly maintained, filled with litter or a become location for anti-social behaviour. The edges of the development are what the rest of the community sees and encounters – both across the landscape and within the village, and this is perceived as both poor design and un-neighbourly.

“There are no sightlines in the development at all. Nobody will see a horizon. You won’t know you’re in the countryside.” Village resident, Caldecote.
5. Density is not the problem, design is

There is a perception in rural communities that densities are too high in new developments. When this is interrogated further through workshops and case study tours, it emerges that it is not the numerical densities that form the issue. Some developments and existing areas with relatively high density are much liked. It is the perception of cramming, as expressed through awkward site layouts, poorly shaped gardens, and the prevalence of detached homes with small gaps between them, mixed with three-storey apartment buildings to accommodate one- and two-bedroom affordable homes in the most cost-effective way that meets the local authorities’ policy on housing mix. These form the visual expression of ‘density’ which is perceived as problematic.

Communities often favour using semi-detached homes or short terraces to create density without sacrificing the legibility and visual generosity of site layouts. Communities welcome smaller homes being built to provide options for down-sizers and younger people, but three-storey multi-unit blocks are typically felt to be ‘urban’ rather than ‘rural’. Contrary to most design guidance, the communities we worked with for the Village Design Statements prefer three-storey buildings to be located not at ‘landmark’ street corners and other prominent positions, but as part of a varied composition along a street.

“The realisation that our village had traditionally developed lanes perpendicular to the High Street with terraced housing, thereby giving a distinctive characteristic, and that this would be a very appropriate way of developing affordable housing in new developments, was a real eureka moment for me.” Village resident, Sawston.

6. Rural areas need rural design approaches

A frequent critique by rural communities is that new development is urban or suburban in character, not rural. The use of standard house types and layouts – common to suburban and urban extension developments - with only minor variations to cladding is a significant contributor to this perception. Local materials and locally distinctive details and forms are rarely used. However, communities are rarely in favour of a strict recreation of historical ‘vernacular’ designs, and they welcome new design approaches which create their own distinctive identity. In particular, accessibility and environmental performance are priorities, as are making space for the contemporary demands of bin storage, home-working, and space for storing large items, from cycles to surfboards, tools to play equipment – the stuff of rural lifestyles.
Providing good quality public open spaces within developments, and enabled by new development, is a key community priority. However, the form and location of amenity spaces that are typically provided are perceived as low-quality – particularly the provision of several small play areas rather than consolidated open space for multiple activities. Communities care deeply about specifically rural design issues such as flood resilience, ecology, bridleways and tree species, and frequently critique the landscape design of new developments for being too sterile, dominated by mown grass and lacking a rural, un-manicured quality.

“Rural-style ditches, very practical as the village gets waterlogged. Great biodiversity, so many animals, invertebrates, life in the ditches. (And kids! My nephew was in that this summer).” Village resident, Papworth Everard.
RECOMMENDATIONS
The critique offered by members of rural communities is powerful, but there are clear steps that can be taken by both developers and planners in order to start bridging the quality gap. The following recommendations draw on lessons learnt co-creating the Village Design Statements with local, rural communities.

1. Developers should consider the impact of poor quality, ‘anyplace’ development in undermining the market for their product.

As improving urban placemaking increasingly creates options for young families to stay in larger towns and cities, housebuilders must be careful to ensure that the countryside continues to offer the quality of life that is its key asset.

2. Local authorities should reshape planning teams to create named planning contacts for each parish, and planners should actively facilitate engagement between village communities and developers.

Planners should work closely with parish clerks to facilitate constructive dialogue between developers and communities. While the confidentiality of early pre-application discussions must rightly remain a part of the planning process, planning authorities should consider whether they offer anything more than high level advice on the principle of development, unless scheme promoters are in dialogue with the local community.

Creating a planning officer lead for each parish can enable a joined up approach between schemes, and a better understanding of local issues within planning departments. It can increase planners’ ability to collaborate with other departments, such as community and housing teams, to ensure they are aware of key community issues and projects.

3. Design policy in Local Plans, and design guidance SPDs, can and should be more locally specific and based on rural principles in rural areas.

Requiring high quality design is too vague, but it is possible to develop simple and clear guidance on key design principles. Design policies should be clearer about how proposals should respond to local context, while encouraging new and innovative design approaches.
4. Planners and developers should prioritise integration as a key design driver for all new developments.

Developments should be designed from the edges in – not the centre out. Planners should require developers to submit drawings and analysis that looks well beyond the ‘red line’ of the application site, to demonstrate the approach to integrating proposals with movement networks, visual connections, landscape views and the wider structure of the village. If developments are well-integrated with the village and the landscape, many community objections will be resolved.

5. For villages with potential growth capacity, specific design and landscape guidance, co-created with local communities, should be produced.

Creating locally specific design guidance can help secure good outcomes at all stages of the planning process. It can ensure pre-application responses are made with an understanding of local community concerns, without requiring local engagement at a commercially sensitive stage in the process. It can be used to help with the assessment of allocations and the plan-making process.

The process of co-creating policy and guidance with local communities also addresses one of the most critical issues of all - raising the capacity and knowledge of local communities about the planning system, which enables better engagement with formal and informal consultation at all stages of the planning process.

NEXT STEPS
This Practice Note has investigated the principles and practices of good rural design and suggested a series of guidelines for how developers and planners can work with local communities to create new developments that are welcomed by communities. To take these findings further, there are a number of areas of research that would benefit from further development:

- Establishing what kinds of additional training should be provided to planning officers working with rural communities.
- Identifying ways to gather evidence / case studies from Authorities that are looking to improve their community engagement methods.

The South Cambridgeshire Village Design Guides can be downloaded at publicpractice.org.uk/resources. Public Practice welcome feedback on the findings and recommendations set out in this Practice Note to help update current resources and inform future research. Please contact us at info@publicpractice.org.uk.
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Rural areas, especially around high-growth towns and cities, are in high demand for housing growth. However, market-led growth can be unpopular with existing communities and there is an urgent need for a better, more considered approach.

This Practice Note discusses best practice for rural design. Drawing on research carried out as part of a year-long placement in South Cambridgeshire District Council, it shows how co-creating simple design principles together with local, rural communities can help justify and shape village growth.

Recommendations include clear steps that both planners and developers can take to raise the quality of new development in rural areas and support inclusive, sustainable growth. The Practice Note is accompanied by a series of draft Village Design Guide Supplementary Planning Documents produced through Hana Loftus’ placement in South Cambridgeshire.

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