



Dacorum Borough Council

Local Planning Framework

DACORUM CORE STRATEGY EXAMINATION IN PUBLIC

Statement by Dacorum Borough Council

Issue 16: Countryside

September 2012

Purpose of this statement

The purpose of this statement is to summarise the Council's position regarding the following issues raised by the Inspector in advance of their discussion at the public hearing sessions.

To avoid repetition this statement includes cross references to appropriate technical work and includes relevant extracts as appendices.

Matters raised by Inspector

- 16.1 Are the vision and local objectives for the countryside appropriate and justified, including in relation to national guidance and local needs, and in terms of economic, social and environmental impact?
- 16.2 Is sufficient protection afforded to the AONB? Is sufficient protection given to the setting of the Borough's towns and villages?
- 16.3 What is the Council's approach towards the re-use and extension of rural buildings and is it justified?
- 16.4 What is the Council's approach to the provision of moorings on the Grand Union Canal and is it justified?
- 16.5 Is the settlement boundary for Wilstone justified?

Dacorum Borough Council's Response

16.1 Are the vision and local objectives for the countryside appropriate and justified, including in relation to national guidance and local needs, and in terms of economic, social and environmental impact?

16.1.1 In order to ensure preparation of a distinctive planning framework that reflects the needs and priorities of different communities, the Council has prepared an overarching Core Strategy with spatially distinctive strategies for each place within the district. This includes the countryside.

National guidance

16.1.2 Achieving sustainable development is the Government's stated purpose for the planning system (paragraph 6 of the National Planning Policy Framework): it is elaborated in sections 1-13 of NPPF.

16.1.3 There are 3 aspects to sustainable development – i.e. an economic role, a social role and an environmental role. These roles are interlinked and should not be taken in isolation (ref paras 7 and 8, NPPF). Economic, social and environmental gains should be sought jointly (also ref paragraph 8, NPPF).

16.1.4 Paragraph 9 (NPPF) summarises what pursuing sustainable development involves: i.e.

“...seeking positive improvements in the quality of the built, natural and historic environment, as well as in people's quality of life, including (but not limited to):

- making it easier for jobs to be created in cities, towns and villages;*
- moving from a net loss of bio-diversity to achieving net gains for nature;*
- replacing poor design with better design;*
- improving the conditions in which people live, work, travel and take leisure;*

- and*
- *widening the choice of high quality homes.*

Plans (and decisions) need to:

“... take local circumstances into account, so that they respond to the different opportunities for achieving sustainable development in different areas.” (Para 10 NPPF). Furthermore, “Local plans are the key to delivering sustainable development that reflects the visions and aspirations of local communities.” (paragraph 150 NPPF)

16.1.5 The Council concludes that:

- a) the purpose of the Core Strategy and place strategies is to ensure that new development is sustainable;
- b) the Core Strategy should guide development to sustainable locations;
- c) development should support the achievement of the objectives and factors listed above;
- d) the appropriate balance between these factors may vary from place to place, due to their particular characteristics and their current and intended role within the Borough; and
- e) due consideration should be given to local community aspirations.

16.1.6 These principles underpin and are articulated in the Core Strategy. The Council has looked at the role of each place within this context and outlined what it considers to be the most appropriate strategy.

16.1.7 The settlement hierarchy for the borough and descriptions in Table 1 is based on the function and character of each place, and potential scale of change which each settlement (and the countryside) can reasonably absorb without undue detriment (see question 2.1 in Issue Paper 2: The Distribution of Development (Settlement Hierarchy) and the Green Belt).

16.1.8 Table 1 identifies all small villages and the countryside as being ‘Areas of Development Restraint.’ These are recognised as the least sustainable areas of the Borough, where significant constraints apply. These include areas of high landscape quality, such as the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and the countryside between settlements. This needs to be protected to ensure its rural character is retained and settlements keep their separate identities. The broad approach to development set out within the Dacorum Borough Local Plan 1991-2011 (Examination Document OT1) remains appropriate.

Local Considerations

16.1.9 The Borough’s needs and those of places within it have been considered through the creation of a substantial evidence base. This comprises technical studies, the results of public consultation and testing through the sustainability appraisal

process: among other things they address the matters listed in paragraph 9 NPPF (see above).

Technical studies

16.1.10 Technical studies form an important part of the Council's evidence base. They look at the Borough both as a whole, and specific places within it. For all technical work carried out until July 2009 (Guide to the Evidence Base: Examination Document OT4) the conclusions were broken down into key place-based recommendations to assist the formulation of the individual Place Strategies.

16.1.11 The approach to homes and jobs within the countryside has been informed by:

- Housing assessments (e.g. Examination Documents HG9, HG14 and HG16)
- Employment space studies (e.g. Examination Documents ED1, ED8 and ED12)
- Retail studies (e.g. Examination Documents ED2 and ED6).

16.1.12 For the countryside, key recommendations are as follows:

Employment – The countryside has two main employment areas (Bourne End Mills and Bovingdon Brickworks). Both are within the Green Belt. These employment areas should be retained as they often serve the lower end of the market and hence play an important role in the overall employment market within the Borough. Bourne End Mills is well located to the strategic road network (A41) and the brickworks produces important local buildings materials that support traditional building techniques. Farming and tourism have an important role to play in the rural economy.

Retail – The retail assessments focussed upon larger areas of commercial activities (i.e. the towns and large villages), so no particular retail role has been identified for the countryside. However, the importance of supporting small-scale services and facilities within rural areas is recognised by the Council as important to support the vitality of rural communities and reduce the need to travel.

Housing – The starting point has been to retain the Borough's rural population at approximately its current base. Natural population growth cannot be accommodated due to policy and environmental constraints. Local objectives for housing have been set to reflect these conclusions, indicating an expected delivery of around 420 new homes between 2006 and 2031. Delivery will primarily be through small levels of infilling and changes of use, and the identification of rural exceptions sites. Policy CS19: Affordable Housing sets a lower threshold for on-site delivery of affordable homes for rural areas than Hemel Hempstead to reflect local conditions (see response to Issue 7: question 7.2). Affordable housing will also be delivered through Policies CS20: Rural Sites for Affordable Homes and CS6: Selected Small Villages in the Green Belt (see response to Issue 7: question 7.1). The Chilterns Buildings Design Guide (Examination Document EN9) will play an important role in ensuring new built development respects its landscape setting and historic character.

Environmental – Key documents include work on Green Infrastructure (Examination Documents EN13 and EN14), the Landscape Character Assessment (Examination Document EN2), the AONB Management Plan (Examination Document EN5) and the Biodiversity Action Plan (Examination Document EN1). These studies highlight the importance of the rural landscape, in particular the Chilterns AONB, and the need to protect habitats and biodiversity – especially where this is rare or locally distinctive. Tranquilly is a relatively new concept, but one that is very important to consider in rural areas, as many of the qualities of the countryside relate to the peace and quiet it offers. It is an issue raised in the Chilterns AONB Management Plan and reflects growing concerns about flight paths and the impact of new transport infrastructure. The potential negative impact of equine activity on the landscape (especially within the Chilterns AONB) is another current area of concern. In addition to these reports and studies, advice has also been received from experts, including English Heritage, the Council’s ecological adviser from the Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre and the County Archaeologist. This advice has helped identify the issues faced within rural settlements and the countryside between and is articulated within the Countryside Strategy and the Vision Diagram that accompanies it. This reflects the extent of the AONB, the location of settlements, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and nature reserves, rivers, the Grand Union Canal, main transport corridors and long distance footpaths.

Infrastructure – Through technical work (especially the Infrastructure Delivery Plans – Examination Documents ID3 and ID5) and consultation, relevant thresholds for new infrastructure and the capacity of existing infrastructure, including schools (especially primary schools), road network, leisure and community uses and utilities infrastructure have been considered. Consideration has also been given as to whether there should be any ‘jumps’ in thresholds e.g. what infrastructure is needed to accommodate different scales of development. In particular, primary school planning has been a useful check on the scale of new development. In terms of social infrastructure, some rural primary schools are at capacity and sports halls at Aldbury Primary School and Gaddesden Row JMI School are too small to effectively deliver the curriculum (see part 3.2 of Examination Document SC2). There is therefore the need to take a flexible approach to school expansions within the rural areas in order to ensure appropriate facilities are provided (paragraph 4.7 of Examination Document SC1). Community centres in rural areas are generally well used, although some are in need of upgrading. Rural areas experience relatively poor accessibility by public transport to key services and facilities such as schools, libraries, healthcare and supermarkets. There are however relatively few rural households without cars (Examination Document TR1). There are no identified absolute constraints to development at the level proposed for the countryside (i.e. around 420 new homes over the plan period) and this is accepted by the County Council in terms of service issues.

16.1.13 The recommendations of all this technical work has been taken into account when developing the Countryside Strategy – both in the formulation of the vision, the setting of local objectives and the approach to growth and change.

Consultation

16.1.14 Consultation has been carried out with residents and stakeholders. A full summary of the consultation processes, the results received and how this consultation has resulted in changes to the Core Strategy (up to the stage of Pre-Submission) is set out in the Report of Consultation (Examination Document SUB6). Key elements have been:

(a) *Place Workshops* (see Volume 3 of Report of Consultation – refer to section 1).

16.1.15 This involved local councillors and representatives from a wide range of local businesses, residents and other organisations such as the Chilterns Conservation Board. A range of questions were asked relating to the scale and nature of rural housing provision, how best to support local business and services, the sort of tourist facilities that should be encouraged, key landscape areas, areas in need of environmental improvement and key features within villages and the wider countryside that should be protected and enhanced.

16.1.16 The top five priorities (in order of importance) were identified as:

- Affordable housing of appropriate type and size for the area;
- Support for local businesses, including farming;
- Protection of, and access to, rural facilities and services;
- Protect and enhance the AONB; and
- Maintain character of the rural landscape.

(b) *Emerging Core Strategy* (see Volume 4 of Report of Consultation).

16.1.17 The Emerging Core Strategy contained draft settlement strategies for each place, with background context covering characteristics, issues and options, the draft vision and level of housing. The evidence base was summarised and presented by place at this stage to inform the consultation. It sought feedback on two different housing levels – Option 1: 389 and Option 2: 567 homes.

16.1.18 The majority of respondents supported the vision – including a number of key organisations (Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre, National Trust, Chilterns Society, Chilterns Conservation Board and the Environment Agency). Those individuals who disagreed largely did so on the basis that the strategy proposed too many new homes and raised concerns regarding the impact of this upon the landscape.

(c) *Consultation Draft* (see Volume 6 of the Report of Consultation)

16.1.19 In this version of the plan, feedback was sought on the proposed Countryside Strategy. In particular, the role of this consultation was to highlight any specific issues that had become apparent for the rural parts of the borough and what alternative options were for tackling these issues. A figure of 400 new homes was put forward.

16.1.20 Almost equal numbers of respondents supported and objected to the approach set out. Once again, the principal area of disagreement was the level of new homes appropriate for the countryside and the need to protect the Green Belt. There was general support for the strategy from key organisations including Friends of the Earth, the Chilterns Conservation Board and the Hertfordshire Biological Records Centre.

(d) Citizen's Panel

16.1.21 Views from residents were separately sought through the Council's Citizens Panel. This helped to ensure that the views and aspirations of a representative range of people from all parts of the borough were considered.

16.1.22 This consultation highlighted a high level of support for the general approach to the countryside.

Sustainability Appraisal

16.1.23 Sustainability Appraisal (incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment) has considered the issue of the distribution of growth (see response to Issue 2) and also considered each individual place strategy against a series of sustainability criteria (which were agreed following consultation with key bodies). The full assessments are contained in Examination Document SUB3. This assessment forecasts positive effects for a number of the environmental objectives within the SA framework, as a result of the strategy's aim to protect and enhance biodiversity, tranquillity and key landscape features. The production of Conservation Area Appraisals and the use of the Chilterns Buildings Design Guide will help to protect the character and setting of villages. In addition, supporting the retention of village services and facilities will help reduce the need to travel to access day to day needs, thereby having a positive effect on the greenhouse gas emissions objective.

16.1.24 Positive effects were also identified in relation to the social and economic objectives, although the potential implications of not meeting the full expected natural growth of the population were noted.

Conclusions

16.1.25 The countryside serves a number of different roles. It is valued for its historic heritage, landscape quality and ecological diversity and is a leisure destination in its own right. It also a 'living landscape' – that must provide jobs and local services and facilities for the rural communities that live there. The Countryside Place Strategy needs to strike an appropriate balance between these often conflicting roles.

16.1.26 Key designations that need to be conserved and enhanced are illustrated on the Vision Diagram (Figure 28).

16.1.27 The scope for change within the countryside is limited due to restrictive policies

relating both to the location (i.e. Green Belt and Rural Area) and quality of the landscape (AONB, SSSIs etc). The trend is for small scale redevelopment and conversions to residential use. Changes have been made to policies relating to development within the Green Belt and Rural Area (minor changes MC10, MC14 and MC16) as a response to National Planning Policy Framework increasing the scope for reuse of previously developed land and buildings.

16.1.28 Existing employment provision should largely be retained and new forms of rural enterprise encouraged to reflect strategic objective 9 and Policy CS14: Economic Development.

16.1.29 The key issue has been how to balance the needs of rural communities with protection of the countryside. It is considered that the approach set out within the Countryside Strategy and supported by other policies within the plan provides the appropriate balance of economic, social and environmental factors.

16.1.30 Seen within this context, it is considered that the approach set out within the Countryside Strategy is both appropriate and justified.

16.2 Is sufficient protection afforded to the AONB? Is sufficient protection given to the setting of the Borough's towns and villages?

16.2.1 Over a third of Dacorum Borough Council's area falls within the Chilterns Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Its extent is illustrated on the Proposals Map (Examination Document SUB2) and in Map 1: Key Diagram, Map 2: Principal Landscape Areas and Figure 28: Countryside Vision Diagram.

16.2.2 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (Examination Document REG15) requires that "great weight" is given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty within AONBs to reflect their national status (paragraph 115). The Council's approach to the AONB complies with this requirement.

16.2.3 The approach has the general support of the Chilterns Conservation Board (Examination Document SUB10). The role and responsibilities of the Council and the Conservation Board are clarified in the glossary through minor change MC103.

16.2.4 Paragraph 16.3 of the Pre-Submission Core Strategy (Examination Document SUB1) acknowledges that the AONB is one of the Borough's most important landscape assets. It was designated for the natural beauty of its landscape and its natural and cultural heritage. Its special qualities include the steep chalk escarpment with areas of flower rich downland, woodland, commons, tranquil valleys, the network of ancient routes, villages with their brick and flint houses, chalk streams and a rich historic heritage.

16.2.5 The policy approach to the AONB is set out in Policy CS24. This states that the special qualities of the Chilterns AONB will be conserved. It explicitly refers to

the protection of the scarp slope – as this is particularly vulnerable to intrusive development. All development within the AONB is expected to have regard to policies and actions set out in the Chiltern Conservation Board’s Management Plan (Examination Document EN5) and to support the principles set out within the Chilterns Buildings Design Guide (Examination Document EN9) and associated technical notes.

16.2.6 Paragraph 8.21 of the Core Strategy acknowledges the Government’s aim of protecting the countryside for the sake of its intrinsic quality, with the AONB designation providing an additional reason to manage development within parts of Dacorum. The AONB is also recognised as a constraint to development in the settlement hierarchy (Table 1).

16.2.7 The requirements of Policy CS24 are reinforced by a more detailed Dacorum Borough Local Plan policy (Examination Document OT1) that will be ‘saved’ until reviewed through the Development Management DPD. Policy 97: Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty reiterates that the prime planning consideration will be the conservation of the beauty of the area; the economic and social well-being of the area and its communities will also be taken into account. The policy includes the clear requirement that any development proposal which would seriously detract from this will be refused and where development is permitted, this will be on the basis of its satisfactory assimilation into the landscape. It goes on to provide more detailed guidance on the approach to:

- a) new buildings and other development;
- b) open air recreation;
- c) mineral extraction;
- d) agriculture;
- e) forestry and landscaping;
- f) nature conservation; and
- g) redundant buildings.

16.2.8 The Core Strategy recognises the setting of the Borough’s towns and villages as an important issue – whether in proximity to the AONB or not.

16.2.9 Paragraph 8.23 identifies that development pressures are particularly acute on the urban fringe. For each town and large village a summary is provided of the particular role of the countryside around that settlement and the particular pressures it faces. This landscape setting is reflected within the context sections of the individual Place Strategies (sections 20-26).

16.2.10 Table 12: Characteristics of Small Villages and Hamlets within the Countryside Place Strategy reflects settlement typologies contained within the Chilterns Buildings Design Guide, which provides further information and advice regarding the nature and importance of their landscape setting.

16.2.11 Figure 11: Dacorum’s Spatial Awareness Framework (part of the ‘3 Step Approach to Successful Design’ referred to in Policy CS10: Quality of Settlement Design) requires consideration to be given to development in the context of the character of the settlement. This includes:

- defined countryside borders;

- the topography;
- landscape setting and green gateways;
- historic setting and settlement pattern; and
- the key views into and out of the settlement.

16.2.12 This is reflected in criterion (b) of Policy CS10 which requires development to reinforce the topography of natural landscapes and the existing soft edges of town and villages.

16.2.13 The definition of different Urban Design Zones within each town and large village supports this approach. These zones are illustrated on the vision diagrams for the place strategies, and explained further within the Urban Design Assessments (Examination Document BP1 and the update in BP5).

16.2.14 Policy L5 of the AONB Management Plan requires decision makers to “*Ensure the impact of development adjacent to the AONB is sympathetic to the character of the Chilterns and maintains the quality of views from it and of it.*” Policy CS24 requires development to have regard to the policies within this document.

16.2.15 In terms of specific sites, a minor change (MC93) is proposed to the development requirements for local allocation LA5 (Icknield Way, west of Tring) to refer to the fact that the layout, design, density and landscaping must create a soft edge and transition with the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and secure a defensible long term Green Belt boundary. This requirement reflects the site’s proximity to the AONB. Similar requirements relating to landscape setting are included for the other local allocations and will be reflected in the future site master plans and detailed requirements set out in the Site Allocations DPD.

16.3 What is the Council’s approach towards the re-use and extension of rural buildings and is it justified?

16.3.1 Dacorum’s countryside is designated as either Green Belt or Rural Area. The Council’s approach to the re-use and extension of rural buildings is set out in Policies CS5: Green Belt, CS7: Selected Small Villages in the Green Belt, and CS7: Rural Area of the Pre-Submission Core Strategy (Examination Document SUB1).

16.3.2 Some minor changes have been proposed to Policies CS5 and CS7 and the associated supporting text (see MC10 and MC14, MC16 of Table 3, Annex 3 of the Report of Representations: Examination Document SUB5) to ensure that they reflect recent changes in national policy set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (Examination Document REG15).

16.3.3 In terms of the Green Belt, a new clause has been added to Policy CS5 to allow “*the appropriate reuse of permanent, substantial buildings*” (clause (d)). There was already a clause in the original wording that allowed for ‘limited extensions to existing buildings’ (clause (c)) and this remains.

16.3.4 Policy CS7 relating to the Rural Area has been similarly amended. A new clause

(clause vi), identical in wording to clause (d) above, has been inserted.

16.3.5 No changes were considered necessary to Policy CS6 as this already takes a flexible approach to the replacement of existing buildings within the Green Belt villages of Chipperfield, Flamstead, Potten End and Wigginton and therefore fully accords with the NPPF.

16.3.6 Policy 23: Replacement Dwellings in the Green Belt and Rural Area of the current Local Plan is 'saved' and articulates the Council's interpretation of '*not materially larger than the one it replaces*' (paragraph 89 of the NPPF). The requirements of Policy 23 will be reviewed through the Development Management DPD.

16.4 What is the Council's approach to the provision of moorings on the Grand Union Canal and is it justified?

16.4.1 This is a detailed issue that the Council considers is more appropriate to be covered within the Development Management DPD rather than the Core Strategy.

16.4.2 Paragraph 26.11 of the Core Strategy does however recognise the potential for "sustainable tourism" within the area. It states *that "the Grand Union Canal is an important historic, environmental and leisure asset. A number of boating facilities are available in the area and additional mooring basins will not be supported."* This approach reflects the recent provision of a new mooring basin a Dickinson Quay as part of the Apsley Lock development in Hemel Hempstead (32 moorings), whilst an existing marina at Cow Roast (between Berkhamsted and Tring) accommodates an additional 110 boats. There has also been a new mooring basin created just north of the Borough at Grove Lock, south of Leighton Buzzard. There is therefore not considered to be a requirement for additional provision during the plan period. This approach is supported by British Waterways (which since July 2012 has become the Canal and River Trust).

16.4.3 Policies 83: Recreation along the Grand Union Canal, and Policy 84: Location of Recreation Mooring Basins and Lay-bys on the Grand Union Canal of the Dacorum Borough Local Plan remains 'saved.' Policy 83 states that the canal and its environments will be protected and promoted as a recreational and environmental resource by joint action with British Waterway and other agencies. The development of low-key canalside recreational facilities will be considered provided there is no adverse effect on the value of the canal for nature conservation. Policy 84 relates specifically to moorings and allows for appropriate, generally small-scale recreational moorings and laybys in urban areas and in the Green Belt outside of the AONB, subject to a number of criteria. Moorings within the AONB are more strictly controlled. This policy approach will be reviewed through the Development Management DPD.

16.5 Is the settlement boundary for Wilstone justified?

16.5.1 Wilstone is defined as a small village within the rural area and are defined as

areas of development restraint within the Settlement Hierarchy (Table 1).

16.5.2 The settlement boundary for Wilstone is shown on the Proposals Map (Examination Document OT1). This boundary, along with those for other small villages, will be reviewed through the Site Allocations DPD.

16.5.3 At the present time the Council considers that the boundary remains appropriate and reflects the natural extent of the village. The only justification for change would be to accommodate important local needs – through a rural exceptions site, as permitted under Policy CS20: Rural Sites for Affordable Housing. As stated in the delivery section relating to this policy, such sites will be allocated through the Site Allocations DPD.

16.5.4 However, as the policy allows for such sites can come forward either within or adjoining selected small villages, a boundary review is not necessarily required to allow such development to take place. A boundary review can however be considered should a scheme be proposed through the Site Allocations DPD. Until this review takes place, the current boundary for Wilstone, and other selected small villages, remains appropriate and justified.