Rural Areas

Background

This section is concerning policies for the rural area. This relates to general policies, and not place specific. These are general policies and not place based specific. The proportional growth in rural areas, rural settlement hierarchy, rural housing distribution and the role of settlement boundaries will be subject to a further consultation in the summer 2022.

These general policies more specifically seek to address:

- Housing in open countryside;
- Agricultural, forestry and other occupational dwellings in the countryside;
- Reuse and adaption of rural buildings.

Housing in Rural Areas

Herefordshire is predominantly a rural county, with around 53% of its population living in rural areas outside of the five market towns and Hereford City. To ensure the future sustainability and resilience of rural communities it's important that the right type and volume of housing is built in the right locations. This requires planning for growth in a way which will strengthen rural communities and ultimately maximising the benefits that could come from growth such as increasing opportunities for the retention and upgrade of key services and/or delivery of new ones.

Focusing growth in appropriate settlements will avoid unsustainable patterns of growth and isolated speculative development in Herefordshire's countryside. This is to minimise adverse effects on Herefordshire's natural and heritage assets, as well as the unique character of Herefordshire's villages and settlements. Moreover, addressing the climate emergency will require a strategic and joined-up approach. Rural housing can contribute significantly in Herefordshire, by channelling development to suitable rural areas where there is a need to strengthen services, such as sustainable transport modes.

However, it is recognised that there are circumstances in which housing is required outside of settlements and within the open countryside. Examples of this would be replacement dwellings, subdivisions, rural workers dwellings and conversions. Adaptable living modifications to existing housing, such as annexes, garden offices and extensions to enable additional living and working capacity, has also become an increasing issue in the past few years.

Agricultural, forestry and other occupational dwellings in the countryside

Herefordshire's economy is more dependent upon agriculture, food and manufacturing than any other economy in the West Midlands or the UK, 32% of the workforce in Herefordshire is employed in this industry above the national average of 16%. The forecast through to 2031 indicated agriculture, food and manufacturing suggests this would continue to be a significant source of employment.

The NPPF seeks to ensure that policies and decisions enable the development and diversification of agricultural and other land based businesses, and provide opportunities for housing in the countryside where there is a need for rural workers to live permanently at or nearby their workplace.

Reuse and adaptation of rural buildings

Within a predominately rural county such as Herefordshire, farm buildings are a common, distinctive and prevalent type of building within the open countryside. When these buildings are no longer required, they can offer a potential alternative use either as housing, employment, tourism or a community use. These buildings can vary greatly in terms of scale, design and materials as well as location, from an isolated building to a farmstead or cluster.

Historically, the reuse of rural buildings has been focused on traditional barns with some heritage value, however more recent changes to national policy means that increasingly more modern structures are also coming forward for conversion.

The following sets out how rural area policy is addressed through the County Plan and the Local Plan's new vision and objectives.

Herefordshire County Plan

The County Plan ambition is to protect and enhance the environment and keep Herefordshire a great place to live. It acknowledges the rich beauty and rural environment of the county, is proud of its rural heritage, and keen to work in partnership with rural and farming communities to maintain stewardship of the countryside.

It specifies that Herefordshire will deliver carefully planned policies for growth, which will deliver sustainable development to meet the need of local people whilst respecting heritage and the natural environment.

Local Plan Draft Vision

The Local Plan 2021-2041 draft vision has a community themed countywide vision, which states:

'*Herefordshire will be an exemplar of 21st century rural living, where rural settlements and market towns have resilient communities, which are well connected digitally*.'

It also has an Economic themed vision, which states:

'*The County will be economically prosperous, with its farming heritage and sustainable tourism continuing to play an important role. It will be well known as a place where innovative, green and creative businesses can thrive. Good quality housing and inclusive infrastructure will be provided, to ensure that people are able to live active and healthy lives*.'

Effective Local Plan policies for rural areas will be crucial in ensuring that this vision is achieved county-wide, including outside of the market towns and Hereford.

Local Plan Draft Objectives

There are a number of Local Plan 2021-2041 draft objectives that can be addressed in making policy for rural areas. Listed below are the most relevant:

- Protect the natural environment and heritage of the county.
- Ensure high quality design of buildings and spaces taking into account local character and heritage.
- Minimise and carefully manage the use of natural resources, including mineral, land and water.
- Provide a range of housing and tenures types to meet local needs, including affordability and specialist requirements.
- Grow a thriving, diverse local economy.
- Continue to recognise the importance of the role of agriculture plays in the local economy and support appropriate diversification and modernisation to strengthen this sector.

National Guidance

The NPPF indicates that planning policies should be responsive to local circumstances, and support housing which reflects local needs. Housing should be identified for villages to grow, thrive and support local services. Policies should avoid the development of isolated homes in the countryside. However, there are some exceptional circumstances in which development could take place:

- Essential need for a rural worker to live on site.
- An optimal and viable use that secures the future of a heritage asset.
- Re-use of a redundant or disused building.
- Subdivision of an existing building.
- A building with an exceptional quality of design.

Supporting a prosperous rural economy is a key theme in national guidance, and indicates that planning policies should enable the sustainable growth of rural business through the conversion of existing buildings and well-designed buildings and that some of these may be found beyond existing settlements. It highlights the importance of ensures that development is sensitive to its surroundings, does not have unacceptable impact on local roads and has the opportunity to be a sustainable location.

National Guidance provides additional details on defining ‘essential’ rural workers. This includes details of the evidence of the necessity of the rural worker to live in that location, the degree of confidence that the enterprise is viable, whether additional dwellings will enable the continued viability of the farming business, if there is already any existing accommodation, and is there the ability for a trial temporary accommodation period.

It also indicates that the need for seasonal workers will generally not be sufficient to justify building an isolated rural dwelling.

There have been a number of changes to the General Permitted Development Order, which has had a significant effect on the conversion of buildings within the county. Class Q in this order, supports the re-use of redundant farm buildings for housing development in rural areas, including within the countryside and area outside of settlements. It can permit up to five dwellings if a range of conditions and criteria are met.

National Guidance also indicates that consideration should be given to resisting inappropriate development of residential gardens, especially where it would cause harm to the area. Therefore a balance will need to be found, that is flexible enough to respond to adaptable living and national policy requirements.

Local Considerations

Housing in the countryside

Isolated dwellings within the open countryside are discouraged within national planning policy unless under certain circumstances. Though national guidance has changed since the adoption of the council's existing policies relating to this, this broad principle remains the same.

Within a recent parish council questionnaire, some parishes have questioned the appropriateness of some dwellings deemed to be of 'exceptional design quality' permitted in the open countryside.

The potential for self-build dwellings to be included within the criteria requirement has also been raised. In addition, the potential to limit the size of isolated dwellings in rural locations and in contrast the need to have adaptability to modern sustainable living have been highlighted. In particular, the recent rise in working from home has elevated the importance of the adaptation of dwellings and additional living space within the rural area.

Agricultural worker's dwellings and seasonal worker's accommodation

The requirement for agricultural workers dwellings and seasonal workers accommodation is a continuing issue within the county. Current local policy deals predominately with single dwellings, rather than larger numbers of seasonal accommodations, such as caravans, cabins, pods or dwelling units.

National Guidance and criteria relating to rural workers accommodation has been updated since the council's existing Core Strategy was produced. There are concerns regarding occupancy control elements of the policy, which will require a review.

Within the recent parish council questionnaire, there was some concern that some seasonal workers accommodation has appeared to be more permanent.

Suitable accommodation for both permanent and seasonal workers is cited as a barrier to recruitment in this sector. Seasonal workers are often housed in mobile homes, or temporary structures onsite, with permanent workers living in fixed accommodation on site.

There are challenges around the 'essential functional need' test and property size limitations in existing policy. Greater clarity within the policy regarding design requirements, the role of larger family accommodation, and the justification needed for the essential functional needs test could improve this.

Reuse of rural buildings

Since the council's existing policy was adopted, significant changes have occurred to the permitted development rights and national policy. This means that it is no longer consistent, and leads to ambiguity between those buildings still requiring a planning application to convert and those permitted under Class Q of the permitted development rights.

There are some concerns that the current policy is permitting the conversion of buildings that are not sustainable or in suitable locations. Issues have been raised about the size, scale and design quality of replacement dwellings particularly when it comes to historic buildings. There are also concerns expressed about the need to properly demonstrate a building's long standing redundancy, to prevent the conversion of recently constructed buildings for alternative uses.

Evidence Base

- The Herefordshire Market Area Needs Assessment (HMANA) provides crucial evidence on the likely demands of the housing market in the county that the Local Plan will need to provide for. This includes forecasts on the likely need for onsite agricultural worker's accommodation.
- The Herefordshire Joint Strategic Needs Assessment indicates that agriculture and horticulture is a fundamental employment sector, reflecting the rural nature of the county. It is estimated that there are around 6000 to 7000 seasonal workers required within the county. Employers within Herefordshire have found it increasingly difficult to recruit sufficient numbers of seasonal workers over the past few years, and partly attributed to this has been a lack of suitable accommodation.
- The Herefordshire Employment Study (2012), undertaken to inform the current Core Strategy, recognises that Herefordshire's economy is more dependent on agriculture and manufacturing than any other economy in the West Midlands and it will continue to be a significant source of employment. An update to this study is currently underway in the form of the Herefordshire Employment Land Requirements Study (HELRS) 2022.
- The West Midlands Farmstead and Landscape Project was undertaken by Historic England in 2010, this project mapped the locations and characteristics of historic farmsteads within the West Midlands, including Herefordshire. It records 3092 farmsteads and 854 farms in Herefordshire, indicating the diverse ranges in size, scale, arrangement, age, function, character, materials and density. This assessment highlighted the importance of using historic farmsteads and their buildings in a sustainable and integrated way. The study provided local context which can help evaluate what future uses farmsteads could take on, based on their character and significance within the local setting.
- Historic England developed guidance in 2017, setting out a best practice guide to how traditional farmsteads and farm buildings, redundant for modern agricultural purposes, could be repaired and redeveloped to accommodate a variety of economically viable new uses. The guidance highlights the importance of understanding the building's relationship to its landscape setting, ensuring redevelopment of traditional farm building is sympathetic to its surroundings.

Existing Policy

The existing general policies in the Core Strategy concerned with the delivery of housing and employment within the rural areas are RA3; RA4; RA5 and RA6.

Core Strategy Policy RA3 – Housing in Herefordshire countryside indicated the limited circumstances in which new dwellings will be permitted. Outside of designated settlement boundaries or rural settlements defined in the existing Core Strategy, residential development would be limited to the following:

- Agricultural, forestry or a farm diversification enterprise where the worker was required to live on site.
- Necessary for the establishment/growth of a farm enterprise.
- Replacement dwellings.
- Re-use of a redundant building.
- 'Rural exception' affordable housing schemes.
- Of an exceptional or innovative design quality.
- Meeting an need for Gypsy or Traveller accommodation.

The National Planning Policy Framework has been updated since the adoption of the existing Core Strategy, and this has resulted in the current wording of policy RA3 no longer reflecting the national policy guidance. Terminology is required to be updated to ensure that there is not ambiguity between local policy and national policy.

Core Strategy Policy RA4 – This addresses in more detail agricultural, forestry and rural enterprise dwellings. This requires a functional need test, a demonstration of the economic sustainability of the enterprise, temporary accommodation, design and landscape considerations and occupational conditions.

Again National Guidance on this has been updated since the adoption of the Core Strategy, and therefore some of the terminology within the currently Policy RA4 is no longer in conformity with the national wording.

Core Strategy Policy RA5 – This relates to the re-use of rural buildings. It recognises the importance, both in terms of environmental sustainability and economic benefits, of reusing existing buildings. It provides criteria that any proposals for the reuse of an individual or group of buildings would need to meet. This includes considerations such as heritage, design, protecting species and biodiversity. Buildings must also be capable of being converted without substantial extensions and alterations.

National policy regarding the conversion and reuse of buildings have changed significantly since the existing Core Strategy was adopted, meaning this policy criteria would also be in need of updating.

Core Strategy Policy RA6 – Rural Economy reflects the important and strong role that the rural areas of Herefordshire play in both local, regional and national food and drink production. This policy and potential options are considered separately.

Neighbourhood Planning

The main role of Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs) in this regard is defining the geographical boundaries between their settlements, and the open countryside. This usually involves drawing a settlement boundary (or suitable alternative) to indicate where development would be most appropriate. The role of NDPs in delineating these policy boundaries is discussed further in the Role of Neighbourhood Planning section of this document.

Rural Areas Policy Options

Housing in Countryside Options

Option RPH1– Continue with the existing policy approach, updated to reflect national guidance

This option would continue a well-recognised and used policy approach which has been subject to testing through planning application and appeals over the past 10 years. There is a requirement to update the wording to ensure it is in conformity with national planning policy.

Option RPH2– Inclusion of an additional adaptable living policy or guidance

The adaptation of existing dwellings to enable home working and increase living space has become more commonplace and important during the Covid-19 pandemic. There is currently no specific policy or guidance regarding annexes, garden offices, or extensions to accommodation living or working space.

This option would look to:

- Add an additional rural policy, to balance the requirement of national planning policy, with the recognition of changing requirement and needs for adaptable living within rural areas.

OR

- An alternative option would be to provide policy guidance within the Local Plan, which could devolve this policy area to individual NDPs, to respond to local circumstances and needs within their area.

Agricultural, Forestry and Other Occupational Dwellings Options

Option AFOD1- Continue with existing policy approach, updated to reflect national policy

This option would continue as well recognised and used policy which has been subject to testing through planning application and appeals over the past 10 years. There is a requirement to update the wording to ensure it is in conformity with national planning policy.

Option AFOD2– Consider inclusion of an additional criteria regarding size and space standards, design and carbon reduction

This option would include space standards and size requirements for permanent isolated rural workers dwellings. It would also seek to reduce the carbon footprint of the buildings, given the rural nature of their location.

Option AFOD3– Consider an additional policy for seasonal workers accommodation and dwellings

This option would seek to include a specific and new policy specifically related to seasonal workers accommodation. This is not covered within the current Core Strategy Policy. This would include greater clarity on the functional need requirements, design, and size of accommodation permissible.

Option AFOD4– Develop a policy for local distinctiveness

This option would look to include criteria elements to reflect the 6 area character types defined in the West Midlands Farmstead and Landscape Project, making the policy Herefordshire distinctive. The siting, design, and positioning of dwellings would be reflective of the historical character of the area

Reuse of Rural Buildings Options

Policy RRB1– Continue with existing policy approach, updated to reflect national policy

This option will continue the policy which has been subject to testing through planning application and appeals over the past 10 years. There is a requirement to update the wording to ensure it is in conformity with national planning policy

Policy RRB2– Consider inclusion of an additional criteria to demonstrate the buildings are genuinely redundant

This option would include additional criteria outlining the requirements for evidence to be submitted with any application to demonstrate that the buildings are genuinely redundant.