

Basingstoke and Deane Local Plan 2011 to 2029

Public Examination Hearings

Issue 7: (Q 14) Town Centre & Rural Economy

Policy EP4 Rural Economy

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1. Much of the area of Basingstoke borough is rural and open, with varied and attractive landscapes and a network of village settlements. The local plan must address all relevant issues and concerns that exist across the borough, and in both town and country. It is not always the case that previously used sites present the best solutions. Development in or near village settlements would often help to boost their viability and vitality. The Plan does little to improve this position, or to assist the rural area.
2. Policies on the economy and housing are closely related. In rural areas, this means ensuring a more flexible approach that is based on a better understanding of rural values. The rural economy is both robust and fragile. It can be very self-sufficient, but also needs better recognition. Some flexibility in the use of the planning system and the role of the Plan is essential to ensure the rural area flourishes. The Plan declares that it will support the rural economy, but the main elements of Policy EP4 are not conducive to a prospering and flourishing rural area. The rural area is not simply a rural hinterland that acts as a background to the town, but has its own strong identity.
3. In the rural context, sustainability is a difficult concept to define, and not easy to interpret. Despite this, the Plan makes a clear declaration of the need to achieve sustainable approaches and solutions. It does not offer any suggestions on what the main elements are, or how they can be delivered. Diversification schemes may not always support a farming enterprise, but might still be regarded as sustainable. It assumes that sustainability is the norm, but this may not always be the case.

Living in rural villages

4. Additional housing in villages can aid and support the rural area. Some locations may be judged sustainable for future development, while others are seen as remote from services and employment centres. Sustainability is not solely about access and proximity. It can also be about self-containment and capability. The use of modern technology and communications can add a different slant to the need for viability.
5. Some villages have become elite locations, filled with inhabitants who raise their incomes from distant sources. The strictures of sustainability may have little bearing on their lives or choice of habitation. Many villages also contain a longer term resident population, perhaps present over many generations. The issues of village expansion and development will weigh heavily with them. The vitality and sense of continuity which these families can bring is all too easily lost and forgotten. Providing a small additional amount of development opportunities may be all that is needed.

Ellisfield village

6. Many rural villages serve an unclear purpose, beyond being the habitation place of people and families. Some have few if any facilities that would become an attraction for visitors. Such villages will only have local facilities, such as sports fields, an historic church and public house. These may tempt only local people rather than visitors.

7. Beyond this, there is very little incentive for visitors. The attraction of local open countryside to explore will rarely bring curious visitors to the fore, even where pleasant tearooms or a hostelry are available. Such a place is Ellisfield, deep but not remote, in an attractive rural setting. In such a place, there are extensive open pockets of land that might be put to better use. These sites could with sensitivity, encourage or support local businesses and families with good quality housing and enterprises. In such a place, there may be significant support for such development, if in keeping with the surrounding mixed use of farmed landscapes and forestry.

8. The Plan should make provision for the modest expansion of the smaller rural settlements in the borough. Land can be identified, perhaps using parish plans or neighbourhood plans, which would enable some houses to be built and enterprises to be developed. This would help affordable housing, but would also include market housing. Some sites may be on a village edge, where visual factors may be significant.

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9. All development in rural areas must be sensitive to the location and surrounding environments. Some may be 'unconventional uses', or may be better located away from centres of population. For example, there may be a haulage yard operating for many years, which might be judged unsustainable by the Plan. Such an enterprise or business may not seek or require outside support, but may wish to expand and develop its profitability in a reasonable manner.

10. It is not always possible to determine in advance if a proposal is likely to be complementary to the rural scene. Appropriateness is a matter of opinion and judgement. Farm diversification may not always be the motivation, and all manner of businesses may find a rural location to be conducive to their operations.

11. Some enterprises will have a clear link to the rural areas, as in using locally grown materials (crafts or wood turning). Others may have a less obvious connection, and may depend on the importation of products from far and wide (wine sales). These are nevertheless legitimate operations, which add to the human experience.

12. Permitted replacement buildings should not be limited to those that have an existing permission. Many buildings are of a temporary nature but are part of the rural landscape, and have long been accepted by the community. This is where flexibility will assist a rural area to provide suitable new buildings, both residential and commercial, that will become part of the community and will support the viability of country living.

Conclusion

13. The Plan reflects an urban approach to planning. It purports to support the rural economy, but has little practical effect. Change has historically always occurred in villages. The Plan's approach is unduly restrictive, and will not help to guarantee the future of villages or sustain them over the plan period. Some modest expansion will be required in terms of both residential and commercial premises.

14. Without investment bringing new life into villages, they may become sterile environments. The policy on rural economy would benefit from being tailored and reduced to a slimmer set of criteria, rather than a prescriptive and burdensome series of requirements. This is a view that will be echoed amongst many organisations and individuals with a strong and enduring interest in the countryside.