

Essential Reference Paper 'B'

Villages Appraisal

1. History

- 1.1 The Supporting Document to the Preferred Options District Plan records the various assessment stages that were undertaken as part of the process to inform the Preferred Options version of the Draft District Plan. It therefore provides an essential background to this Villages Appraisal. In particular, Chapters 4 to 6 of the Supporting Document explained the process of shortlisting or 'sieving' options applied to 'Areas of Search' and their findings.
- 1.2 On the basis of the assessments contained within the Supporting Document, and the rest of the evidence base that was available at that time, the Preferred Options District Plan proposed that villages were classified into three groups reflecting their relative sustainability, with development being directed to the most sustainable villages.
- 1.3 It was proposed that Group 1 Villages, the most sustainable villages in the District, would together accommodate at least 500 new homes, with each village being required to deliver at least a 10% increase in housing stock (based on the 2011 Census), and Parish Councils being encouraged to prepare Neighbourhood Plans to deliver this level of growth. Due to the village of Watton-at-Stone being located within the Green Belt, (the only Group 1 Village identified within the Green Belt), two sites were proposed for release from the Green Belt to accommodate housing development in the village.
- 1.4 It was proposed that development in Group 2 Villages would be restricted to limited infill development whilst no development would be permitted in Group 3 Villages beyond that considered to be appropriate in the Green Belt and Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt, such as rural exceptions affordable housing schemes.
- 1.5 This document continues the narrative beyond Chapters 4 to 6 of the Supporting Document by detailing information and evidence which has emerged since the Preferred Options consultation.

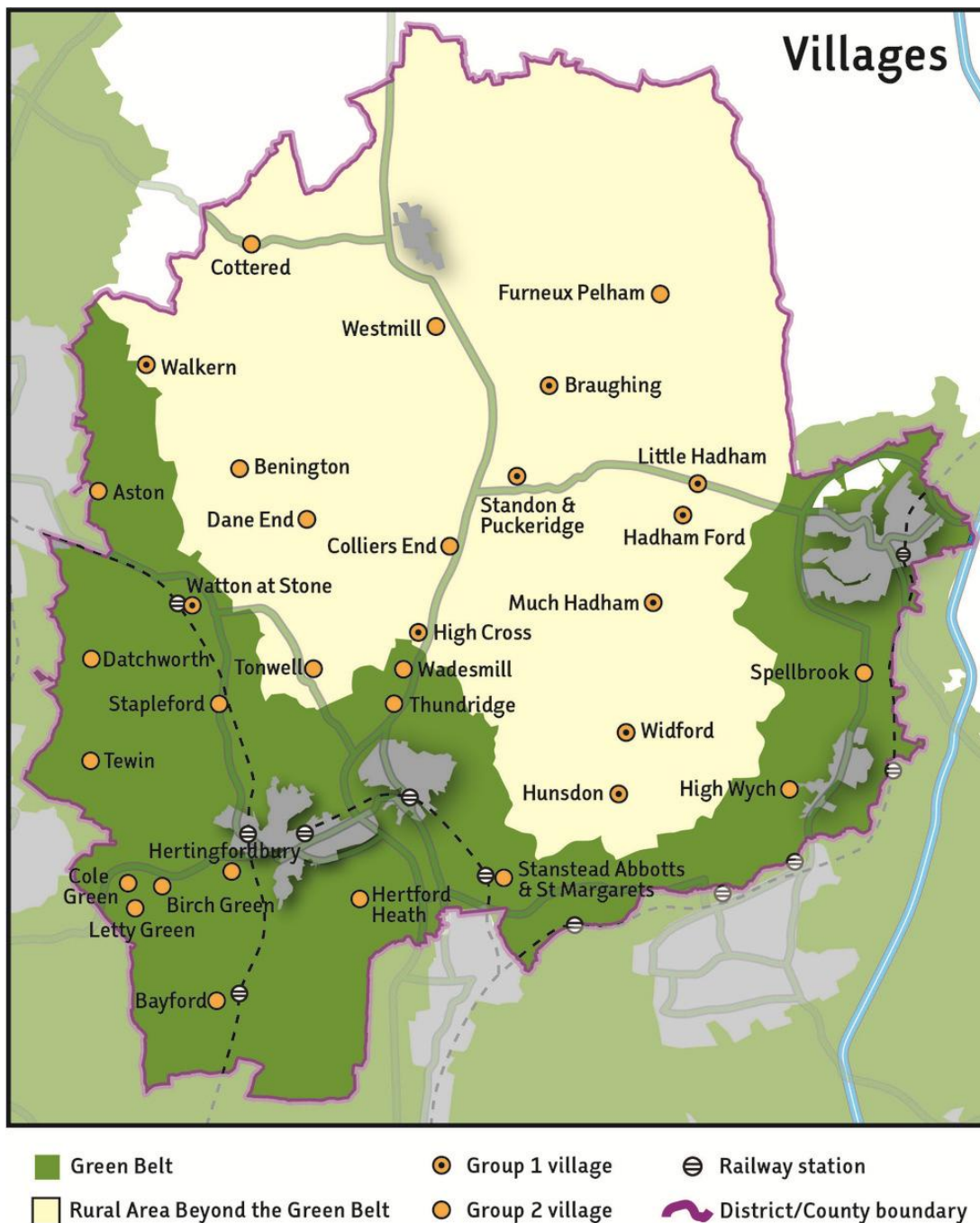


Figure 1: Preferred Options District Plan, Villages Key Diagram

2. Consultation Responses

2.1 The Preferred Options consultation elicited a significant response from members of the local community. While these representations covered a variety of topics, the main areas of concern were:

- The principle of permitting development in villages given their limited range of services and facilities and whether this would constitute sustainable development;

- Infrastructure capacity of the villages (particularly education facilities, healthcare facilities and local road infrastructure);
 - The classification of particular villages within the hierarchy;
 - Restrictive policies that limit development potential in smaller villages;
 - Harm to the character of the countryside.
- 2.2 Several site promoters made representations specific to their sites and further consideration of the village development strategy and the need to allocate sites for development in the villages is covered at appropriate points throughout the remainder of this document.

3. Technical Assessments

Interim Village Hierarchy Study

- 3.1 The Interim Village Hierarchy Study, December 2015, was produced by the Council to provide an up-to-date assessment of the sustainability of villages, to support the preparation of the District Plan. The study built on work that was undertaken earlier in the plan-making process with the aim of presenting a comprehensive review of the village hierarchy, informed through village surveys and engagement with Parish Councils. The study provided a snapshot in time assessment of both facilities, and accessibility to services, within the different villages of East Herts.
- 3.2 A scoring system was formulated and used to rank 42 villages within East Herts with regard to their overall sustainability. The first part of the study was an assessment of the range of services and facilities that a village contains, whilst the second part of the study was an assessment of the village's accessibility to higher order settlements, and the level of public transport provision available.
- 3.3 Following the ranking of the villages, the higher scoring settlements were subject to a further level of assessment, which sought to determine the availability of suitable sites for development and the capacity of the village school to accommodate the pupil yield from additional development. This identified that significant constraints existed within two villages, Stanstead Abbots & St. Margaret's and Hertford Heath, which resulted in a recommendation being made that they should not be identified as Group 1 Villages in the Plan.
- 3.4 The study concluded by confirming that villages that had scored over 50 points in the assessment had been categorised as Group 1 Villages with the

exception of Stanstead Abbots & St. Margarets and Hertford Heath. Settlements that had scored between 15 and 49 points had been categorised as Group 2 Villages, and settlements that scored below 15 points had been categorised as Group 3.

- 3.5 The Group 1 and Group 2 villages identified in the Interim Village Hierarchy Study were:

Group 1:

Braughing	Standon and Puckeridge
Hunsdon	Walkern
Much Hadham	Watton-at-Stone

Group 2:

Albury	Hare Street
Anstey	Hertford Heath
Aston	Hertingfordbury
Bayford	High Cross
Benington	High Wych
Birch Green	Little Berkhamsted
Bramfield	Little Hadham
Brickendon	Spellbrook
Cole Green	Stanstead Abbots and St. Margarets
Colliers End	Stapleford
Cottered	Tewin
Dane End	Thundridge and Wadesmill
Datchworth	Tonwell
Furneux Pelham	Wareside
Great Amwell	Westmill
Great Hormead	Widford
Hadham Ford	

Final Village Hierarchy Study

- 3.6 The Final Village Hierarchy Study, August 2016, was produced by the Council as the concluding report to the Interim Village Hierarchy Study. This was considered by Members at the District Planning Executive Panel Meeting on 25th August 2016. The study presents the final 'sustainability scores' associated with each village and identifies which villages will be classified as Group 1 and Group 2 Villages in the District Plan.

- 3.7 The study used the same scoring system established in the Interim Village Hierarchy Study to rank 44 villages within East Herts with regard to their sustainability. Whilst the first and second parts of the study were identical to that discussed in paragraph 3.2 above, the Final Village Hierarchy Study did not subject the higher scoring settlements to the further level of assessment relating to land availability and school capacity. This is because a proposed change in the village development strategy, explained in paragraph 6.16 below, means that not all Group 1 Villages will be required to accommodate a 10% increase in dwellings, so lack of suitable land available no longer provides the justification to downgrade a settlement within the hierarchy. In addition, it is considered that school capacity constraints are likely to fluctuate over the Plan period so again, it is not considered appropriate to downgrade a settlement for this reason.
- 3.8 The Group 1 and Group 2 villages identified in the Final Village Hierarchy Study are listed below. It should be noted that the villages of Standon & Puckeridge and Thundridge & Wadesmill have been combined in the hierarchy as the way that these adjacent villages function means that they should be treated as a single settlement for planning purposes.

Group 1:

Braughing	Standon and Puckeridge
Hertford Heath	Stanstead Abbots & St. Margaret's
Hunsdon	Walkern
Much Hadham	Watton-at-Stone

Group 2:

Anstey	Hare Street
Aston	Hertingfordbury
Bayford	High Cross
Benington	High Wych
Birch Green	Little Berkhamsted
Bramfield	Little Hadham
Brickendon	Spellbrook
Colliers End	Stapleford
Cottered	Tewin
Dane End	Thundridge and Wadesmill
Datchworth	Tonwell
Furneux Pelham	Wareside
Great Amwell	Westmill
Great Hornead	Widford
Hadham Ford	

4. Duty to Co-operate

- 4.1 Given the level of development proposed in the villages and the fact that the villages identified as being sustainable locations for development are located all around the District, no specific discussions have been had with neighbouring local authorities in regard to the village development strategy, as it is considered that there are limited cross-boundary issues. However, extensive discussions have been held with Hertfordshire County Council to understand any education infrastructure issues in the villages.

5. Neighbourhood Planning

- 5.1 A number of villages have initiated work on the formulation of a Neighbourhood Plan and these are at various stages of the preparation process. The Buntingford Community Area Neighbourhood Plan is the only Plan covering village development to have come forward for formal consideration, with the examination of the Plan due to commence shortly. The table below lists the Area Designations that have been agreed for the purpose of preparing a Neighbourhood Plan and the villages that they cover.

Agreed Area Designations	Group 1 & 2 Villages Covered
Braughing	Braughing
Brickendon Liberty	Brickendon
Buntingford Community Area	Cottered, Great Hornead, Hare Street
Eastwick, Gilston and Hunsdon	Hunsdon
Hertford Heath	Hertford Heath
Hertingfordbury	Birch Green
Little Hadham	Little Hadham, Hadham Ford
Much Hadham	Much Hadham
Sawbridgeworth	Spellbrook
Standon	Colliers End, Standon & Puckeridge
Walkern	Walkern
Watton-at-Stone	Watton-at-Stone

- 5.2 It should be noted that, with the exception of Stanstead Abbots & St. Margaret's, all of the Group 1 Villages are covered by an area designation, which indicates how local communities have embraced the opportunity to get

involved in the planning process and help shape future development in their locality.

6. The Emerging Strategy

- 6.1 Following the publication of the Interim Village Hierarchy Study, December 2015, a number of responses were received from Parish Councils voicing concern about the assessment process and the proposed village development strategy in the District Plan. In addition, Officers had become aware of a number of appeal decisions relating to village development proposals around the country, which provided clarification on how the NPPF should be interpreted with regard to development in villages and the rural area.
- 6.2 The key areas of concern for the Council in terms of the village development strategy proposed in the Preferred Options District Plan and its consistency with national policy, were with regard to the restrictive policy approach to development in Group 3 Villages and the use of fixed 'development boundaries' to restrict development. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) promotes sustainable development in rural areas where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. The associated Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) on Rural Housing is clear that 'all settlements can play a role in delivering sustainable development in rural areas'. The guidance goes on to state that 'blanket policies restricting housing development in some settlements and preventing other settlements from expanding should be avoided unless their use can be supported by robust evidence', whilst the NPPF only seeks to restrict the development of isolated dwellings in the countryside.
- 6.3 It was the view of Officers that further consideration needed to be given to the village development strategy with regard to its restrictive policies on development in the rural area and whether this approach was consistent with the aims of the NPPF. This would also provide the opportunity to consider whether there was a more equitable way to distribute development across the villages and rural area, which could contribute to sustaining the vitality of the smaller villages in the District.
- 6.4 In January 2016, the Council held an informal meeting with a representative of the Planning Inspectorate. The Inspector endorsed the suggested approach of delivering the housing requirement allocated to villages through Neighbourhood Planning. The specific circumstances of the role Neighbourhood Planning could play in the review of Green Belt boundaries was also discussed. The Inspector considered that, although it had not been

tested through an examination process, it would be a reasonable approach for Neighbourhood Plans to carry out a local Green Belt review in order to accommodate sustainable development, given the Government's localism agenda. However, the Inspector did confirm that as the Green Belt is considered to be a strategic policy, it would be necessary for a 'hook' to be included in the District Plan confirming the potential to amend the Green Belt boundary in specific locations through the Neighbourhood Planning process.

- 6.5 Therefore, in April 2016, the Council circulated a discussion paper to Members, Parish Councils and Neighbourhood Plan steering groups to present an alternative policy approach to development in the District's villages. The suggested approach would have resulted in the removal of the village hierarchy, with development being permitted across a wider number of named villages. Villages that are inset from the Green Belt would be encouraged to consider whether it was appropriate to amend their Green Belt boundary through the formulation of a Neighbourhood Plan to accommodate additional development. This approach would also have resulted in the removal of the village development boundaries with development proposals being considered using a criteria based approach on a site by site basis.
- 6.6 The feedback received to the discussion paper showed that a change to the proposed development strategy for the villages was not widely supported. Concern was expressed that the alternative policy approach would lead to uncontrolled development in the rural areas, particularly if the 'fixed development' boundaries were removed. Parish Councils felt that the village hierarchy approach, whilst not faultless, was the preferable approach as it enabled a greater degree of control and influence over the rate and location of development in rural areas to be maintained.
- 6.7 Therefore, it is the view of Officers that the village hierarchy should remain in the District Plan, to help direct housing to the most sustainable locations. Village development boundaries will be defined for all Group 1 and 2 Villages; these delineate the main built up area of the village and denote where development is considered to be acceptable in principle. However, it is considered that the restrictive policy approach to development in Group 3 Villages is no longer appropriate in light of the NPPF which promotes sustainable development in rural areas where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities.
- 6.8 Therefore, it is proposed that in addition to limited infill development in Group 2 Villages, small scale development identified in an adopted Neighbourhood Plan will be permitted. In Group 3 Villages, limited infill development identified in a Neighbourhood Plan will be permitted. This is a more permissive approach than that proposed in the Preferred Options District Plan and allows

local communities to plan positively for the identified housing needs within their villages.

- 6.9 The proposed amendments to the Green Belt around Watton-at-Stone will no longer be made through the District Plan. The Plan will provide a strategic 'hook' which will state that Group 1 Villages that are inset from the Green Belt will be encouraged to consider whether it is appropriate to amend their Green Belt boundary through the formulation of a Neighbourhood Plan to accommodate additional development especially where it contributes to wider sustainability objectives and the delivery of community benefits.
- 6.10 It should be noted that in addition to the policy approach outlined above, development that is considered to be appropriate in the Green Belt and Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt, such as rural affordable housing schemes, will be permitted.
- 6.11 The policy approach contained in the Pre-Submission District Plan is identified below.

Policy VILL1 Group 1 Villages

- 6.12 This policy sets out the position with regard to development in Group 1 Villages. In the Preferred Options District Plan, it was proposed that the ten identified Group 1 Villages would together deliver at least 500 dwellings over the Plan period, with each village expected to deliver a minimum 10% increase in housing stock from a 2011 base.
- 6.13 The list of identified Group 1 Villages has been amended to reflect the findings of the Final Village Hierarchy Study, August 2016. Four villages (Hadham Ford, High Cross, Little Hadham, Widford) have been removed as they are now identified as Group 2 Villages, whilst the villages of Hertford Heath and Stanstead Abbots & St. Margaret's have been added to the list of Group 1 Villages.
- 6.14 Despite being two of the District's most sustainable villages, Hertford Heath and Stanstead Abbots & St. Margaret's had previously been categorised as Group 2 Villages due to constraints which restricted their ability to deliver a minimum 10% increase in housing stock. However, the delivery of a lower level of growth was not tested through this process. As these villages are inset from the Green Belt, and it is now proposed that housing growth beyond the boundary can only be delivered through a local review of the Green Belt, it is the view of Officers that they should be included within the list of Group 1

Villages, but that they will not have a requirement to deliver a minimum 10% growth in housing stock.

- 6.15 The Group1 Villages of Braughing, Hunsdon, Much Hadham, Standon & Puckeridge, and Walkern will continue to be expected to accommodate at least a 10% increase in housing stock (based on the 2011 Census) over the 16-year period between 1st April 2017 and 31st March 2033.
- 6.16 The Group 1 Villages of Hertford Heath, Stanstead Abbots & St. Margaret's, and Watton-at-Stone, will be encouraged to consider whether it is appropriate to amend their Green Belt boundary through the formulation of a Neighbourhood Plan to accommodate additional development especially where it contributes to wider sustainability objectives and the delivery of community benefits. However, these villages will not have a minimum housing target to be delivered over the Plan period.
- 6.17 In addition, whilst the housing requirement to be delivered in villages remains the same at least 500 dwellings, it is now proposed that development across all villages will contribute to this figure, rather than just development from Group 1 Villages. This is due to there being a reduced number of villages identified as Group 1 Villages with a specific housing requirement, and to reflect the amended policy approach to village development whereby there is the opportunity for development to be delivered in a wider number of villages through the Neighbourhood Planning process.

Policy VILL2 Group 2 Villages

- 6.18 This policy sets out the position with regard to development in Group 2 Villages. The list of identified Group 2 Villages has been amended to reflect the findings of the Final Village Hierarchy Study, August 2016. Four villages have been removed from the list of Group 2 Villages; Hertford Heath and Stanstead Abbots & St. Margaret's, have been removed as they are now identified as Group 1 Villages, whilst Cole Green and Letty Green have been removed as they are now identified as Group 3 Villages. Four villages (Hadham Ford, High Cross, Little Hadham, Widford) have been reclassified as Group 2 Villages from Group 1 Villages. Eight villages (Anstey, Bramfield, Brickendon, Great Amwell, Great Hormead, Hare Street, Little Berkhamsted, Wareside) have been reclassified as Group 2 Villages from Group 3 Villages.
- 6.19 As explained in paragraph 6.8 above, it is proposed that in addition to limited infill development in Group 2 Villages, small scale development identified in an adopted Neighbourhood Plan will be permitted.

Policy VILL3 Group 3 Villages

- 6.20 This policy sets out the position with regard to development in Group 3 Villages. Group 3 Villages are all those villages which are not identified as either Group 1 or Group 2 Villages. As explained in paragraph 6.8 above, it is proposed that limited infill development identified in an adopted Neighbourhood Plan will be permitted.
- 6.21 It is the view of Officers that this approach recognises the role that smaller rural settlements can play in delivering a limited amount of additional housing, whilst striking a balance with the need to protect the character of the District.

Policy VILL6 New Employment Development

- 6.22 It is proposed that this policy be deleted from the District Plan as the issue of new employment provision in rural areas is covered by Policies GBR1, GBR2 and ED2 of the Plan.

7. Consideration of Alternative Sites

- 7.1 As part of the Plan-making process it would usually be necessary to consider whether any available and suitable alternative options would be better placed to meet the level of development proposed to be delivered within a particular settlement. However, as explained in this appraisal, the Council is not proposing to allocate particular sites for development in the villages within the District Plan. It will be the role of Neighbourhood Plans to allocate sites for development, and therefore the consideration of alternative sites will form part of this process.
- 7.2 However, it is important to make the distinction between the plan-making process and the decision-making process relating to the consideration of planning applications, in relation to alternative sites. The discussion and conclusions reached in this appraisal relate to the formulation of a sustainable development strategy for the District as a whole, through the plan-making process.
- 7.3 Some villages have seen speculative planning applications submitted and approved in advance of the adoption of the District Plan and a Neighbourhood Plan. Each planning application submitted in advance of the District Plan and Neighbourhood Plan has been considered on its merits in accordance with the saved policies of the Local Plan 2007 and the NPPF. There are still outstanding planning applications awaiting determination that will also be

considered in this context and potentially with regard to the policies contained in the emerging District Plan and emerging Neighbourhood Plans as they gain more weight in the decision-making process.

8. SA Objectives

- 8.1 The Sustainability Appraisal is an integral part of Plan-making. As no sites are being allocated for development in the villages within the District Plan, and there has been no consideration of alternative development options, the development strategy for the villages will be assessed through the District-Wide Sustainability Appraisal.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 The Villages Appraisal has recognised the role that smaller rural settlements can play in delivering additional housing to meet local needs, and it is considered that the village development strategy to be included in the District Plan strikes an appropriate balance between providing additional housing to meet local needs and protecting the rural character of the District, with the majority of the District's housing needs being met through development proposals on strategic sites adjacent to larger, more sustainable settlements.
- 9.2 The Final Village Hierarchy Study has ranked the District's villages based on their relative sustainability. Neighbourhood Planning, a key part of the localism agenda, has been given a central role in delivering additional homes in the villages.
- 9.3 It is considered that the village development strategy is justified and appropriate in the context of national policy and guidance, and that it presents a positive and sustainable development strategy for the villages and rural area.