

4. GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 The Government's policies for the countryside are contained in the White Paper 'Our Countryside: The Future, A Fair Deal for Rural England' (November 2000) and in PPS7. These emphasise the importance of ensuring that policies for the countryside are sustainable. The Local Plan has a key role to play in the protection of critical and other important environmental assets for the benefit of present and future generations. It seeks to do this by managing and guiding change in the environment, and where necessary, controlling development. At the same time it has to make proper provision, in a sustainable way, for the needs of the present and future generations. The aims and objectives listed below set out the Council's planning strategy for meeting these needs.

Aims

- A. To protect, preserve and enhance the quality and character of the countryside, whilst meeting the needs of all those who live and work there in a sustainable manner, ensuring vital and viable communities.
- B. To implement the Village Development Strategy.
- C. To encourage access to the countryside for all, whilst ensuring that areas of critical capital and other environmental assets are preserved for future generations and that the needs of agriculture are protected.

Objectives

- 1. To prevent the coalescence of settlements and urbanisation in the Metropolitan Green Belt and Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt.
- 2. To protect the best and most versatile agricultural land and to retain land in agricultural, forestry and related uses.
- 3. To encourage high quality in design and promote local distinctiveness and diversity in the landscape and built form.

- 4. To provide opportunities for access to and enjoyment of the countryside and the waterways.
- 5. To promote vital and viable rural communities.
- 6. To retain attractive landscapes and enhance landscapes near to where people live.
- 7. To protect, retain and where appropriate enhance areas of nature conservation value.
- 8. To improve understanding of local landscape character. The character assessments contained in the document 'Landscape Character Assessment, Evaluation and Guidelines for East Hertfordshire District' should be used to guide decisions.

4.2 The Rural Area

4.2.1 The Rural Area of East Hertfordshire comprises the whole of the District, outside of the towns, and other identified settlements. The landscape is rich and diverse reflecting a variety of natural features and thousands of years of human activity. It is an undulating, complex, and widely dispersed mix of fields, woodland, river valleys and settlements, with the main river valleys of the Lea and Stort containing the major settlements.

4.2.2 Based on work originally undertaken by the Countryside Commission and English Nature (now merged to form Natural England), but refined by local understanding, a regional pattern of landscape character has been established for Hertfordshire. Six landscape regions have been identified by the County Council, of which there are three in East Hertfordshire: The East Hertfordshire Plateau which covers the majority of the District, the Central River Valleys Region and a small section of the South Hertfordshire Plateau. These regions are based on a variety of criteria, but predominantly landform and topography, soil types, vegetation, field pattern and settlement pattern. A summary of the landscape character of these regions can be found in Section 4.14.

4. GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

4.2.3 The protection of environmental assets, both in terms of natural resources and historical features, is a key principle of sustainability. The pressure for development is significant, nevertheless it needs to be addressed in such a way that does not jeopardise these assets for future generations.

4.2.4 Approximately 30% of the District's population live in the rural area, although only a small percentage now work on the land. Changes in agricultural practice and loss of farm income have resulted in fewer people working in agriculture. This has, and will, continue to lead to pressure for the diversification of farm businesses. In line with national trends, the District has seen the closure of rural shops and schools, centralisation of health care facilities, loss of bus routes, and a lack of affordable housing for some sections of the community, in particular the young and elderly. There is a need to ensure that the District's villages are balanced, vital and viable communities.

4.2.5 The District Council identifies the rural area as a key resource that needs to be conserved and, where possible, enhanced. Restraint strategies that emphasise the protection of the countryside are seen as a priority. Within the Rural Area priority will be given to conserving and enhancing the character, appearance and quality of the countryside.

4.3 Metropolitan Green Belt

4.3.1 PPG2 states the general intentions of Green Belt policy, including its contribution to sustainable development objectives; sets out the specific purposes of including land in Green Belts; specifies objectives for the use of land in Green Belts; confirms that Green Belts must be protected as far as can be seen ahead; and maintains the presumption against inappropriate development, setting out the categories of appropriate development.

4.3.2 The essential characteristic therefore of the Green Belt is its permanence, the protection of which must be maintained as far as can be seen ahead. The adoption of this principle sets clear long-term limits to development, thereby helping

to safeguard the countryside. In East Hertfordshire a band of Green Belt, forming part of the Metropolitan Green Belt, secures the containment of the settlements of Bishop's Stortford, Hertford, Ware, Sawbridgeworth and Stanstead Abbots and St. Margarets, and the Category 1 Villages of Hertford Heath, Tewin, and Watton-at-Stone. A Green Belt will be maintained in the south of the District, as defined on the Proposals Map, wherein there is a presumption against inappropriate development.

GBC1 Appropriate Development in the Green Belt

Within the Metropolitan Green Belt, as defined on the Proposals Map, permission will not be given for inappropriate development unless very special circumstances can be demonstrated that clearly outweigh the harm by reason of inappropriateness or any other harm.

The construction of new buildings on land falling within the Green Belt will be inappropriate unless it is for the following purposes:

- (a) agriculture or forestry;
- (b) essential small scale facilities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation;
- (c) essential facilities for cemeteries and other uses of land which preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land in the Green Belt;
- (d) limited extensions or alterations to existing dwellings in accordance with Policy ENV5;
- (e) replacement dwellings in accordance with Policy HSG8;
- (f) limited infill development in Category 2 Villages, in accordance with Policy OSV2 (II);
- (g) small scale affordable housing for local needs within existing rural settlements in accordance with Policy HSG5 and Policy OSV3;

4. GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

- (h) the adaptation and re-use of rural buildings in accordance with Policies GBC9 and GBC10;
- (i) limited infilling or redevelopment of 'Major Developed Sites', identified on the Proposals Map, in accordance with Policy GBC4.

The material change of use of land or engineering operations within the Green Belt will be inappropriate unless they maintain openness and do not conflict with the purposes of including land in the Green Belt.

development strategy of the Structure Plan is to concentrate and direct development to the main settlements. Other settlements have been selected where limited development may be appropriate to maintain the vitality of the area. Development in smaller settlements will be accommodated only to support facilities and services needed and meet the employment and housing needs for that settlement and its surrounding area. In addition, the Structure Plan seeks to conserve the county's critical capital and other environmental assets. There is therefore a strong restraint on inappropriate development, as defined in policy GBC3, within the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt.

4.4 Alterations to Metropolitan Green Belt Boundary and Safeguarded Land

4.4.1 Some alterations to the Green Belt boundary have been made as part of the Local Plan Review. In some cases greenfield land has been incorporated into the Green Belt, (Hertford and Bishop's Stortford) to afford them better protection, and in others, land has been released, in settlements where there is insufficient brownfield land, to meet the District's housing allocation. These alterations are identified in the Settlement Chapters and on the Proposals Map. Only sufficient land to meet the current housing requirements (1991-2011), has been released from the Green Belt. No new safeguarded land in the form of Areas of Special Restraint (ASR's) has been identified, other than existing ASR's, not required in the plan period up to 2011, which are carried forward to a future review of the Local Plan.

4.4.2 Sites identified for release for development have been environmentally appraised and selected on the basis of sustainability criteria and least damage done to the purposes of the Green Belt. The District Council has paid particular regard to selecting and allocating sites, which offer demonstrable benefits to the parent settlement.

4.5 Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt

4.5.1 The Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt comprises approximately the northern two thirds of the District's area. It is, therefore, a considerable and significant rural resource. The main

GBC2 The Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt

A Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt will be maintained in the central and northern part of the District, as defined on the Proposals Map, wherein inappropriate development will not be permitted.

GBC3 Appropriate Development in the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt

Within the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt, except for development within the main settlement of Buntingford and the other settlements identified in Policy OSV1 (Category 1 Villages), permission will not be given for the construction of new buildings or for changes of use for purposes other than:

- (a) agriculture or forestry;
- (b) essential small scale facilities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation;
- (c) limited extensions or alterations to existing dwellings in accordance with Policy ENV5, to employment premises in line with Policies EDE3 and OSV6, and to community facilities in line with Policy OSV8;
- (d) replacement dwellings in accordance with Policy HSG8;

Continued...

4.GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

- (e) limited infill development in Category 2 Villages, in accordance with Policy OSV2 (II);
- (f) small scale affordable housing for local needs within existing rural settlements in accordance with Policy HSG5 and Policy OSV3 (Category 3 Villages);
- (g) the adaptation and re-use of rural buildings in accordance with Policies GBC9 and GBC10;
- (h) other essential small scale facilities, services or uses of land which meet a local need, are appropriate to a rural area and which assist rural diversification;
- (i) limited development within 'Major Developed Sites' which are identified on the Proposals Map, in accordance with Policy GBC4;
- (j) Agricultural, Forestry and other Occupational Dwellings in accordance with Policy GBC5;
- (k) small-scale riding and livery stables in accordance with Policy GBC11
- (l) Gypsy or traveller accommodation in accordance with Policy HSG10.

4.6 Major Developed Sites

4.6.1 PPG2 advises that where major developed sites such as factories, water and sewage treatment works, and research and education establishments exist within the Green Belt, the Local Plan may seek to identify such sites and apply appropriate policies to them. As there is no precise definition given in PPG2, it is left to local planning authorities to define them, but they must be substantial. Such uses are generally well established and may provide important sources of local employment. Once such sites have been identified in an adopted local plan, then limited infilling or redevelopment, which meets the criteria in Annex C of PPG2, becomes appropriate development.

4.6.2 Limited infilling or redevelopment of these sites should have no greater impact on the Green Belt than the existing development; it should not lead to a significant increase in floor area or activity on the site; and should be required to meet current operational requirements rather than an expansion of the concern. Complete or partial redevelopment may offer the opportunity for environmental improvement, and should contribute to the objectives of having land in the Green Belt. Major Developed Site status does not mean that planning permission will automatically be granted for such development. Any proposal will, like any other application, be subject to all the policies contained within the Local Plan.

4.6.3 In East Hertfordshire there is also a strong restraint on inappropriate development in the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt (Policies GBC2 and GBC3). The District Council considers that there should be a consistent approach to the remaining two thirds of the District and a policy framework that is no more restrictive than that for the Green Belt. It is, therefore, considered appropriate to identify similar sites within the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt.

4.6.4 The District Council has identified Major Developed Sites, on the basis of the following criteria: size (footprint, levels of activity, e.g. number of students; employees and/or visitors); planning unit; planning history; and their capacity to accommodate infill development, without compromising the purposes of the Green Belt or its openness, or the character of the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt.

4.6.5 These sites are listed in paragraphs 4.6.6 and 4.6.7 and are identified on the Proposals Map. For each site a boundary has been drawn defining the area, within which limited infill development or redevelopment may occur. Policy GBC7 below outlines the circumstances under which such development may occur. However, a number of the sites are also of considerable environmental interest either through being listed buildings or because they adjoin areas of national nature conservation importance. In such cases, policies contained within Chapter 8 (Environment and Design) and Chapter 9 (Built Heritage) should also be referred to.

4. GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

GBC4 Major Developed Sites

Major Developed Sites in the Green Belt and Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt are identified on the Proposals Map.

- (I) Limited infilling at Major Developed Sites will amount to appropriate development, provided that such infilling:
- (a) has no greater impact than the existing development on the purposes of including land in the Green Belt or on the character of the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt;
 - (b) does not exceed the height of the existing buildings;
 - (c) will not lead to a major increase in the developed proportion of the site.
- (II) Redevelopment or partial redevelopment of a Major Developed Site should be accompanied by a planning brief and landscape scheme and:
- (a) should have no greater impact than the existing development on the purposes of including land in the Green Belt or on the character of the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt;
 - (b) sites within the Green Belt should make a positive contribution to the achievement of the aims and objectives listed in paragraph 4.1.1 of this Local Plan;
 - (c) sites within the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt should make a positive contribution to the aims and objectives listed in paragraph 4.1.1 of this Local Plan;
 - (d) should not exceed the height of the existing buildings;
 - (e) should not occupy a larger area of the site than the existing buildings (unless this would achieve a reduction in height, which would benefit visual amenity).

4.6.6 The following sites within the Green Belt are identified and delineated on the Proposals Map as Major Developed Sites:

- Merck Sharpe and Dohme, Terlings Park
- Hayters plc, Spellbrook
- Haileybury and Imperial College, Hertford Heath
- Former University of Hertfordshire, Balls Park, Hertford
- Simon Balle School, Ware
- Presdales School, Ware
- Leventhorpe School, Sawbridgeworth
- Sele School, Hertford
- Van Hage's Garden Centre, Great Amwell
- Rye Meads Sewage Works, Stanstead Abbots

4.6.7 The following sites within the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt are identified and delineated on the Proposals Map as Major Developed Sites:

- Former GlaxoSmithKlein site, Bury Green
- St. Edmund's College and St. Hugh's School, Old Hall Green
- St. Elizabeth's Centre, South End, Much Hadham
- Freman College, Buntingford

4.7 Housing in the Countryside

4.7.1 The Housing Provision Strategy directs development to the main settlements, with limited small scale and/or infill development being directed to villages identified in the Village Development Strategy. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 (Housing) and Chapter 17 (Other Settlements - The Villages). Changes in agricultural production methods and a declining agricultural workforce mean that the need for additional agricultural dwellings outside the settlements is increasingly rare. There may, however still be circumstances where additional essential accommodation is required and these will be assessed in accordance with Policy GBC5 and the criteria in Annex A of PPS7. In very exceptional circumstances there may be a need for residential accommodation to accompany other rural-based enterprises. In these circumstances proposals will be expected to meet the same stringent criteria as for agricultural and forestry housing.

4.GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

GBC5 Agricultural, Forestry and Other Occupational Dwellings

- (I) The District Council will:
- (a) only permit agricultural, forestry or other occupational dwellings in the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt where the applicant has demonstrated that it is essential for the proper functioning of the enterprise for one or more full time workers to be readily available at most times of the day and night;
 - (b) where the above 'functional test' is not conclusive, apply a financial test to complement it, to establish whether the existing or proposed business has been planned on a sound financial basis;
 - (c) not grant planning permission where existing accommodation is available suitably close to the enterprise;
 - (d) not grant planning permission where severance or subdivision of a holding has resulted in a new holding with no dwelling associated with it, except in cases where a genuine need has been clearly demonstrated.
- (II) In all cases new dwellings must be sensitively designed and sited to minimise the impact of the building on the character and appearance of the countryside.

4.8 Occupancy Conditions

4.8.1 Where planning permission is granted for a new dwelling in the countryside on the basis of a particular local need such as agriculture, forestry or other rural-based enterprise, the appropriate conditions will be imposed to ensure that the dwelling will be kept available to meet that particular need.

4.8.2 In the absence of a future need related to agriculture, forestry or other rural-based enterprise, occupancy will be limited to households who qualify for local affordable housing. Planning applications to remove an occupancy condition will only be granted in exceptional circumstances.

GBC6 Occupancy Conditions

- (I) Where planning permission is granted for a new dwelling in the countryside on the basis of a particular local need such as agriculture, forestry or other rural-based enterprise, the appropriate conditions will be imposed to ensure that the dwelling will be kept available to meet that particular need;
- (II) In the absence of a future particular local need such as agriculture, forestry or other rural-based enterprise, occupancy will be limited to households who qualify for local affordable housing;
- (III) Planning Applications to remove an occupancy condition will only be granted in exceptional circumstances. Evidence will need to be submitted to prove that:
- (a) there is no agricultural, forestry or other rural-based occupational need for the dwelling, having regard to need in the area as a whole, not just the particular holding; and
 - (b) a contribution to meeting local affordable housing needs in the area could not be made by the dwelling.

4. GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

4.9 Agricultural Development

4.9.1 Changes in permitted development rights for agricultural development mean that for certain types of development, planning permission needs to be sought, or prior notification of intent needs to be given. Changing agricultural practices brought about by changes in hygiene and welfare legislation, the European Union Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform, and changing requirements of the market place may well result in the need for new development. The District Council wishes to ensure that such development is sensitively located, and respects the character of the area. Anyone proposing to erect an agricultural building should first discuss their proposals with the Council's Development Control Service to clarify whether planning permission is required.

GBC7 Agricultural Development

Proposals for new agricultural buildings, which require planning permission, will be permitted provided that all of the following criteria are met:

- (a) the building is located within or adjacent to an existing group of buildings, unless it can be demonstrated that a more isolated location is essential to meet the needs of the holding. Where an isolated location is essential, the site should be chosen to minimise the impact of the building on the character and appearance of the countryside;
- (b) the proposal is accompanied by a landscape scheme, reflecting the landscape character of the area;
- (c) the building is of a design which is appropriate for its intended use, and sympathetic to its surroundings in terms of scale, materials, colour and architectural details.

4.10 Rural Diversification

4.10.1 The nature of agriculture has changed dramatically since the Second World War, reflecting greater specialisation, levels of mechanisation and improvements in productivity.

This restructuring has resulted in the need for farmers to diversify into non-agricultural activities in order that they may supplement their incomes, which is essential in achieving a competitive and sustainable agricultural industry.

4.10.2 As discussed in Section 6.9 'The Rural Economy', the reform of the European Common Agricultural Policy and the introduction of the Rural Development Regulation means that this trend to diversify is set to continue throughout the Plan period.

4.10.3 The District Council recognises the importance of encouraging appropriate diversification. Examples of rural diversification might involve setting up and running new enterprises such as bed and breakfast facilities or farm shops, equestrian uses, nature trails and holiday cottages.

4.10.4 Wherever possible applications should be accompanied by a farm management plan indicating the use of other land and buildings on the holding. Where the conversion of agricultural buildings would be likely to result in the proliferation of uses that would harm the amenity of the surrounding area, the District Council will consider the removal of permitted development rights, in accordance with Policy GBC10. Planning applications for new buildings will be expected to meet the criteria identified in Policy GBC7.

GBC8 Rural Diversification

Proposals for farm diversification will be permitted provided that all of the following criteria are met:

- (a) the proposal would support the continuation of the farm enterprise as a whole and would not result in the inappropriate and unsustainable subdivision of the farm unit;
- (b) the scheme where possible re-uses existing farm buildings;
- (c) where a new building is required it meets the criteria of Policy GBC7.

4.GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

4.11 Adaptation and Re-use of Rural Buildings

4.11.1 An important part of the District Council's Strategy on rural diversification will be to encourage the appropriate adaptation and re-use of rural buildings. Re-use provides a way of encouraging commercial and industrial development as well as providing opportunities for leisure and tourism. It can reduce demands for new building in the countryside whilst bringing under-used buildings into productive use.

4.11.2 However, whilst acknowledging this, the District Council also places considerable importance on safeguarding the character and appearance of the countryside, ensuring the openness of the Green Belt is maintained and the principles of sustainable development are met.

4.11.3 It is important to note that many rural buildings within East Hertfordshire are located within or adjacent to sensitive areas. Such areas may be taken to include not only the Green Belt, but also Conservation Areas, sites affecting the setting of listed buildings, and sites of nature conservation and archaeological interest. Furthermore, approximately 500 farm buildings are listed as being of special architectural or historic interest. In the light of these circumstances and the potential number of properties involved, the District Council consider that a selective approach to the re-use of rural buildings is justified.

4.11.4 Clearly, the wholesale conversion and re-use of buildings in the countryside for employment generating purposes would cumulatively change the rural character of the District, both visually and in terms of the general level of activity, particularly as a result of additional traffic movements. The advice in PPS7 is that all development in rural areas should be well designed, in keeping and scale with its location, and sensitive to the character of the countryside and local distinctiveness.

4.11.5 In pursuing a policy that is intended to assist economic activity and protect the countryside, the conversion and re-use of buildings for residential purposes, besides often being visually harmful to the building and its

surroundings, has little or no positive effect on the rural economy. However, in circumstances where it would be desirable to retain the building and a commercial use is considered inappropriate, consideration will be given to a residential use having regard the criteria set out in GBC9 (II), and the advice published in the District Council's Guidance Note entitled 'Farm Buildings'.

4.11.6 The Council considers that policies GBC9 and GBC10 achieve a sustainable balance between wholesale re-use of buildings and the protection of the countryside.

GBC9 Adaptation and Re-use of Rural Buildings

- (I) Proposals for the adaptation and re-use of agricultural and other non-residential/ domestic rural buildings for business, leisure, tourism, community and other purpose compatible with the rural area, will be permitted, provided that all of the following criteria are met:
- (a) the existing building is of a form, bulk, general design and materials of construction such that it is in keeping with its surroundings;
 - (b) the building is permanent and is soundly constructed, not requiring complete or substantial reconstruction before adaptation to a new use;
 - (c) the proposed use is sympathetic to the rural character and appearance of the building, not requiring extensive alterations or anything other than minor extensions to accommodate it;
 - (d) conversion would not lead to dispersal of activity on such a scale as to prejudice town and village vitality;

Continued...

4.GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

- (e) the proposed use is sympathetic to its surroundings not resulting in the creation of visually intrusive hardstandings or visually distinct curtilages or involving significant levels of outdoor working and storage;
 - (f) in the case of Listed Buildings, the historic (archaeological) value of the structure(s) has been assessed in a historic building impact assessment and appropriate mitigation of any impact on the structure(s) has been put in place.
- (II) The residential use of a building will be permitted only if the following criteria are met:
- (a) the building is worthy of retention and the introduction of a residential use would not detract significantly from the rural character and appearance of the area;
 - (b) the retention of the building is unable to be facilitated by conversion to a business use or part of a scheme for business re-use, leisure, tourism, community or other purposes compatible with the rural area;
 - (c) a contribution to the local affordable housing needs in the area cannot be made by the building; and
 - (d) in the case of Listed Buildings, the historic (archaeological) value of the structure(s) has been assessed in a historic building impact assessment and appropriate mitigation of any impact on the structure(s) has been put in place.

4.11.7 The District Council recognises that the redundancy of a building in agricultural terms should not be an overriding issue in consideration of proposals for the re-use of buildings for non-agricultural purposes. However the District Council is concerned that tenanted agricultural buildings in particular, which may have a significant

agricultural value in planning terms, as part of an agricultural holding, may be lost. Value in planning terms is intended to mean a building that has a potential value to the use of the holding, or surrounding land for agricultural purposes particularly by reason of its size, design, location, accessibility or facilities. This may also create a potential need for the construction of new buildings in the countryside.

4.11.8 In assessing proposals, the District Council will weigh the value of the building in planning terms against the potential benefits of re-use. Matters such as whether the building was originally erected to serve a genuine agricultural need, and the extent to which the proposed use contributes to rural diversification, will also be relevant in considering applications for change of use.

4.11.9 The redundancy of a building may still, in certain instances, be an important consideration, such as where it would be unreasonable for the District Council to attach conditions removing permitted development rights for new buildings, or where it might appear that a building was erected with permitted development rights with the intention of early conversion to another use. In these circumstances GBC10 (II) will apply. In any event, proposals for additional agricultural buildings should be supported by a justification for the development.

GBC10 Change of Use of an Agricultural Building

- (I) Where a change of use of an agricultural building is sought, in addition to the criteria set out in GBC9, applicants will be required to demonstrate that:
 - (a) the building was originally erected to serve a genuine agricultural need;
 - (b) the proposed new use relates to the diversification of the agricultural business of which it forms part;

Continued...

4. GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

- (c) the building is operationally important to the holding;
- (d) in the case of a tenanted agricultural building, the existing use has a significant agricultural value in planning terms.

(II) Planning permissions for the change of use of agricultural buildings or for the development of new agricultural buildings may require a condition or legal agreement removing agricultural permitted development rights where the District Council is concerned that additional buildings may have a seriously detrimental effect on the countryside. Permitted development rights will be removed in circumstances where:

- (a) that it is essential to maintain the openness of the Green Belt;
- (b) that additional buildings would have a significant adverse effect upon areas of high landscape value, sites of nature conservation interest or areas of archaeological value as identified on the Proposals Map;
- (c) that the erection of new farm buildings may adversely affect the setting of listed or other architecturally or historically important buildings within the countryside.

(III) Where a condition or legal agreement would be required under the terms of (II) above and the applicant is unable to demonstrate control over a farm holding, beyond the application site, the District Council may take account of whether the building is redundant in deciding whether to grant planning permission in order to assess the likelihood of its replacement.

4.12 Riding Stables and Associated Development

4.12.1 In recent years there has been a proliferation of pony paddocks and horse related activities, especially in urban fringe areas. The use of land for recreational horse keeping can bring employment and economic benefits, and offer an attractive way of exploring the countryside, but it can also have a significant impact on the countryside.

4.12.2 The keeping of horses can lead to the subdivision of fields, downgrading of pasture and a demand for new buildings to provide shelter and accommodation. Commercial riding establishments and livery yards can amount to substantial developments with stabling, flood-lit exercise areas, indoor riding schools and occasionally, demand for 24-hour employee presence on site. The landscape can, therefore, be fundamentally altered, leading to a loss of visual amenity, and a change in the character of the area, particularly when a number of such uses are in close proximity. There can also be conflict between motorised and non-motorised road users, with a consequent impact on road safety.

4.12.3 In some cases, however, horse keeping can be a positive force in maintaining traditional pastoral landscapes, especially where there is a commitment to good pasture management and boundary maintenance. Equestrian activity which respects the rural environment can help to diversify the rural economy and is a traditional part of rural life. Additionally, land used for grazing is usually considerably more biodiverse than arable land.

4.12.4 The grazing of horses for recreational or agricultural purposes generally lies outside planning control, but associated development, such as horse shelters, stables, manege and turn out areas, is normally the subject of planning control.

4. GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

GBC11 Riding Stables and Associated Development

The establishment of small scale riding and livery stables in the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt will be permitted provided that all of the following criteria are met:

- (a) the proposed development is sited or landscaped to minimise visual intrusion. The landscaping should reflect the landscape character of the area;
- (b) the site is well related to the existing or proposed bridleway network, other off-road routes, or the proposal includes works to provide new routes to enable connections between the development and other routes or places of equestrian interest;
- (c) the scale, design, siting and materials of any development and any necessary ancillary structures must be appropriate to the character of the site and the ability of the local environment to absorb the development;
- (d) where possible facilities should utilise existing buildings;
- (e) in assessing the application regard will be paid to the Natural England and British Horse Society recommended standards for stabling, and grazing;
- (f) where necessary, on site security can be adequately provided utilising existing buildings without significant alteration or adaptation; and
- (g) the amount of horse riding that is likely to result would not have an adverse impact on the management, ecology, or public use of open spaces and rights of way.

4.13 Parish Plans

4.13.1 Parish Plans were announced in the November 2000 Rural White Paper, which sets out the Government's plans for the countryside. They

are intended to develop previous work, such as Village Design Statements, and set a framework for communities to plan their own futures. They are part of Natural England's 'Vital Villages' initiative. A Parish Plan is a document outlining how the community sees itself developing over the next few years. It should set out a vision of what is important to the community; show how new development can best be fitted in; identify key facilities and services; set out the problems that need to be tackled; and demonstrate how distinctive character and features can be preserved.

4.13.2 Parish Plans can offer parish councils and local communities a framework for enhancing and contributing to both the Local Plan process and the Community Strategy.

4.13.3 In particular, Parish Plans provide an opportunity for parish councils and local communities to contribute and influence planning in two ways:

1. By securing Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) status for land use, development and design matters, Parish Plans give communities greater influence in planning decisions; and
2. Parish Plans can offer a framework for enhancing and contributing to the preparation and review of the Local Plan as part of the formal planning system.

Parish Plans also have a role in feeding into the Community Strategy. By taking a holistic view of the community and its surrounding environment, Parish Plans provide an opportunity to find local solutions to local problems.

4.13.4 The District Council wishes to encourage Parish Councils to prepare Parish Plans and as such it has set a corporate target of encouraging eight Parishes to produce Parish Plans by March 2007, to achieve the corporate priority of improving standards of neighbourhood management in our towns and villages.

4. GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

4.14 Environmental Assets

4.14.1 The conservation of key environmental resources and inherited environmental features is fundamental to the aims of sustainability. Environmental assets is a term used by the Structure Plan to encompass both critical capital, and those elements of the environment which, although able to accommodate some form of change, still need a measure of protection or enhancement in order to avoid their degradation. Proposals for policies concerning the protection of environmental assets are contained throughout the Local Plan. Those relating specifically to the countryside are discussed below.

Agricultural Land

4.14.2 PPS7 advises that the presence of best and most versatile agricultural land (defined as grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification) should be taken into account alongside other sustainability considerations when determining planning applications. Development should not be permitted unless opportunities have been assessed for accommodating it on previously developed sites and on land within the boundaries of existing urban areas. When significant development of agricultural land is unavoidable, development should seek to use areas of poorer quality (grades 3b, 4 and 5), except where this would be inconsistent with other sustainability considerations. The Structure Plan states that permission will not be given for development which is not associated with agriculture or forestry, unless there is a strong and overriding need.

GBC12 Agricultural Land

Development of best and most versatile agricultural land will only be permitted where opportunities have been assessed for accommodating such development on previously developed sites or within existing urban boundaries. Where development of agricultural land is unavoidable, development should seek to use areas of poorer quality, except where this would be inconsistent with other sustainability considerations.

Countryside Management and Stewardship

4.14.3 Pressures on the countryside can cause tensions between farmers, landowners and those seeking enjoyment of the countryside. Countryside Management enables a co-ordinated approach to be taken towards the resolution of conflicts between various interest groups, particularly in the urban fringe. It is also an important tool in the management and revitalisation of wildlife habitats and local landscapes, whilst increasing recreational opportunities and access to the countryside.

4.14.4 Environmental education is an important tool helping the community to appreciate the countryside and respect its delicate nature.

4.14.5 The District Council's role on this issue, along with other authorities and agencies, is primarily one of promoting countryside access, particularly where close to urban areas; protecting sensitive locations from over exposure to human activity; and encouraging and assisting voluntary effort in pursuit of measures intended to resolve conflicts between various needs and interests.

GBC13 Countryside Management

The District Council will:

- (a) consolidate and, where opportunities arise, extend its role and involvement in the field of countryside management, and strongly supports the coverage of the whole District by the Countryside Management Service and the voluntary organisations;
- (b) assist the County Council in monitoring changes in the rural environment and, in consultation with the Biological Records Centre, the Archaeology Section of the Historic Environment Unit and other environmental groups, identify further sites or areas which may benefit from countryside management techniques;
- (c) in association with the County Council, continue to support those projects currently the subject of countryside management activity.

4.GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

Landscape Character

4.14.6 The classification and designation of areas for their "landscape" value has long been part of the development planning process. However, a watershed was reached in 1997 with the publication of PPG7, which identified a move away from designating landscapes as special, based on typically subjective criteria, in favour of a comprehensive approach for all landscapes.

4.14.7 This shift in emphasis is supported by Government departments and agencies. For example, in the mid 1990's English Nature and the Countryside Commission produced a Joint Character Map for England. This map identifies and describes broad areas of relatively homogenous character, based on a holistic and systematic approach. As significant, the Countryside Agency (now Natural England) and Scottish Natural Heritage have also published guidance on how this same approach can be cascaded locally. The intention is that alongside decisions about development there can be community-owned guidance on the conservation, enhancement and in some cases creation of landscape character.

4.14.8 The Rural White Paper (2000) reaffirms this approach, stating that local authorities should seek to enrich the countryside as a whole, not just in the protected areas, and maintain its distinctive local features.

4.14.9 Hertfordshire County Council embraced this approach in the Structure Plan 1998, adopting as supplementary planning guidance the Hertfordshire Landscape Strategy Volume 1, which had been published the year previously. The Strategy identified six landscape character regions for the county, of which there are three in East Hertfordshire: the East Hertfordshire Plateau which covers the majority of the District; the Central River Valleys Region; and a small section of The South Hertfordshire Plateau.

Landscape Character of East Herts

The East Herts Plateau is an undulating area of boulder clay, incised by several rivers, with a complex mix of fields and small woodlands plus widely dispersed settlements. The open country lanes afford a succession of unspoilt views, and the valley settlements, typically associated with fords, are a distinctive feature of the region.

The Central River Valleys area was created and defined by the former route of the Thames and now contains the major rivers of Hertfordshire, many of the major settlements and the major communication corridors.

The South Hertfordshire Plateau is a region of generally small fields, woodland and heaths, of some historic, scientific and amenity importance.

4.14.10 A key action within Volume 1 was the pledge to undertake landscape character assessment at a finer resolution and since its publication the County Council, in partnership with district councils, has agreed a methodology for, and led the production of detailed landscape character assessments for Southern Hertfordshire. The first 93 of these have been compiled as Volume 2 of the Hertfordshire Landscape Strategy (2001).

4.14.11 Work to complete the East Herts District assessment has been completed and this will form the basis of a Supplementary Planning Document.

4. GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

GBC14 Landscape Character

Landscape Character Assessment prepared in accordance with an agreed methodology will be used to assess development proposals which will be required to improve and conserve local landscape character by:

- (a) conserving, enhancing or creating landscape features which are considered desirable to strengthen local landscape character;
- (b) contributing to the strategy for managing change, with reference to the Landscape Character Assessment for the area; and
- (c) enhancing or conserving key characteristics and distinctive features, as identified in the Landscape Character Assessment.

Where damage to local landscape character is unavoidable, appropriate mitigation measures will be sought. The relevant Landscape Character Assessment will inform the nature of these measures.

Nature Conservation, Natural Features and the Water Environment

4.14.12 Policies concerning these elements are contained within Chapter 8 (Environment and Design), as they relate to both the natural and built environments. They are, however, important features of the countryside contributing to its character, distinctiveness, diversity and quality.

4.14.13 A wide range of individual features are of particular importance, most notably: trees and woodlands; traditional field boundaries such as lanes, hedgerows, and boundary patterns; rivers, streams, navigable waterways, water areas, drainage patterns and land associated with rivers and other watercourses; and historic designed parkland and gardens. Such features play a vital role in the landscape, providing highly visible evidence of its historical evolution, as well as being important for wildlife.

4.14.14 The District is fortunate in having a number of nature conservation areas, with 15 nationally important Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's) some of which are also included within two international sites, as well as around 500 Wildlife Sites of local or regional significance. The richness of these areas adds immeasurably to the quality of the countryside. However, it is important to remember that wildlife is not confined to designated areas and that road verges, hedgerows, areas of wasteland, canals, river valleys and ponds have a nature conservation value in their own right as well as acting as corridors, or stepping stones, linking one habitat to another.

4.14.15 The District's river valleys are particularly important in this context, not only as corridors for wildlife, but in providing access from the town into the country. They also provide opportunities for formal and informal recreation, and as a mode of transport. These differing uses can provide both enhanced opportunities and added pressures, which need to be managed sensitively, if potential conflicts of interest are to be minimised.

4.15 Mineral Resources

4.15.1 Planning applications for the winning and working of minerals are dealt with by Hertfordshire County Council, and therefore the degree of influence the District can exert is limited to giving observations on these applications.

4.15.2 There is a need to safeguard known mineral supplies from inappropriate development. Accordingly, the District Council will permit proposals which would sterilise or prejudice extraction of known supplies only if the development can be shown to be essential or if extraction can take place prior to the development being implemented.

4.GREEN BELT AND COUNTRYSIDE

GBC15 Mineral Resources

Development likely to sterilise or prejudice the extraction of known mineral supplies will not be permitted unless:

- (a) it can be demonstrated that the development is essential, or
- (b) the mineral resource can be extracted prior to or in conjunction with implementation of the development.