

## **The Parish Council's Response to Points Raised Regarding the Possibility of the Old Tree Nursery, Wrestlingworth being Developed by Central Bedfordshire Council as a Rural Exception Site to Meet the Housing Need Identified in the Housing Needs Survey Conducted in 2013.**

**These matters were discussed during the Open Forum at the Parish Council Meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2017.**

### **Point One Development on a Rural Exception Site**

Government legislation currently requires developers to provide a percentage of social housing on sites above 10 dwellings, but not below. It has already been established that such a development is not appropriate or sustainable in Wrestlingworth. Social housing on such a development would be open to anyone on the local authority (Central Bedfordshire Council) housing waiting list. Therefore your wish to see social housing provided by open market developers is not possible in our parish.

Government regulations provide for Rural Exception Sites to be used in rural villages to meet specific demonstrable parish needs. They are designed to be used to build social housing for rent or shared ownership. Eligibility is restricted to people who live in the parish, have family connections with the parish or work in the parish. They must not be home owners and must be able to meet financial criteria relating to low income and must be on the housing waiting list in the relevant local authority (Central Bedfordshire). The key to understanding Rural Exception Site is the word "Exception". The site must be outside the Settlement Envelope of a parish, but adjacent to it. The site would be an exception to other planning regulations and as such would not create a precedent if a planning application for open market housing were to be submitted on land outside the Settlement Envelope.

An extract from Central Bedfordshire Council's Lettings Allocation Policy is set out below: [http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/Images/lettings-allocation-policy\\_tcm3-2700.pdf](http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/Images/lettings-allocation-policy_tcm3-2700.pdf)

#### **"Rural Exception Schemes**

Rural exception schemes are an important provision of affordable housing and contribute to the sustainability of rural and village communities. In Central Bedfordshire, a number of successful schemes have been delivered in recent years. The Council has an obligation to ensure that priority for vacancies in rural areas is given to households with a relevant local connection. The Council adopted in February 2013 a Local Lettings Policy on Rural Exception Sites, which is set out as Appendix 2 to the main Policy.

Special rules will apply when prioritising applicants who are being considered for housing in a village where a rural exception policy is in place. All such village vacancies will be advertised with priority given to those with a local connection to that village.

The intention is that properties will be let to applicants having a local connection to the parish. Where there are no qualifying applicants having a connection with the parish, the allocation has to be made to qualifying applicants with a local connection to a neighbouring parish. If still no such applicants exist, an allocation can be made to qualifying applicants with a local connection to the Central Bedfordshire area. In this instance, any applicant will need to be eligible and qualify in line with the criteria established by this Housing Allocation Policy.

A local connection is (in order of priority):

- Current residence in the parish for a minimum of 2 years, or a previous residency in the parish for a period of not less than 10 years
- Family connection through mother, father, brother or sister, son or daughter being resident in the parish for a period of not less than 2 years
- Employment in the parish as a main place of work, for a period of not less than 2 years
- Current residence, family residence, or an employment connection where the time period does not meet those stated above.”

## **Point Two**

### **The Rural Exception Site as Part of the Neighbourhood Plan**

The Parish Council agreed that a Housing Needs Survey should be carried out by Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity in April/May 2013 to identify the housing needs of local people over the following 20 years. The survey report is the property of the housing provider, the local authority, which in this case are one in the same: Central Bedfordshire Council, and the parish council to which it relates.

The purpose of the survey was two-fold: to assess the need of local people for affordable (social) housing, which would be required in order to bring forward a Rural Exception Site development; and to inform the Parish Council of the needs of local people for other types of housing. Even if the Parish Council had not agreed to develop a Neighbourhood Plan, the Housing Needs Survey Report would have been used by CBC to take steps to bring forward a Rural Exception Site to meet the survey's stated need.

In the autumn of 2013 the Parish Council agreed to undertake a Neighbourhood Plan. It is a requirement of the Localism Act 2011 that a Neighbourhood Plan must be based on a wide evidence base. The inclusion of the Housing Needs Survey Report is crucial in evidencing housing need in the parish, both open market and social.

You can find the full report with all the other evidence supporting the Submission Draft Neighbourhood Plan on the Parish Council website:

<http://www.wrestlingworthandcockaynehatley-pc.gov.uk/Housing%20Needs%20Survey%202013.pdf>

### **Point Three Highways Matters**

The Parish Council agrees with your comments about access to the Old Tree Nursery, which at present is quite close to the T junction. At this stage it is not confirmed that development will go forward on the site. Highways matters would be considered in a formal planning application. Even though the land belongs to CBC, it would still be subject to the same planning regulations as any other application by any other land owner. It is my understanding that the recent visit by surveyors was to measure the site. We have been informed that any development would not be linear, but in the form of a small close on the southern side of the site protected from Potton Road by improvements to the existing hedge. Any proposed access point set out in a planning application to develop the site would need to meet the requirements of the Highways Department. The Parish Council, in common with all residents of the parish, is able to comment on planning applications. If it was felt that the chosen access point was dangerous then we would say so.

### **Point Four Affordable/Social Housing**

The words “affordable” and “social” are interchangeable in the context of the provision of local authority/housing association dwellings for rent or shared ownership. They refer to what years ago we would have called “council housing”. The phrase “open market affordability” is used in the context of the provision of smaller dwellings which are more financially attainable than larger “executive dwellings”. It can be confusing but it is hoped that this explanation will help with understanding the jargon.

A reference to Central Bedfordshire Council’s Lettings Allocation Policy is set out under Point One. It is hoped that reading this will help with understanding how social housing is allocated and any fears expressed that any homes built would go to people from outside the district.

### **Point Five Off Street Parking**

The provision of off-street parking would be a requirement of any planning application put forward. Again, the Parish Council would comment on the need to make adequate provision as on street parking in Potton Road would not be an option.

### **Point Six The Old Tree Nursery as a Rural Exception Site**

The Submission Draft Neighbourhood Plan and all supporting documents can be seen on the Parish Council website [www.wrestlingworthandcockaynehatley-pc.gov.uk](http://www.wrestlingworthandcockaynehatley-pc.gov.uk)

Comprehensive consultation was undertaken in the preparation of the Neighbourhood Plan. This is set out in detail in the Consultation Report

submitted to Central Bedfordshire Council with the Submission Draft Neighbourhood Plan. <http://www.wrestlingworthandcockaynehatley-pc.gov.uk/Statement%20on%20Community%20Consultation%20%20final.pdf>

A Residents Survey was conducted in both Wrestlingworth and Cockayne Hatley in March 2015. Information from the questionnaires delivered to each household was used to shape the policies in the Neighbourhood Plan. In Wrestlingworth 284 questionnaires were distributed and 149 were returned, 52%. Analysis of the questionnaire responses is in Appendix 4.

Residents were asked where they thought the social housing need identified in the Housing Needs Survey should be built. Not all respondents answered this question.

The comments recorded relate only to potential exception sites. Of those who did want to see this type of new housing, nine responses indicated vacant land within the village; the most popular sites were the old tree nursery and land at Hatley End next to Twin Elms.

Drop-in Sessions were held in both Wrestlingworth & Cockayne Hatley in January 2016 to test the development of Neighbourhood Plan Policies. Display material relating to the Neighbourhood Plan Housing Policies is in Appendix 6. Here we set out clearly the requirement identified in the Housing Needs Survey, a definition of a Rural Exception Site and informed visitors to the Drop-in that by that stage in the development of the Neighbourhood Plan the Parish Council was working with CBC to develop the Old Tree Nursery site for both social housing and allotments. We believed that half size allotments could be provided at the northern end of the site without compromising any housing.

92 people attended the Wrestlingworth session, 19 attended at Cockayne Hatley. The report covering both sessions is at Appendix 7. 75 people agreed with our proposals for housing policies, three were against. The comments made are recorded and the three people who were against objected to development on the site of the old tree nursery.

In parallel with the Neighbourhood Plan numerous approaches to CBC regarding the Old Tree Nursery for allotments met with no response. Members of the Parish Council then met with CBC's Housing Department to see how the need for a Rural Exception Site could be taken forward. At that meeting it was discovered that CBC's Assets Department had earmarked the site to meet the need identified in the 2013 Housing Needs Survey.

There is no requirement to specifically identify sites in a Neighbourhood Plan. The Old Tree Nursery is not mentioned in the Submission Draft Neighbourhood Plan as the Parish Council was still trying to get a response from CBC on whether the site would be acceptable for allotments as well as for a Rural Exception Site.

Regardless of whether a majority of those voting at the referendum on the Neighbourhood Plan are in favour of the Plan or not, the project to provide social housing for those with a link to the parish will go ahead. If the Old Tree Nursery site proves to be unsuitable then we shall work with CBC to find a private land owner willing to sell them a parcel of land at less than market rate.

**Point Seven  
Potential for Flooding**

Central Bedfordshire Council's Flood Team takes the risk of flooding in Wrestlingworth very seriously. The Neighbourhood Plan has been strengthened on this subject following the Flood Team's comments during consultation on the Plan. Any planning application put forward for the Old Tree Nursery site by CBC would be subject to scrutiny by the Flood Team.

**Point Eight  
Footpaths and Bridleway**

At the present time the Parish Council has been offered a 125 year lease on Miss Mayne's Meadow (the existing amenity land) and the area between it and the Old Tree Nursery. This lease is dependent on CBC achieving a Rural Exception Site on the Old Tree Nursery. Were the Parish Council to sign such a lease a suitable part of the land would be selected for allotments. Depending on the site chosen it might be necessary to apply for a variation in a footpath or bridleway.

Cllr Sandra Williams  
Wrestlingworth & Cockayne Hatley Parish Council  
10.10.17