BILLINGSHURST NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

HOUSING DENSITY PAPER – DRAFT 1   **APRIL 2018**

Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to consider housing density and whether this or other considerations of design and layout help development to give the feeling of not being overly 'dense'. Ultimately this should inform design policies for new residential development in the Neighbourhood Plan.

2. Density is measured in dwellings per hectare (dph). One hectare is the equivalent of an international rugby or football pitch.

3. Building new housing at higher densities commonly has negative perception from residents with preconceived notions that it will involve bad design principles, sacrifice on quality and create issues between local authorities, developers and residents. These were issues that were raised at the Neighbourhood Plan workshops in December 2017 and January 2018.

4. The Horsham District Planning Framework (HDPF) 2015 expects the majority of residential schemes across the district to be "well designed medium to high density development" (para 7.34). In villages such as Billingshurst, development would reasonably be expected to be at the lower end of this density range or below this. It is generally observed that in villages broadly similar to Billingshurst, low density development is typically around 15-25 dph, medium density around 25-35 dph and high densities above 35 dph.

5. In Billingshurst, the areas that residents at the Neighbourhood Plan workshops in December 2017 and January 2018 consider to be 'too dense' were:
    a. The Alders
    b. Treetops (off Easton Crescent)
    c. Centurion Close
    d. The Honeysuckle Drive area. This area is shown in Figure 1. This development to the south of Billingshurst has been developed since 2014 and has 150 dwellings over a 6-hectare site, which equates to 25 dph. This illustrates that the perception of 'density' by existing residents of a community is often not borne out by simple maths (i.e. dph) but rather by other factors that combine to create (or not create) a 'sense of place'.

Figure 1: Aerial view of the Honeysuckle Drive area

Source: Google Earth

6. However, given the current UK housing crisis, building at higher densities is increasingly being viewed as an opportunity, rather than a problem. Indeed, the draft revisions to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) propose the inclusion of specific guidance on such matters which includes directing local plans to include "policies to optimise the use of land" (para 123a). Benefits include providing a safer, more inclusive and mixed environment and community, as well as minimising the amount of land needed. These principles will be discussed in this paper in terms of housing design, parking and open spaces.

Key Examples

7. The Maidstone Borough Local Plan 2017 has a policy requiring housing development on the edge of larger villages to achieve a density 30 dph (subject to achieving good design and not compromising the character of the area). With a number of the sites allocated in the Maidstone Local Plan having already been brought forward, the outcomes of this policy approach provide a reasonable comparison to the type of development density which might be reasonable in Billingshurst. One good example is of a number of development areas in Lenham, Maidstone.
    a. Housing around Wealden Square and Glebe Gardens (an older development) are key examples of low-to-medium density development at 25-26 dph, as shown in Figures 2 and 3. There are public open spaces such as playgrounds in the area and homes have relatively large sized private gardens.
    b. Wealden Square is modern medium density development that consists of terraced dwellings at 33 dph. This is shown in Figures 2 and 4. Yet this feels far less dense than this would suggest because of the provision of open space outside the development.

Figure 2: Map of Wealden Square (off Groom Way) and Glebe Gardens

Source: Open StreetMap

Figure 3: Low-to-medium density development at Glebe Gardens

Source: Google Streetview

Figure 4: Medium density development at Groom Way

Source: Google Streetview

c.   Figure 5 shows Old School Close and The Millers in Lenham. Old School Close consists of mixed housing and is medium-high density. Homes around The Millers are mostly in row housing, as shown in Figure 6. This is an example of medium-high density development in a semi-rural village at around 37 dph. Yet the overall feel is not significantly more dense than the example of low-medium density development at Glebe Gardens.

Figure 5: Map of Old School Close and The Millers

Source: Open StreetMap

Figure 6: High density development at The Millers
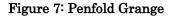

Source: Google Streetview

Density and housing development

8. Pockets of higher density developments may be acceptable to contrast areas of low density housing with small areas of open space. Building for Life's 2012 report[1] states that varying the density of development can help to create areas with different character within larger developments, and a range of features can help create elements that can give a place a sense of identity.

9. These principles are evident in areas such as Penfold Grange in Billingshurst, an area to the south-west of the village constructed in the early-2000s. The houses in this estate have included many desirable architectural features including a varying style of houses, tile hanging and painted brickwork in the same street scene.

10. Courtyards of smaller dwellings are designed with integrated parking and either enclosed with larger dwellings to form courts as shown in Figure 7, or visually dispersed amongst open space. Frontage development is predominantly open plan and broken up through the use of soft landscaping with small shrubberies and bushes which have been replicated through other developments in the village. Sympathetic boundary treatments such as low walls, picket or post fencing have also broken up frontages. This creates a feeling of lower density development, even if it isn't necessarily so in terms of the number of dwellings per hectare, and so these principles could be applied elsewhere in the village.

Figure 7: Penfold Grange

Source: Google Streetview

11. The positioning and layout of the houses is important for good design. Small, informal groups of dwellings give a feeling of space compared with monotonous or repetitive layouts often observed in 'dense' developments. Figure 8 shows a housing layout in Penfold Grange that is around a central open space with no front driveways (parking is provided at the rear or in courtyards). Decorative street furniture such as streetlights show good examples of design features.

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[1] Birkbeck & Kruczkowski (2015) *Building for Life 12*, Nottingham Trent University

Figure 8: Housing off Luxford Way in Penfold Grange

Source: Google Streetview

12. Development oriented towards the highway with staggered frontages can give more of a feeling of space rather than uniform lines. By contrast, long stretches of boundary walling along the highway tend to do the opposite. Footpaths that are segregated from the highway allow the formation of landscaped verges which help to soften the overall street scene.

Figure 9: Staggered frontages and landscaped verges at Forge Way, Belinus Drive

Source: Google Streetview

13. Woodland Place, a recent development east of Marringdean Road, was developed by Rydon Homes.
   a. This development has around 50 new homes on approximately hectare of land, i.e. 50 dph. This is generally considered high density for a rural village. The development has been designed in a way so it does not impact upon the neighbouring area with a tree buffer surrounding it, as shown in Figure 10. There is one public green space which breaks up the feeling of density in the area.
   b. Figure 11 shows that some areas have varied style of housing but other areas may look quite uniform in layout and design (Figure 12). Parking and driveways are parallel, rather in front of housing to create a less cluttered looking environment.

Figure 10: Woodland Place aerial view

Source: Application documentation

Figure 11: Woodland Place street view

Source: Google Images

Figure 12: Woodland Place street view

Source: Google Images

Density and parking

14. An increase in population will lead to an increase in the number of car users and so adequate parking provision must be made available. According to the CABE 2005 Better Neighbourhoods report[2] the biggest barrier to building higher density development in the South East is concern about the impact on traffic and parking. Arguably little has changed since that time.

15. On street parking creates a more cluttered environment in which motor vehicles dominate the design, character and amenity of the neighbourhood. In addition to this, they can pose hazards to pedestrians, traffic congestion and obstruct emergency vehicles.

Figure 13: Garages off the main road tucked behind houses

Source: Google Streetview

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[2] CABE (2005) *Better Neighbourhoods: Making higher densities work*

16.   Lack of off-street parking is a key issue in Billingshurst. To deal with these issues, some developments have used parking courts (shown in Figure 13 Penfold Grange). These can park a number of cars in a safe location away from roads and are designed in a way that is not visually obtrusive. Figure 14 shows how this can create a less cluttered looking environment which avoids the traditional negative image of parking courts as illustrated by the older garage/parking court development off Rowan Drive (Figure 15) with its grey corrugated roofs creating a dilapidated, uninviting looking and less integrated environment.

Figure 14: A parking court in Penfold Grange

Source: Google Streetview

Figure 15: Poor quality parking provision - garages off Rowan Drive

Source: Google Streetview

17.   In addition, garages are integrated with homes or free standing within developments. They generally have pitched roofs with pitch matching adjacent dwellings and constructed using the same materials as shown by Figure 16. This still however does not address the fact that most people do not use garages to park cars, instead using them for storage.

Figure 16: Garages integrated into development in Penfold Grange

Source: Google Streetview

18.   Although not prevalent in Billingshurst, car ports are an alternative to garages. They provide a covered space which is much more easily accessible by car and they can also provide some storage space, as shown in Figure 17.

Figure 17: Example of a car port design

Source: Google Images

Open spaces and surrounding areas

19. Dwellings oriented and grouped around an open space have the objective of creating interesting and open places. One example is shown in Figure 18 at Morris Drive. Communal space can have a use through parks and children's play areas but also may simply be informal open space for residents to enjoy.

20. These spaces are important not only for a high quality public realm, but for visual amenity and residents' wellbeing. These forms and layouts of development could help more dense areas seem less so and create a 'sense of place'.

Figure 18: Morris Drive

Source: Google Streetview

Summary

21. In summary, the best examples of good design that help to reduce the feeling of density exhibit the following features:
    a. Soft landscaping
    b. Communal parking
    c. Courtyard layouts
    d. Varying style of housing
    e. Staggered layouts rather than uniformity
    f. Off road parking provision away from public view (use of garages and/or possibly car ports)
    g. Housing constructed around green open space
    h. Public open spaces and parks

Possible policies

22. In order to create one or more policies on design, it is important to establish whether the community agrees with these principles and which are the priorities. This will require further engagement with the community, showing good and bad examples of design in order to elicit feedback. Following this, policies on residential design can then be developed.