

Review of Settlement Development Limits – a discussion paper for Planning Review Panel

Purpose and function

Settlement development limits are intended to manage the development of housing growth at our settlements and are an essential part of the Local Plan (2015) development strategy.

Their purposes are:

- To direct development to appropriate and sustainable locations across the District;
- To protect the countryside from isolated and inappropriate development;
- To ensure that new development is sympathetic in scale and location to the form and character of our settlements; and
- To prevent the uncontrolled expansion of settlements and potential coalescence.

National policy

The (emerging) NPPF says the following on the location of rural housing:

79. In rural areas, planning policies and decisions should be responsive to local circumstances and support housing developments that reflect local needs. Local planning authorities should support opportunities to bring forward rural exception sites that will provide affordable housing to meet identified local needs, and consider whether allowing some market housing on these sites would help to facilitate this.

80. To promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. Plans should identify opportunities for villages to grow and thrive, especially where this will support local services. Where there are groups of smaller settlements, development in one village may support services in a village nearby.

81. Planning policies and decisions should avoid the development of isolated homes in the countryside unless one or more of the following circumstances apply:

- a) there is an essential need for a rural worker, including those taking majority control of a farm business, to live permanently at or near their place of work in the countryside;
- b) the development would represent the optimal viable use of a heritage asset or would be appropriate enabling development to secure the future of heritage assets;
- c) the development would re-use redundant or disused buildings and enhance its immediate setting;
- d) the development would involve the subdivision of an existing residential property; or
- e) the design is of exceptional quality, in that it:
 - is truly outstanding or innovative, reflecting the highest standards in architecture, and would help to raise standards of design more generally in rural areas; and
 - would significantly enhance its immediate setting, and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area.

Issues for discussion

The Plan argues that the use of SDLs provides certainty for the market and local communities and minimises urban sprawl, but it can be seen as too prescriptive and lacking flexibility to assess individual proposals. Specific issues identified include:

1. Too inflexible – a black or white approach to proposals
2. No justification – it is not always clear which purpose of SDLs is being satisfied in each circumstance
3. Consistency – some SDLs follow property limits, some cut across gardens. Although reviews were carried out in 2013 to check consistency, anomalies remain
4. Fixed at adoption – SDLs don't take account of recent changes on the ground
5. Errors – Many SDLs were defined by old maps which have now been replaced by more accurate digital mapping which has highlighted errors in SDLs as drafted

Future options

Option 1: Continue with existing settlement development limits amended as necessary

The approach to managing growth has been supported at examination and is in accordance with the NPPF. Anecdotally, local people support the principle of SDLs and the certainty it provides. In responding to the issues and options consultation, option 1 was the second most popular (37 out of 123, 30%).

The accuracy of SDLs could be addressed through minor changes to reflect more accurate base mapping. As in 2013, we could invite parish councils to suggest minor changes to reflect perceived anomalies.

As part of the development of the preferred strategy, officers would need to ensure that the combination of existing SDLs and allocations provide sufficient opportunities to reflect the expected position of that settlement in the settlement hierarchy.

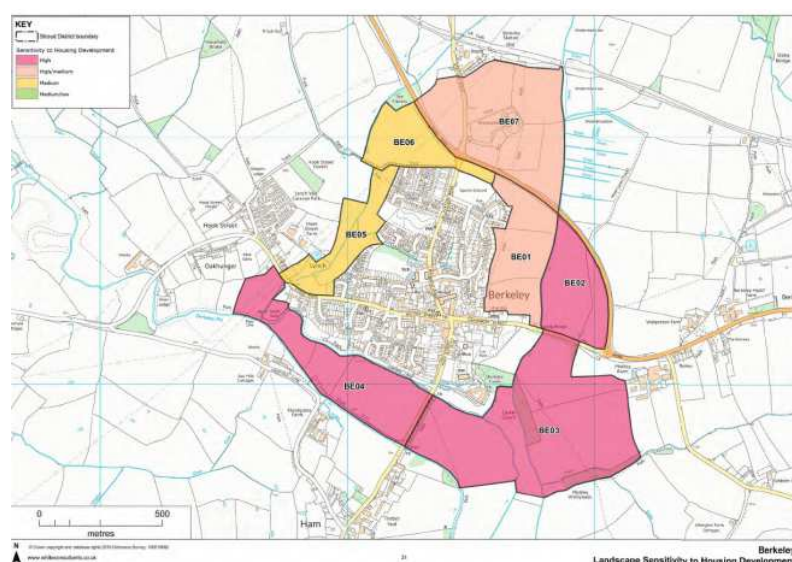
Option 2: Assess proposals on a case by case basis using broader criteria (e.g. landscape impact; form of settlement, proximity to services, etc.)

In responding to the issues and options consultation, option 2 was the most popular (48 out of 123, 39%) although it was not clear from all the responses whether they supported retention of SDLs as a guide, or supported removing SDLs altogether.

One option would be to retain SDLs as a framework but to allow proposals to come forward on sites adjoining SDLs subject to satisfying specific criteria e.g. ensuring no impact on landscape or setting of village, achieving suitable access to local facilities, achieving good quality design, landscaping etc. This approach has been taken in North Somerset, where proposals for fewer than 25 dwellings can be considered on sites adjoining SDLs at service centres subject to satisfying detailed criteria.

Such an approach would require the drafting of tight criteria and a good evidence base of local townscape character, landscape sensitivity, mapping of services and facilities to inform decisions. On a positive note, the publication of the landscape sensitivity assessment in 2017 for all tier 1-3 settlements means that we are in a better position to be able to assess proposals adjoining SDLs at large settlements in terms of likely landscape impact than in the past, and required distance to facilities could be defined and measured accurately using GIS tools. However, there is a lack of other information to support such an approach, for example, a lack of comprehensive conservation character assessments for all conservation areas. Without the certainty of SDLs, there is likely to be a greater resource requirement for case officers and members to assess applications on a consistent basis and a greater number of appeals against refusal to resource.

To further guide development adjoining SDLs the Plan could identify diagrammatically zones where small developments were more likely to be acceptable (perhaps based on areas with a medium/low landscape sensitivity as opposed to high sensitivity – see below) or could identify a buffer area beyond SDLs (e.g. based on c.800m distance from local facilities) within which proposals would be considered.



Extract from Landscape Sensitivity Assessment (2017)

Option 3: Continue with settlement development limits but expand the types of development that are allowed beyond them in the countryside

In responding to the issues and options consultation, option 3 was the least popular (10 out of 123, 8%).

Recent Government announcements and proposed changes to the NPPF support new forms of housing development, including starter homes and entry level homes for first time buyers, custom and self build homes. One option would be to include within the Plan positive encouragement for these forms of development adjoining SDLs, either through a permissive policy, through allocations or support for rural exception sites.

There may be some support locally for allowing for cheaper homes adjoining SDLs provided that they were limited by numbers, size and by local connection. For example, allowing small sites (up to 10 or 25?) to be developed for affordable home ownership and rent, first time buyers and small self build properties for those with a demonstrable local connection.

Within the countryside, explicit allowance for conversion of rural buildings for housing could be included within the Plan provided that criteria could be satisfied. This would potentially run contrary to the current objectives for ensuring housing is delivered in close proximity to services and where a choice of means of transport is available. Very dispersed patterns of development will impact negatively on the effective delivery of public services.

Option 4: Alternative options

There are a number of hybrid options that could also be considered, including:

1. Assess strategic role of each settlement and for those where growth could support services or rebalance the make up of the local community, “loosen” SDLs to include parcels of land that could provide future development opportunities;
2. Remove SDLs for large settlements (Stroud, Stonehouse, Cam, Dursley) to allow for incremental growth adjoining these most sustainable settlements but retain SDLs tightly drawn for small villages with few facilities in sensitive locations;
3. Conversely, retain tightly SDLs to prevent urban sprawl from the main towns and allow some flexibility adjoining SDLs at smaller settlements for “natural” growth where no specific allocations have been made;
4. Retain SDLs but provide for Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDP) to amend SDLs where flexibility is required to meet local needs.

Conclusions

Settlement development limits are an established part of the strategy for managing growth in Stroud and have been since the 1990s. Whilst there are issues relating to flexibility and accuracy, it would be a significant departure to consider removing them entirely and relying on policy wording and site by site assessment with potential issues relating to consistency of decision making and additional resources required to make and defend robust decisions.

A more feasible approach would be to continue to use updated SDLs but to provide for flexibility by allowing some limited development adjoining these boundaries subject to satisfying detailed criteria and/or allowing certain types of housing development (affordable homes including first time buyers, custom and self build) subject to size and design criteria.

Ultimately the preferred approach towards SDLs will need to integrate with the overall strategy approach. It may be that a slightly different approach to SDLs could be taken depending upon the role of each settlement in the settlement hierarchy and how much growth is envisaged at each settlement.