

Rother District Council

Report to	-	Cabinet
Date	-	9 March 2020
Report of the	-	Executive Director
Subject -		High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Housing Design Guide

Recommendation to COUNCIL: That the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Housing Design Guide be formally adopted as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

Head of Service: Tim Hickling

Lead Cabinet Member: Councillor Vine-Hall

Introduction

1. The High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership, including the 15 local authorities with land in the AONB, has prepared a Design Guide for new housing development in the High Weald. The Housing Design Guide has been prepared to support the objectives of High Weald AONB Management Plan 2019-2024, which was adopted by this Council on 11 February 2019 (Minute CB18/72 refers).
2. The Housing Design Guide aims to give succinct, practical and consistent advice to set clear design expectations for new housing development within the High Weald AONB. This will help to ensure higher quality and landscape-led design that reflects intrinsic High Weald character, and is embedded with a true sense of place, without stifling innovation and creativity. Whilst the Design Guide is not a formal planning policy document as such, it will be a material consideration in relation to planning policy and the determination of planning applications.
3. Copies of the Guidance have been left in the Members' room; below is a link to the online copy:

<http://www.highweald.org/downloads/publications/land-management-guidance/legislation-and-planning/2345-high-weald-housing-design-guidance/file.html>

4. The High Weald Partnership carried out a public consultation on a draft Design Guide from 19 June until Wednesday 14 August 2019. The consultation is considered to have had due regard to our adopted Statement of Community Involvement. On the 15 July 2019 a consultation workshop, with an invited group of developers, architects and Registered Providers, was also hosted by the High Weald Unit and supported by Local Authority officers. Following the public consultation, all comments received on the draft Housing Design Guide were summarised, and duly considered with a number of amendments made to the Guide. Full details of the consultation process and

the summary of representations and responses can be found in the Consultation Statement¹ published on the High Weald Unit's website.

5. At their meeting on the 25 November 2019, the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) approved the revisions to the Design Guide and has recommended its adoption by the constituent Local Authorities.

Commentary

6. The level of housebuilding across the High Weald AONB as a whole has risen from an average of 186 units per year 2001-2011; to 895 units per year 2015-2017. Delivering appropriate new housing development within the AONB is a key part of local planning policy for the local authorities covering the High Weald, and for qualifying bodies producing Neighbourhood Plans. Within Rother District specifically, over 82% of the district lies within the High Weald AONB, and environmental factors such as the AONB were very influential in setting the levels of development in Rother. The Rother Local Plan Core Strategy sets housing targets for some 1900 houses (approximately) within the AONB over the plan period 2011-2028.
7. Housing development within the High Weald is necessary and desirable in creating a thriving and successful place, but it is also a responsibility and privilege to make long lasting interventions in such a special and protected landscape. The imposition of generic and poor design for housing development in the High Weald AONB can be a threat to its settlement character, as set out in the Management Plan. The Housing Design Guide has been written to help balance housing delivery with the statutory duty on local authorities to conserve and enhance the AONB, and setting the standards expected of new housing development in the High Weald.
8. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out that "*The creation of high quality buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve*". It advocates Design Guides in order to provide maximum clarity about design expectations at an early stage. It sets out that design guides provide a framework for creating distinctive places, with a consistent and high quality standard of design.
9. The Housing Design Guide brings together policies, best practice and analysis from a wide range of areas, from national policies relating to design quality, to local studies of landscape character and identity, in order to provide a concise and easy to access resource for designers and decision makers. The Guide is broadly based on 'Building for Life 12', a widely accepted national industry standard, along with the design guidance in the NPPF and Planning Practice Guidance, and the National Design Guide, adapted to be locally specific to the High Weald.
10. The Design Guide is structured in four sections:
 - i. Chapter 1 introduces the Housing Design Guide, explains the development challenge in the High Weald AONB, and explains the aims of the Guide.

¹ <http://www.highweald.org/downloads/publications/2347-high-weald-housing-design-guide-consultation-statement/file.html>

- ii. Chapter 2 provides a brief explanation of the High Weald AONB and its settlement character.
- iii. Chapter 3 is the core of the Design Guide, and contains guidance relating to the most common design issues, with a particular emphasis on tailoring design approaches and decisions to support the overall character and identity of the High Weald. To achieve this, it consists of 10 design themes:
 - a. Response to Site and Landscape Context
 - b. Connecting Beyond the Site
 - c. Layout and Structuring the Site
 - d. Using Buildings to Define Streets and Spaces
 - e. The Right Built Form
 - f. Parking Strategies
 - g. Building Appearance, Local Details and Sustainable Design
 - h. Ancillary and Storage
 - i. Detailing the Street
 - j. Reinforcing Local Planting Character and Habitats

Each theme contains detailed analysis and advice, illustrated with photographs and diagrams, and a summary checklist. The format is intended to help structure the design process, so that the setting of the High Weald is dealt with first, placemaking principles next, and detailed design built in towards the end.

- iv. Chapter 4 includes advice for developers on creating a meaningful Design and Access Statement for planning applications, along with information about how the Housing Design Guide relates to the range of other policy and guidance documents, such as national planning policy and guidance, County Landscape Studies, Local Authority Development Plans, and High Weald AONB documents.
- 11. The Housing Design Guide aligns well with the adopted Rother Local Plan Core Strategy, in particular – Policy EN3: Design Quality. The Guide will help support this Council's various roles in the planning process, from Plan-Making, through to Neighbourhood Plan liaison, and the Development Management process, helping us to successfully deliver housing requirements and meet NPPF and Core Strategy policy objectives.
- 12. Following adoption, it is intended that the Design Guide will be promoted on the Council's website, circulated directly to Parish and Town Councils and Neighbourhood Planning groups, and to housing developers working in the district.

Conclusion

- 13. It is considered that the High Weald AONB Housing Design Guide is a supportable and appropriate framework for considering housing design in the AONB and can be adopted as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications. The Housing Design Guide has been subject to public and expert engagement and scrutiny.

Dr Anthony Leonard
Executive Director

Risk Assessment Statement

Failure to adopt the High Weald AONB Housing Design Guide would undermine the Council's ability to carry out its duties with regard to the High Weald AONB.