

Alison Wilson REPORT SEPT 26

Alliance for Wealden

Green Party Councillor for the Arlington Ward

New National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

On August 17 the new NPPF came into force. The document has a new structure and style, and, most importantly, distinguishes between plan-making policies and decision-making policies (the latter being a material consideration in planning applications, the former not). Many of the principles in the new NPPF will be familiar, however there are some differences. One important example is the presumption in favour of sustainable development. This is divided into two parts - policy S4 (which deals with the principle of development within settlements) and policy S5, which provides a list of the only circumstances in which development should be approved outside settlements. This list is different and broader than what we have been used to - for example, there is a specific reference to 'limited infilling within groups of houses', which developers are likely to make much use of in rural villages (indeed we have already had one such example before the Minors committee last week).

Officers and councillors are in the process of getting to grips with the new NPPF and will share learning as it arises.

Draft Reg 19 Local Plan

This was published at the end of last week and will be considered by Full Council on Friday 18 September. If the draft - which incorporates the results of the last consultation - is approved by Full Council, then there will be a 6 week consultation period, from 21 September to 2 November. As this is essentially the final draft version of the plan to be submitted for inspection, the consultation works a little differently from previous ones, because all the submissions received are sent to the inspector, with the draft plan. In terms of the Wealden process, officers will consider the submissions in the Reg 19 consultation, make any modifications as necessary and then there will be another Full Council vote in December to agree to submit the draft (along with all the submissions) to a planning inspector.

While I am very pleased that the two huge option sites which were put forward in our area - the Oakleigh Gardens site at Laughton Park Farm/Halland and the Grosvenor ('land west of Hailsham') site between Upper Dicker and the Boship roundabout - have not been included in the latest draft of the plan, it is important for us all to be realistic about what this means. It could well be that planning applications come forward on either or both of these sites, and the Council would have to consider these in the usual way. That said, the Council has done a lot of work in gathering evidence which points to these sites being unsuitable for development, so it would not be straightforward for a developer taking this route. The other consideration is that those who promoted these sites could make representations when the plan is before an inspector. But again, the fact that the Council's evidence points to the

unsuitability of these sites, means that there would be considerable hurdles for a developer to overcome.

The new draft also includes some significant changes for Laughton, which I mention here as they may be of interest to neighbours in Ripe and Chalvington:

- The first change is that, because of our now more frequent bus service, the extended opening hours at the village shop and the recent opening of the farm shop, Laughton is considered to be higher in the settlement hierarchy and is now considered a Type 4 settlement. An important consequence of this is that Laughton will have a development boundary, ie an area within the settlement which would fall under policy S4 in the new NPPF (which in turn would mean that development should be approved unless the benefits of doing so would be outweighed by any adverse effects). A map with the new development boundary has only recently been published (16 September 2026) and is attached. It has been tightly drawn around the main road and the top of Church Lane and includes the two sites in the village (land behind the Roebuck and land adjoining Home Farm Cottages) where planning permission has already been given (these are shown in grey); and
- It is being proposed that 5 small houses could be accommodated on Church Lane, on the field south of Coopers (referred to in the draft plan as 'The Briars') and this site is also included within the new development boundary. Residents will be aware that there is currently a live appeal against a PIP application for 7 houses on this site, and this remains a material fact, because if the appeal is not successful, then it is likely that the proposed allocation would be removed.

Residents will be aware that there is a lot of talk about the draft local plan online. I feel that it is important here to set out a few facts and/or bust a few myths:

- The government's own formula requires approximately 1,400 houses per year which, if applied in Wealden, would mean 25,000 houses over the full 15 year plan period. This draft plan proposes 16,833 homes over that period, which equates to 1,052 homes per year and is about 70% of the government figure;
- The plan provides for more of the smaller homes which local people actually need, as well as more affordable homes;
- The plan contains sustainability policies which require every new build to use less energy and water, as well as introducing higher design standards and better protections for nature;
- The plan provides for infrastructure to be delivered alongside growth, not after it.

The planning system is deeply flawed, and continues to be led by developers and those landowners who put their land forward for development. However, with a local plan, decisions about development are made by local councillors, not by central government. If the plan is approved, it will mean that the district has a development plan - the primary source for planning decisions - for the next 15 years. Whatever happens with central government, or the new mayoral or unitary authorities, the district will have certainty as a result of having its own policies and allocations. This is not perfect, but is better than the alternative, which would be more inappropriate development, to poorer standards and without the supporting infrastructure.

Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)

The government announced recently that it is going to pause its programme of LGR. This followed threatened legal challenges in four of the areas. The government has indicated that it will review the programme and conclude this review in October, but in the meantime it has also announced that district council elections will now go ahead next May, in accordance with the ordinary 4 year term which we all expected when we were elected. Currently it is expected that district councillors elected in May will serve for a further 2 years, but this could change and will depend on the outcome of the review and the timetable, yet to be decided, for the start of the new unitary authority.

I am sorry that I was not able to attend the last CWRPC meeting. As always, if anyone has any questions or issues they would like to raise with me, please get in touch by email - cllr.alison.wilson@wealden.gov.uk

With best wishes,

Alison Wilson

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