

Notes of Barns Workshop

Tuesday 28 February 2006

Council Chamber, North Norfolk District Council offices

AGENDA:

- Welcome by Cllr Simon Partridge, Leader of the Council
- Overview of policy context, Jill Fisher, Planning Policy Manager
- Short presentations:

Max Sowerby – Sowerby's estate agents

Ian Johnstone – Avada Country Homes

Nigel Morgan – Edwin Watson Partnership

Andy Hutcheson - Norfolk Museums and Archaeological Service

Michael Knights – Head of Heritage and Landscape, Norfolk County Council (not present)

Ian Shepherd – CPRE North Norfolk

Michael Gurney – local landowner

- Questions and discussion

Overview of policy context: Jill Fisher, Planning Policy Manager

See handout notes of presentation

Existing Local Plan Policy 29: 'The reuse and adaptation of buildings in the countryside' was aimed at protecting landscape character and encouraging the rural economy. A holiday occupancy condition is placed on permissions for residential conversions, but further clarity is needed on the definition of second homes/holiday homes. The Welsh Assembly definition gives some guidance here.

There are differences between council tax records and the census in terms of numbers of second homes. Census figures generally under-represent the numbers as depends on someone being present at the house on census night.

Many of these rural buildings are in isolated locations which will be very car dependent and therefore not compatible with Council objectives of reducing emissions and helping to reduce climate change implications. Also, the more dispersed the population the higher the cost on service providers such as health visitors, school buses etc.

There is a choice to be made in terms of housing allocations. Allowing residential reuse across the district will use up the housing allocation and there will be no scope for making Brownfield or Greenfield allocations, that can make a contribution towards affordable housing.

Max Sowerby – Sowerbys Estate Agents

The current policy is good in that it allows barns to be reused, however it has problems:

- Local people feel restricted that they cannot buy good quality homes as these are only available to outsiders

- Previously there was a large second home market, but now it is more people looking to move here permanently, either retiring or having a change in lifestyle.
- Viability of conversions. They are large buildings that do not lend themselves to division into small units. Therefore the holiday lets attract the family market that have a restricted season, rather than couples who have a year round tourism season. There is also a capital gains tax issue.
- It creates a 'them and us' environment as residential conversions are not permitted for permanent use, therefore local people cannot live in such properties. This creates very heated arguments in local estate agents.

Location: Holiday lettings are not ideal in isolated locations, as families want to be close to facilities and the beach. There is also a security issue if houses are in a remote area and are not occupied all the time.

The community should not be segregated – conversions should be allowed for permanent residential use. Other districts have a more relaxed approach which is successful where barns are being developed with resultant happy developers and happy purchasers.

Ian Johnstone, Avada Country Homes

See handout notes of presentation

Avada Homes has been developing barns in Norfolk for 5 years and employs 50 people. They aim for good quality, distinctive, high spec dwellings.

They have carried out 45 barn conversions in Norfolk, 32 of these have the holiday occupancy condition.

Some historic buildings are not always in good condition and have collapsed roofs, inappropriate additions, decay etc. This causes a problem as the cash-strapped farmer has the liability of maintaining these. Farming is in a hard financial climate. It is now more economical for farming to operate from modern buildings rather than old.

Conversions can allow for original features to be restored to their original beauty and the buildings to be maintained.

Conversion costs more than new build, takes longer, is more difficult and technically more demanding. Building regulations are applied to these conversions as if they were new-build; however it is more difficult to achieve the standards. Therefore, feeling that there would not be a flood of people bringing forward buildings for conversion.

Holiday uses provide an alternative viable use, reduce pressure on other housing, avoid disrepair and promote tourism, sport and recreation. However this can also be achieved through full residential use.

For those units with a holiday restriction, about two-thirds are going to city professionals or retired people looking for a second home.

If it was for unrestricted use, feeling about the market that demand would be about 50% for second homes and about 50% for permanent residential use.

Nigel Morgan, Surveyor, Edwin Watson Partnership

Has lived in North Norfolk for 45 years and worked in property for 30 years. Redundant barns and rural buildings make an important social, historical and landscape contribution. They require a robust policy for their particular use. Supports the officer recommendation, however suggests that there are more barns out there than we think:

If you assume there are 100 rural parishes, with about 4 to 5 groups of barns in each which contain about 3,000 sq ft, this could translate to 3 million sq ft of space and bring about 3,000 residential units over the next 20 years.

These redundant buildings have no use as farm buildings any more and new uses to be found or they will be lost. The LDF should actively support appropriate new uses. New uses will need to be high value and high quality in order to be viable.

If they are located within a settlement where new build residential is acceptable than this is fine, however elsewhere they should not be for residential use as they do not have access to services and facilities and they do use up the housing allocation.

Commercial and office uses are appropriate; however there is not enough demand for this. Therefore, second home and holiday use is the next best. The current policy does not work very well though. A simple and understandable robust policy is needed.

In his experience there is only about a 10% difference in value between permanent residential and that with a restriction.

Allowing them to be used for second homes maintains the buildings, brings in employment (cleaners and gardeners etc) and brings in visitors and their money. It also takes the pressure of the second home market away from existing cottages, which might be viewed as more affordable as second homes if barns were allowed unrestricted use for permanent occupation at higher values.

Andy Hutcheson, Head of Archaeological Planning, Norfolk Museums and Archaeological Service

See handout notes

Norfolk Historic Environment Record is a comprehensive database of historical information.

There are 188 listed barns in North Norfolk and 50 other important historic barns that are not listed. Don't know what % of the total this represents.

More baseline information is needed on the range, quality and state of barns in North Norfolk so the effect of any policy can be monitored.

Barns make an important contribution to North Norfolk's landscape character. The Historic Landscape Characterisation has been carried out for North Norfolk, and this should be combined with the Landscape Character Assessment to inform the issue.

Barns are important habitats and any policy should ensure this is protected.

Problems of residential conversions include:

- Windows inserted to meet building regulation standards.
- Subdivision of the large internal volume
- Over-restoration and loss of the character, age and memory of the building.

Relaxing the policy on residential conversions would dramatically affect the landscape character and biodiversity of North Norfolk.

Ian Shepherd, CPRE North Norfolk

See handout notes

Three key criteria include:

- Location. Residential use should only be allowed close to settlements to reduce travel. A key aim of the LDF should be to minimise climate change.
- Proposed use. Does it help the local economy and sustain local services?
- Historic value and character. Not all of them are worthy of retention.

Conversions can reduce the value for wildlife. If the building can be maintained so the roof is kept in place this can provide valuable habitats for many species.

Michael Gurney, local landowner

See handout notes

Historic buildings are of no use to modern farmers, however here is no money in farming, and farmers cannot afford to maintain them. Need new uses to give long term sustainability of these assets.

Converting traditional buildings is difficult and expensive – see his handout for costings.

Returns on residential conversions are just better than holiday lets.

It does not have to be large expensive houses for second home sales. Could provide residential lettings at an affordable rent.

Questions and Discussion

Cllr Willis: There are several important issues:

- The holiday and second home conditions are constantly abused.
- Farmers cannot afford to maintain the buildings
- People will drive to facilities whether they live there permanently or are on holiday

Suggests that all restrictions on the use of barns are lifted, but we should charge for this through the application of a tariff or levy towards the provision of affordable housing. This would free up holiday cottages for permanent residential use and the income could be used to provide affordable housing where we want it.

Max Sowerby: If a levy is viable for the developer then this would be acceptable

Ian Johnstone: Agrees. There is an opportunity for planning gain but it has to be realistic.

Ian Shepherd: The local need for affordable homes is the important factor. The suggested development strategy approach and exceptions policy are the best way to achieve this across the district. Would not want to see residential use across the rural area.

Simon Partridge: the value of the land and buildings would be affected if a charging policy was put in place, and this would have an impact.

Cllr Corbett: Supports conversion for residential use if it is adjacent to a settlement. For those that are not well located to a settlement and are not worthy of retention there could be a policy that allows demolition and then re-use of the materials to restore those that are allowed to be converted.

Michael Gurney: This would result in the loss of those isolated buildings. A financial levy is a better answer. A social housing tax could be imposed if the house is sold, but not payable if it is rented to locals or for holidays.

Cllr Corbett: Could photograph and record the asset before it is demolished.

Andy Hutcheson: Need baseline information about what to save and what to let go.

Cllr Cordeaux: Residential conversion of barns within 1km of a settlement is a good idea. If conditions are relaxed across the district there would be a queue of applications to lift the conditions which would use up all our housing numbers.

Ian Johnstone: The floodgates would not open because:

- Lots of barns are not financially viable to convert because of their state of repair and the cost
- Surrounding authorities that don't have the restrictions still have lots of barns that have not been converted
- Many developers have had their fingers burned by conversions and prefer new build

Cllr Cordeaux: But what about those that are already converted and could just apply to remove the condition and then be used for permanent residential occupation.

Ian Shepherd: North Norfolk has more to conserve than other areas, and NN also has a lower housing allocation than surrounding authorities.

Nigel Morgan: A numerical assessment is needed of how many barns are out there – could do a sample of 10 parishes for example.

Cllr Jones: The discussion should focus on the impact on people and how the resource of the barns could help reduce homelessness in North Norfolk.

Need to look beyond developer and profit driven ideas and look at other solutions to meet the housing need. There is a low wage economy and any conversions should use local labour and skills.

Steve Blatch: Does not think that barns can provide a solution to the affordable housing need, as the costs of conversion are far greater than for new build. Therefore any financial levy might be difficult to implement and we would find that developers are unable to honour the affordable housing commitment. Also, unless it is done in a very transparent way it could be seen as buying planning permission and we could be open to legal challenge. RSL partners would not see barn conversions as an attractive option due to the costs of conversion and also the long term maintenance and running costs for the RSL and the tenants (heating, travel costs etc)
Providing affordable housing is not as simple as a landowner offering up his barns or land for cheap housing. It needs to be ensured that it can be kept as affordable housing in perpetuity, therefore the current requirement is that it must be developed in association with a RSL who can provide long term security. This is an issue locally as a number of large estates have suggested that they would be willing to provide housing for rent; but not in perpetuity and therefore such properties do not fall within the definition of affordable housing.

Cllr Wilkins: Barns that are listed are allowed to be converted to permanent residential in order to protect the resource. Could consider refusing permission for conversions on buildings post 1900.
Barn conversions are a quick fix for cash-strapped farmers, not a long term solution.
Ruins in the landscape have their own appeal.
Homes with the holiday restriction meet a demand for second homes of that price. If the restriction is lifted and the price goes up, the people who were looking for property at that price will be priced out and will look at other properties that are currently available to local's e.g. smaller houses in villages. This would be a double whammy as high value barn conversions would increase the migration of the wealthy retired to the district, and small market homes in villages would be bought by people seeking second homes further disadvantaging local people in the housing market.

Cllr Nelson: Our holiday market is changing. There is an increase in self catering and a decline in the traditional bucket and spade market. North Norfolk attracts discerning visitors who need high quality accommodation. Barns are part of a very precious landscape that needs protection.

Cllr Arnold: The Council has a responsibility to ensure that barns are preserved in some way for the future. Affordable housing is important, but there are other people who want large houses in the countryside to live in. Permanent residential use does contribute to the community – there is someone there all year round and they often employ cleaners, gardeners etc.

Jill Fisher: Permanent residential use when compared to other uses brings less value to the area. Short term holiday-lets bring most benefit to the economy as visitors will visit many attractions etc whereas second home owners and those who return many times for long periods are less likely to do so.

Cllr Craske: The housing numbers are crucial. Making large allocations in towns will allow contributions towards infrastructure such as schools etc. This is vital as many areas, such as North Walsham, are lacking these facilities and infrastructure.

Need to lobby Government about a solution that provides funding for affordable housing but doesn't result in 'buying a permission'.

Sustainability is about more than how far you drive in a car. It is about keeping young people economically active and having a balanced community that can support older people. Most of North Norfolk is not a sustainable location.

Michael Gurney: In the future there will be great demand from people who want to live in a beautiful place and can work over the internet. This will create local employment and raise the area.

Sue Willis: Does it matter if we provide above our housing allocation?

Steve Blatch: The Government Office could say that we have to cease permissions and house-building until the next roll-forward to the regional numbers if we exceed completions much beyond the figure in our LDF. This would further restrict housing supply and push up prices.

Roger Howe (Planning Legal and Enforcement Manager)

In the past, NNDC has investigated affordable housing contributions on barn conversions and in September 2004 took barristers advice on practicality and legality of this. There were two main conclusions:

- That this would be a 'radical suggestion'
- Contributions should be bricks and mortar on-site, not financial.
However this would be in unsustainable locations.

Any decisions must be grounded in robust policy to avoid challenge to the LDF and permissions.

Keith Bacon: Chair of Broads Society and North Norfolk CPRE

The buildings themselves are an important part of our architectural heritage and economic history. The prime consideration should be what is best for that building, rather than the particular future use. Applications must be high quality, or refused.

Listed buildings get high protection, while those that aren't get nothing. Need a local grading where farm buildings are assessed for their quality.

In archaeology some areas are left un-dug so that with improved technology in the future more thorough investigation can be carried out. The same could

apply for barns and we could leave some as they are currently for possible higher standards of conversion in the future when better technologies are available.

Nigel Morgan: Those who advise property owners need a guideline, cannot just say look at each on its' merits. Policy must protect original materials and appearance, however internal aspects could be relaxed.

Ian Johnstone: Building Regulations have a huge impact on methods of insulation, means of escape and ventilation and escape etc that add cost. Simple cheap conversions are not an option. There is no difference in Building Regulations for holiday/permanent home.

Cllr Crowe: Would be useful to have information from the other districts so we can learn from them.

Max Sowerby: Kings Lynn and West Norfolk generally allowed unrestricted conversion. Breckland ask for business use to be considered first – so farmers work out the rental income that would be charged, than market it. Normally there are no business takers so it then goes for residential use.

Cllr Howe, Chair of NN Housing Trust: It is not appropriate to bring affordable housing into the discussion. The Government has made conversion very difficult, and RSLs generally only look for green or Brownfield new build.

Could the CLA help provide information on the number and quality of barns? Second and holiday homes have severe impact on our settlements – local people cannot afford to live there and facilities and public transport are declining as they are no longer viable.

Michael Gurney: Could ask parishes for information on barns rather than the CLA.

Cllr Birch: Agree with Cllr Willis's idea for a levy on permissions. The barrister's advice was that this would be radical (not illegal). NNDC is a radical council and should investigate a financial solution.

Tim Hayward, Jackson-Stops and Staff

Barns are more difficult and expensive to convert and there are a limited number of developers willing to take that on (generally these are local companies employing local people). Barns are not viable to be converted for affordable housing, but a levy could contribute towards provision. Conversion to business use is also not viable, and therefore residential use is the only viable option.

Ian Shepherd: But any residential use involves a loss of character and light pollution at night.

Cllr Ford: We need to help support farmers in some way. Capital gains tax is another issue.

Keith Bacon: A second home is subject to full capital gains tax. A holiday-let has taper relief on the business rates scale and it goes down rapidly. So there are advantages in having it as a holiday let.

The Inland Revenue definition of a holiday home is good:

‘available to let for 140 days a year and actually let for more than 70 days per year. Nor to be let to one person for more than 30 days’.

Cllr Wilcox: There would not be a flood of applications for barn conversions because the market would regulate it.

Nigel Morgan: There could be, because having a residential permission on the building increases its capital value. People will be keen to cash in.

Cllr Cordeaux: Asked for an explanation of the housing numbers in terms of allocations and affordable housing.

Steve Blatch: If barn restrictions were relaxed a substantial amount would come forward for residential use and these would come off our total housing numbers, therefore limiting the amount of allocations that can be made which are more likely to produce affordable housing than individual units.

Restricting barns and windfall development allows us to make allocations that could deliver 40% affordable housing, and secure contributions towards infrastructure.

Cllr Wilcox: What is the difference between these contributions and a levy?

Cllr Birch: Cabinet asked for a minimum of 8,000 – there must be some lee-way to go over the numbers

Jill Fisher: The LDF is subject to independent examination by an Inspector to assess how our policies will achieve the RSS figures. If evidence suggests that we will over-provide by several thousand the Inspector will not accept the LDF. We must have a robust strategy that delivers the Councils objectives. It is doubtful whether allowing residential conversion of barns achieves the objectives of affordable housing, inclusive communities etc. If the principle of residential conversions and new build in isolated locations is not acceptable, then charging for them will not make it OK. We could be legally challenged if the policy is not robust and defensible.

Cllr B McGoun: NNDC has a duty to care for the heritage, however there needs to be mechanisms to pay for this. A problem for future years is going to be the upkeep of redundant churches.

Steve Blatch: Conversion is expensive for business use, and previously the RDC had redundant building grants to help with costs. These are no longer available. **The Council could make representations to Go-East and EEDA that this is affecting the rural area.**

Michael Gurney: He looked at all avenues of funding for his office conversions and there is nothing available. EEDA have committed all their funding to 4 or 5 major projects and most of rural Norfolk won't get any of it.

Summary - Jill Fisher

Many thanks to all speakers and participants for an informative debate.

We need to remember that planning cannot resolve all the problems of rural areas and is unlikely in itself to sustain rural facilities. However a development strategy that concentrates development in key locations can support what is there currently. Dispersed development will continue recent trends of rural services becoming unviable.

Recognise that Sustainable Development is about more than car travel – it is about viable communities. This can be best supported by providing affordable housing for local people, rather than large expensive houses for retired incomers and second home owners. Planning policy needs to support social objectives.

Any policy should acknowledge that historical value is the most important factor and then see what the most appropriate use is. NNDC will investigate further survey work to gain more information on the number and quality of barns in the area. Listed barns are allowed to convert to residential use in order to secure their future.

The approach that officers are recommending (see handout notes) would allow residential conversion within 1km of a selected town or 500m of a rural service centre. It would also give a much clearer distinction between second homes and holiday-lets.

There can be room for flexibility and allow an element of residential, for example live-work units.

Closing remarks - Simon Partridge

The LDF will involve a change in policy. The general feeling seems to be not to allow residential use across all of North Norfolk.

Show of hands

In favour of residential conversions within 1km of a town or 500m of a rural service centre: the majority agreed

Permanent residential use of all barns with a financial levy: 7 agreed.