

11. Countryside

Introduction

- 11.1** As set out in the Spatial Strategy (see Section 3) of the Local Plan, the strategy for the rural areas in Uttlesford is to promote a sustainable rural economy and to address any issues of rural deprivation while at the same time protecting the important countryside assets including agricultural land, historic and landscape features and biodiversity. Strategic Policy SP10 – Protection of the Countryside in the Spatial Strategy section sets out the principle of the protection of the countryside for its intrinsic character and beauty. Policy SP10 also sets out the approach to development in the Green Belt and the London Stansted Airport Countryside Protection Zone.
- 11.2** This section of the Local Plan sets out more detailed policies that will be applied when considering planning applications for development in the Countryside. These policies relate to: protection of landscape character; re-use of rural buildings; change of use of agricultural land to domestic garden; and new community facilities within the countryside.

Landscape Character

- 11.3** The District is made up of three main types of landscape. The largest area is the farmland plateau landscapes which are gently rolling landscapes with medium to large arable fields but well wooded in places. The landscape is cut into by river valleys providing in places long distance views across the valleys. The open nature of the skyline of the ridge tops is particularly visually sensitive to new development. There are four river valley landscapes in Uttlesford based on the Rivers Cam, Stort, Pant and Upper Chelmer. The valleys have flat or gently undulating valley floors and are served by several tributaries. The open skyline at the top of the valley slopes is particularly sensitive to change through development, as are the more intimate views between the lower slopes and the valley floor. The North West corner of the District is characterised by chalk upland landscapes which are rolling landscapes of broad round back ridges. They are characterised by expansive arable farmland providing panoramic views. The open nature of the skyline of the chalk ridge tops is particularly visually sensitive to change. Each of these landscape character types can be subdivided into Landscape Character Areas and 26 of these areas have been identified in Uttlesford. Detailed profiles of the Landscape Character Areas setting out the visual, historic and ecological characteristics, sensitivities to change and planning guidelines are set out in the Landscape Character Assessment for Uttlesford (Chris Blandford Associates; 2006)¹.
- 11.4** The landscape holds evidence of human activity in Uttlesford stretching back at least 50,000 years. Some irregular shaped fields are pre 18th Century but are probably of medieval origin and some maybe older. Larger more regular fields can be evidence of fields enclosed in the early post medieval period and later in the 18th and 19th Century as part of the parliamentary Enclosure Act. A number of small commons and linear roadside greens can also be found; the former have all been enclosed but the latter still largely survive as wide road side verges

¹ Landscape Character Assessment (Chris Blandford Associates, 2006). Available via the UDC website: <https://www.uttlesford.gov.uk/article/4109/Environment>

- 11.5** Throughout Uttlesford there is a network of minor roads which evolved in Roman and Saxon times when the area was first settled so they follow the contours of the landscape. They are of historical importance because they retain their original alignment linking ancient settlements. They are infinitely variable and picturesque. Some are sunken lanes with steep banks indicating that they are the routes of early settlers; others are broad byways indicating that they are early coaching routes. The lanes are identified on the Policies Map.
- 11.6** Although the following policy will be most frequently used when considering applications within the countryside there may be instances where development within or on the edge of settlements can have an impact on the broader landscape. This policy will apply to development within and beyond development limits.

Policy C1: Protection of Landscape Character

Development will be permitted provided that:

- **Cross-valley views in the river valleys are maintained with development on valley sides respecting the historic settlement pattern, form and building materials of the locality;**
- **Panoramic views of the plateaux and uplands are maintained especially open views to historic buildings and landmarks such as churches;**
- **It preserves or enhances the historic settlement pattern, especially scale and density, and that it uses materials and colours that complement the landscape setting and landscape character. Such development should be well integrated with the surrounding landscape;**
- **It preserves or enhances the landscape pattern and structure of woodland areas, hedgerows and individual trees and does not diminish the role they play in views across the landscape;**
- **It preserves or enhances the historic landscape character of field patterns and field size, greens, commons and verges;**
- **It preserves or enhances the form and alignment of protected historic lanes.**
- **It enhances the landscape significance and better reveals cultural and heritage links.**

Re-use of Rural Buildings

- 11.7** Buildings in the countryside, including listed and non-designated buildings outside the defined development limits of settlements, are an integral part of both the landscape and the local economy. It is therefore important to facilitate their reuse but in a manner which makes a positive contribution to both the rural landscape and the rural economy. In May 2013 the Government made changes to the Permitted Development rights to allow the change of use of agricultural buildings under permitted development for a range of uses subject to certain criteria being met. The policy below will only apply to those cases where planning consent is required. The first part of the policy determines a series of priorities in terms of the preferred use of rural buildings and the second addresses the quality and character of the building. The implications of the policy are that not all buildings will necessarily be appropriate for another use.

Policy C2 - Re-use of Rural Buildings

The re-use of rural buildings (where permission is required) outside the defined development limits will be permitted provided that:

- The buildings are of a permanent and substantial construction;
- The buildings are capable of conversion without major reconstruction or significant extension;
- The buildings are not of an essential agricultural need to support an existing rural enterprise and the buildings loss would not result in additional buildings being required;
- The development would protect or enhance the character of the countryside, its amenity value and its biodiversity and not result in a significant increase in noise and light levels or other adverse impacts; **and**
- The development would not place unacceptable pressures on the surrounding rural network in terms of traffic levels, road safety, countryside character or amenity.; **and**
Change of Use of Agricultural Land to Domestic Garden

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- 11.8** Proposals to change agricultural land to domestic garden will be acceptable where there is no material change to the character or appearance of the surrounding countryside and should not create wedges of domestic garden intruding into an agricultural landscape. Proposals could include, for example, unworkable corners of fields. Proposals should include appropriate boundary treatments like native hedges or post and rail fencing which do not have the effect of urbanising the area or changing the openness of the countryside. If structures in the new garden, like sheds etc, would change the open character the Council may impose conditions removing permitted development rights when granting planning permission

Policy C3 - Change of Use of Agricultural Land to Domestic Garden

Change of use of agricultural land to domestic garden will be permitted if the proposal, particularly its scale and means of enclosure, does not result in a material change in the character and appearance of the surrounding countryside.

New Community Facilities within the Countryside

- 11.1** In line with the Essex Rural Strategy 2016 – 2020 (RCCE 2016) and successor documents published by Essex Rural Partnership the Council seeks to promote vibrant, mixed and sustainable rural communities. Applications to provide and/or improve community facilities in the District will be favourably considered, providing the scale of the development is proportionate to the size of the catchment population it serves. Community facilities include buildings such as village or community halls,

youth clubs, places of worship, education, childcare facilities and healthcare facilities.

Policy C4 - New Community Facilities within the Countryside

The provision of new or replacement indoor and outdoor sport facilities, recreational or community facilities is acceptable beyond development limits.

Facilities will be permitted if the following criteria are met:

- **The need for the facility can be demonstrated;**
- **The need cannot be met on a site within the development limits; and**
- **The site is well related to the settlement.**