HELLINGLY NEIGHBOURHOOD DEVELOPMENT PLAN

TOPIC PAPER NO. 2

LANDSCAPE

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Introduction

1. The stated aims of the Neighbourhood Development Plan for the Parish of Hellingly are:

   a) To protect the rural character of the area; and

   b) To retain the separate character and identity of the four main settlements in the parish.

2. This Topic Paper suggests some ways in which the first of these aims might be approached. It is in two parts. The first describes briefly the salient landscape characteristics of the area. The second considers how those aims might be met, in part, by local landscape designations which, together with their accompanying policies, would constitute material considerations in the determination of future planning applications.

Part 1 – Landscape Character

Context

3. The East Sussex County Council's Landscape Assessment (2010) identifies 40 broadly defined Landscape Character Areas in the County. Of these, 17 fall within Wealden District and are shown in Figure 3.1 at the end of this Paper. Hellingly Parish lies partly within Character Areas 5 (South Slopes of the High Weald) and 15 (Eastern Low Weald).

4. The division between these two County Landscape Character Areas forms part of the longer dividing line between the High Weald and Low Weald Natural Character Areas defined by Natural England and also shown in Figure 3.1 at the end of this Paper.

5. This dividing line runs through the centre of Hellingly Parish in a broadly north-west to south-west direction and corresponds with a major geological discontinuity. It is for this reason that the northern and southern parts of the parish differ markedly in their landscape characteristics.

Geology

6. The landscape of Hellingly parish is dominated by two geological strata exposed at the surface dating from the Lower Cretaceous period.

7. The northern part is made up mainly of Tunbridge Wells Sand with outcrops of underlying Wadhurst Clay where the top part of the sequence is cut out by faulting. Sunken roads are a feature of this area. Over the centuries continued use of unsurfaced tracks, particularly by vehicles with wooden wheels with iron rims, gradually widened and deepened them. Such sunken roads can be seen in Church Lane, Mill Lane and Vicarage Lane, Hellingly.

8. The southern part of the parish is made up of Weald Clay which consists of shales and mudstones with subordinate siltstones, shelly limestones and clay ironstones. The dividing line between the Tunbridge Wells Sand and the Weald Clay occurs in the vicinity of Broad Farm, Hellingly, and the structural relationship between the two beds is illustrated in an extract from British Regional Geology: The Wealden District (4th Edition, p56) reproduced at the end of this Paper.

9. This geological discontinuity has affected the history of Hellingly Parish in various ways. For example, in the 18th and 19th centuries Sussex was a greater hop growing county than Kent and an 1844 map records 114½ acres under cultivation in Hellingly[1]. Though hops like moisture they do not like heavy soil and, as the map at the end of this Paper shows, almost all of them were located in the northern part of the parish where the lighter soils of Tunbridge Wells Sand occur. So, too, are the few remaining oasthouses, now converted into dwellings.

10. At the same time, brickmaking and pottery were thriving industries in Hellingly Parish. These were concentrated where the heavier clay soils are found in and around Lower

[1] The History of Hellingly, Sussex, Richard R Creasey, p67

Dicker, with the Dicker and Boship Potteries just to the west of the Boship Hotel and brickyards in Mansers Lane and Hackhurst Lane. Clay extraction provided the basis of these industries. Bore holes drilled at the Dicker Pottery in 1925 found one field with fine quality potting clay to a depth of at least 15 feet and two fields with clay suitable for brickmaking[2].

Topography

11. The relief of the parish largely reflects its underlying geology. Where Weald Clay predominates in the southern part of the parish the land is generally flat and low-lying. Mostly it is below 20 metres above sea level and falls to below 10 metres in the river valleys.

12. By contrast, where Tunbridge Wells Sand predominates in the northern part, the land is higher and more undulating. It rises to 78 metres above sea level near Grove Hill on the eastern boundary with Herstmonceux parish and to 59 metres above sea level at Coggers Cross on the northern boundary with Horam parish.

13. The parish has three rivers which run through it from the higher land in the northern part of the parish and beyond. The River Cuckmere enters in the north east and runs mostly southward, exiting to the south of the Boship Hotel. The River Bull enters from the west and runs in a broadly south easterly direction before joining the River Cuckmere near Hellingly. Hurst Haven runs north-south along the south eastern part of the parish before flowing into the Pevensey Levels. These rivers often cut quite deeply into the softer Sands in their higher upper reaches but broaden out where they reach the Clay plains in their lower reaches. Flooding from these rivers is a regular occurrence in the autumn and winter, particularly around Grovebridge on the A267 and around the eastern end of New Road near Amberstone, and extensively around the low flat areas in Hellingly and Lower Horsebridge.

14. Some impressive long-distance views over the Low Weald to the South Downs are found on this higher land. One such vantage point is situated on a public footpath just south of the Wellshurst Golf Driving Range. Another is on the public footpath from Grove Hill leading down to Shawpits Farm off Mill Lane, Hellingly. These views are shown in the photographs at the end of this Paper.

Agriculture

15. While geology has determined the landform of the parish, man's activities have shaped its appearance.

16. With the exception of the built-up settlement areas and the managed recreational spaces at Wellshurst Golf Course, Hellingly Country Park and the Lower Horsebridge Recreation Ground, land uses in the parish consist predominantly of agriculture and woodland.

17. As shown in the Habitat and Natural Features Map of Hellingly Parish prepared by the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre and included at the end of this Paper, arable farming predominates in the southern part of the parish, especially in the flat open

[2] Sussex Pottery, John Manwaring Baines, 1980 p90

area known as The Broad. There is little arable farmland in the more undulating northern part of the parish apart from in the vicinity of the boundary with Horam parish and to the north of Park Wood.

18. Conversely, the northern part of the parish consists largely of natural or improved grassland. In the southern part, such grassland is confined mainly to the floodplain of the River Cuckmere and areas to the north and south of Lower Dicker.

19. These different agricultural patters are reflected in field sizes. As shown on the map included at the end of this paper, fields in the northern part of the parish tend to be small and irregularly shaped, whereas those in the southern part tend to be larger and more regularly shaped, especially where the land is used for arable purposes.

Woodland and Hedgerows

20. In 2006 the Ancient Woodland Inventory for Wealden District was reviewed and revised by English Nature. Ancient woodlands are defined by English Nature as those where there is believed to have been continuous woodland cover since at least 1600 AD, generally due to natural regeneration or coppice re-growth.

21. The Habitat and Natural Features Map prepared by the Sussex Biodiversity Record Centre shows the distribution of ancient woodland in the parish. The largest areas of ancient woodland abut the eastern boundary (Park Wood and Jarvis Wood). Elsewhere the surviving ancient woodland occurs in much smaller patches which are distributed widely throughout the northern part of the parish but less so in the southern part.

22. In addition to this woodland, many of the smaller fields in the northern half are bounded by long-established hedgerows with trees, whereas the southern half is more open and the tree cover less pronounced.

23. These woodlands and hedgerows are rich in biodiversity and constitute an essential part of the character and appearance of the parish.

Assessment

24. For all the above reasons – geology, relief, agriculture, tree cover – the character of the landscape differs markedly between the northern and southern parts of the parish. This has been recognised in various studies including the National Character Areas identified by Natural England and the East Sussex County Landscape Assessment (see paras 3. and 4. above).

25. The South Slopes of the High Weald, which include the northern part of Hellingly Parish, are described in the East Sussex County Landscape Assessment as:

> *"An intricate, small scale landscape with a strong pattern of hedgerows, falling southward from the Heathfield to Battle ridge towards the Low Weald and Pevensey Levels. This landscape of gentle valleys and slopes affords good views of the Downs."*

Key characteristics include streams draining into the River Cuckmere; a close network of small woods and hedges; winding lanes with scattered farms, cottages and linear settlements often on ridges.

26. The Eastern Low Weald, which includes the southern part of Hellingly Parish, is described in the East Sussex Landscape Assessment as:

> *"A more open and exposed area with many more flat, treeless areas."*

Key characteristics include significant areas of flat, nearly treeless country with a remote, windswept feel; less abundant hedges and hedgerow trees; ancient pathways crossing the area; fine, open views of the Downs; small, remote and largely unspoiled rural villages; small, winding, partly tree-lined streams, notably the River Cuckmere, but also artificial, straightened drains and channels.

27. It is important to remember that these descriptions apply to much larger areas than just Hellingly Parish. A more localised appraisal was carried out in 2014 by Chris Blandford Associates for Wealden District Council with the aim of indicating how best development could be accommodated in the District Council's Core Strategy having regard to landscape considerations and helping to develop landscape management and protection policies within the Local Plan. It examines in more detail the landscape setting of key settlements.

28. Thus, in the case of Hellingly Village, the area between the A267 and the Cuckoo Trail is considered to make a major contribution to the landscape setting of the settlement providing a strong inter-visibility with buildings in its historic core and a strong sense of place as a result of views to the South Downs. By contrast, the area to the west of the A267 makes only a limited contribution because it encompasses large-scale modern fields which lack landscape structure and have no inter-visibility with the historic core.

29. In the case of Gun Hill on the north-western boundary of Hellingly Parish, the landscape setting is described as comprising:

> *"a range of ancient fieldscapes, including cohesive and aggregate assorts, and regular piecemeal enclosure."*

The area around Gun Hill, which includes part of Hellingly Parish, is considered to make a major contribution to its landscape setting as a result of its strength of place with views to the South Downs and other ridges and large patches of ancient woodland.

30. These national, county and local landscape assessments all point to the very pronounced contrast between the northern and southern parts of the parish – between the predominantly pastoral undulating southern slopes of the High Weald (the outer edge of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and the more open arable countryside of the Low Weald.

31. Most significantly perhaps, the southern part is becoming increasingly urbanised. Of the 1,892 electors listed in the 2014/15 Electoral Register for the parish, 1,644 or

86.9% lived to the south of the dividing line suggested in the next Section. That percentage has increased with developments completed since then and will increase still further with the large developments proposed in the current Wealden Local Plan Submission.

Part 2 – Landscape Designations

Locally Valued Landscape

32. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out the Government's planning policies for England and *"must be taken into account in the preparation of local and neighbourhood plans".* Para 109 of the NPPF states that the planning system *"should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by protecting and enhancing valued landscapes ……".*

33. In an appeal decision in 2015, the concept of locally valued landscapes proved crucial in a decision to reject a planning application for 46 houses in a Warwickshire village[3]. The Inspector argued that a valued landscape does not equate to one that is formally designated such as a National Park, Green Belt, AONB or SSSI, stating that if these *"were the only valued landscapes for the purpose of the framework, it would say so".* He also took into account the site's intimate relationship with the Millennium Way long-distance footpath, finding that the path's existence conferred some measure of value on the landscape closely associated with it.

34. It would therefore be open to the NDP for Hellingly to designate the northern part of the parish as a Locally Valued Landscape. Its landscape is not only worthy of protection but is also valued by users of the Cuckoo Trail (cyclists, walkers, runners, horse-riders and wildlife enthusiasts), the long-distance Wealdway and the extensive network of local footpaths, as well as by visitors to public attraction venues in the area (Wellshurst Golf Course, Blackstock Farm and Park Wood). Such a designation would enable the NDP to include policies to protect its landscape and resist inappropriate development.

35. In a more recent High Court decision, Mr Justice Hickinbottom argued that a landscape is "valued" only if it has physical attributes taking it out of the ordinary[4]. The northern part of Hellingly Parish does not have a unique landscape character as this character extends over a wide area. As previously noted, it is part of the southern slopes of the High Weald and its character extends into the adjoining parishes of Herstmonceux, Horam and Chiddingly. What does take it out of the ordinary, however, is its proximity to and accessibility from the town of Hailsham, one of the two largest towns in Wealden and planned to expand considerably in size over the next 15 years. It is this urban/rural inter-relationship which makes the area specially valued as well as of value itself

36. Another more recent appeal decision has lent support to this view. Dismissing plans for 74 homes within a valued landscape on an urban fringe site in Leicestershire, the Inspector found that the site was valued locally because it formed part of open countryside providing the context and setting of the town[5]. He considered that the Council's analysis, which looked at the relationship between people and place in the wider context, more helpful than the appellant's narrow approach, which focused on whether key features of landscape character areas were present in and around the site.

[3] Planning, 3 July 2015
[4] Planning, 21 October 2016
[5] Planning, 10 February 2017

37. If the northern part of the parish were to be designated as a Locally Valued Landscape, it would have to be defined on the Proposals Map and its boundary would need to be recognisable on the ground. Its southern boundary could, going from west to east, be along the Bull River to the A267, then along Vicarage Lane and Mill Lane and part of Grove Hill, before finally skirting the southern boundary of Park Wood. This would broadly follow the geological divide described in paras 7 and 8 and the related changes in topography, vegetation and agriculture. The Locally Valued Landscape would correspond to the area classified by the East Sussex County Landscape Assessment as the South Slopes of the High Weald.

38. Such a designation would need to be accompanied by a policy or policies which provide a clear guide to owners and prospective developers as to what will be required in order to protect this Valued Landscape. It is suggested that it might include the following:

    a) Development will not be permitted if it is detrimental to the scenic quality and rural character by reason of siting, scale, design, materials or colour, or if it would impact adversely on the rural setting of public footpaths.

    b) Development should wherever practical enhance the rural character and biodiversity of the Area by additional tree planting and other landscaping.

    c) Long-distance views of the South Downs from public vantage points identified on the Proposals Map will be protected from obtrusive development.

    d) Development should demonstrate that lighting proposals are the minimum needed for security and/or working purposes and minimise the potential for obtrusive light from glare or light trespass as the Area is within Zone EZ2 of the Institution of Lighting Professional Guidance Notes for the Reduction of Light Pollution (2011).

Local Green Space

39. Para 76 of the NPPF states that:

> *"local communities through local and neighbourhood plans should be able to identify for special protection green areas of particular importance to them. By designating land as Local Green Space local communities will be able to rule out new development other than in very special circumstances."*

It goes on to say that the designation should only be used:

- where the green space is in reasonably close proximity to the community it serves;
- where the green area is demonstrably special to a local community and holds a particular local significance, for example because of its beauty, historic significance, recreational value (including as a playing field), tranquillity or richness of its wildlife; and
- where the green area concerned is local in character and is not an extensive tract of land.

40. Candidates for designation as Local Green Space might include:

a) Hellingly Country Park at Roebuck Park
b) Lower Horsebridge Recreation Ground
c) The field next to Hellingly Village Hall (Festival of Transport, Circus, Horse Carriages and Longdogs) and
d) The Lower Dicker cycleway and playground
e) The Cuckoo Trail
f) Union Corner Allotment Site
g) Park Wood (Site of Special Scientific Interest)
h) Hellingly Cemetery (Site of Special Scientific Interest)

41. These areas all meet the NPPF criteria for Local Green Space, being close to North Hailsham and the main settlements in Hellingly Parish, local in character and valued for their recreational use, biodiversity or historic significance.

42. Para 78 of the NPPF state that "*local policy for managing development within a Local Green Space should be consistent with policy for Green Belts"* and paras 89 and 90 set out a number of exceptions to the general rule that the construction of new buildings should be regarded as inappropriate in the Green Belt.

43. These exceptions include buildings for agriculture and forestry, appropriate facilities for outdoor sport and recreation and for cemeteries, small scale extension or alterations of a building and redevelopment of previously developed sites. The Neighbourhood Development Plan policy Local Green Space should reflect this national guidance.

Woodland, Trees and Hedgerows

44. Para 118 of the NPPF states that:

> "*Planning permission should be refused for development resulting in the loss of deterioration of irreplaceable habitats, including ancient woodland and the loss of aged and veteran trees found outside ancient woodland, unless the need for, and benefits of, the development in that location clearly outweigh the loss."*

Ancient woodlands within the Parish of Hellingly are shown on the Habitat and Natural Features Map at the end of this paper and identified on the Neighbourhood Development Plan Proposals Map.

45. The Draft Submission Wealden Local Plan (March 2017) stated in Policy EA1(c):

> "*Housing development, and development identified within allocations of this plan that will lead to the loss of Ancient Woodland will not be supported, and where relevant the provision of a 15 metre buffer between the development and the Ancient Woodland should be provided, unless a different buffer area can be substantiated taking into account the objective of no loss of irreplaceable habitat."*

It is suggested that the Neighbourhood Development Plan extend this policy to include aged and veteran trees and ancient hedgerows. The former usually provide landmark features within the landscape and could be made the subject of tree preservation orders by the District Council. The latter are particularly important for their biodiversity. For the policy to be effective, a survey or surveys would be necessary to identify the trees and hedgerows to which it applies.

46. The preservation of ancient woodland, trees and hedgerows is vital if the rural character of the parish is to be maintained. However, preservation alone is not enough. There is a continuous loss of such assets through development, neglect, misuse and natural decay.

47. It is also necessary to consider whether and where opportunities exist for the creation of new woodland, especially if this would meet the objectives of the District Council's proposed Green Infrastructure Strategy which inter alia seeks to:

- Ensure that existing green infrastructure assets and corridors that link them are protected and retained to maintain the green network;
- Provide new green space to address deficiencies in provision, accessibility or to improve the quality of the green network;
- Maximise opportunities to enhance, restore, create and strengthen habitats and landscape features to improve connectivity for wildlife and allow species adaptation to climate change; and
- Improve the quantity and quality of access links including footpaths, cycle paths and bridleways.

48. There is one such opportunity in Hellingly Parish. The Draft Submission Wealden Local Plan (March 2017) shows an unallocated area of land between the strategic

housing allocation numbered NHIA, NHIB, NHIC and NHID (see Plan at end of this Paper). Part of this, between the former and now diverted new Road, provides SUDs for the Roebuck Park development and is partly self-seeded woodland. Immediately to the south of this is an area in the north west corner of the Hellingly Meadows development (NHIA) which is to be planted as woodland and transferred to the Parish Council. From this core, arms of woodland could extend north along the east side of Park Road and west along the already partly wooded south side of Station Road.

49. Such an area of new woodland (Swingate Wood?) would have the following advantages:

    a) It would provide a physical divide and screen between NHIC, which has historically considered itself to be part of Hellingly Village, and the large new residential developments to the south and east.

    b) It would provide a green corridor linking the Cuckoo Trail and River Cuckmere with Park Wood and Jarvis Wood and benefit biodiversity.

    c) The closed section of New Road and the disused route of the former railway line between Hellingly Station and Hellingly Hospital could form an attractive cycle pedestrian way between the new development to the east of the Cuckoo Trail.

    d) It would give visual cohesion to an area which otherwise could appear as "left over" bits of land without clear form or purpose.

Edges of Development

50. New development in the open countryside or abutting it can have a detrimental effect on its character and appearance if not adequately screened by boundary planting. There are some good examples of how this might be achieved in Hellingly. Both Orchard Grange off Coldharbour Road, Lower Dicker, and Ashley Gardens, off the A271 in Hawkswood, have planted belts around the boundary which are not part of the adjoining residential properties but maintained by separate Management Companies funded from service charges.

51. On the other hand, there are various examples of new developments with minimal or nil boundary planting – where it has been considered sufficient to plant a few trees along the boundary of species which provide little screening and which, being within residential curtilages, are at risk of inappropriate management, damage or even removal. Field Close off North Street in Lower Horsebridge is an example of a development which lacks any boundary planting and as a result is discordant in its rural setting, as shown in the photograph at the end of this Paper.

52. It is suggested, therefore, that the Neighbourhood Development Plan should include a policy to ensure that new development in or abutting the open countryside fits comfortably into its rural setting by providing a planted belt of trees and shrubs not less than 2 metres in width along its countryside boundary.

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