

Housing in Barcombe – an overview

Since the Barcombe housing survey was presented to the village in August 2015 the Parish Council, through its Steering Groups, has been trying to make sense of the continuing changes to Lewes District Council's housing policy.

Alex MacGillivray (Steering Group Chairman) and I have had long exchanges of e-mails with LDC's Planning Department, plus a recent two-hour meeting. We have read endless documents issued by government (The National Planning Policy Framework) and Lewes District Plans (Local Plan Part Two and others).

The whole process seems to have failed and I have detailed below the story as it stands today (*August 2018*).

Each bullet point below is backed by volumes of paperwork.. However, I hope the following compresses it into a readable format.

- Planning Departments, throughout England, are obliged by ministerial decree to find land for an increasing number of houses.
- Lewes District Council's latest target is 5,432 (6,900 when including the South Downs National Park) spread over the period 2010 to 2030.
- Locations and numbers appear in the Lewes District Plan Part 2 (= LPP2). The completion of this plan has already been delayed for 18 months and it is unlikely to be ready to be presented to, and potentially approved by, government inspectors until 2020. Housing construction is expected to begin thereafter, i.e. after 2022.
- Progress towards LDC's target number is measured annually over three and five year periods (land for 810 and 1,350 houses respectively)
- As of April 2018 Lewes District Council has not been able to identify sufficient land to meet its targets.
- Consequently, while Lewes District Council's LPP2 continues to be finalised, housing supply policies and those of neighbourhood plans are considered 'out of date'. This means they have no legal basis, so cannot be used to determine any planning application. Instead, housing development applications will be determined in the context of a presumption in favour of 'Sustainable Development'.
- It is therefore possible that housing-related planning applications will be made for Barcombe before LDC's Plan is finally approved, and that permissions may well be granted without the policies and design restrictions built into both LPP2 and Neighbourhood Plans.

We understand that there is also some doubt whether Neighbourhood Plans created and approved before 2016 are now valid.

The land allocation process

- All District Planning departments in England send out a 'call for sites' to local landowners, asking if they wish to put forward land for development.
- Land put forward is then assessed by Planning Officers for its suitability using a multi-factor matrix. Each area is then assigned a colour: red, amber or green.
- In Barcombe, this process produced three green areas (Hillside/Bridgelands), and several red areas: to the west of the Village Hall; behind Grantham Bank, and behind the Weald View /Sidehills bungalows.
- The call for sites and assessment processes are repeated annually.
- The Parish Council is *not consulted by LDC or involved in any way in that process*.
- Land may be under assessment by LDC without the knowledge of the Parish Council, and without consultation with it.
- Land currently assigned red or orange status may be upgraded to orange or green status if the landowner or developer can overcome LDC's reason(s) for assigning a lower status.
- The existing village planning boundary has no permanence. In pursuit of housing targets, it can be extended.

Neighbourhood Plans

With land in Barcombe Cross already assessed by LDC as suitable for development, and as that land is potentially able to provide the number of dwellings allocated to Barcombe Cross by LDC (at least 30), a potential Neighbourhood Plan was (and is) limited in its scope to dealing with the size, design and sustainability of housing.

Two successive Parish Council-supported Steering Groups have tried to reach a sensible and achievable list of housing policies that we felt the village would want, informed by the results of its 2015 Housing Survey. The intent was to follow the standard procedure: to create a Neighbourhood Plan and present it to the village for comment; to refine policies according to comment, then to put the Plan to a village vote in a referendum. If approved by a majority, the Plan would then go to Lewes District Council for ratification. With this achieved, it would serve as guidelines to developers.

LDC's Local Plan Part 2 does, in fairness, cover and restrict building materials, the heights of buildings and parking arrangements, and it does set out to prioritise smaller homes over extensive developments of large properties.

However, regarding the Parish Council's intentions to influence the following...

- Housing number
- Housing density
- Smaller houses for first-time buyers and downsizing
- Respecting and reflecting the design and material of existing buildings, and respecting the Barcombe Cross Conservation Area
- Wildlife habitat
- Landscaping, signage, kerbs, lighting, and routes to school
- Securing the village planning boundary
- Options for locals to buy first

...we have been told that as simple intentions, none of the above carry weight. Why? Because they are not acceptable as an objection to a planning application, and cannot be placed as an obligation

on any development/developer unless the land had been allocated for housing as part of a ratified Neighbourhood Plan. The latter was not anyway an intent in the case of Barcombe's developing NP.

Affordable housing

Whenever more than ten dwellings are to be built, government policy requires that least 40% of these should be 'affordable' units. But if a developer can convince LDC that to include this proportion would have a negative effect on the site's viability, then LDC can let the developer shift the obligation to a different site – which may be in another parish. So there is no guarantee of affordable housing in Barcombe Cross.

To sum up

The inability of LDC to demonstrate a five-year rolling supply of housing land has effectively rendered the production of a Neighbourhood Plan and/or a Village Design Statement for Barcombe Cross a pointless exercise.

Central government requires LDC to reach its allocated housing number. Until LDC can again identify a five-year rolling supply, policies laid out in its Local Plan Part 2 and in Neighbourhood Plans are in limbo.

Of course, planning applications for housing will still come before the Parish Council for comment, and we will continue to recommend either approval or rejection according to the application's perceived merit. But we are not convinced that our comments will have much impact on Lewes District Council.

Alan Marler

Chairman, Barcombe Parish Council

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