

Going rural



Much is spoken of the housing crisis and the need to build, but little consideration is given to the character of the villages of rural England. Recognising the issue, South Cambridgeshire District Council sought to give villages a voice using Village Design Guides. Hana Loftus, introduced to SCDC via Public Practice, spoke to Cambridge Architecture about the future of the countryside

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In the Greater Cambridge area, more than a third of new housing growth takes place in the rural hinterland of villages – outside the city centre, city fringe, and new settlements, such as Northstowe and Cambourne. The ideas behind rural planning, however, have remained relatively unexamined compared with the attention paid to urban and fringe schemes by architects and urbanists.

Our planning orthodoxy has been to heavily restrict growth in villages generally, while releasing a limited number of larger sites on the edges of villages deemed more 'sustainable' due to local services such as schools and shops.

Rural life continues to hold a deep-seated

Study tour with Village Design Guide community member

appeal for many people, but affordability for first-time-buyers who grew up in – and want to stay in – rural areas is severe.

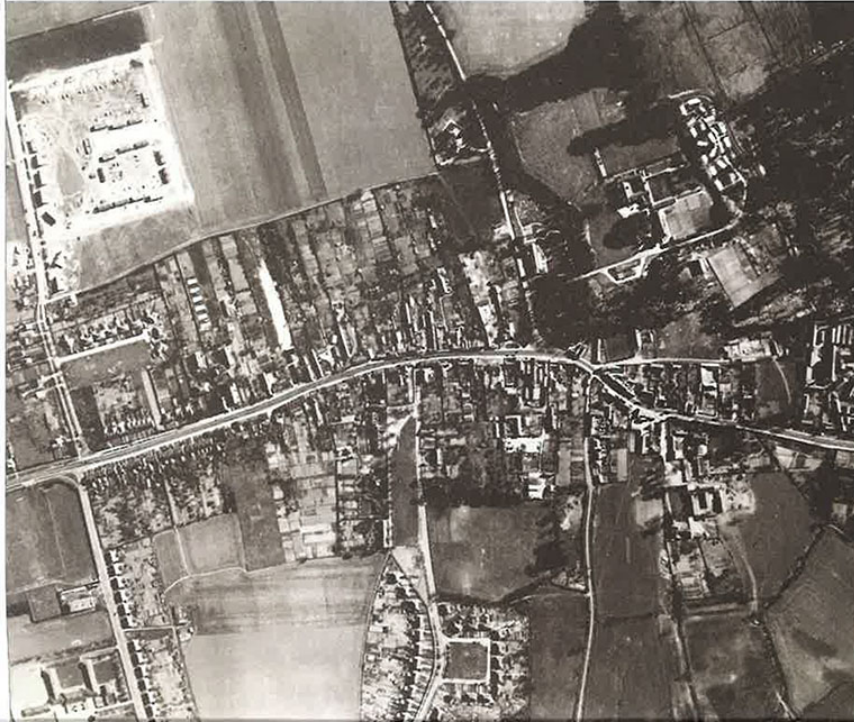
Within South Cambridgeshire, the delay to the adoption of the Local Plan from 2013 to 2018 led to the lack of housing land supply and forced planning consents of many speculative and poor-quality developments on village fringes, to the vocal dismay of residents.

Contrary to popular perception, this dismay was not because rural communities are inherently anti-growth. In fact, many of the 'unsustainable' villages restricted by current policy from growing further are pushing for more homes to be built so that the next generation of local people can live there, and their remaining local services can be sustained by an increase in population. The opposition stemmed primarily from the lack of any genuine attempt to engage local communities with shaping where these developments should be and how they should be designed; the perceived lack of planning for services and transport provision; and the dilution of village identity in a sea of generic house designs with no relationship to the landscape or built context.

In 2018-19, South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) used funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to trial the development of new design guides for villages, to try to understand what rural communities want from development in their areas. We worked with eight village communities, using a range of consultants with community facilitation and rural design experience, to understand their built character and co-design specific guidance for each village, to supplement the generic 'urban design' guidance presented in district-level policy. The methodology and outcomes can be read in more detail on SCDC's website¹ and in the author's *Practice Note for Public Practice*² – but one of the most interesting findings from a design perspective is the problem of 'urban design' as a discipline when applied to rural areas.

Community members question why 'urban design' consultants, officers or 'experts' are called to comment on rural planning applications. 'We're not urban – we're rural' was a common call from participants in the Village Design Guide process whenever 'urban design' was used as a shorthand to describe the way that buildings, streets and spaces relate to one another.

This would be a specious argument if the principles of 'urban design' were relevant to both urban and rural areas, but urban design courses rarely address the specific challenges of rural and fringe sites. The principles that many urban designers imbibe, which become codified in design guides and so-called 'best practice' – the relationship of building to street, pedestrian to car



▲ Sawston historic centre

technological shifts to enable more sustainable rural lifestyles. As we move into developing the new joint Greater Cambridge Local Plan, I hope we can build on the lessons learned from the pilot Village Design Guides to embed better rural planning principles that meet this challenge – but we also need rural developers to work with us. As the city has developed some outstanding exemplars of progressive urban design, we should press landowners to invest in rural development models that look forward and that extend the distinctive rural character of our villages.

References

- ¹ In this article, Greater Cambridge is used to mean the combined area of Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council – the area covered by the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service and now preparing a joint Local Plan for the first time.
- ² www.scambs.gov.uk/villagedesign
- ³ www.publicpractice.org.uk/resources/growing-villages



▲ Aerial photograph of Sawston in 1948 showing housing developments under construction

user, landmark buildings and background buildings – are often inappropriate for village locations. The lack of expertise in the specific problems of rural design leaves a vacuum into which developers step with their standardised house types and profitable layouts, and where planners go by the urban design 'handbook when attempting to improve them. The result is the lamentable quality of the new housing, unpopular with communities and detracting from the distinctive character of the rural landscape.

Our rural communities are ambitious about design, environmentalism and the potential of design. Our rural communities are the ambitious of design, environmentalism and the potential of design. Our rural communities are the ambitious of design, environmentalism and the potential of design.

An illustration from the Sawston Village Design Guide showing key strategies for village planning