

**Supplementary Planning Guidance**

**Retention of Shops, Post Offices  
and Public Houses in Villages**

**Adopted February 2004**

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The loss of community facilities in rural settlements is a trend throughout Great Britain. In Suffolk the number of basic facilities such as the shop, post office or public house has been in decline for a number of years. At the same time there is a growing awareness of the valuable contribution that these facilities offer in their communities; acting as they do as a focus for village activities and country life.
- 1.2 Mid Suffolk reflects this national trend, and the loss of these basic facilities has become increasingly noticeable in recent years to the detriment of the individual's quality of life and the vibrancy of the local economy.
- 1.3 The council may help in the process of trying to retain services and facilities especially where they are the last of their type in a community. Financial support may be available e.g. through rate relief and the planning control system can complement these initiatives by resisting changes of use that would otherwise result in the loss of key services.
- 1.4 This Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) sets down the criteria by which applications for changes of use in respect of such community facilities will be judged.

## 2. Objective

- 2.1 The loss of any village service or facility is a source of concern because of the effect it has on the users and its providers who may be losing their business. This loss is felt more strongly in a community if it relates to the last of a particular type of service or facility. In these circumstances if no action was taken, the Council would be failing to meet the objectives of the Community Strategy, to meet basic needs more locally. Planning guidance plays an important role in encouraging the retention of local services.
- 2.2 In order for the planning guidance to work effectively it must state its objectives clearly, present robust information and monitor the effects of its policy implementation. This SPG has three objectives;
  - To encourage the retention of rural services.
  - To ensure that proposals for changes of use are properly justified
  - To enable the reopening of a service or facility at a future stage by resisting specific building alterations that would prevent reopening.
- 2.3 The role of the Local Planning Authority is to support these initiatives by resisting changes of use from general stores, post offices and pubs. In pursuing this role the Authority must treat both local communities and prospective applicants equitably and be guided by national policy and its interpretation in recent case law. This resistance can only be appropriate, where there is local

support for the retention of facilities, where they can be shown to be viable and where the loss will mean that there is no other basic facility of that type available in the parish.

2.4 People in villages are increasingly reliant on travelling greater distances to meet their everyday needs. Loss of local services can threaten the viability of communities and affect some people severely – particularly the low paid and unemployed, the young and the elderly. These negative effects on individuals quality of life run counter to National, Regional and Local Government Policies on social exclusion, rural viability and sustainability.

2.5 Mid Suffolk shares the National vision for a vibrant rural future set out in – ‘The Future...A fair deal for rural England’ (DEFRA 2000). We aim to see;

- Diversified, village community-backed enterprises offering a wide range of products and services, using new technology and good business skills.
- Public service providers retaining and improving essential village services which are well used and at the heart of the community. Using new technology, post offices will offer local access to banking and a wide range of services.
- Community initiative to share use of village facilities, such as the church, school, hall or pub, and to re-establish basic services.

2.6 In preparing this Guidance the Council has regard for the Central Government’s Village Rate Relief Scheme, which the council has helped pioneer.

- Rate relief; A mandatory Central Government scheme allows 50% rate relief for qualifying rural businesses including grocery stores, post offices, public houses and petrol filling stations. The Qualifying criteria for ‘Vital Village Services’ are set out in Appendix A.
- Local authorities have a discretionary power to boost the rate relief up to 100%. Mid Suffolk District Council increases rate relief to 100% for every business that qualifies under the mandatory scheme. The Council also has a policy for assisting rural businesses other than those that qualify for mandatory rate relief. The policy includes qualifying criteria aimed at measuring the benefit that a business brings to the rural community it serves. Businesses that qualify under the policy can receive up to 100% discretionary rate relief.

The Councils approach has resulted in more than 130 businesses, which now receive either full or partial relief.

### 3. Background

#### 3.1 National Trends

In the UK a third of all villages have no shop and the loss of banks, garages and pubs in rural areas has continued. The ability of local residents to continue to satisfy their needs locally is an important consideration. The disappearance of rural pubs, shops and post offices is identified in more detail below:

#### 3.2 Pubs

Pubs have long been established at the heart of rural communities and are often an important focal point for social interaction. Pubs also offer employment opportunities and can contribute to the local tourist industry by providing overnight accommodation and running local events adding to the attractiveness of an area.

In recent years pubs have come under pressure. The reasons for this include:

- An ageing population
- High overheads compared to turnover
- Decline in traditional rural occupations
- Low incomes in rural areas
- Increase in alcohol purchased from supermarkets and abroad
- Drink driving legislation
- Increase in the price of beer
- Increasing regulatory demands e.g. disabled access and employment.
- The increase in value of residential property, which in turn has encouraged the change of use of rural pubs to housing. Pubs changing to residential can increase the value of the property as much as 50%, this fuels the drive for change of use.

The pressure for change to residential use is particularly strong where pubs enjoy large gardens that can also be developed.

‘The disappearance of a local pub can often affect the quality of life as a focal point for the community disappears, as well as leaving a gap in the local economy.’ (Countryside Agency. The pub is the hub, a good practice guide 2001)

The Countryside Agency survey, Rural services in 2000, identifies that 52% of rural settlements have no pub and most rural community councils report a continuing decline of the number of rural pubs.

**47% of villages in Mid Suffolk do not have a pub.**

#### 3.2 Shops

The general store (often combined with a post office) is the most fundamental community service for many rural communities. The steep decline in this facility that started in the 1970's continues and though recently less severe, the latest figures show that only 58% of parishes (nationwide) have a permanent shop of any kind.

The decline in numbers of village shops/post offices derives from pressure on shop incomes from three main sources:-

- Competition from out of town superstores
- New technology facilitating direct payment of benefits and pensions
- Increased car ownership and personal mobility.

This cycle is often self-reinforcing, with the closure of general stores, post offices and businesses driving a greater level of car dependency and a pattern of less rather than more sustainable development.

**64% of villages in Mid Suffolk do not have a local shop/general store.**

### 3.3 Post Offices

There has also been a continual decline in the number of post offices in rural villages. A NFWI survey in 1999 showed a decline in the number of villages with a post office of 10% over the last 10 years to a national level of 75%.

The increasing ageing population in Mid Suffolk should be an advantage to post offices in the area. However this is not the case nationally, regionally or locally with many post offices going out of business.

The main reason for this is its failure to modernise its business.

**62% of villages in Mid Suffolk do not have a post office.**

### 3.4 Local Trends

The Planning Policy section currently monitors the loss/decline of rural services as part of the countywide project, Suffolk...Planning A Sustainable Future. The study measures the vitality of the settlements and tracks the loss of services on a yearly basis. In the drive to “ensure that basic needs are met more locally” (MSDC, Community Strategy, Goal 3) the retention of existing services and amenities is fundamental.

Annual monitoring of these basic facilities will act as a measure to enable us to make year on year comparisons and measure the level of loss that is occurring in our district; providing a real indication of the state of services and facilities within Mid Suffolk.

Future monitoring of basic facilities will be extended with the inclusion of health facilities as a sixth ‘service’ encompassing a wider social aspect of accessibility. This is due to a lot of rural communities relying on the shop, post office or pub as a delivery/distribution point for medical prescriptions coming up from ‘the town’.

The SPG excludes the towns Needham Market and Stowmarket in Mid Suffolk.

Summary of 2001 figures.

Total no of rural catchment areas	No of villages without a pub	Percentage of those villages without a pub
117	56	47%

Total no of rural catchment areas	No of villages without a general store	Percentage of those villages without a general store
117	75	64%

Total no of rural catchment areas	No of villages without a post office	Percentage of those villages without a post office
117	73	62%

#### 4. Planning Context

4.1 National Level – The Government's most recent concern about the decline in rural facilities has been expressed in *Our Countryside The Future – A Fair Deal for Rural England* (November 2000)

4.2 The decline in rural retail outlets has particularly affected small rural areas. The small general store or post office in a rural village has a special social function. It often provides an invaluable, and irreplaceable, service for local people without cars or ready access to public transport. Its demise is often seen as a severe blow to the community.

4.3 Planning Policy Guidance Notes further amplify this concern. The most relevant PPG's on such issues are PPG 6 and PPG 7

#### 4.4 PPG 6 – Town Centres and Retail Development

Although PPG 6 concentrates on the location of shopping outlets in urban areas, it does recognise that village shops play a vital role in rural areas, and that the loss of the 'traditional' village shop can have a particularly severe impact on the community it serves. It specifically states in relation to village shops that 'their importance to the community should be taken into account when considering applications for changing existing shops into dwellings'.

#### Draft PPS6 – Planning for Town Centres

This document makes reference to rural centres stating that in planning for shops and services, local planning authorities should adopt policies which:

- Ensure that the importance of the shops and services to the local community is taken into account in assessing proposals which would result in their loss or change of use; and
- Reflect a positive attitude to proposals for the conversion and extension of shops, which are designed to improve their viability.

#### 4.5 PPG 7 – The Countryside and The Rural Economy

This document emphasises that sustainable development forms the cornerstone of both the Government's rural policies and its planning policies. In this respect the pursuit of sustainability should endeavour to improve the viability of existing villages and market towns. The Guidance Note makes clear that Local Planning Authorities can help retain existing services.

##### Draft PPS7 – Sustainable Development in Rural Areas

The statement confirms the role of planning authorities, which should support the retention of these local facilities and set out in development plans the criteria they will apply in considering applications that will result in the loss of vital villages.

#### 4.6 County Level – Suffolk Structure Plan

The Suffolk Structure Plan was adopted in September 2001. The Plan recognises that shopping, service and community facilities in villages reduce the need to travel and allow access for those without the use of a car. In recent years many Suffolk villages have seen the loss of facilities such as shops, post offices and public houses. While changes in social habits and travel patterns may mean that not all local facilities can survive in future, it is important to ensure that careful consideration is given to development proposals that would result in the complete loss of particular types of facility. In addition it is important to encourage the creation of new facilities where appropriate. This approach is consistent with guidance given in PPG 6 and reflects local concern in many parts of the county.

Community facilities include convenience shops, post offices, public houses and community halls.

**ECON 11:** Proposals for new community facilities in keeping with the character and scale of villages will be encouraged where there is no conflict with residential amenity or with policies for transport or protection of the environment.

Development that would result in the complete loss of a particular type of community facility from a village will not be acceptable unless it can be demonstrated that the facility cannot be made viable in the foreseeable future.'

#### 4.7 Local Level – Mid Suffolk Local Plan

The Mid Suffolk Local Plan that was adopted in September 1998 (prior to the new Structure Plan), therefore there was no provision made to safeguard these facilities. This has led to some difficulty in refusing proposals that result in the loss of community facilities, even when they are considered essential to the vitality of the village.

Policy S7 encourages the provision of new local shops in an effort to stimulate first time proposals and Policy S9, was originally drafted with the aim of facilitating the reopening of local shops. In this context, the Local Plan had insufficient policy support for the retention of services and recent applications have highlighted the need for such a policy change.

## 5. Policy Statements

5.1 In the absence of relevant policies in the Mid Suffolk Local Plan, the following policy statements are intended for immediate use, supplementing the Structure Plan Policy ECON 11, and will be included within Mid Suffolk Local Plan review

5.2 Mid Suffolk council supports retaining existing community facilities. Villages, which have been designated as CS3 under County Structure Plan guidelines will be particularly supported, as to maintain them as 'sustainable'.

### 5.3 Policy statement for shops/post offices

PLANNING PERMISSION WILL NOT BE GRANTED FOR CHANGE OF USE WHICH COULD CAUSE THE LOSS OF AN EXISTING GENERAL STORE/POST OFFICE WITHIN THE SETTLEMENT BOUNDARY OR WITHIN COMFORTABLE WALKING DISTANCE, UNLESS IT CAN BE DEMONSTRATED THAT:

- ALTERNATIVE FACILITIES ARE AVAILABLE IN THE SAME VILLAGE WHICH IT SERVES;  
OR
- THERE IS NO REASONABLE ECONOMIC PROSPECT OF THE USE BEING RETAINED OR RESURRECTED;  
OR
- THERE IS NO SIGNIFICANT SUPPORT FROM THE COMMUNITY FOR THE RETENTION OF THE SHOP/POST OFFICE

### 5.4 Policy statement for village pubs

THE CHANGE OF USE OF A VILLAGE PUBLIC HOUSE TO AN ALTERNATIVE USE WILL NOT BE PERMITTED UNLESS:

- AT LEAST ONE OTHER PUBLIC HOUSE EXISTS WITHIN THE SETTLEMENT BOUNDARY OR WITHIN EASY WALKING DISTANCE TO IT; AND
- IT CAN BE DEMONSTRATED BY THE APPLICANT THAT ALL REASONABLE EFFORTS HAVE BEEN MADE TO SELL OR LET (WITHOUT RESTRICTIVE COVENANT) THE PROPERTY AS A PUBLIC HOUSE, AND THAT IT IS NOT ECONOMICALLY VIABLE;  
AND
- THERE IS NO EVIDENCE OF SIGNIFICANT SUPPORT FROM THE COMMUNITY FOR THE RETENTION OF THE PUBLIC HOUSE.

IF PERMISSION IS GRANTED FOR CHANGE OF USE, PREFERENCE WILL BE GIVEN TO THE PREMISES REMAINING IN SOME FORM OF COMMUNITY OR EMPLOYMENT USE; AS LONG AS THERE ARE NO SIGNIFICANT TRAFFIC, AMENITY, ENVIRONMENTAL OR CONSERVATION PROBLEMS AS A RESULT.

THE COUNCIL WILL REQUIRE APPLICANTS TO PROVIDE  
INFORMATION ON THE FOLLOWING MATTERS TO ENABLE FULL  
EVALUATION OF THEIR PROPOSALS

6. Criteria on which to judge whether to resist change of use applications.

6.1 The evidence on which the District Council will determine relevant planning applications by reference to the Policy Statements in this Guidance is set out below:

Evidence which maybe of assistance in determining an application

- Alternative facilities are available in the same village.
- This criterion is effectively self-explanatory. In the case of shops, an alternative comparable/equivalent shop means one selling goods bought on a regular (often weekly) basis. It is expected to include a wide range of foodstuff as well as cleaning items, household hardware and stationary. The presence of other durable goods outlets do not affect the situation and cannot be counted or covered in the range identified.
- Whether garage shops or farm shops count, as convenience outlets serving a village will depend upon their location in relation to the settlement concerned, together with the nature and range of goods sold. These are matters, which must be assessed on a case-by-case basis.
- In the case of pubs, the 1987 Use Class order limits the extent, to which the planning system can prevent change of use between pubs and restaurants, whatever their similarities, they provide very different amenities to the local community. Few groups or societies can properly meet in restaurants; therefore a distinction should always be made.
- Within easy walking distance to the settlement boundary
- In the situation that the public house, shop or post office is outside the settlement boundary, a location that is within easy walking distance of the settlement boundary would be acceptable.
- The acceptable walking distance is 200-300 metres of the defined settlement boundary, as specified in PPG6: Town Centres and Retail development and draft PPS6: Planning for Town Centres.
- There must be a significant expression of public support and evidence illustrated, this should include:
  - Considerable support in the form of letters expressing local concern is strong evidence of support;

- The expressed concern of the Parish Council, which should be based on consultation with ‘the public’ to be valid.

Supplementary evidence in the following forms may be of assistance to determine an application:

- The impact a change of use would have on the attractiveness and vitality of the village, particularly if located within a Conservation Area.
  - The age profile of the parish, and the reliance of a particular group, such as senior citizens, on the continuation of the facility;
  - Public concern includes people who generally live in the community, actual or potential users, the old and the young.
  - Indications of the possibility of a co-operative buy-out, showing whether the local inhabitants are willing to invest in the future of the business.
  - The availability of a questionnaire, showing the proportion of the inhabitants using the facility.
  - In the case of a public house, the effect of closure on certain groups of the community using the location as a meeting place.
- If the building is listed, the impact of any alterations or the change-of-use itself.

Supplementary evidence in the following forms may be of assistance but not essential to determining the application:

Applications for change of use can sometimes not fully draw the attention of local residents and more important, the regular users of the pub from further afield to the potential loss of a valuable facility. Consultation with more consumer led groups maybe necessary.

A pamphlet produced by CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) in April 2000 entitled ‘Public House Viability Test’ (Appendix 2) provides additional guidance to assist Local Planning Authorities and others in considering the viability of public houses. It sets out issues such as population density, visitor potential, local competition, flexibility of the site and car parking as factors, which can affect the trade potential and viability of public houses.

A pamphlet produced by ViSRA (Village Retail Services Association) entitled Village Shops Viability Test questionnaire (Appendix 3) provides additional

guidance in assessing such cases where ‘no reasonable economic prospect of the service being retained or resurrected’.

- Evidence on the viability of the facility:  
All of the following points need to be addressed by the applicant:
  - The property is required to have been advertised for sale for a minimum of 12 months. Information should include selling agent’s literature, valuations and offers that have been received on the property.
  - Information on the annual accounts/turn over of the premises for the most recent trading year should be submitted to the Local Planning Authority. These should take the form as if submitted to HM Inland Revenue and not just a single line ‘the losses were...£\*\*\*’
  - Evidence needs to be submitted on the opening hours of the premises, and attempts at diversification to sell/provide a wider product range/let rooms.
  - Whether an application for financial assistance by an application to the Local Authority for rate relief has been made.
  - Whether an application to the Local Authority to accommodate multiple use of the premises has been made.
  
- Diversification
  - The public house owner has explored the availability of financial support through rate relief.
  
  - Explore how the pub could have an alternative use as well as the public house.

## 7.0 Case Law

- 7.1 Appeal decisions – Community facilities are gaining greater importance in planning policy statements, decisions made by Planning Inspectors on appeals form an important source of guidance. Four planning applications representative of recent cases that were determined on appeal by Planning Inspectors are highlighted below:

North Wiltshire District Council 06.04.01  
Address: The White Horse Inn, Station Road, Minety

### Change of use of a public house in a village to a dwelling

The applicants argued that the business was not viable and that in its last trading year it lost £40,000 despite the introduction of a range of measures to increase local support. This level of loss led to its closure in June 2000. The inspector observed that there was only one other pub in the village and this was used essentially for the sale of beer. It did not have family facilities and did not have the potential to offer an extensive range of food in contrast with the appeal premises. Consequently the loss of the principle public house in the

village would be detrimental to the well being of the community. In examining the viability of the business, it was noted that the appellants had appeared to pay more than the business was worth based upon its turnover and the asking price therefore did not realistically reflect its use as a public house. Letters from local residents suggested that the management of a public house had a direct bearing on profits. This led him to conclude that it would be viable if it was operated in a manner, which met local demands and acquired at a realistic valuation such that new occupiers would not face over-large set up cost.

West Dorset District Council 17.8.00  
Address: The Oak at Dewlish, Dewlish

#### Conversion of pub to dwelling

“In common with the trend nationally to broaden the appeal of rural public houses, the attraction of custom from beyond the immediate community may be necessary to sustain the facility. In this regard it seems to me that The Oak at Dewlish is not unusual, and in so far as it is patronised by residents it does fulfil a local need particularly as this is the only pub in the village, with the nearest alternatives being in other villages about three miles away.”

“The public house has been advertised for sale. While, on behalf of the appellant, it has been argued that questions of valuation are not directly relevant to viability, I consider that the marketing can be a useful indicator of potential interest in continuing with the public house if tested on a reasonable valuation.”

“Bearing in mind that other than the parish church, methodist chapel and church hall, The Oak is the only other venue for the village residents to socialise, I consider that its conversion to a dwelling would be a significant loss to the community of Dewlish and that its loss would be damaging to the character and vitality of this small village.”

South Somerset District Council 12.09.00  
Address: The Blue Boy Inn, Clapton, Crewkerne.

#### Conversion of pub to dwelling.

“There is clear evidence from local residents, both in writing and at the inquiry, of the level of use of the Blue Boy prior to the occupation by the appellants. This evidence is consistent with the account of the previous landlord. This evidence paints a picture of a well-used local public house, which catered for a range of activities. As such it would have been a focus for community life as well as serving a wider catchment area and passing/tourist trade on the Crewkerne to Lyme Regis road. The Blue Boy is the only public house in Clapton and the surrounding area, which contains a number of small hamlets and scattered dwellings. It is clear to me that the loss of the Blue Boy would be a significant loss of an important local service to the community.”

“In my view a period of just 11 months is not long enough to indicate that what had clearly been a viable business is no longer able to satisfy any reasonable test of viability now, or in the foreseeable future. I have no doubt that the business could still be viable given appropriate management.”

“Whilst I can well understand the appellants’ wishes to recover as much of their investment as possible, I would not be satisfied that there was no potential purchaser for the Blue Boy until it has been properly exposed to the open market at a price which reflects its current value.”

Congleton borough Council 26.11.98  
Address: Morecross, School Lane, Brereton Green.

#### Change of use of shop to dwelling

“It is clear that the former shop was an important local amenity in this village which has no other retail premises but which has a primary school, a church and a public house. It seems to me that national and emerging local policies recognise the importance of local shopping facilities not only to maintain local communities, but to help people without access to private transport and to reduce the need to travel by car.... The Council is right in seeking to protect the shopping use here and to allow the appeal would be contrary to national policy and emerging structure plan policy.

I conclude that the Council is correct in seeking to retain the premises for a shopping use and that it has not been demonstrated that a shopping use could not be re-established”.

#### Conclusion

- 8.0 Retaining the vitality of our rural communities poses a challenge for the planning system. Consideration needs to be given to the need for Development Plan policies to protect the loss of key facilities, together with concerted action in the forms of rate relief grants and advice.
- 8.1 Reversing the trend in declining services and facilities within rural areas is one of the greatest challenges for local planning authorities if sustainability issues are to be addressed. This supplementary planning guidance is a positive step towards this goal.
- 8.2 The policies suggested at 5.3 and 5.4 will be included in the Local Plan Review document but subject to Council approval, they will be adopted as interim planning policy for the purposes of development control.

## Contact List

Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA)  
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Bury St Edmunds  
IP33 3XQ

Mid Suffolk District Council  
131 Council Offices  
Needham Market  
Ipswich  
IP6 8DL

- i) Marie Edwards, Planning Policy Officer  
> Policy Advice 01449 727240
- ii) Joanne Rogers, Community Development Officer  
> Rate Relief Advice 01449 727365

The Countryside Agency  
East of England Region  
Ortona House  
110 Hills Road  
Cambridge  
CB2 1LQ  
Tel: 01223 354462

Village Retail Services Association (ViRSA)  
The Little Keep,  
Brideport Road,  
Dorchester  
Dorset  
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## **APPENDIX 1**

Mid Suffolk Grant Aid Guidance Notes  
Social and Economic Development  
June 2003-10-22  
Pg25

### **RATE RELIEF VITAL VILLAGE SERVICES**

Help is at hand for village shops, pubs and petrol stations, which are a vital part of village life. Keeping villages alive and thriving is a high priority for Mid Suffolk District Council, and so it is making rate relief available.

#### **WHICH BUSINESS CAN BENEFIT?**

The following Mid Suffolk businesses are eligible for 100% rate relief if they are in a rural area with a population of less than 3,000:

- The sole Post Office or village grocery store (or combined business) in the rural community provided it has a rateable value of up to £6,000.
- Any food shop in the rural community provided it has a rateable value of up to £6,000 (excluding shops whose main business is as a restaurant, tea room, takeaway or confectionery sales).
- The sole public house in the rural community provided it has a rateable value of up to £9,000.

The sole petrol filling station in the rural community provided it has a rateable value of up to £9,000. In addition, businesses recently set up on previously agricultural land or buildings may be eligible for rate relief. The business must have a rateable value of up to £6,000.

To qualify for relief, the property occupied by the business must have been in agricultural use for at least half the year before the commencement date of the scheme, which is 15 August 2001.

The Council may also give up to 100% relief to any other business in a rural community with a rateable value up to £12,000, if it is satisfied that the business is of benefit to the community. It will take into account the interests of its council taxpayers in making the decision.

**APPENDIX 2**

**APPENDIX 3**