

# North Hertfordshire District Council

## Building Conservation comments

**File Ref:** 23/00666/FP

**Date:** 09/05/2023

**Planning Officer:** MT

**Address:** Dixies Meadow, High Street, Ashwell, Hertfordshire SG7 5NS

**Subject:** Erection of 12 dwellings with associated hard and soft landscaping, creation of vehicular access, public open space and children's play area.

### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 In July last year, I gave pre-application advice under ref: 22/00896/PRE in relation to *'Residential development comprising of 12 dwellings including creation of vehicular access off of the High Street'* (below) and it can be seen that this is very similar to the scheme currently under consideration (further below).



- 1.2 In my summary, I stated that *"whilst the development of the site would still enable some narrow gaps through to the land beyond to be maintained, I consider that the development would erode the importance of this gap which contributes positively to the open nature and rural character of the Ashwell Conservation Area (ACA). This would lead to an uncharacteristic interruption of this gap and lead to a built form and suburbanisation that would be at odds*

with the open quality of the area. The development will also impair the setting and hence the significance of Dixies Farmhouse/Dixies. If a formal submission is received, I will be raising an **OBJECTION** on the basis that the scheme would fail to satisfy the provisions of Sections 66(1) & 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and as supported by the aims of Section 16 of the NPPF, Policy HE1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 - 2031 (Proposed Main Modifications November 2018) and further Proposed Modifications (May 2021)".

- 1.3 Since commenting last year the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 - 2031 was adopted on Tuesday 8 November 2022 and replaces the saved policies of the District Plan Second Review with Alterations.

## 2.0 Ashwell Conservation Area (ACA)

- 2.1 The front part of Dixies Meadow is located within the Ashwell Conservation Area (ACA) which is a Designated Heritage Asset.

- 2.2 At 3.2 of the submitted Heritage Impact Assessment by HCUK Group and dated March 2023 it states:

*".....The conservation area (Figures 8 and 9) is the subject of a character statement by North Herts Council, dated October 2019, which summarises the character of the conservation area.....".*

Further on, paragraphs 3.14 and 3.15 (which more or less repeat) fail to mention the Ashwell Conservation Area Character Appraisal and Management Plan dated June 2022 and prepared by Place Services on behalf of North Herts Council.

*3.14 Dixies meadow is not mentioned by name in the council's appraisal of the conservation area, and its spatial and historic relationship with Dixies farmhouse is not discussed. There is no suggestion that the view northward over the meadow, from High Street, is a significant key view, or that the view southward from the Rollys Lane and Gardiners Lane junction (Figure 15) is of any particular significance. The meadow is not identified by the council as a significant green space (Figure 9).*

*3.15 Ashwell Conservation Area a place of special heritage interest and significance, and High Street is the principal route through the village. Dixies farmhouse is intrinsically of special architectural and historic interest, and it has a longstanding connection with High Street and the surrounding land, including Dixies meadow. The meadow itself is not mentioned by name in the council's appraisal of the conservation area, and its spatial and historic relationship with Dixies farmhouse is not discussed. There is no suggestion that the view northward over the meadow, from High Street, is a significant key view, or that the view southward from the Rollys Lane and Gardiners Lane junction is of any particular significance. The meadow is not identified by the council as a significant green space.*

- 2.3 As stated on the NHC website 'Consultation on draft Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plans (CAAMPs) for Ashwell and Pilton has finished'. This is the most up-to-date appraisal of the ACA and is due to replace the October 2019 appraisal by Wood.
- 2.4 At page 56 of this consultation document under the subheading 'Views Toward the Conservation Area' it states:

*“The rural setting of the Conservation Area and the views it allows are important, positive elements that allow its historic special interest and character to be appreciated. From outside of the Conservation Area boundary, it is possible to appreciate the historic built form of the Ashwell settlement. Again, the church spire of St Mary’s is a prominent feature in the landscape. The view north from the High Street across Dixies Meadow [Figure 76] also provides important views across the Conservation Area’s setting, including views of the Church of St Mary...”*

2.5 The following is noted on page 57:

Ashwell Conservation Area  
Character Appraisal and Management Plan



### 3.8 The Setting of the Conservation Area

The setting of the Conservation Area is a contributor to its significance, allowing for the Conservation Area to be understood and appreciated. Setting is defined within the NPPF as:

*The surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Elements of a setting may make a positive or negative contribution to the significance of an asset, may affect the ability to appreciate that significance or may be neutral. (NPPF: Annex 2: Glossary).*

Along with its high-quality buildings of historic and architectural merit, the Ashwell Conservation Area derives significance from its historic settlement pattern. The agrarian landscape that surrounds the settlement of Ashwell has played a vital part in the evolution of this settlement pattern, the village's development and the economy of the community for many centuries. The quality of the surrounding rural landscape therefore makes an important contribution to the historic setting and significance of the Conservation Area.

There are many vantage points within the Conservation Area, where the open pastoral landscape of its setting can be viewed and experienced. The historic and rustic character of this setting is highly tangible and the enhancement it brings to the Conservation Area's significance, along with that of individual listed buildings and non-designated heritage assets is clear. The surrounding open landscape and fields have a direct historical and functional association with Ashwell village and the conservation area and the setting's surviving agrarian character, which is generally empty of modern development, greatly enhances its significance.

Revisions to the boundary of the Conservation Area have been undertaken



Figure 78: Dixies Meadow, north of the High Street, the undeveloped nature of this part of its setting enhances the Conservation Area



Figure 79: The view south from the open area of Elbrook and Cow Lane Meadows to the north of the Conservation area, taken from the public footpath 018.

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2.6 Whilst at page 58 it says:

*“Within Ashwell’s setting are areas that are currently and were historically empty of development. They have had agricultural uses in the past, historically supporting the community of Ashwell (such as Dixies Meadow, Elbrook Meadow and Cow Lane Meadow). In general, the village is surrounded by a landscape which has a pronounced agrarian character, which allows an appreciation of the significance of the Conservation Area. The fields and meadows to the north and west of Ashwell Bury, to the north and northeast of Mill Street, Elbrook Meadow and Cow Lane Meadow and also to Dixies Meadow on the north side of High Street would be particularly sensitive to unsympathetic development....”*

*I suggest that it is incorrect to suggest that ‘Dixies meadow is not mentioned by name in the council’s appraisal of the conservation area, and its spatial and historic relationship with Dixies farmhouse is not discussed’.*

### 3.0 The Local Plan and NPPF

- 3.1 The Local Plan is now adopted and Policy HE1 carries material weight. It should be noted that the settlement boundary for Ashwell was redrawn to exclude the application site.
- 3.2 The following are the most relevant paragraphs of the latest version of the NPPF:

197. In determining applications, local planning authorities should take account of:

- a) the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;
- b) the positive contribution that conservation of heritage assets can make to sustainable communities including their economic vitality; and
- c) the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

199. When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance.

200. Any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting), should require clear and convincing justification.....

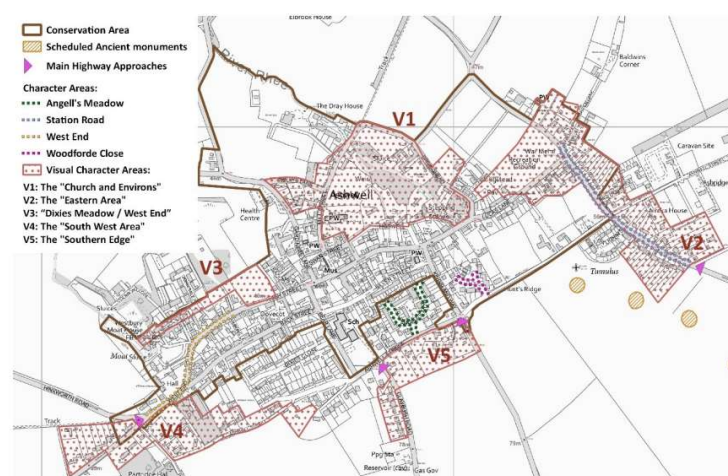
202. Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.

206. Local planning authorities should look for opportunities for new development within Conservation Areas and World Heritage Sites, and within the setting of heritage assets, to enhance or better reveal their significance. Proposals that preserve those elements of the setting that make a positive contribution to the asset (or which better reveal its significance) should be treated favourably.

#### 4.0 Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan (ANP)

- 4.1 The application site forms part of Visual Character Area 3 and Significant View 6 and is also identified as part of the village's Green Infrastructure.

##### Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan Regulation 16 Submission





POLICY ASH3 CHARACTER OF DEVELOPMENT

- A Development should conserve and enhance the Conservation Area, the Character Areas V1 to V5 as shown in Figure 7.1 , and key views and assets identified in the Conservation Area Character Statement 2019.
- B The design of new development should demonstrate how it has taken account of the local context and reflected the character and vernacular of the area, using architectural variety in form and materials, in order to avoid building design that is inappropriate to the ANP area. For example: clusters of large, similar houses (in excess of three bedrooms) are not a characteristic of the village.  
However, innovation in design will be supported where this demonstrably enhances the quality of the built form in a character area.
- C As appropriate to their scale, nature and location, development proposals should address the following criteria:
- (i) make a positive contribution to the visual impact of the village from the highway and footpath approaches; and
  - (ii) not have a significantly detrimental impact on the local views as set out in POLICY ASH9 Locally significant views.
- D Development proposals affecting designated and non-designated heritage assets (either directly or via a change in their settings), will be expected to respect, conserve and enhance the significance of those assets.

Conformity reference: NP Objectives: 8; Saved Plan 1996: 7; Emerging Local Plan: SP8, SP9, SP13; NPPF (2019): 125, 127

- 4.2 I note that para 70 of the NPPF says that: *“Neighbourhood planning groups should also give particular consideration to the opportunities for allocating small and medium-sized sites (of a size consistent with paragraph 69a) suitable for housing in their area”*. This has not been allocated as a suitable site in the ANP.
- 4.3 Policy ASH3 of the ANP says that clusters of large similar housing (in excess of 3 bedrooms) is not characteristic of Ashwell. Considering that the Planning Inspector stated in 1987 (see extracts further on in this report) that the site is suitable for very sheltered housing due to the site being level and close to the village centre and amenities, a **key question to raise is what is considered suitable housing for this site if indeed this site is appropriate for residential development at all?** In this respect, I am interested in understanding as to whether there is a need for elderly accommodation in this village considering what was reported in 1986/7.
- 4.4 As an aside, an article in The Planner Tuesday Newsletter dated 5 July 2022 states that *‘more than a third of local authorities in England are not prepared to provide suitable housing for the country’s ageing population, according to research’*. The NPPF acknowledges the importance of seniors housing.
- Lauren Harwood, head of seniors housing consultancy at Knight Frank, said:
- “This year’s survey is released against a backdrop of an increasingly difficult development environment; with nutrient and water neutrality issues, insufficient local government resources and local plan failures all making it harder than ever to bring forward new seniors housing schemes. Rising operational and build costs, as well as an increasingly competitive land market have added another layer of complexity”.*
- 4.5 The article goes on to say that *“As a result, there is currently still a huge supply and demand imbalance of senior housing in England, which is widening amidst a growing and ageing population. It is vital therefore that we increase the provision of seniors housing. With that in mind, it is crucial that developers understand where the opportunities are, and how they can access these to help meet the needs of our seniors.”*

- 4.6 I question whether single-storey 'almshouse' type development at the centre of the village perhaps introducing a village green type character as found in the neighbouring village of Newnham, could be a potential way forward but the caveat to this is that this should only be considered if the physical suitability of developing the site and the effect upon the character of the village can be convincingly justified.

Ref	Description of the view	Photograph
SV6	<p>To the North East and also to the North (not pictured) - from the High Street.</p> <p>St Mary's Church tower viewed across <b>Dixies</b> Meadow, the only green space, bordering High Street, and close to the village centre.</p> <p>It is the combination of a green space and a view of the church's position in the village directly visible from the main road which makes this piece of land sensitive to development.</p>	

- A The Plan identifies twenty one locally-significant views, described and mapped in Figures 6.9 and 6.10. As appropriate to their scale and nature, development proposals within the arcs of the various views as shown on Figure 7.10 should be designed in a way that safeguards the locally-significant view or views concerned.
- B Development proposals are required to ensure that they do not have a significantly detrimental impact on the locally significant views shown in Figure 7.9 and mapped in Figure 7.10 and the policy maps, Figure 16.1 and Figure 16.2
- C Development proposals are to comply with the findings and guidelines in Character Area Assessment 224 referred to in paras 7.44 to 7.47 of the ANP.



## 5.0 Previous planning history

- 5.1 In 1986, an outline application (design, external appearance and landscaping reserved) for erection of 30 elderly persons housing units was submitted under ref: 86/00448/1.
- 5.2 The following extracts from the case officer's delegated file note makes interesting reading, the content of which I fully endorse.

2. There is, in my view, a fundamental planning objection in principle to the development of this site which does not accord with current County or District Local Plan policies for new development in Ashwell, despite arguments advanced in a lengthy supporting document from the applicant's agents in which the need for this type of housing in the village is identified as the primary planning consideration. I cannot agree. Whilst I would not wish to dispute the contention that there is a requirement for more 'homes' for the elderly within Ashwell, the argument relating to needs in this case has to be set against the physical suitability of developing this site and the effect of its development upon the character of the village.
3. The land historically relates to Dixies Farm, one of the great listed farmsteads which dominates this portion of Ashwell High Street. Historically these farms related directly to landholdings which extended behind and in front of them, forming broad strips along the High Street. Few of the farmsteads are any longer in agricultural use and their landholdings have been progressively developed over the years as Ashwell has grown and expanded. The meadow at Dixies is the sole reminder of the Mediaeval pattern of agricultural landholding and as such as an historic interest.
4. Additionally, the meadow provides a visual link between the village and open agricultural land to the north and a 'breathing space' between the more compact development along this part of the High Street. It is not sufficient in my opinion to argue on the basis that because it is flat and relatively featureless in itself and that it is presently in a rather unkempt physical state, that it has no amenity value or contributes little to the character of Ashwell as an Outstanding Conservation Area. Its contribution lies in its very contrast with the built-up sites on either side and in its bringing a reminder of the agricultural basis of village life into the heart of this part of the village. In their supporting statement, the applicant's agents have argued that the visual amenity of the land in the same ownership, immediately to the north of the application site, would not be compromised. They are I feel, by that contention, admitting that the land beyond, which is all part of an area of landscape value, does have a visual value, which would be irretrievably lost to view from the village itself, if the land in question was to be developed.
5. The open nature of the application site also provides a view into the centre of the village from the land to the north in the vicinity of Ashwell Grange. The focal feature is, of course, the twin gables of Dixies Farmhouse itself, a Grade II statutory listed building and a valuable example of the Mediaeval Hall House. The development either side of the meadow provides a much less satisfactory feature in the views towards the village and in my opinion the visual contribution of the clear view through to the High Street and Dixies is an equally important consideration. The site in question was specifically excluded from the recommendations in the Rural Settlements Study, when after careful consideration it was felt that bearing in mind its important visual role in this part of the village its important visual role in this part of the village, any development of it would create an unacceptable impact on the character of the Outstanding Conservation Area. I suggest to you that to receive this proposal sympathetically would not only prejudice the conclusions of that study and undermine effective control of development elsewhere in the village and public confidence in the authority and its policies.

- 5.3 In particular, I note the following:

*"The meadow at Dixies is the sole reminder of the Medieval pattern of agricultural landholding and as such as an historic interest ...."*

*"The meadow provides a visual link between the village and open agricultural land to the north ...."*

*"Its contribution lies in its very contrast with the built-up sites on either side and in its bringing a reminder of the agricultural basis of village life into the heart of this part of the village ...."*

*"The open nature of the application site also provides a view into the centre of the village from the land to the north in the vicinity of Ashwell Grange ...."*

- 5.4 The application was refused and the subsequent appeal dismissed. The Inspector's Report (1 April 1987) also makes for interesting reading, the following being part of para 3:

for such a development as it would be capable of accommodating the 30 units necessary to make the development financially viable. Also the site is level and close to the village centre and amenities. The scheme would provide additional local employment and provide this type of elderly person development in an area which is deficient in such accommodation.

- 5.5 I have selected the following extracts for specific points made:

6. For the council it was accepted that there was a difference between the structure plan policy 15 and local plan policy 21. Due to this difference an interim statement agreed between the county council and the district council had the effect of applying policy 15 to the villages listed in policy 21 and to apply the criteria of policy 21 to proposals for development within those villages. It was considered that the development would have a detrimental effect upon the Conservation Area and Area of Great Landscape Value contrary to policies 3 and 8 of the local plan. The Rural Settlement Study has identified that in the case of Ashwell the elderly and young households are those categories of housing in greatest need. However any argument relating to household needs must also be set against the physical suitability of developing this site and the effect created upon the character of the village.

7. The site was said to provide a visual link between the village and the open agricultural land to the north. Its contribution to the Conservation Area is its contrast with the built-up areas on either side. If the land were built upon the views through to the agricultural land and countryside would be lost and that would change part of the character of this attractive village. As the appeal site is not a small gap in the road frontage it would not represent an infilling development in the terms of the local plan. To develop the appeal site would cause detriment to the character of the Conservation Area resulting in an irretrievable loss of an open area essential to the village. In the opinion of the council, the question of need for such accommodation should not outweigh the environmental considerations.

11. Ashwell Village was generally accepted by the parties to the inquiry as being worthy of its designation as an Outstanding Conservation Area. Its historical and architectural attributes and its general appearance are reasons for local people to rightly feel proud of their village. Clearly any new development must be sensitively designed and carefully positioned to avoid damage to the Conservation Area. Development Control Policy Note No. 7 states that in determining planning applications one should look at the Conservation Area as a whole and emphasis should be upon control rather than a prohibition of new development. There is evidence that new development in the village has been approached in this manner and has to a large degree been successful. However when looking at the Conservation Area generally, the village has progressed with a series of consolidations of development and leaving large areas of open space protruding into the main body of the village. This has in my opinion contributed to the high standard of appearance and spacious character. Although in some areas of the village such as Swan Street and Back Street, development both old and new has taken place in a compact manner, this tends to be balanced by open spaces such as the meadow adjoining the church, land close to the River Rhee, land in Springhead and the appeal site. I accept that at the present time the appeal site may appear unkempt, but it still provides a contrast between the built-up part of the village and the open agricultural land to the north. This spacious and open character is part of the attractiveness of Ashwell and to develop it in the manner proposed would in my view destroy the appearance and character of this part of the village and would not preserve or enhance the character of the Conservation Area as advised in Development Control Policy Note No. 7. Far from closing a discordant gap in the High Street frontage, the development would in my opinion cause the loss of a pleasant open appearance to the High Street.

- 5.6 Although I am not here to comment on the merits or otherwise of infilling, at para 7 above the Inspector took the view that *".....As the appeal site is not a small gap in the road frontage it would not represent an infilling development in the terms of the local plan....."*. Furthermore, the Planning Portal describes infill as *'The development of a relatively small gap between existing buildings'*. Due to the site width, is this technically an infill site or not? If the site were to be partially built upon would this then create a more readily identifiable infill site on the area that would remain open, thus, be presented as an infill site at a later date?

- 5.7 I note a recent appeal decision (30 July 2019) at The Lordship (C15 North from Winding Hill to New Road), Much Hadham and the decision by East Herts DC. The Inspector states:



*“While the Framework does not provide a definition of what constitutes an infill development, I find it appropriate to rely on the definition that it constitutes a small-scale development that fills a gap in an otherwise built-up frontage .... Given the separation distance and relationship with the adjacent dwellings, I consider that the open appeal site, with its relatively wide frontage, represents a definite visual break and cannot reasonably be considered as a limited infilling in this village location.”*

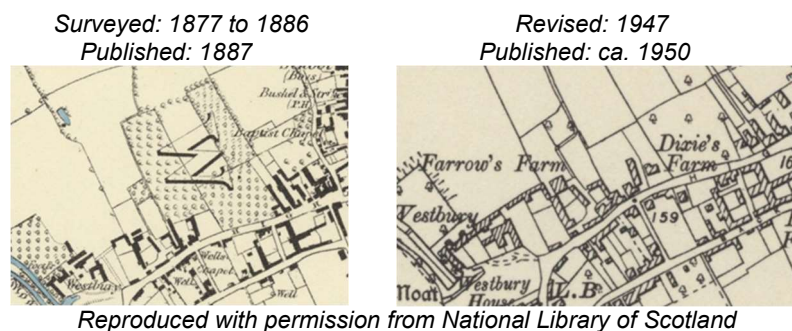
- 5.8 As stated previously, part of the site is within the ACA and the remainder of the site is adjacent to the ACA. The ACA is an historic asset of some importance. Paragraph 202 of the NPPF sets the following test for development which would have a ‘less than substantial’ impact on that asset:

*Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal, including securing its optimum viable use.*

- 5.9 We must be mindful of the dismissed appeal on this site and the Inspector’s conclusions that this space was important in the context of the ACA when determining that its development would be harmful thereto. While it is accepted that this appeal decision is many years old, the views expressed in relation to the value of the site in the context of its setting remain material in my view. Accordingly, as the case officer said in 2018, all we are entitled to do now is to reconsider the weight one may attribute to the benefits which might accrue today – benefits which may not have carried as much weight in the planning balance when the appeal was determined but which may be regarded as carrying more weight in light of the presumptions set out in contemporary policy and the NPPF.

## 6.0 The proposal

- 6.1 Historically, the application site has always remained open and the two OS extracts below help to illustrate this point:



- 6.2 Farrows Farm is one building group that is experienced when approaching the site from the west and serves to establish the agrarian character of the village. Whilst further to the east, no.110 High Street (grade II listed) is noted just before the site (building to left in central image below).



- 6.3 Although the tree to the right in the right-hand image above screens a significant part of the site when approaching from the west, it is the prospect of two-storey housing on the application site which gives rise to more significant concerns, particularly the impact upon long distance views of the church tower/spire in the images above.
- 6.4 Directly opposite the site is Dixies Farmhouse (grade II – see below) whilst Bacon's House (no.82) and 84 High Street (including attached outbuildings) – all grade II and no.74 (Digswell Manor – grade II) are located to the east of the site.



- 6.5 The application site provides a visual link between the village and the open agricultural land to the north and if the development were to proceed, then the views through to the open agricultural area beyond would be lost or severely curtailed. In my opinion, retaining key open areas such as the application site, Elbrook Meadow, the meadow/paddock next to the church on Mill Street together with The Springs make an important contribution to local character. There have been occasions such as the development at Whitby/Angels Farm where redeveloping a former brownfield site has resulted in a positive change to local character but this would not be the case here.
- 6.6 It is worth noting that at 3.7 of the submitted Heritage Impact Assessment by HCUK Group it states:
- “The setting of Dixies farmhouse includes the High Street and the open spaces on the north and south sides, including Dixies meadow. It is an altered setting, that has changed significantly in detail since the house was first built, but the essential visual and spatial relationships (to the High Street, to Dixies meadow and to the church tower) will have remained perceptible over the centuries. The listed building relies on this setting for part of its significance, but it is primarily of special interest as an example of the local vernacular, and as an archaeological resource in its own right, and as a physical historical link with the past.”*
- 6.7 In addition, although there is development in depth at Colbron Close/John Sale Close and at Bacons Yard, these developments are, to an extent, set behind more established properties such as Farrows Farm and Digswell Manor respectively (both grade II) so their impact upon the character of the area is not as pronounced as would be the case with the development site.
- 6.8 The following extracts from the HIA are of particularly relevance as they highlight an acceptance that the proposed development would occasion some harm and there is commentray on what that level of harm that would be.

*4.9 The application proposal will have an effect on Dixies meadow, albeit that part of the frontage of the meadow will be retained, closest to Dixies farmhouse and to 90 High Street (Dixies Cottage). Although there will be some visual permeability between the new houses, and along the access road, much of the view outward from High Street into the surrounding countryside will be removed by the development. To this extent, there will be harm to the character and appearance of the conservation area,*

*and to the significance of the conservation area. However, Dixies meadow is not identified as significant green space in the council's appraisal of the conservation area, and the view outward to the north is not identified as a significant key view.<sup>12</sup>*

*4.12 The main heritage effects will be on the setting of Dixies farmhouse, and on the character and appearance of Ashwell Conservation Area. On the basis of the council's own appraisal, and on the present assessment, both those effects will fall into the category of less than substantial harm to significance, within the meaning in paragraph 202 of the NPPF. As far as the extent of that harm will be concerned, <sup>12</sup> As noted in paragraph 2.12, the absence of any attempt to identify the open space, or the view, as important, must be read in light of the planning history of the application site.*

- 6.9 Although reduced in number, the current scheme raises similar issues to those raised under ref: 18/00856/PRE and indeed by the Inspector in 1987 including the introduction of another street encroaching into open countryside. Whilst the scheme may deliver some social and economic advantages, it is considered that this will not outweigh the less than substantial harm that would be occasioned to the ACA and to the setting (hence the significance) of other Designated Heritage Assets. The harm would, in my opinion, certainly be towards the upper end of the less than substantial harm continuum.

- 6.10 At 4.4 of the HIA it states:

*"In terms, of listed buildings, the main effect of the proposal will be on the setting of Dixies farmhouse, by way of a change within Dixies meadow. Visually, the impact will be set back from the High Street frontage, so the significant key view along the High Street identified by the council in the conservation area appraisal will only be peripherally affected. Moreover, the proposed development will not intervene in views of the listed building from High Street. In fact, there will be greater opportunity for people to see and appreciate the listed building from the open space on the north side of High Street, in front of the new houses – thereby better revealing the significance of the listed building, as encouraged in paragraph 206 of the NPPF. This cannot be done at present, because there is no public access to the application site."*

- 6.11 I suggest that the principal beneficiary of the view back towards Dixies Farmhouse would be the occupiers of Plot 2.
- 6.12 Street scene C-C looking south from the northern end of the site indicates a relatively dense built form and would be a view that looks back towards Dixies Farmhouse. It becomes quite apparent that any views towards this listed building (which currently can still be experienced within a semi agrarian context) would only be experienced from in front of Plots 1-3 and from the access road leading up towards Plots 5 & 6. The point being that the point made in the HIA regarding the greater opportunity for people to see and appreciate the listed building is of limited public benefit.



STREET SCENE C-C (PLOTS 9, 10 & 11)

- 6.13 In my opinion, it is the gable end of nos.8-11 Bacons Yard which has the most significant and least positive impact when currently experiencing Dixies Meadow from the west. The height and width of this gable end is a dominant feature in views towards the church.
- 6.14 Although some effort has been made to address the experience of viewing Dixies Meadow from the west and from directly in front of Dixies Farmhouse including repositoning the road access from directly opposite Dixies Farmhouse/Dixies to being located much further to the west, Plots 1-3 are two-storey and would sit just to the north of the sight line towards the parish church. In addition and as can be seen in the street view below, there would remain development in depth. Therefore, even though more space is provided directly opposite Dixies Farmhouse, there would be little by way of an outward appreciation of the countryside beyond the village but rather the HIA refers to what is considered to be a positive of an inward view towards Dixies Farmhouse only.



- 6.15 Furthermore, I am concerned that the layout (in particular the way the access road terminates), leaves the potential for development to extend even deeper on the site at some later date. This is not a site that should be considered in a similar way to that of Colbron Close/John Sale Close. In my opinion, plots 8-12 which sit beyond the rear curtilage of properties at Bacon's Yard, are particularly objectionable due to the perceived development in depth. I hasten to add that this is not to suggest that plots 1-7 are acceptable because the depth of development would be lessened.
- 6.16 An alternative view of the site is offered in the Google Maps image below (little altered since taken in Aug 2008) and which shows cows grazing in what is a rather pleasant bucolic scene. In the distance and enlarged for the purpose of highlighting the white gables of Dixies Farmhouse, the relationship between the village's built form and its countryside setting would be eroded. In this view it may also be said that the wider setting of the Church of St Mary the Virgin, would also be adversely affected if viewed from here.







- 6.17 Apart from the number, size, design and position of the house-types, it is hard-landscaping, parking bays and garages that would also figure significantly at the front of the site, contrary to the Green Infrastructure annotation in the ANP and adversely affecting SV6. This would also be contrary to paras 56 & 58 of the Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan for Ashwell prepared by Place Services.
- 6.18 As stated at pre-app, it is my opinion that it would take an exceptionally well-designed scheme of considerably fewer units and a higher percentage of affordable homes to effectively 'tip the balance' in favour of development outweighing heritage harm. Even then, I am unconvinced that the harm to the character and appearance of the ACA and to the setting (hence the significance) of Dixies Farmhouse/Dixies would be offset by public benefits. If a convincing justification can be made, then and only then, there may be a case for considering the provision of a small group of exceptionally well-detailed, single-storey 'almshouse' type development at the centre of the village considering that this site is 'on the level' and close to village services but I am not entirely convinced. This would relate to the earlier appeal decision. Consideration could then be given to a 'village green' layout (similar but not the same as that found in the neighbouring village of Newnham or as indicated in the image below).



- 6.19 However, this still brings me back to the case officer's comments in 2018 whereby the neutral test in para 202 may be satisfied "... *If a scheme were to be limited to the area contained by established development on either side, retain a meaningful open space, both aesthetically and functionally, and address the form and character of development in the High Street and beyond...*".
- 6.20 I do not necessarily assign to the above view and in fact I positively discourage the development of this site for the reasons set out above. However, should the case officer consider that the case made for resisting development has not been convincingly justified, then my comments above would at least have the potential to:
- a.) Ease the concerns regarding development in depth;

- b.) More fully retain/preserve an agrarian frontage setting directly opposite Dixies Farmhouse/Dixies;
- c.) Provide a small number of potential elderly non-assisted accommodation on a level site close to the heart of the village;
- d.) Introduce a built-form that could make a positive contribution to local character and would not have such a direct impact upon distant views of the church tower/spire when approaching from the west.

## 7.0 Recommendation

7.1 The NPPF advises that in determining applications, local planning authorities should take account of the desirability of new development making a **positive contribution** to local character and distinctiveness (para 197c) and that **great weight** should be given to the asset's conservation (para 199). Furthermore, at para 200 it is noted that any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting), should require **clear and convincing justification**.

7.2 The following is a summary of salient points:

- When commenting on an outline application in 1986 the case officer stated that *"the land historically relates to Dixies Farm, one of the great listed farmsteads which dominates this portion of Ashwell High Street"* and that *"the meadow at Dixies is the sole reminder of the Medieval pattern of agricultural landholding and as such as (sic) an historic interest"*,
- The above application was refused and the subsequent appeal dismissed. The Inspector's Report stated the following at para 11: *"the village has progressed with a series of consolidations of development and leaving large areas of open space protruding into the main body of the village. This has in my opinion contributed to the high standard of appearance and spacious character"*. Furthermore, the Inspector says that *"Far from closing a discordant gap in the High Street frontage, the development would in my opinion cause the loss of a pleasant open appearance to the High Street"*.
- Contrary to the submitted HIA saying that *"Dixies meadow is not mentioned by name in the council's appraisal of the conservation area, and its spatial and historic relationship with Dixies farmhouse is not discussed"*, pages 56-58 of the Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan for Ashwell prepared by Place Services and nearing adoption does provide commentary.
- Para 70 of the NPPF says that: *"Neighbourhood planning groups should also give particular consideration to the opportunities for allocating small and medium-sized sites (of a size consistent with paragraph 69a) suitable for housing in their area"*. The application site has not been allocated as a suitable site in the ANP.
- The Heritage Impact Assessment acknowledges that the application site forms part of the setting to Dixies Farmhouse thus forms part of its significance and that *"there will be harm to the character and appearance of the conservation area, and to the significance of the conservation area"*

(para 4.9). Furthermore, the HIA says *"The main heritage effects will be on the setting of Dixies farmhouse, and on the character and appearance of Ashwell Conservation Area. On the basis of the council's own appraisal, and on the present assessment, both those effects will fall into the category of less than substantial harm to significance"* (para 4.12).

- Although there is development in depth at Colbron Close/John Sale Close and at Bacons Yard, these developments are, to an extent, set behind more established properties such as Farrows Farm and Digswell Manor respectively (both grade II) so their impact upon the character of the area is not as pronounced as would be the case with the development site.

7.3 Although the dwelling types are generally considered to be well-designed, by reason of their number and two-storey height, these dwellings would erode the importance of this gap which contributes positively to the open nature and rural character of the ACA. This would lead to an uncharacteristic interruption of this gap and lead to a built form and suburbanisation that would be at odds with the open quality of the area. The development will also impair the setting and hence the significance of Dixies Farmhouse/Dixies.

7.4 I raise an **OBJECTION** on the basis that the scheme would fail to satisfy the provisions of Sections 66(1) & 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and as supported by the aims of Section 16 of the NPPF and Policy HE1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 - 2031.

#### **Suggested Reason for Refusal (Heritage Impact)**

*The NPPF advises that in determining applications, local planning authorities should take account of the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness (para 197c) and that great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (para 199). The application site is a greenfield site that historically relates to Dixies Farm and is a reminder of the medieval pattern of AN agricultural landholding and its contribution lies in its very contrast with the built-up sites on either side and in its bringing a reminder of the agricultural basis of village life into the heart of this part of the village. The open nature of the application site also provides a view into the centre of the village from the land to the north in the vicinity of Ashwell Grange. By reason of the number of units proposed, the road layout resulting in an incursion in depth into open countryside and together with the two-storey height of the development, the scheme will result in the irretrievable loss of this space, thus, failing to respect the open and positive contribution the site makes to the character and appearance of Ashwell Conservation Area. Furthermore, depending upon where viewed from, the development will harm the wider setting off the Church of St Mary the Virgin (grade I). Although Colbron Close and Bacons Yard are relatively recent developments north and off the High Street, the case for developing the application site is not convincingly justified. The scheme fails to satisfy the provisions of Sections 66(1) & 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and would also fail to satisfy the aims of Section 16 of the NPPF, Policy HE1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 – 2031 and Policies ASH1, ASH3 and ASH9 of the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan. The degree of harm would be towards the upper end of the less than substantial harm continuum and this would not be offset by public benefits.*

**Mark Simmons**  
**Senior Conservation Officer**