

**Mid Devon Local Plan consultation
Comment re small villages and hamlets,
11 March 2014**



We totally appreciate the very rural nature of Mid Devon, and the need to keep the nature of the small villages and hamlets that are dotted through the landscape.

However, we think that it is unhelpful to exclude any building at all in these places, because some of them need to grow slightly in order for them to maintain their community. The recent speech by Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal, patron of the English Rural Housing Association (February 2014) is of interest, not least because of the support it received from the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE). In essence she was promoting the idea that small villages would benefit from 4-6 houses built within their area, and that this was more attractive and sustainable for their communities than to build a large conglomeration of houses and thereby greatly change the nature of the place and the landscape. This seems very desirable, and we therefore would like to see some recognition of that approach in the plan. This plan needs to be fit for the future. We recognize that more houses are needed, but we need to think beyond just the obvious places to build, based on previous guidance. Our proposal also recognizes the great need for affordable housing in these very small villages (outside the 21 identified by MDDC). There are often more large houses and fewer small ones. In addition, it is very often the case that young people that have grown up in such a village have no chance of continuing to live near family and friends.

We understand that you define your 21 villages as having a school, a bus service and a shop. Our village, Cadeleigh, has a pub, a church, a school bus service that runs through – even street lighting. These things also need a community to coalesce around them. As a small village we own our pub, indeed nearly 50 people have invested. The church has a small congregation, but a good band of bellringers and an unusually good choir mean that the community can come together regularly. Add to this the recently refurbished Hall, again supported by the community both in the time spent to raise money and complete building tasks, as well as in the support that is given to the many events that take place there – from community plays to bingo, from Quiz nights to Ballroom dancing. In addition the WI meet at the Hall. They, too, need enough people to keep their group viable.

Indeed this is all about viability. Things do not remain static. A village that cannot grow may well decline instead. Here we use Cadeleigh simply as an example that we know well, but we feel sure the same can be said of many other small villages and hamlets in rural Mid Devon. In our village we know that we rely on a certain number of people to keep the activities mentioned running, and if the young people move out because they cannot afford to stay, then only the older people will remain in the existing houses, and the place gradually loses its heart and future – as well as its mixed demographic.

Mid Devon is actually well connected by trains and the motorway, so it is a little misleading to talk about remoteness for anywhere in Mid Devon. Our village does not have a regular bus – apart from the school buses – but there is a bus just over a mile away on the main A396 road between Tiverton and Exeter. The same is true for the school, which is in Bickleigh. More important for us, as a village community, is the existence of the church and of the pub and of the Parish Hall. These are the things that the villagers collect around, these are where we make our friends and entertain our families. These are more important in maintaining a community than a bus service, when realistically, most people own a car wherever they live these days. Even if you do live on a bus route, it doesn't always take you where you want to go.

So our argument is this: that if such small communities are not supported through the addition, as The Princess Royal suggests, of 4 – 6 houses, many of which may well need to be affordable housing, then they may well decline through the lack of a mixed community, or become ghettos of weekenders, because of the type, and cost, of housing. Also such people tend not to be full time community members. If this approach was permitted in our village, there are probably 4 derelict sites that could be identified around the village that would benefit from one or two good quality houses. This would only benefit the village's pub, church and hall, all places that can be walked to for community inclusion. Enough such villages would re-invigorate the countryside without creating any major change in its appearance, creating more sustainable small communities within it.

From the support that the idea received when The Princess Royal's speech was given, it would seem likely that the idea could be acceptable nationally. It would be excellent to see a forward thinking Local Plan that gave some recognition to the need of small communities to thrive, and not merely survive. A sustainable community is one that will include working aged people that will stay in the area.

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