

A Neighbourhood Plan for the Parishes of Michaelchurch Escley, Newton, St Margaret's, Turnastone and Vowchurch

Introduction

People in the five parishes, together with the Parish Council which serves them, welcome the opportunity to develop planning policies that support our communities and protect the area in which we live. The vision we have developed reflects two broad and mutually supportive aspirations. One is to protect and where possible enhance the local environment, since the parishes lie in an area of great natural beauty. A second is to enhance the lives of people in our communities by encouraging the provision of appropriate new housing for families and by encouraging the development of small businesses which increase the number of jobs available locally.

Our Vision

The work we have done has enabled us to develop and agree a view about how we want to see the area develop over the next few years and to agree some objectives for what we want to achieve.

Looking ahead to 2031, we want to see an area that preserves its beautiful and essentially rural character, whilst accommodating housing developments that enable more families to live in the area, largely, but not entirely, within the existing settlements.

Objective 1 – to meet local housing needs through the provision of additional and affordable homes to meet the needs of the community:

Objective 2 – to ensure that any new development is designed to complement the character of the existing settlements and the wider environment:

Objective 3 – by enabling more families to live in the area to support local businesses, particularly farming, and support local services, not least by maintaining local schools.

Background

Characteristics of the local area - (Insert map of the five parishes)

The five parish areas are largely rural with very small village centres. They lie in the Golden Valley, an area of considerable natural beauty. National and local policies recognise the need to protect local environments by limiting development in open countryside. This is not inconsistent with a small amount of development which permits the evolution of areas to meet the needs of local communities.

Other than in village centres, most people in the five parishes live in houses with a high degree of physical separation from their neighbours. This reflects the fact that historically the area supported mainly small family farms providing an occupation for most people.

The two villages which are the main focus of proportionate development in Herefordshire Council's Core Strategy, Michaelchurch Escley and Vowchurch, contain less than 15 homes each at present. Both have a church. Apart from a public house in Michaelchurch and a small garage workshop in Vowchurch, neither village centre has any amenities for local people. Lower Maes-coed consists of a small scattering of houses in the south of Newton parish with no local amenities.

National legislation

National legislation makes it possible for town and parish councils to lead the local development of plans for how an area should develop in the future. This legislation sets out the basis for how such work is to be done. It also makes it quite clear that any neighbourhood plans must be consistent with both national and local authority planning frameworks. In our case this is Herefordshire Council's Core Strategy and in particular the section which deals with the rural areas.

Herefordshire Council's Core Strategy

The Core Strategy sets out targets for new housing in the county as a whole, making a distinction between what is likely to be built in the city, in the major towns and in the rural areas.

For Herefordshire's rural areas, the Core Strategy identifies a number of settlements within several distinct geographical areas as being "the primary focus for (new) housing" which will meet housing needs and support the regeneration of the rural economy.

In the Golden Valley, the Core Strategy identifies two settlements in our parishes with the potential "for sensitive and appropriate housing growth." These settlements are Michaelchurch Escley and Vowchurch. New developments here should be "within or adjacent to the main built up areas" and support and enhance the character of these local settlements. Development will be permitted which is "proportionate to the size of the community and its needs.."

The Core Strategy also identifies Lower Maes-coed as a community in which some new housing development can take place. Here any such new housing should "respect the scale, form, layout, character and setting of the (existing) settlement" - recognising that such small settlements often do not have a village centre. New housing proposals will need to respect the existing settlement pattern and can meet identified local housing needs.

The Core Strategy is based on an expectation about the numbers of new homes that will be built in rural areas up to 2031. These are homes that will be built in parishes as a

whole, not only within the settlements. This growth will be made up of -

- the homes that are built in line with existing planning guidelines, including barn conversions;
- homes built in open countryside that meet planning criteria, such as buildings linked to businesses;
- development within the settlements which is covered by this plan.

The Core Strategy expectation is that about 28 homes will be built in our five parish areas by 2031. By way of comparison, over the period from 1996 to 2011, 34 new developments were completed. The majority of these developments were for single units, either replacements or conversions, that is, they were small scale and in keeping with the characteristics of the area.

In the period covered by the Core Strategy, that is, from 2011, one development has already taken place and a number of others have been put in train in the five parish areas, both replacements of existing homes and new developments.

The projected level of growth for the area within the Core Strategy up to 2031, is therefore comparable with that which occurred during the period from 1996 to 2011. That is, there are likely to be a significant number of conversions in the wider area. These will be complemented by the small scale developments which this neighbourhood plan supports within the settlement boundaries of Michaelchurch Escely and Vowchurch and in Lower Maes-coed. The scale of the developments that are needed to meet the Core Strategy objectives in the two villages and Lower Maes-coed is therefore quite modest.

The Basis for the Policies in this Plan

The Plan is based on the consultations we have had with local people at public meetings which everyone had an opportunity to attend and through a questionnaire in 2014 which everyone had an opportunity to complete. At all stages of the process of preparing the plan we have held public meetings and sought local involvement in our work. We have advertised meetings in local parish newsletters, put up posters and distributed information leaflets. Where we were aware of people, such as landowners, who have an interest in our parishes but did not live locally, we have written to them.

The results of consultations and a survey of residents and interested parties are as follows.

I Settlement Boundaries

The expectation of the Core Strategy is that the proportionate growth in housing in Michaelchurch Escley and Vowchurch will take place within a defined settlement boundary. We consulted on the boundaries that have been used over the years for the two settlements. The responses to the questionnaire confirmed that these should continue to be the boundaries within which new homes should be built.

The boundaries are shown on the maps that follow. [Maps to be added]

II Housing and businesses

Kind of housing – a large majority of people supported the building of modest sized houses, either 1 to 2 bedroom or 2 to 3 bedrooms in both villages.

This is broadly consistent with the local housing market assessment carried out on behalf of Herefordshire Council in 2013. The report on this work concludes that about two thirds of the market housing required in the Golden Valley should be three bedroom, with most of the rest being smaller homes of one or two bedrooms.¹

Type of homes – For Michaelchurch Escley 67% of people thought that new houses should be privately owned. At the same time 56% supported building affordable homes and 56% supported homes which are provided on the basis that they are partly rented and partly owned. For Vowchurch 65% thought that new houses should be privately owned. 47% supported building affordable homes and 59% supported homes that are partly rented and partly owned.

The local housing market assessment carried out on behalf of Herefordshire Council in 2013, referred to above, shows that in the Golden Valley over 75% of homes were privately owned, whilst over 10% were privately rented. Both these figures were higher than the average in the county, perhaps reflecting lower than average levels of social housing renting or ownership. In addition 70% of homes were detached, higher than the average in the county. There is also a high level of second home ownership, at 3% higher than the county average.

Style of homes – 94% of people supported building homes in keeping with existing buildings.

External lighting – 85% of respondents supported having clear limitations on the amount of external lighting in future developments.

Converting redundant buildings – 87% of people supported converting such buildings for local families to live in. 69% supported the further use of such buildings for workshops and small businesses, whilst 48% supported their use for holiday lets.

Small businesses – a majority of respondents supported the development of small businesses (73% workshops, 77% farms and 55% small manufacturing)

This has to be seen against a background in which over 30% of people in the Golden Valley worked at home, whilst more have to travel over 10 miles to get to work. Employment in the Golden Valley tends to be concentrated in the construction, health and social work, information and communications and property sectors.

¹ Herefordshire Local Market Housing Assessment 2012 Update, November 2013

Tourism – less than half of those responding (43%) supported the inclusion of tourist facilities in the neighbourhood plan (57% either opposed it or had no opinion). 56% of people thought that there should be bed and breakfast accommodation and 46% short term holiday lets in any new tourist facilities.

Identification of suitable sites for future developments

We have considered whether there would be a benefit in identifying specific sites for future developments. However, sites which might be suitable for development within the settlements are relatively small. This is a rather different situation from places where it is possible to designate a reasonably large and clearly demarcated area of land for future development. Our preference therefore is to identify policies which provide criteria against which planning applications whether within the village centres, in the small area of Lower Maes-coed or in open countryside should be assessed.

Conclusion

The outcome of our consultation is therefore quite consistent with the policies and expectations of the Core Strategy. In particular sensitive and proportionate development within the two identified settlements would be welcomed by local residents. There is a wish to see some development locally which meets housing needs, in particular those of families with children.

There is strong local support for new commercial developments. Proposals for such developments will therefore be encouraged whether involving the conversion of existing buildings or developments on existing businesses such as farms.

At the same time we have to recognise that our parishes lie within a broader area and will continue to depend on services and facilities in other parishes, in nearby towns and in Hereford itself. These services and facilities will in turn derive support from developments in our settlements.

It is on this basis that we have developed a set of policies for use in assessing future planning applications. These are set out below.

Policies for protecting and enhancing the local environmental

Policy 1 – To protect and enhance the local environment development proposals will have to demonstrate the following -

- **that their design and scale reflect the character of the local environment and existing buildings in a way which enhances the natural and historic beauty of the local area;**
- **that they protect and enhance wildlife sites, listed buildings and ancient monuments, and assets such as stone walls, wildlife sites and commons;**

- **that they protect and maintain native trees, hedgerows and other important vegetation and do not have an adverse impact on local brooks, streams and rivers.**

Justification – This reflects the vision set out above for preserving the beauty of the local environment and the three objectives we have for achieving that vision.

Policies for assessing planning applications for new homes

Policy 2 – Location of future developments in Michaelchurch Escley, Vowchurch and Lower Maes-coed.

New housing proposals will be permitted within the defined settlement boundaries for Michaelchurch Escley and Vowchurch and within the small settlement area of Lower Maes-coed. Proposals will be subject to the following criteria -

- **they should broadly be for no more than 1 to 3 homes on each site;**
- **they should be for in-fill on land around or between existing buildings;**
- **where possible they could be for the conversion of existing buildings such as stables, barns and workshops;**
- **schemes should blend in sensitively with the historic pattern of houses.**

Justification – This policy reflects the priority given in Herefordshire Council's Core Strategy for development in rural areas to take place within defined geographical areas. We have consulted on the settlement boundaries and those described here reflect the views of local people. It further reflects the wish to see the development of suitable market homes which are proportionate to the size of the existing community.

No flooding issues arise in relation to Michaelchurch Escley and Lower Maes-coed, whilst in Vowchurch the River Dore on the western settlement boundary does not pose a flood threat to the area within the boundary.

Policy 3 – Developments in open countryside

In line with the Core Strategy, new housing development in the countryside will only be permitted when it satisfies one or more of the following –

- **it is essential housing for agricultural, forestry or other local worker to live permanently at or near their place of work**
- **it accompanies and is necessary for the establishment of a new, or growth of an existing rural business**
- **it replaces an existing dwelling and is no larger than the dwelling to be replaced**
- **it re-uses an existing rural building**
- **is rural exception housing in accordance with Policy H2 (that is, it is a small affordable housing scheme to meet a clear local need)**

- **is of exceptional quality and innovative design**
- **is a site providing for the needs of travellers**

Justification – This policy reflects our overall objective which is to preserve the natural beauty of the local environment. This objective also underpins national and Herefordshire strategies (Core Strategy policy RA3) to restrict new housing in open countryside, even though new national planning guidelines make possible the development of redundant barns which meet defined criteria.

Policy 4 – Nature and scale of new homes

New housing proposals will be permitted for small family homes of two and three bedrooms. The accent should be on well designed, modest buildings which are affordable, especially for local people.

Justification – The views of local people about the kind of homes that are needed is completely consistent with the findings of the study carried out for Herefordshire Council referred to above. That is, primarily homes with up to 3 bedrooms, as well as some smaller homes being required.

Policy 5 – Housing design criteria

Housing proposals will be permitted for buildings which reflect the existing, particularly historic, local building styles in the use of materials such as stone, slate, wood and brick. Proposals will be subject to the following criteria -

- **modern suburban bungalows are not considered suitable for these locations;**
- **building proposals should be in keeping with the existing nature of the settlements, providing gardens, with tree screening and blending with the surrounding environment;**
- **proposals for buildings which offer a high degree of energy efficiency will be welcomed as long as they meet the above criteria.**

Justification – This reflects the objective we have to “ensure that any new development is designed to complement the character of the existing settlements and the wider environment”.

Policy 6 – Affordable housing

Proposals for new homes which are affordable for local people, whether as fully owned, partly owned or rented will be welcomed. This includes schemes which favour local people either as private owners or renters will also be encouraged.

Policy 7 – External lighting

Planning proposals that include external lighting will have to demonstrate that there

has been a proper assessment of the need for such lighting and that care has been taken to design appropriate lighting which minimises the impact on neighbours and reduces light pollution and reduces energy consumption.

Justification – External (and in some cases, internal) light installations can have an adverse impact on neighbours, the local environment and views of the night sky. At the same time well designed lighting can reduce the risk of crime and improve safety. Minimising light pollution is a high priority for local people and this plan.

Policies for other developments

Policy 8 – Applications for new commercial developments

Proposals for small businesses in the five parishes will be supported where they are consistent with the overall objective of preserving the existing rural character of the area.

Justification – Proposals for small businesses in the area will be supported in line with the policies in Herefordshire's Core Strategy for diversifying the rural economy (RA6) which supports proposals “where they are of an appropriate scale for their location, accessible by a choice of transport modes and of a form which protects and respects the environmental and landscape quality.” It has to be acknowledged that there is limited scope for commercial developments in the two villages and Lower Maes-coed, but some development is possible through the conversion of existing buildings within or close to the settlement boundaries, as well as more generally.

Policy 9 – Applications for new tourist developments

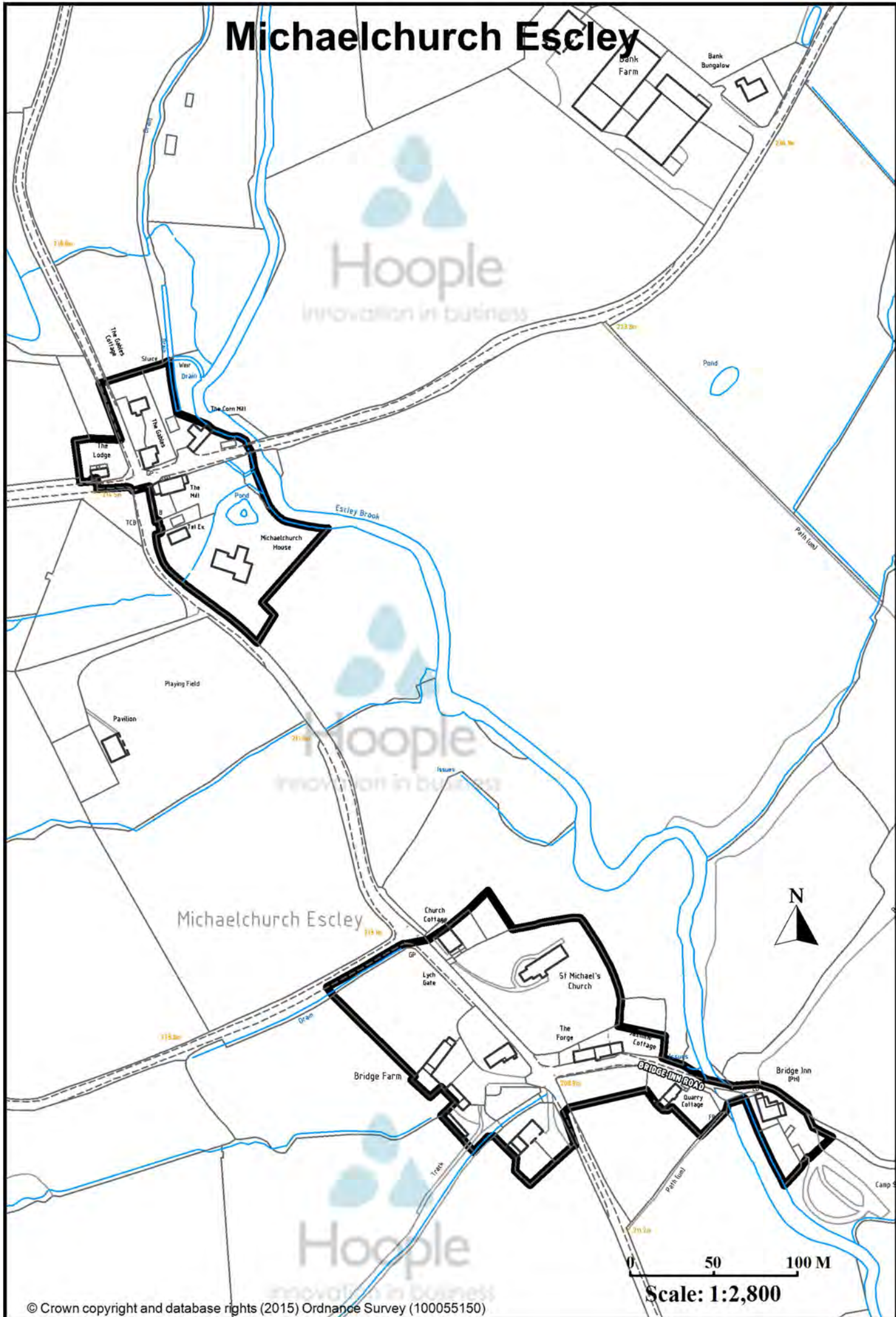
The development of new facilities in the wider area should be supported where this is appropriate and meets current planning guidelines.

Justification – The natural beauty of the area makes it attractive for visitors as a place to enjoy for its own sake and as a base for exploring the Brecon Beacons National Park and attractive local towns such as Hay on Wye. There is already a range of bed and breakfast accommodation and short term holiday lets, including a caravan site at Poston, in Vowchurch. There was qualified support in our survey for new tourist facilities in the area.

This would be consistent with the policies in Herefordshire's Core Strategy which “recognises the contribution that tourism makes to the Herefordshire economy and seeks to ensure that this continues and is enhanced through new developments which are of an appropriate scale, type and location.”

Any developments should meet the criteria set out in the policies above, that is, they should fit into the local environment, be consistent with existing building styles and minimise external lighting.

Michaelchurch Escley



Vowchurch

