

Belchamp Otten & Belchamp St Paul Local Design Code Draft

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The Purpose of the Local Design Code

This Local Design Code (LDC) has been prepared by the Parishes of Belchamp Otten and Belchamp St Paul to define the distinctive local character, cherished features, and community views and desires for managing development across the area. It represents the views of the residents and was produced via a consultation process detailed in Section 6: This included a survey distributed to all residents of which 25% responded (121 adults and 12 under 18s).

Geographically, this LDC covers the villages of Belchamp Otten and Belchamp St Paul, the smaller hamlets of Knowl Green and Hickford Hill, as well as any outlying settlements or properties located within the parish boundaries (LDC area).

Serving as a material planning consideration in the determination of planning applications by Braintree District Council, this document is designed to complement and interpret the overarching policies of the Braintree District Local Plan (LPP 2022) and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2024) by providing local, detailed design guidance.

This document has been produced in accordance with the principles of the NPPF (Chapter 12,

Achieving well-designed places), which states that planning should "foster well-designed, beautiful and safe places" and "take local circumstances into account, to reflect the character, needs and opportunities of each area." It also draws its principles from the Essex Design Guide (2005/2018), Braintree District Council's emerging Design Code, and the Essex Historic Landscape Characterisation (2011). This statement does not seek to prevent change, but to manage it.

As one resident summarised, we should aim to:

"...take a balanced view that villages have evolved over time to create their unique character and that this process should be allowed to continue with good design being the core principle." (Parish Survey Respondent, 2024)

Introduction

Location

Located in the rural north of Essex, the parishes lay within the Braintree Council District and are designated as a Third Tier Village in the settlement hierarchy. The settlement pattern is characteristically dispersed, comprising two distinct village centres of Belchamp Otten and Belchamp St Paul, and several smaller, separate hamlets and greens, all connected by a network of minor rural roads. The LDC area covers approximately 1,600 hectares (4,000 acres) with the River Stour forming the historic northern boundary, connecting the landscape to the Stour Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The neighbouring towns of Clare and Sudbury in Suffolk provide the nearest centres for retail, medical and employment services.

As per the 2021 census, the parish of Belchamp Otten has 168 residents across 71 households while the parish of Belchamp St Paul has 371 residents across 161 households. Over the last 100 years, the population of Belchamp Otten initially fell but has now since recovered, whilst Belchamp St Paul has seen a slow and steady decline in residents over the last 200 years.

Context and Alignment

This LDC is a community-led planning document that provides the local interpretation and evidence base for the overarching planning policy hierarchy. This section confirms the document's legal and policy grounding:

- **Statutory Basis:** This LDC is a **material planning consideration** for Braintree District Council.
- **Alignment:** It ensures local policies implement the national mandate and interpret the broad requirements of the **Braintree District Local Plan (LPP 2022)**, particularly for

Open Countryside protection and landscape character (LPP 67).

This document is aligned with and interprets the following planning documents:

- **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2024):** Specifically Chapter 12 (Achieving well-designed places) and Chapter 15 (Conserving and enhancing the natural environment).
- **Braintree District Local Plan (LPP 2022):** Including, but not limited to, LPP 39 (Infill in Hamlets), LPP 47 (Built Environment), and LPP 67 (Landscape Character).
- **Essex Design Guide (2005/2018):** Providing specific standards for the quality and context of new development.

Historic Landscape

The area's character is rooted in its deep and varied history, which established the "Ancient Landscape" character that the community seeks to protect today.

The name 'Belchamp' may be derived from Old English 'Bylcham' meaning 'beamed roof', the Norman French 'Belle Champs' meaning 'beautiful fields', or, as The Stour Valley Heritage Compendia suggests, an Old English name meaning 'the settlement on the baulk or ridge'. Historically recognized as fragments of an Anglo-Saxon agricultural estate, the area was later divided into the current pattern of medieval parishes situated on the Belchamp Farming Plateau. The Historic Landscape Characterisation validates that the rural settlement pattern is

"historically very dispersed, comprising church/hall complexes, manors, farms... and small hamlets strung out along an extensive network of linear and triangular greens" (Essex HLC Report, Braintree District, p.7).

Across the area there are currently 74 listed churches, farmhouses, cottages, barns and buildings that date all the way back to circa 1000. The LDC area also includes the "lost" village of Belchamp Albright, aka Belchamp St Ethelbert, which was formally "incorporated into Ovington in 1473" (Stour Valley Heritage Compendia, p.42). Belchamp St Paul was given to St Paul's Cathedral in AD 939 and is noted as forming a "neat church-and-hall complex" of likely Late Saxon date. The landscape was further shaped by 19th-century parliamentary enclosure, recorded in Belchamp Otten in 1840.

The Stour Valley Heritage Compendia defines this area as a classic "Ancient landscape,": "The land of hamlets, of medieval farms in the hollows of hills... of immense mileages of quiet minor roads, hollow-ways, and intricate footpaths; of irregularly shaped groves and thick hedges..." The close proximity to Clare and The River Stour, which lies within the Stour Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), reinforces the need to preserve its sensitive, high-quality landscape.

This historic context is the foundation of the community's desire to maintain a dispersed, low-density settlement pattern.

Character Assessments

The LDC area is defined by a series of distinct character areas: Belchamp Otten, Belchamp St Paul, Knowl Green and Hickford Hill. Each village profile integrates physical character, key properties and specific community mandates identified in the 2024 Parish Survey. Any buildings mentioned that are followed by an asterisk denotes their listed status.

Belchamp Otten

This area is characterized by a largely linear village structure with a strong mix of historical and modern styles. Key features include St Ethelbert's Church*, originally believed to have been built in the 12th century and added to across the following 6 centuries, which is surrounded by a cluster of prominent large period properties including The Old Rectory* and Otten Hall*. Cole's Barns, located next to the 16th-century Cole's Farmhouse*, are successful examples of converted agricultural heritage. This historic part of the village features predominantly listed buildings and is covered by a large Conservation Area which in turn protects a vast number of trees. Heading outside of this area towards The Red Lion public house and smaller period cottages such as Endway* and Thrums*, we find the newer portion of the village featuring modern in-fill houses and bungalows in varying sizes. Development is mostly constrained to one side of The Street, with properties generally set back from the road. Materials are varied, including thatch, slate, and clay pitched roofs, with walls predominantly made of red brick and render. The area mainly includes large, detached properties on spacious plots, maintaining a low-density feel. All properties have extensive views of the surrounding arable countryside from at least one side.

Belchamp Otten has expressed a significant need for infrastructure improvement, directly informing LDC 8 (Drainage). The 2024 Survey showed significant dissatisfaction with 67% of Belchamp Otten residents disagreeing that surface water drainage was adequate, mandating proactive planning solutions for any new development.

Belchamp St Paul

Belchamp St Paul is the LDC area's primary community hub. The settlement is centered around the historic Cole Green, part of a large Conservation Area, defined by thatched properties such as The Half Moon* public house with roads radiating out towards Clare, Sudbury and Great Yeldham. The central area maintains open views across Cole Green, an important feature. The Community House, which also looks out towards the green, was built in the 1960's, but in a style of an earlier time, to serve the surrounding villages. Housing is highly varied, including grade II listed timber-framed cottages and red brick Victorian houses blending with later modern detached and semi-detached houses. Most properties are set back with boundary hedges, railings or low brick walls, and have private driveways. Towards Gages Road, dwellings are constrained to one side of the road with modern 20th-century bungalows forming in-fill development between existing period cottages. Gage's House*, a historic grade II listed building dating back to the 15th century, sits between Belchamp St Paul and Knowl Green. The estate features 7 protected trees, likely due to its significant age and historic connection to the

distinguished Belchamp Estate. The village Playing Field is situated off Cole Green behind The Savilles, with properties backing on to it along two sides and paddocks bordering another. The village green continues a part way down Vicarage Road, and is overlooked by St Paul's Primary School. From here the village again takes on a more linear structure as it heads towards Otten Road and Church Street, where a mix of detached and semi-detached properties feature a similar mix of materials. Unlike the dispersed farmhouses set back in large plots, these properties front directly onto the road.

While the dominant settlement pattern in the village is linear and fronts the road, a few rare pockets of 20th and 21st century backfill development can be found: a small cluster of large detached homes built behind Lymburners* (C17); a small cluster of cottages behind Little Amos Cottage (built on the original site of Amos' bus station); and two large detached properties, currently being built at the rear of a small development of six, at Michael's Yard which was also an existing automotive-based commercial site.

Located about 1 mile from the village centre, St Andrew's Church*, a 15th century rebuild of a site dating back to the Late Saxon era, is a prominent feature at the top of Church Street hill with views across the surrounding farm land. Paul's Hall*, an early 16th century timber-framed building, sits behind the church and provides a direct link to the area's deep medieval roots. To the south-west of the hall lies a barn which was constructed circa 1000 and later partially rebuilt in the Norman era. Beyond the centre of the villages, farmhouses and cottages are scattered across the countryside. The village is surrounded by open farmland with its higher than average elevation resulting in extensive countryside views in all directions.

Belchamp St Paul confirms its role as the social heart, underpinned by the high and active usage of protected assets (LDC 4).

Knowl Green

Knowl Green is located approximately 1 mile to the south-east of the main village centre of Belchamp St Paul. This hamlet is centered around its former triangular Village Green, which has long been enclosed with mature hedging and farmed as pasture. Key, dominant properties include Hole Farmhouse* with its extensive agricultural outbuildings, and The Cherry Tree*, a 17th century former public house. The settlement features a loose, non-linear, informal layout with properties ranging from thatched and flint-walled cottages to Victorian red brick and 20th-Century bungalows, mostly set behind mature indigenous hedges. There is a natural speed restriction in the form of a narrow bridge, crossing the Belchamp Brook, which is only wide enough for one vehicle and is followed by restricted sight lines. Views are primarily into the settlement, but the hamlet is surrounded by arable and grazing land with some large areas of established woodland visible in the distance. Although there is no conservation area here, a significant TPO area protects trees surrounding Old Pastures* beyond the edge of Belchamp Brook.

This area is characterized by the largest infrastructure deficit in the parish. Geographically, Knowl Green sits on a steep hill with The Cherry Tree* located at the lowest point, making it highly susceptible to run-off, exacerbating drainage issues. The survey showed that 60% (the

highest in the parish) of Knowl Green residents believe that mains drainage/sewerage is inadequate, while a significant majority of 67% believe that surface water drainage is inadequate. The topographical and survey evidence mandates that all future development provide exceptional, self-contained solutions to prevent exacerbating existing issues.

Hickford Hill

This geographically distinct, linear settlement is built exclusively up the steep southern slope of the Stour River Valley. It is located nearly 3 miles north-west of Belchamp St Paul and is functionally closer to Clare, Suffolk (approx. 1–1.5 miles). Key properties include Lindsells Farmhouse, the 16th century Claredown Farmhouse* and 18th century Shearing Place*. Claredown Farmhouse* is a predominant farmhouse set back from the road towards the river Stour and features 3 listed barns and outbuildings dating from C15 to C19. The siting of farmhouses and cottages built on raised banks alongside the road is dictated by the area's unique topography. A notable visual characteristic is that almost half of the properties are painted the same shade of pink. Besides this, the dominant materials feature red brick and flint, render, and clay or slate tiles. Boundaries are marked by mature indigenous hedging, meaning most properties are hidden behind vegetation with only sporadic sections of rooflines visible from a distance. Some properties have steep driveways but many do not have off-road parking meaning they have to park their vehicles along the road or in unofficial dirt laybys. The unique position and character creates both the iconic enclosed 'tree tunnel' road view and the open, dramatic views across the Stour Valley towards Clare.

Due to the nature of the landscape, many properties do not have off-road private parking, therefore the specific physical constraints here mandate strict protection, informing LDC 8 (Parking). 100% of Hickford Hill respondents agreed that 'parking on grass verges has a negative effect,' requiring stringent off-street parking and verge protection.

Agricultural and Commercial Landscape

Agriculture has been integral to the development and shaping of the villages since their origins as an Anglo-Saxon agricultural estate. Farming remains the predominant commercial endeavour and economic driver, influencing the economic infrastructure needs of the community (LDC 1, LDC 10). The landscape character is visually defined by agricultural structures, including traditional timber-framed barns, Victorian brick outbuildings, and modern corrugated steel farm buildings. These structures are scattered throughout the LDC area, often found on the immediate outskirts, creating a 'soft edge' between the settlements and the open countryside. These agricultural structures are key heritage assets, and their preservation and sensitive re-use are the evidence base for LDC 10 (Commercial Uses), which supports their conversion to sustain the rural economy.

Infrastructure and Services

Roads, Byways, Footpaths and Bridleways

The roads across the LDC area are predominantly narrow single-track country lanes with soft verges, and extremely limited areas of hard kerbing and pavements. This hard kerbing is only featured in the main village centres and pavements are limited to an area outside the village School along Vicarage road. Many sections of the roads are defined by high hedgerows and occasionally feature "tree tunnel" aspects.

Long Lane in Belchamp St Paul is a historic byway used by pedestrians, cyclists, and horse riders. The lane is recognised as an ancient drovers' road, a historic route used for moving livestock.

The extensive Public Footpath and Bridleway Network is a highly valued community and economic asset. This network is recognised as a tangible heritage asset, crisscrossed by major historic trails such as the Magna Carta Walk and the Wool Towns Walk, the local, intricate footpaths are centuries-old heritage integral to the area's character.

Streetscape

Positive Rural Assets: The streetscape contains specific, functional, and historic features that contribute positively to the villages' character. These assets must be retained and maintained to support community identity. They include:

- Historic Features: Grade II listed cast iron water pump on The Street in Belchamp Otten as well as a second water pump located on the green in Belchamp St Paul. Traditional red telephone boxes, that have since been repurposed, are found in both Belchamp Otten and Belchamp St Paul, with the latter being a listed type K6, designed in 1935.
- Community Features: Benches, locally provided village signs, post boxes and public and dog waste bins.
- Wayfinding: Traditional directional highway signs and footpath signs, which blend with the rural aesthetic.

Rural Minimalism: Aside from these specific historic and functional items, the public realm is defined by a lack of urban clutter. There is an absence of street lighting, hard kerbing, excessive road markings, or plastic signage. This minimalism is key to maintaining the LDC area's tranquil, rural character (LDC 1).

The 2024 Survey confirms that residents value these specific existing assets but expressed strong opposition to introducing new 'urban' features like street lighting (70% disagree) or hard pavements (56% disagree). The strategy is therefore to retain and maintain existing assets while aggressively resisting non-essential urban furniture, providing a clear evidence base for LDC 8 (Parking, Drainage, and Flood Risk).

Core Facilities and Services

Belchamp St Paul functions as the primary community hub for the LDC area, hosting Belchamp St. Paul's Primary School, The Community House (Village Hall), the Playing Field, The Half Moon public house, a Public Access Defibrillator located at the Community House, and a repurposed telephone box which serves as a Book Exchange. Belchamp Otten features The Red Lion public house and a second Public Access Defibrillator which is located in a repurposed telephone box. Churches are present, and integral, in both parishes.

Core services including mains electricity, broadband/fibre connections, mobile and digital TV reception and refuse and recycling collections are provided across the LDC area. The DaRT service is currently the only form of public transport available in the area. This bookable service operates 4 times a day in each direction between Braintree and Sudbury. 60% of people surveyed felt that public transport was inadequate.

The community has expressed an interest in the return of a village shop and/or café, which is currently absent along with any medical facilities.

In regards to infrastructure, there is a lack of mains gas across the entire LDC area. Mains foul and surface water sewerage is also absent beyond the village centre of Belchamp St Paul, with the majority of the LDC area relying on private septic tanks and treatment plants. When surveyed, Knowl Green (60%) and Belchamp Otten (42%) residents showed the highest dissatisfaction with mains drainage/sewage. 51% of the community also believed surface water drainage to be inadequate (Parish Survey, 2024).

Local Design Code Principles and Policies

The following policies interpret the community mandate and the strategic planning framework. Compliance with these policies is required for all new development, extensions, or alterations within the Parish.

LDC 1 Protection of Landscape, Views, and Tranquility

LDC 1.1 Development proposals must protect and maintain the tranquil, rural character of the LDC area, its open countryside views, and its distinct skylines.

This policy is supported by the community's core value of retaining the open character of the area, evidenced by 83% agreement that planning must 'retain current open spaces and countryside views' (Parish Survey, 2024). Tranquility and a peaceful setting were also universally cited as core values.

LDC 1.2 Proposals must minimize light pollution and control noise pollution to protect the amenity and dark skies of the rural environment.

This aligns with the community's desire to preserve the rural atmosphere (LPP 77, BDC External Artificial Lighting SPD).

LDC 1.3 Proposals for new vertical structures (e.g., telecommunications masts, large turbines) that impact the skyline or views will require exceptional and careful justification to demonstrate that the need for the structure outweighs the harm to the landscape and the community's visual amenity.

This cautious approach is necessary to navigate the community's conflicting desires: 38% of respondents who value 'open spaces' also disagree with the need for masts, proving a highly sensitive approach is mandated over simple, top-down infrastructure installation (Parish Survey, 2024).

Reference: NPPF (2024) Ch. 15 (Conserving and enhancing the natural environment); LPP 67 (Landscape Character); LPP 77 (External Lighting); BDC External Artificial Lighting SPD (2009); Essex Design Guide (2005) (Rural Character).

LDC 2 Footpaths and Infrastructure Enhancement

LDC 2.1 The existing Public Footpath and Bridleway Network must be protected, maintained, and clearly signposted. New development must not compromise access or the visual amenity of these routes.

Footpaths are a universal, all-ages mandate: 100% of Youth Survey respondents use them and 96% of Adult respondents agree on their importance. Usage is at or near 100% for most working-age groups, proving footpaths are essential economic infrastructure for a modern, flexible-working community.

Historical Significance The PRow network, including trails named for the Magna Carta Walk and Wool Towns Walk, represents tangible, centuries-old heritage. Protection is mandated not only by overwhelming survey support but by the preservation of these historic routes that define the LDC area's "Ancient landscape" character.

LDC 2.2 Policy advocates for demonstrable and timely improvements to essential services, including regular drain/ditch clearing, road maintenance, and the enhancement of broadband and mobile coverage.

This addresses the 'Infrastructure Deficit', where 26% are dissatisfied with broadband and 51% are dissatisfied with surface water drainage. This policy ensures development works towards remedying known deficits (NPPF Ch. 8, LPP 42, LPP 67).

Reference: NPPF (2024) Ch. 8 (Promoting healthy and safe communities); LPP 42 (Sustainable Transport); LPP 67 (Landscape Features); ECC Developers' Guide to Infrastructure Contributions.

LDC 3 Tree and Vegetation Protection

LDC 3.1 All native trees, ancient woodlands, and hedgerows are non-negotiable assets and must be preserved and protected wherever practicable. New planting should utilise local, indigenous species.

This is a universal, non-negotiable mandate across the entire community, evidenced by 95% agreement on the importance of retaining and upkeeping hedgerows and verges and 90% agreement that trees should be preserved.

These features are the defining elements of the LDC area's "Ancient landscape" and "intricate footpaths," and their protection is essential to maintaining the character that the community values (LPP 67).

LDC 3.2 New property boundaries visible from the road should utilize native/agricultural hedging, planting, or low brick/flint walls to maintain rural character and sense of enclosure. High or close-boarded fencing is strongly discouraged.

Reference: NPPF (2024) Ch. 15 (Conserving and enhancing the natural environment); LPP 65 (Tree Protection); LPP 67 (Landscape Features).

LDC 4 Community Facility Safeguarding

LDC 4.1 All core community facilities are protected from loss or change of use. Protected assets include: The Half Moon and The Red Lion public houses, The Community House, St. Paul's Primary School, the Churches, and the Playing Field.

These assets are statistically proven to be essential: Village Pub/s (96%), Community House (88%), Playing Field (78%). Protection is warranted even by passive support, as 5 respondents rated the pub 'important' while 'never' using it.

LDC 4.2 Policy will actively support local initiatives for new facilities identified in the survey, such as a local shop/café, bike park, or football facilities, provided the development adheres to all other design policies in this code.

The protection of the Community House is essential for integration: new residents (<5 years) are its highest users (85%), proving its role in integrating new community members. The Playing Field is a key asset for young families, with the 25–44 age group showing the highest usage (84%). This policy safeguards the mechanisms that build and sustain the community (NPPF Ch. 8, LPP 61).

Reference: NPPF (2024) Ch. 8 (Promoting healthy and safe communities); LPP 61 (Local Community Services); BDC Open Space SPD (2009).

LDC 5 Village Separation and Envelope

LDC 5.1 The visual, physical, and functional separation between the main village centres (Belchamp St Paul, Belchamp Otten) and all hamlets/greens (Knowl Green, Hickford Hill) must be strictly maintained.

This is the most fundamental policy, supported by an overwhelming 60% majority opposition to extending the Village Envelope and 79% agreement that planning must maintain separation between settlement areas.

LDC 5.2 New development must not extend beyond the established Village Envelope and must be limited to sympathetic infill within the existing built form, respecting the low density, loose, and scattered settlement pattern of the surrounding area.

The opposition to envelope extension is strongest among newer residents (<5 years) at 63% disagreement, proving protection is a core value for those who recently chose the area for its existing character. The policy protects the historic, "dispersed" settlement pattern of an "Ancient landscape" (LPP 39, LPP 67).

Reference: NPPF (2024) Ch. 12 (Achieving well-designed places); LPP 39 (Infill in Hamlets); LPP 67 (Landscape Character); BDC Design Code (principles of local character).

LDC 6 New Dwellings: Density, Scale, and Access

LDC 6.1 New housing development is limited to sympathetic infill that respects the low density and loose pattern of its context. Backfill development (behind the existing building line) is not supported.

This respects the clear mandate for low-density infill (LDC 5) and ensures new dwellings maintain the established open character and building lines of the LDC area (Essex Design Guide).

LDC 6.2 Development proposals must prioritize the provision of smaller dwellings, specifically 1–2 and 2–3 bedroom family homes, which meet an identified demographic need, and should include high energy efficiency and adaptable design to meet future needs (e.g., level access).

This policy is essential to retaining and attracting younger residents and families. It aims to secure the long-term future of the village and safeguard the viability of one of its most critical community amenities, Belchamp St Paul Primary School. This targeted approach is justified by the demographic need for 1–2 bedroom homes (100% support among 18–24s; 63% among 25–44s) and 2–3 bedroom homes (57% overall support).

LDC 6.3 Proposals for individual infill dwellings that respect the established grain and pattern are strongly preferred over proposals for small housing clusters or intense development.

Reference: NPPF (2024) Ch. 5 (Delivering a sufficient supply of homes); LPP 47 (Built Environment); LPP 52 (Layout and Design); LPP 33 (Specialist Housing); Essex Design Guide (Density/Layout).

LDC 7 Building Materials and Form

LDC 7.1 All new development, including extensions, must respond to the specific, varied material palette and architectural character of its immediate context as defined in Section 4 (Character Assessment). The use of high-quality materials is non-negotiable.

While the Survey showed strong community preference for 'Red Brick' (86% agree) and 'Flint' (85% agree), this must be balanced with the physical evidence that the village vernacular is a

varied mix of materials and finishes (LPP 52, Essex Design Guide). The policy, therefore, focuses on quality and context over a rigid, limited palette.

LDC 7.2 Traditional building forms are required, including the retention of pitched roofs and functional chimneys where appropriate. Flat roofs are not acceptable for primary dwelling structures. Sympathetic, high-quality innovative design and modern replacement materials that retain original character are supported (see LDC 9).

The prohibition on flat roofs is explicitly justified by 61% community opposition. Support for sympathetic innovative design (69% agreement) validates the policy's nuance, allowing for modern, high-quality, non-traditional design that adheres to local character principles.

Reference: NPPF (2024) Ch. 16 (Conserving and enhancing the historic environment); LPP 53/57 (Heritage Assets/Conservation Areas); LPP 52 (Layout and Design); Essex Design Guide (Architectural Details).

LDC 8 Parking, Drainage and Flood Risk

LDC 8.1 All new development must provide adequate off-street parking in line with ECC standards to prevent encroachment onto verges or narrow lanes. The use of permeable materials like gravel or shingle for driveways is encouraged over the use of hard paving.

This addresses vehicle conflict and damage, justified by 93% agreement on the need for off-street parking and 84% agreement that verge parking has a negative effect on rural character.

LDC 8.2 Proposals must demonstrate satisfactory surface water drainage and foul sewerage solutions (e.g., SUDS/private treatment plants), proving they will not place an additional burden on the existing, inadequate systems.

The necessity of this strong policy is evidenced by the significant infrastructure deficit: 51% of respondents believe that surface water drainage is inadequate, with dissatisfaction concentrated in areas like Knowl Green and Belchamp Otten. This also aligns with NPPF requirements for flood risk (Ch. 14, LPP 74/75).

LDC 8.3 To protect the rural and tranquil character (LDC 5), the introduction of new pavements, hard kerbing, or street lighting is strongly resisted.

This preserves the fundamental rural, non-urban character of the public realm, justified by the strong community opposition: 70% disagree with 'street lighting' and 56% disagree with 'more pavements'.

Reference: NPPF (2024) Ch. 14 (Meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding and coastal change); LPP 43 (Parking Provision); LPP 74 (Flooding Risk); LPP 75 (Surface Water); ECC Parking Standards (2009).

LDC 9 Extensions and Outbuildings

LDC 9.1 All residential extensions and alterations must be sympathetic to the original dwelling in terms of scale, form, and materials (LDC 7). They must be clearly subordinate to the main building and not remove important gaps between buildings or significantly reduce neighbouring amenity. Outbuildings for home-working must be discrete and their scale and design must not negatively impact the landscape or amenity.

This is justified by the community's mandate for sensitive growth, with 69% agreement for sympathetic innovative design over poor design. The policy safeguards the low-density, open nature of the settlement (LPP 36).

Reference: NPPF (2024) Ch. 12 (Achieving well-designed places); LPP 36 (Residential Alterations, Extensions and Outbuildings); LPP 57 (Heritage Assets).

LDC 10 Commercial and Non-Residential Uses

LDC 10.1 New industrial development is strictly prohibited within the existing Village Envelope/s. The conversion of agricultural land for new permanent Traveller sites is also strictly prohibited.

This prohibition is based on overwhelming community consensus: 79% disagree with 'Industrial development' within the Village Envelope and 91% disagree with converting agricultural land for 'Travellers sites'.

LDC 10.2 The conversion of redundant agricultural buildings for residential use (LDC 6) or for small-scale commercial, retail, or café use is actively supported, provided it: i) Maintains the original character and form (LDC 7). ii) Is of a scale appropriate to its rural location. iii) Can be achieved without negative impacts on landscape, amenity, or the local road network (LDC 5 (Village Separation) and LDC 8 (Parking, Drainage, and Flood Risk)).

This policy supports sustainable rural enterprise. It is justified by 56% majority agreement for converting redundant buildings for 'Commercial/retail/café use'. Support for a new café/shop is highest among the 'Self-employed' at 59%, ensuring this policy supports community vitality and a modern rural economy (NPPF Ch. 6). Furthermore, a 'shop' and 'café' were identified as key desired amenities in the Youth Survey.

Reference: NPPF (2024) Ch. 6 (Building a strong, competitive economy); LPP 40 (Residential Conversion of Buildings); LPP 61 (Community Services); LPP 7 (Rural Enterprise); Historic England (2017).

Conclusion

This Local Design Code represents the considered, multi-year, and evidence-backed vision of the parishes of Belchamp Otten and Belchamp St Paul. Driven by a clear consensus across all demographics, as evidenced by the statistically robust 2024 Parish Survey, this document

provides the required evidence base and a complete set of policies to guide development within this sensitive ancient landscape.

The community's mandate is clear: to protect the tranquil, rural, and dispersed nature of the settlements while supporting the enhancement of community facilities and the sensitive adaptation of its historic buildings.

The policies and character principles defined within this LDC are a direct reflection of this community-led vision and must be treated as a material planning consideration in the determination of planning applications by Braintree District Council.

Consultation Process

The process began on 23 April 2022 with a 'Village Design Code meeting', including a walkabout session where residents detailed their observations of the parish on worksheets. Building on this initial engagement, a formal 'Village Design Code Working Group' was created by the Parish Council on 4 June 2023 to undertake detailed Character Assessments (Section 4).

A series of interactive exhibitions were held in Autumn 2023 (28 Sept 2023 at The Community House and 4 Oct 2023 at The Red Lion) to share the initial character findings and gather village-wide feedback. This featured a community-led policy prioritization exercise where residents used a "token voting" system to select the five policies most important to them. The results of this voting exercise shaped the final policy order and focus.

The quantitative Local Design Code Survey was distributed to all households the week of 23 April 2024 and collected by 31 May 2024. The final response numbers were: 121 adult respondents and 12 youth respondents, providing a statistically robust foundation for the policies.

The consultation loop was closed with exhibitions of the final survey results (7 January 2025 at The Red Lion and 8 January 2025 at The Community House). This comprehensive consultation process provides the robust evidence base for every policy in this document, ensuring the LDC is a direct reflection of a clear community mandate.

An LDC draft was distributed to all councillors on 14th January 2026 and to residents in February 2026 via the Parish Council website, The Parish News and the village noticeboards. The end date for comments was on the 8th of March 2026.

Sources, References and Credits

- National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, December 2024)
- National Model Design Code (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2021)
- Braintree District Local Plan (Adopted 2022)

- The Essex Design Guide (Essex County Council & Essex Planning Officers' Association, 2005 / 2018)
- Braintree District Council Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) (e.g., External Artificial Lighting SPD, 2009)
- ECC Parking Standards Design and Good Practice Guidance (September 2009)
- Historic England - National Heritage List for England
- Historic England - The Setting of Heritage Assets (GPA 3) (2017)
- Historic England - Adaptive Re-use of Traditional Farm Buildings (2017)
- The Stour Valley Heritage Compendia: The Historic Landscape Compendium (Managing a Masterpiece, c. 2013)
- Essex Historic Landscape Characterisation Report (Braintree District) (Essex County Council, February 2011)
- ONS 2021 Census & Stour Valley North Ward Profile (Braintree District Council, 2023)
- Belchamp Otten & Belchamp St Paul Parish Survey (2024)
- Parish Character Assessments (Belchamp Otten & Belchamp St Paul Parish Council, 2023)