

# LOW CONISCLIFFE & MERRYBENT PARISH NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

Settlement Boundary Background Paper



**Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group  
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## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to explain the process which has led to the proposed designation of settlement boundaries around the villages of Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent in the Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Neighbourhood Plan.
- 1.2 As part of the consultation on the Pre-Submission Draft Neighbourhood Plan feedback was sought on the proposed settlement boundaries. The background paper has been updated following consultation and to reflect the new National Planning Policy Framework that was published in July 2018.

## 2. Background

### Settlement boundaries

- 2.1 A settlement boundary is a line that is drawn on a plan around a village, which reflects its built form, this is also known historically as a 'village envelope'. A settlement boundary is used as a policy tool reflecting the area where a set of plan policies are to be applied. The settlement boundary does not necessarily have to cover the full extent of a village or be limited to its built form. In general, there is a presumption in favour of development within the settlement boundary. Any land and buildings outside of the boundary line are usually considered to be open countryside, where development would be regulated with stricter planning policies. However, it should be noted that any land which has been included within the boundary line does not have a guarantee of approval of planning permission, as there will be other planning policies which will need to be adhered to also, for example; the protection of the character of a settlement.
- 2.2 Settlement boundaries have a number of advantages, they seek to:
- Ensure development is directed to more sustainable locations, both in terms of accessibility to and support of existing services and transport and in terms of landscape;
  - Protect the countryside from encroachment of land uses more characteristic of built up areas, which can help conserve and enhance cultural heritage and natural beauty;
  - Provide an easy to understand tool that gives certainty for landowners, developers and the community over where development is likely to be acceptable and where it is not;
  - Direct development to specific parts of the area and this can help increase the viability of local services, as well as encourage new ones to establish;
  - Ensure a plan-led and more managed approach to future development, providing a firm basis for protecting the countryside from unnecessary encroachment;
  - Support the presumption in favour of sustainable development of sites that are too small to be identified as formal allocations;
  - Make it easier for local residents to obtain planning permission for domestic outbuildings within a settlement boundary than outside;
  - Provide a guide for appropriate locations for rural exception sites to provide affordable housing for local needs (in locations adjoining and outside of the settlement policy boundary); and
  - Ensure a co-ordinated and consistent approach.
- 2.3 However, there can also be some disadvantages of settlement boundaries:
- By restricting development, settlement boundaries can artificially increase land values within the settlement compared with land outside, as the likelihood of successfully gaining planning permission differs;
  - Artificially increase land values on land adjoining the settlement boundary due to future 'hope value', with landowners seeking the possibility of the boundary being realigned at some point in the future to accommodate future growth of the settlement. This could mean fewer rural exception sites coming forward, as the landowner may wish to take a longer-term view;
  - The general presumption that development within settlement boundaries is acceptable can result in pressure for the development of unsuitable land. This can result in pressure for the development of valued open spaces within settlement boundaries but where development may not be appropriate. Although, this can be overcome through ensuring that any open space valued by the community is protected through formal designation;

- The use of settlement boundaries can lead to the perception that they result in denser development in already well-developed settlements e.g. within the gardens of houses; and
- Settlement boundaries can be crude and inflexible. For small rural communities with a character of dispersed development, it can be difficult to draw a logical boundary around the village.

### **The Development Plan**

- 2.4 The Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Neighbourhood Plan proposes a general presumption in favour of sustainable development within the settlement boundaries of the two settlements in the Plan area: Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent.
- 2.5 The current Development Plan for the Plan area comprises the: Darlington Core Strategy (2011) and the saved policies of the Darlington Local Plan (1997). Local Plan policy E2 defines settlement limits for both Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent villages and requires most new development to be located within settlements across the borough. Outside settlement boundaries, policy E2 restricts development to: agricultural or forestry operations; small scale development beneficial to the rural economy or the needs of rural communities; operational development; and countryside related sports or recreation activities.

### 3. Settlement Boundary Methodology

- 3.1 As explained in section 1, the concept of settlement boundaries is to identify a policy line which separates built-up areas (within which development is, in principle, acceptable), from the countryside (within which, with limited exceptions, development is not acceptable).
- 3.2 There is a presumption in favour of development if land is within a settlement boundary and therefore land should only be included within the boundary if that is where development is considered acceptable in principle, subject to compliance with other policies. There is a judgement to be made as to whether other development or areas adjacent to but outside the current settlement policy area relates more to the built environment than to the surrounding countryside.
- 3.3 There is no definitive methodology to establish settlement boundaries and different approaches have been taken by Local Planning Authorities and Neighbourhood Plan groups across the country. This settlement boundary methodology for the Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Neighbourhood Plan, has been informed by a review of a number of different approaches and has been prepared in the context of the Parish and follows a five-stage process which is set out below.

#### **Stage 1 – Desktop review:**

This first stage involves a review of existing evidence documents, including:

- Darlington Local Plan Proposals Map (1997);
- Darlington Landscape Character Assessment (2015);
- Neighbourhood Plan evidence documents, such as the Historic Assets background paper;
- Review of current planning applications/ permissions;
- Darlington Housing Employment Land Availability Assessment (2017); and
- Aerial mapping (Google Earth).

#### **Stage 2 – Identification of a draft boundary and on-site review:**

Following the desktop review, an initial draft boundary is identified which can then be viewed on site. In order to establish robust settlement boundaries for Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent villages there are a number of guiding principles:

- Where practical, the boundary should follow clearly defined physical features, such as walls, fences, hedgerows, roads and water courses;
- Areas to be included are:
  - Built development that visually forms part of the settlement;
  - Those with extant planning permissions for built development which is physically and functionally related to the villages;
  - Agricultural buildings if they are well related in terms of scale and positioning to the rest of the village;
  - Community facilities where they are within the built-up area;
- Areas to be excluded are:
  - Curtilages of properties which have the capacity to extend the built form of the settlement - including large residential gardens;
  - Recreational or amenity space at the edge of settlements which primarily relate to the countryside;
  - Allotments, unless within the built-up area;
  - Isolated buildings, not well related to the settlement;
  - Designated wildlife sites, unless within the built-up area;

- Woodlands, orchards and other community green spaces, including cemeteries and churchyards, unless within the built-up area;
- Car parks on the edge of settlements;
- Community facilities clearly outside the settlement e.g. pubs/ hotels.

**Stage 3 – Engagement:**

- Contact land owners prior to wider public engagement
- Public feedback on the draft boundary as part of the consultation on the Pre-Submission Draft Plan.

**Stage 4 – Review:**

- Review of comments received and amendment where necessary.

**Stage 5 – Submission/ adoption:**

- Inclusion of proposed settlement boundaries within Submission Draft Plan, if endorsed through examination and referendum, will be adopted as part of the Neighbourhood Plan.

#### 4. Desktop review – key findings

4.1 A number of key considerations were identified as part of the desktop review, these are set out below.

##### Darlington Local Plan Proposals Map (1997)

4.2 Policy E2 of the Darlington Local Plan defines development limits for settlements across the Borough. The settlement boundaries for Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent are set out below.

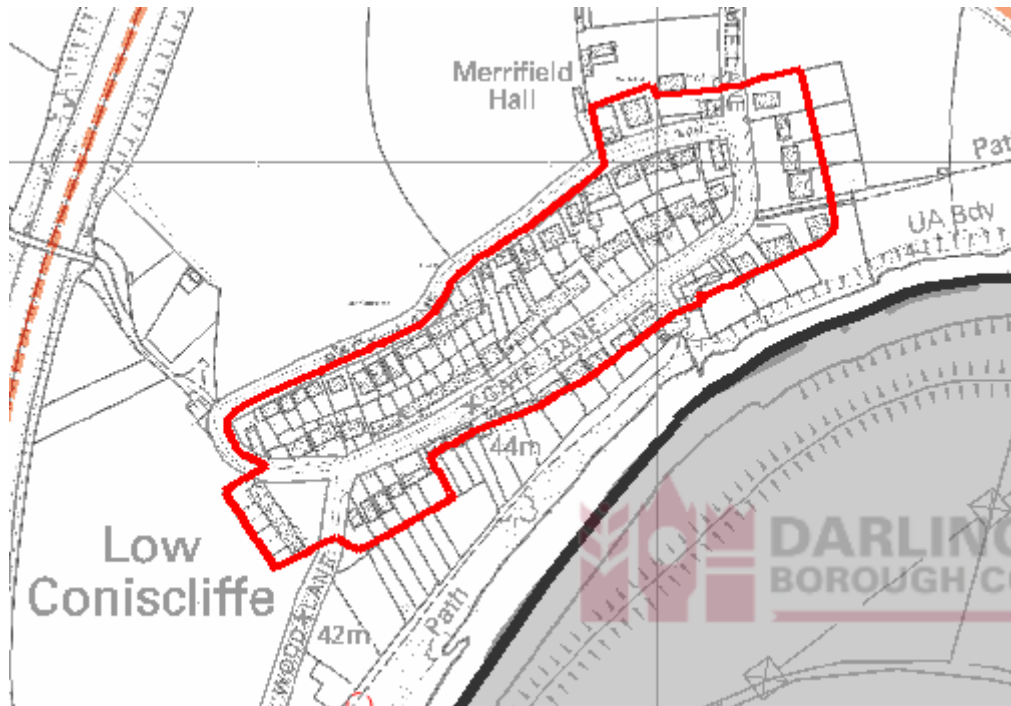


Figure 1: Extract from Darlington Local Plan Proposals Map - Low Coniscliffe Settlement Boundary

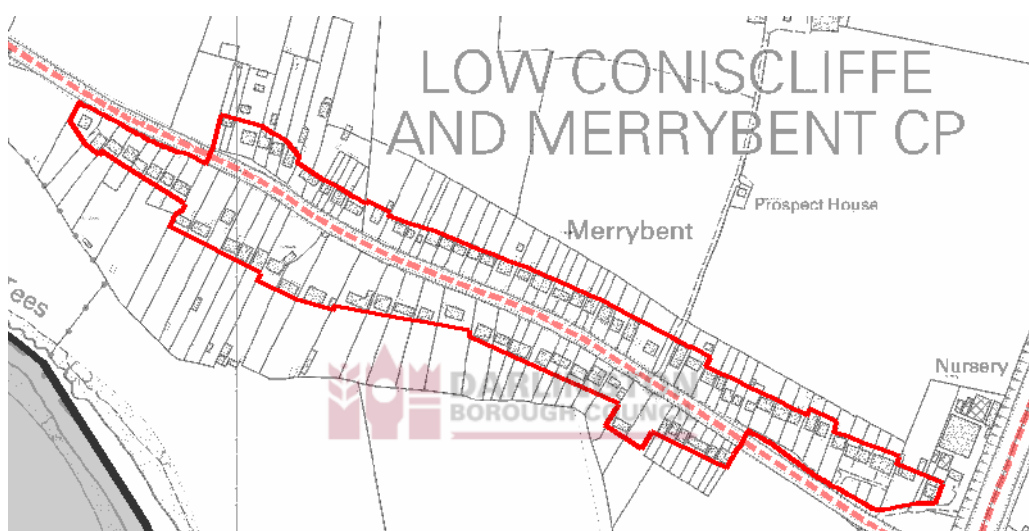


Figure 2: Extract from Darlington Local Plan Proposals Map - Merrybent Settlement Boundary



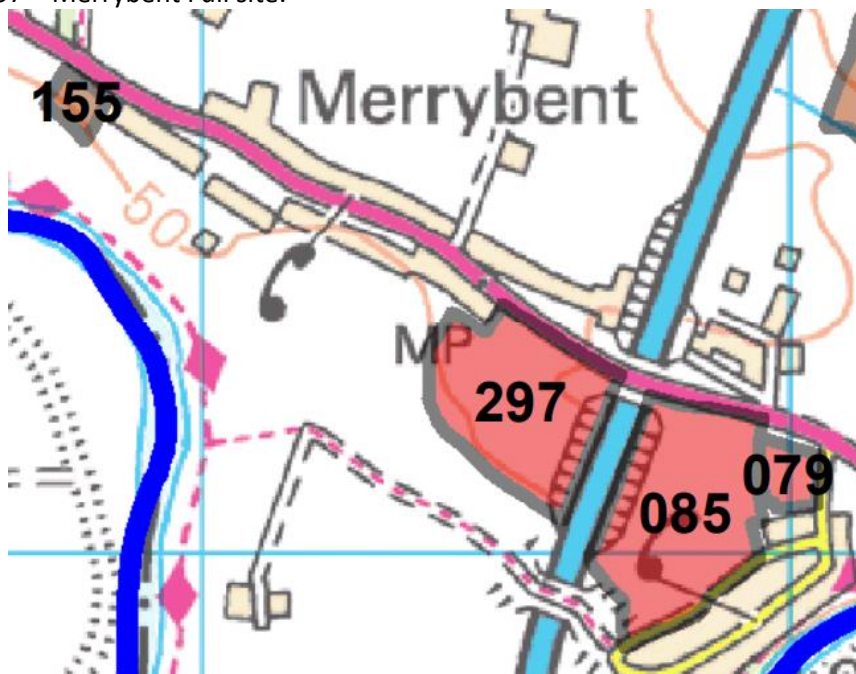
Darlington Landscape Character Appraisal (2015)

- 4.3 The Landscape Character Appraisal considers landscape and visual sensitivity to built development highlighting the importance of the historic character and form of small villages within the character areas covered by the Plan. Therefore, there is a need to retain strong settlement boundaries to ensure that development which may affect this important landscape setting is carefully considered.

Darlington Housing Employment Land Availability Assessment (2017)

- 4.4 There are four sites contained within the Darlington HELAA that are relevant to the consideration of the identification of settlement boundaries for the villages of Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent:

- 079 - West of Gate Lane, Low Coniscliffe;
- 085 – South of Coniscliffe Road, Low Coniscliffe;
- 155 – 80 Merrybent;
- 297 – Merrybent Full site.



*Figure 3: Extract from Darlington HELAA showing sites adjacent to Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent villages*

- 4.5 The Steering Group agree with Darlington Borough Council's (DBC) assessment of sites 79, 85 and 297 that the sites are not suitable for housing and therefore should not form part of the settlement boundary.
- 4.6 Sites to the east and west of Gate Lane were discounted as it was considered that development in this location would be contrary to the Darlington Landscape Character Appraisal. In addition, the entrance to sites from Gate Lane would extinguish the important green approach to Low Coniscliffe, which is framed by historic hedgerows and other planting. There are also highway concerns with regard to the ability to access sites off Gate Lane.
- 4.7 The site to the south of Coniscliffe Road, north of Back Lane was discounted as a result of the impact of development on historic stone walls, flooding, highways and noise.

- 4.8 Land at 80 Merrybent, to the west of the village, was discounted because after evaluating all of the potential options, it was concluded that the site was the least viable as a result of the sloping nature of the site. In addition, more suitable and deliverable sites are available to deliver the level of development identified as being required to meet the housing needs of the Plan area.
- 4.9 Given the distance sites 041 (Coniscliffe Park South), 128 (Farmland, Staindrop Road) and 249 (Coniscliffe Park North) are from the existing villages and the size of the proposed sites they are not considered to be logical extensions to the villages and have therefore been discounted.

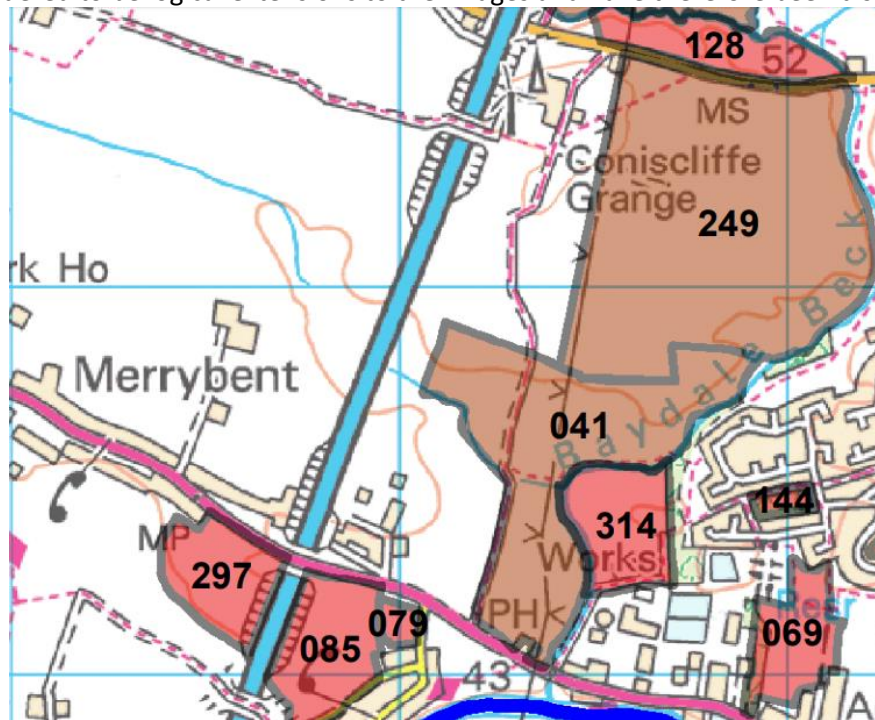


Figure 4: Extract from Darlington HELAA showing other sites

Historic Assets Background Paper (2018)

- 4.10 The Historic Assets Background paper illustrates the wealth of historic assets across the Plan area, particularly within the village of Low Coniscliffe. These important assets have been taken into consideration through the identification of a draft settlement boundary.

## 5. Identification of a settlement boundary

5.1 As identified above, the impact of future development on the landscape and setting of the villages has been critical in the definition of the settlement boundaries as well as ensuring the boundaries support the sustainable growth of Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent villages. The proposed boundaries:

- Take into account extant planning permissions in Merrybent;
- Will manage development to the north of Low Coniscliffe which may have a negative impact on the landscape setting of the village;
- Will manage development to the south of Merrybent which may have a negative impact on the landscape setting of the village;
- Establishes a logical shape to the edges of the villages, again seeking to conserve and enhance the character of the area;
- Avoids irregular incursions into the open countryside; and
- Has been drawn along features which are easily identified on the ground.



*Figure 5: Proposed Low Coniscliffe Settlement Boundary*



*Figure 6: Proposed Merrybent Settlement Boundary*