

# A Sustainable Rural Estate

Hertfordshire County Council  
Rural Estate Strategic Plan

February 2023



Hertfordshire

# Foreword

“ Our aim as a council is to create a cleaner, greener, healthier Hertfordshire.

We lead and inspire communities by supporting employment opportunities, increasing access to the countryside and continuing to hold land for strategic opportunities across the county. We are the custodians of a sustainable rural estate with a positive and viable future. ”

**Cllr Bob Deering**, Executive Member for Resources and Performance



“

It is essential that Hertfordshire has a future as a county where sustainable rural business and farming can thrive alongside protected and enhanced habitats which communities can enjoy.

This strategy explores further how the rural estate plays a pivotal role in ensuring the county council meets the ambitions set out in its corporate plan: improving the health and wellbeing of our people, protecting and improving our environment, supporting the sustainable and responsible growth of our county, and providing excellent services that are accessible for all. ”

**Scott Crudginton**, Executive Director for Resources and Performance and Deputy Chief Executive



# Executive Summary

In July 2019 Hertfordshire County Council declared a Climate Emergency and our aim is to create a cleaner, greener, healthier Hertfordshire.

Hertfordshire County Council own a Rural Estate which is just over 10,500 acres spread across the county. The Estate has been managed with reference to a series of strategic plans. This latest strategy draws on key council ambitions such as the Sustainable Hertfordshire Strategy which sets out the policies and strategies needed to embed sustainability across the county council. There is also an ambition for strategic growth across the county, and a small proportion of the land in the Rural Estate is well placed to provide for these growth opportunities.

Our vision is for a greener Hertfordshire where sustainable rural businesses can thrive, our natural environment is protected and enhanced, and communities can prosper. It is our mission to be custodians of a sustainable rural estate with a viable future.

This strategy sets out how the Rural Estate can help deliver these, sometimes competing, objectives whilst also ensuring a viable Estate continues into the future. This will be achieved through classifying the assets into 3 categories Strategic, Rural Economy and Environmental,

The retention of the Rural Estate is key to this strategy, which will enable the county council to meet its ambitions, however it is acknowledged small parts of the Rural Estate will be disposed of for strategic growth. There are also many opportunities for enhanced environmental benefit across the Estate and the proposed re-investment policy will ensure retained assets are fit for purpose and managed in the best possible way to ensure a viable future for the Rural Estate.



Berrygrove Woods, Watford



## Introduction & Background

# The Rural Estate

**Over 10,500 Acres**

**Over 450 interests in land**

**Over £1.8 million  
rental income**

The Rural Estate assets are spread across the 4 corners of Hertfordshire. From Tring in the West to Hertford in the East, Ashwell in the North to Oxhey in the South.

The Estate has a key role to play in the delivery of the county council's strategic priorities for a cleaner, greener, healthier Hertfordshire.

It is also an important council service providing Small Holding opportunities and supporting the rural economy in Hertfordshire.

# The Estate

The Estate was acquired principally for 2 distinct purposes:

## Small Holdings

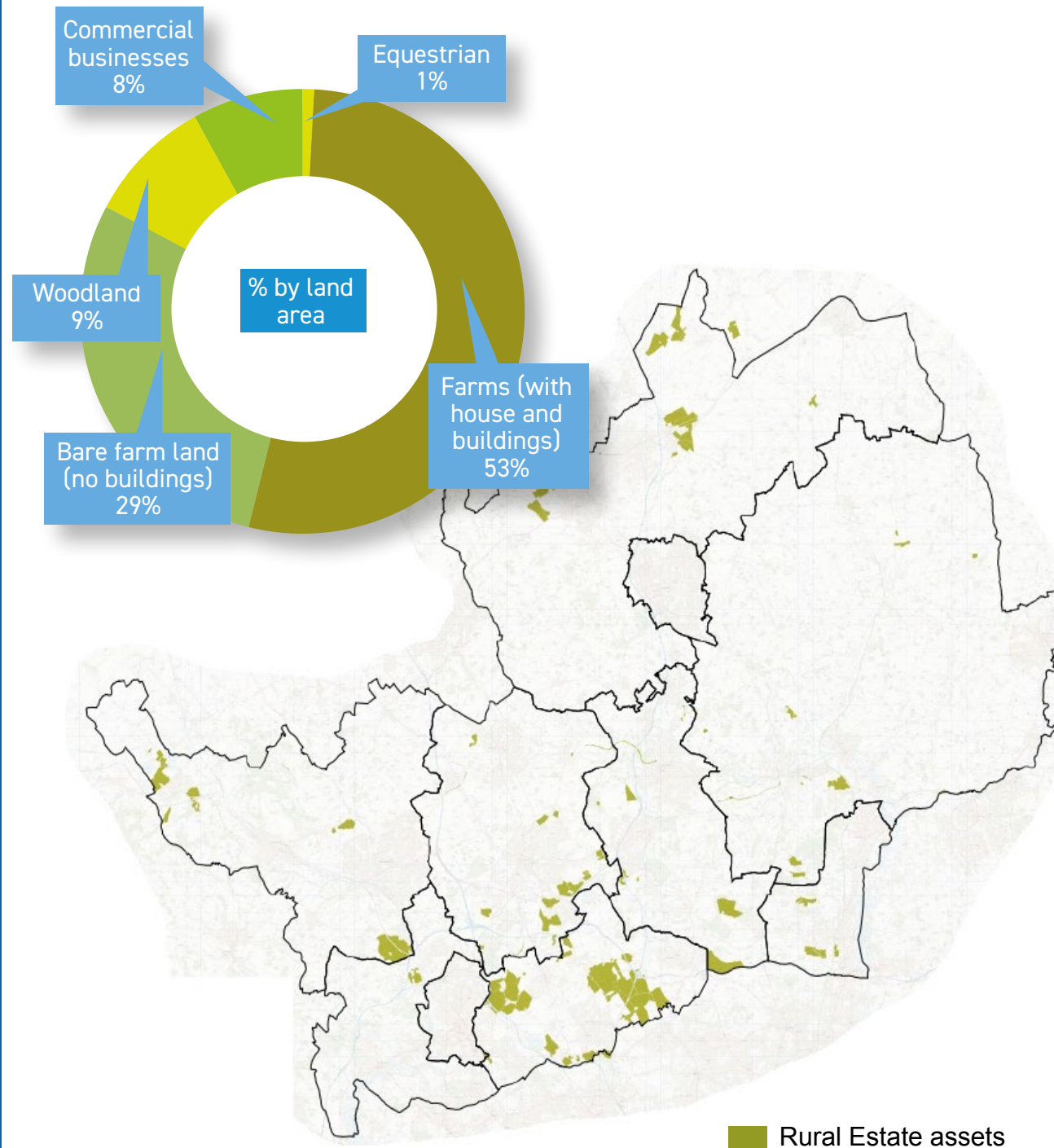
Bought during the early 1900's to provide a first step on the farming ladder, especially for returning service men.

## Green Belt

Protection of the Green Belt is now performed by District and Borough Councils through planning legislation. Pre-dating this land was acquired by the county council to stop the spread of villages within the M25 by having direct control of the land.

## Key stats

- |   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| <b>50</b> Farms                               | <b>1</b> national nature reserve   |
| <b>64</b> bare land lettings                  | <b>1</b> Country Park              |
| <b>26</b> woodlands                           | <b>2</b> golf clubs                |
| <b>120</b> residential properties             | <b>1</b> Private school            |
| <b>18</b> listed buildings                    | <b>800</b> acres of wildlife sites |
| <b>9</b> telecoms masts                       | <b>80+km</b> Rights of Way         |
| <b>13</b> village greens & recreation grounds |                                    |



# The National Picture

The Rural Estate operates within a framework of national legislation, policies and agricultural markets that shape and influence how the estate is managed



## Brexit & The Agriculture Act 2020

When the UK left the EU The Agriculture Act 2020 sought to establish a new support scheme for farmers, outside control of the EU. This is based on the principal of public money for public goods. A new payment scheme, ELMS (Environmental Land Management Schemes), has been introduced. At this time it is not expected that the new payments will be at the same level as previous subsidies, leaving a significant gap in funding for farmers.



## The Environment Act 2021

This act set out two key objectives which centre around the protection and preservation of natural resources. It seeks to halt the decline in species by 2030, and requires new developments to improve or create habitats for nature (Biodiversity Net Gain). It also introduced the Local Nature Recovery Strategies to create less fragmented habitats. It is expected this act will have an impact on the farmed landscape as the focus to improve nature and biodiversity will require significant change.



## Strategic Planning

Districts and Boroughs are struggling to balance the Government's housing need numbers against pressure to protect the Green Belt. Key strategic land within the Rural Estate will be promoted as appropriate opportunities arise and through the local plan process. Hertfordshire is also a key location for strategic transport routes, especially road and rail, which may have impacts on the Estate.



## Societal Change

National food security is an increasingly important issue with the release of the Government white paper The National Food Strategy focuses on backing farmers to ensure strong domestic supply chains to protect against future instability. This has coincided with the recent crisis in Ukraine which has highlighted the issue of national food security and the importance of growing our own arable crops. Society is also becoming more environmentally aware, with consumers looking for food with less air miles and prioritising and supporting shopping local.

## Corporate plan

The Council's Corporate plan has 4 objectives

- A cleaner and greener Environment
- Healthy and fulfilling lives for our residents
- Sustainable, responsible growth in our County
- Excellent Council Services for all

## Growth Agenda

The Growth Agenda was adopted in 2019 to recognise the importance of sustainable growth within Hertfordshire. A strategic land promotion report was commissioned to identify land across the Rural Estate that may contribute to meeting housing and employment land supply requirements.

## Property Service Plan

The Rural Estate sits within Property who have the following ambitions

- Enable service delivery
- Operate sustainably
- Optimise the estate
- Support growth and regeneration
- Achieve value for money

## Sustainable Hertfordshire

After declaring a climate emergency in 2019, the council have an ambition to improve nature on our own land by 20% as well as 3 specific actions for the Rural Estate

1. Develop the Rural Estate Strategic Plan (this document)
2. Develop a site management plan for in-hand land to enhance nature by 20%.
3. Develop a tenant engagement programme to support land management that enhances nature by 20%

Other opportunities for the Rural Estate such as Biodiversity Net Gain and Local Nature Recovery will also be explored.

## HCC Tree and Woodland Strategy

The strategy confirmed in 2022 aims to identify tree and woodland establishment targets, enable the expansion and enhancement of Hertfordshire's treescapes, and promote resilience in trees and woodlands. Woodlands in the direct control of the Rural Estates team will be managed with reference to this strategy.

## Pollinator Strategy and Action Plan

The pollinator strategy was adopted in 2019 to improve habitats for pollinators across the Rural Estate. This includes engagement with tenants and introducing bee hotels.

# Challenges and opportunities of a semi urban Rural Estate

Due to the location of the Rural Estate there are associated challenges and complexities due to its urban nature, however its positioning can also provide exciting opportunities.

## Challenges

**Family Businesses** - The farms are people's homes as well as their businesses from which they derive their income and in some cases it may have been in the family for several generations.



**Legislation** - The legislation under which most farms are let is historic and complex with tenant's having a high degree of security of tenure. The estate comprises of different assets each with individual agreements that have differing obligations.

**Geographically disparate** - It is a large and sprawling Estate that can have the same capital value and rental income as a city office block but instead of being a few hundred meters across with one tenant, it takes over a day to drive around and has hundreds of tenants.

**Security** - Its boundaries are not obvious and cannot be easily secured. Issues with trespass, fly tip and encroachment are high.

**Competing demands** - The location of farms on the edge of existing settlements mean there are possibilities for housing developments, highway schemes, other infrastructure as well as the increased demand for sustainability schemes.



# Opportunities

**Sustainable and the Environment** - A large land holding allows the opportunity to contribute to the various Council strategies and ambitions such as reaching net zero by 2030, tree planting, air quality and biodiversity improvements. The large land holding means the Council can effect change in nature at a large scale.

**Development** - Due to the location of assets across the Estate some have been identified for urban extensions, and this will continue as pressure on housing supply increases. A large estate the size of Hertfordshire's will also lead to windfall opportunities over time, such as ransom strips and small development opportunities for 1 or 2 houses.

**Capital reinvestment** - Development opportunities could provide the capital which needs to be reinvested back into the Estate to maintain its infrastructure and enable the new ambitions to be met.

**Entrepreneurial tenants** - The location of farms near good transport links and close to population centres has encouraged a base of entrepreneurial and engaged tenants.

**Rental values** - Good transport links and a large affluent population means commercial leasing can bring in high value rents, which can help to offset the lower market level of agricultural rents.

Wayside Farm, Kings Langley

# Rural Estate achievements over the last 10 years

## Supporting the Environment

- Planted a 40 acre Carbon Woodland with over 35,000 trees on land adjacent to the M25 with native and fast growing trees with the aim to absorb CO2 from the atmosphere
- In conjunction with the Countryside and Rights of Way team created over 10km of new routes in support of Healthy Herts
- Worked with tenants on a pilot scheme to install Barn owl boxes which has led to 30+ chicks being ringed
- Planted an avenue of trees for the Queens Green Canopy project to celebrate her Platinum Jubilee
- Managing over 5 acres of biodiversity mitigation sites for other services with others in the pipeline
- Implemented a pollinator strategy and action plan
- Banned the release of sky lanterns and balloons across the Estate

## Supporting Growth

- Over 500 acres identified for urban extensions across Hertfordshire which will deliver 3000+ homes, employment hubs and service provision such as recycling centers, fire stations, care home and schools.
- Managing over 100 acres of land ahead of future service use
- Capital Receipts of over £15 million from sales of surplus residential properties and surplus assets
- Agricultural barns have been converted to residential units resulting in an uplift of 1000% in capital value

## Supporting Rural Economy


- The Rural Estate rent roll has increased nearly 50% from £1.2 Million to £1.8 Million
- There have been 10 Smallholding opportunities re-let to new tenants and entrants into farming ensuring this sector continues to thrive in Hertfordshire
- Supporting tenant led diversification which has led to rural employment opportunities, with some farms on the Estate now supporting upwards of 30 employees



The future strategy of the Rural Estate has been developed in consideration of the national agricultural picture, various County Council strategies, and opportunities that can arise from a semi urban rural estate.

The future strategy will set out the new vision and mission for the Rural Estate, our ambitions and how the Estate will be classified in the future with objectives for each category.

## Future Strategy



**Our Mission** a greener Hertfordshire where sustainable rural businesses can thrive, our natural environment is protected and enhanced, and communities can prosper

**Our Mission** to be the custodian of a sustainable rural estate with a viable future

## We will achieve this by

### Environment

Recognising the importance of the relationship between nature and farming and how these must work in harmony

### Rural Economy

Supporting our tenants to allow their businesses to thrive and become more sustainable and provide opportunities for people to become farmers through a modern Small Holdings service

### Strategic Opportunities

Leading and inspiring communities by supporting employment opportunities, increasing access to the countryside and continuing to hold land for strategic opportunities across the county

Our vision is for greener Hertfordshire where sustainable rural business and farming can thrive alongside protected and enhanced habitats which communities can enjoy.



# Our Ambitions

The ambitions capture the essence of national policies, county council strategies, as well as the location and context of the Rural Estate to provide a clear steer on how we can reach our vision and fulfil our mission.

## To operate sustainably

We will look for opportunities to help the county council reach its carbon neutral target by 2030 by providing and facilitating sites for renewable energy and carbon sequestration schemes, improving the energy efficiency of our buildings and support our tenants to operate sustainably.

Environment

## To protect and enhance nature

We will protect and enhance nature by at least 20% across the Rural Estate. We will strive for 100% of in-hand (un-let) sites to have management plans in place and 100% of tenants to have land in agri-environmental schemes. We will seek to protect and enhance local wildlife sites that are found across the Rural Estate.

## To support strategic opportunities

We will support strategic opportunities across the Rural Estate by providing land for county council services, strategic growth sites and infrastructure projects, as well as small scale redevelopment opportunities. Assets will be considered for disposal at the appropriate time providing a capital return to the county council and a proportion of receipts re-invested back into the Rural Estate.

Strategic Opportunities

## A modern Small Holding service

We will deliver a county Small Holdings service that provides opportunities for entry into farming or diversified rural businesses, support tenants that wish to farm sustainably to protect nature and provide local produce to residents of Hertfordshire whilst contributing to the nations food security.

Rural Economy

## A diversified commercial Estate

We will look to secure a revenue stream from a diverse portfolio of lettings and support appropriate tenant led diversification and employment opportunities to achieve a commercially viable rural estate.

# A Sustainable Rural Estate

# Asset Classification

To ensure the key ambitions for the Rural Estate are delivered it is important to have a clear focus for each asset. Therefore, each asset will be placed into one of three classifications.

- Rural Economy Assets
- Environmental Assets
- Strategic Assets

Assets will be classified using the process set out in the asset classification flow diagram and scoring matrix. The classifications will ensure the priority ambition for each asset is both clear and at the heart of its management.

# The Asset Classifications

Classifying the assets across the Rural Estate will ensure that it is evident why the asset is held and how it should be best managed to meet the ambitions set out in this strategy. Sustainability is a key theme throughout the strategy and will underpin all 3 asset classifications, not just the environmental assets. We will look for opportunities to undertake sustainable actions such as protecting and enhancing nature and improving energy efficiency on all assets.

Sustainable actions

## Strategic Assets

These assets will include land that has been identified for development or future service use as well as smaller sites where we are looking to sell or develop part of the site.

## Rural Economy Assets

These assets will be farms, agricultural land and other let rural businesses all of which are important for a thriving rural economy. There will be 2 sub classifications; Commercial Assets and Small Holding Assets.

## Environmental Assets

These assets will mainly be in hand land (land without an occupier) such as woodlands and open spaces, it will also include sites which are being used to meet Sustainable Hertfordshire ambitions.





Rural Economy Assets will form the core of the Rural Estate. Let farms, land and other rural business will sit within this classification as well as assets such as telecoms masts and garden licences.

The Rural Economy Assets will be formed of 2 asset classification;  
The Small Holdings Assets & The Commercial Assets

## The Rural Economy Assets

### We will...

- Ensure food production remains a priority on good quality land
- Encourage diversification especially where it provides rural employment opportunities and/or produce for residents
- Hold a range of property across different business sectors to reduce the impact of market fluctuations on rental income
- Look to undertake energy efficiency improvements to Landlord buildings and consider alternative energy sources
- Include appropriate green lease clauses in new agreements
- Identify farms that will be primarily managed to enhance and protect nature for example by encouraging alternative farming practices, such as agroforestry and regenerative farming
- Strive for 100% of tenants to have land in agri-environmental schemes which provide funding to tenants and supports biodiversity, enhances the landscape, and improves the quality of water, air and soil which will help deliver the ambition to improve nature by 20% across the Estate
- Strive to plant 1km of hedgerows per year for the next 4 years in line with Local Nature Recovery Strategies to link habitats



# Small Holding Asset Objectives

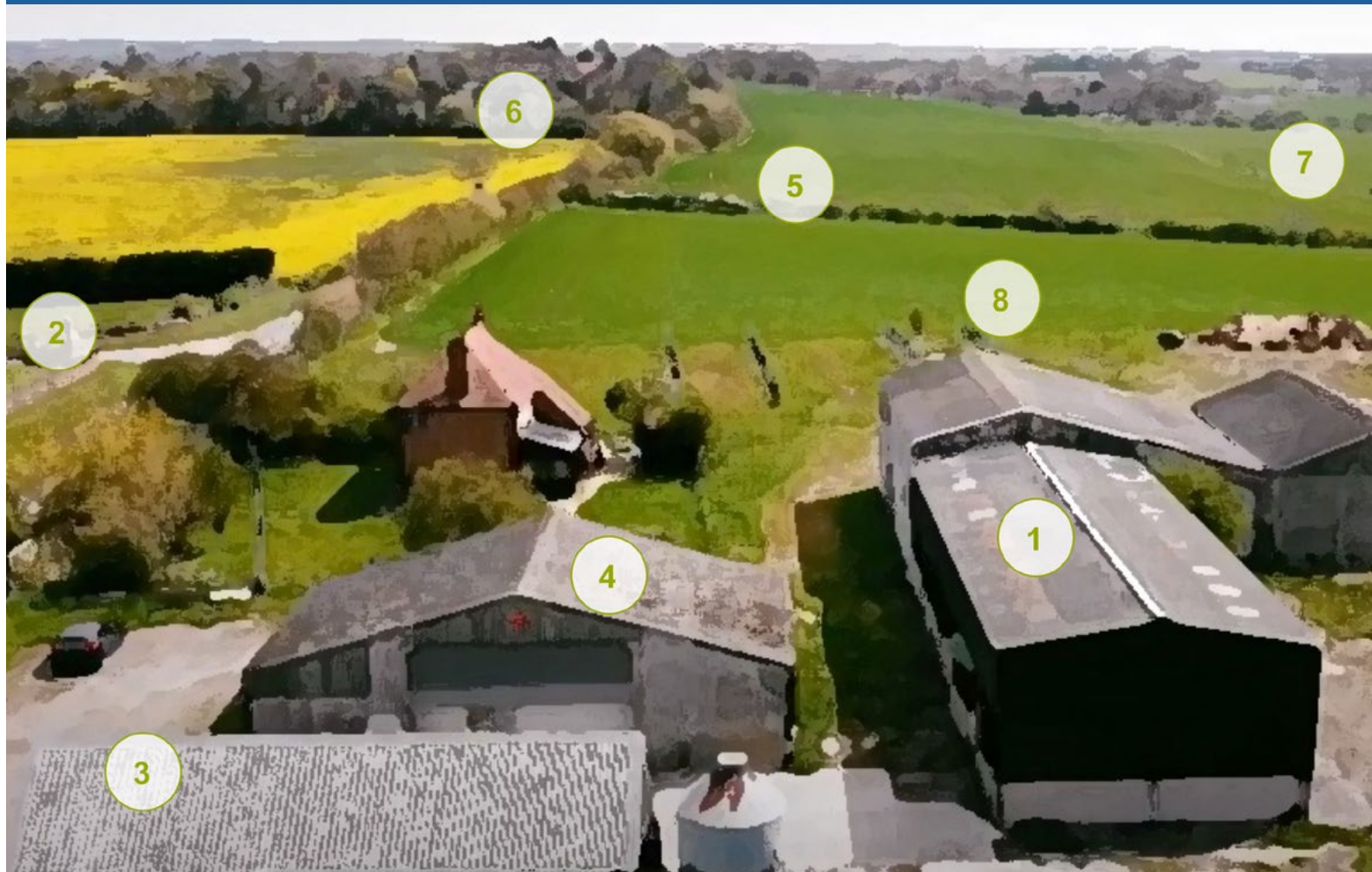
Our vision and objectives for a Small Holding Asset are:

1. There are fit for purpose buildings in good condition
2. It is in the right location in a small cluster of other Small Holding Assets
3. There is a small scale agricultural related diversification opportunity
4. Opportunities for renewable energy solutions are considered such as solar panels on roofs
5. Environmental improvements are undertaken
6. Trees are planted in unproductive corners
7. Options are considered for creation of rights of way
8. The Tenant is supported and encouraged to apply for agri-environment schemes

Small Holding Assets will be mainly farm holdings between 50-200 acres spread across the County.

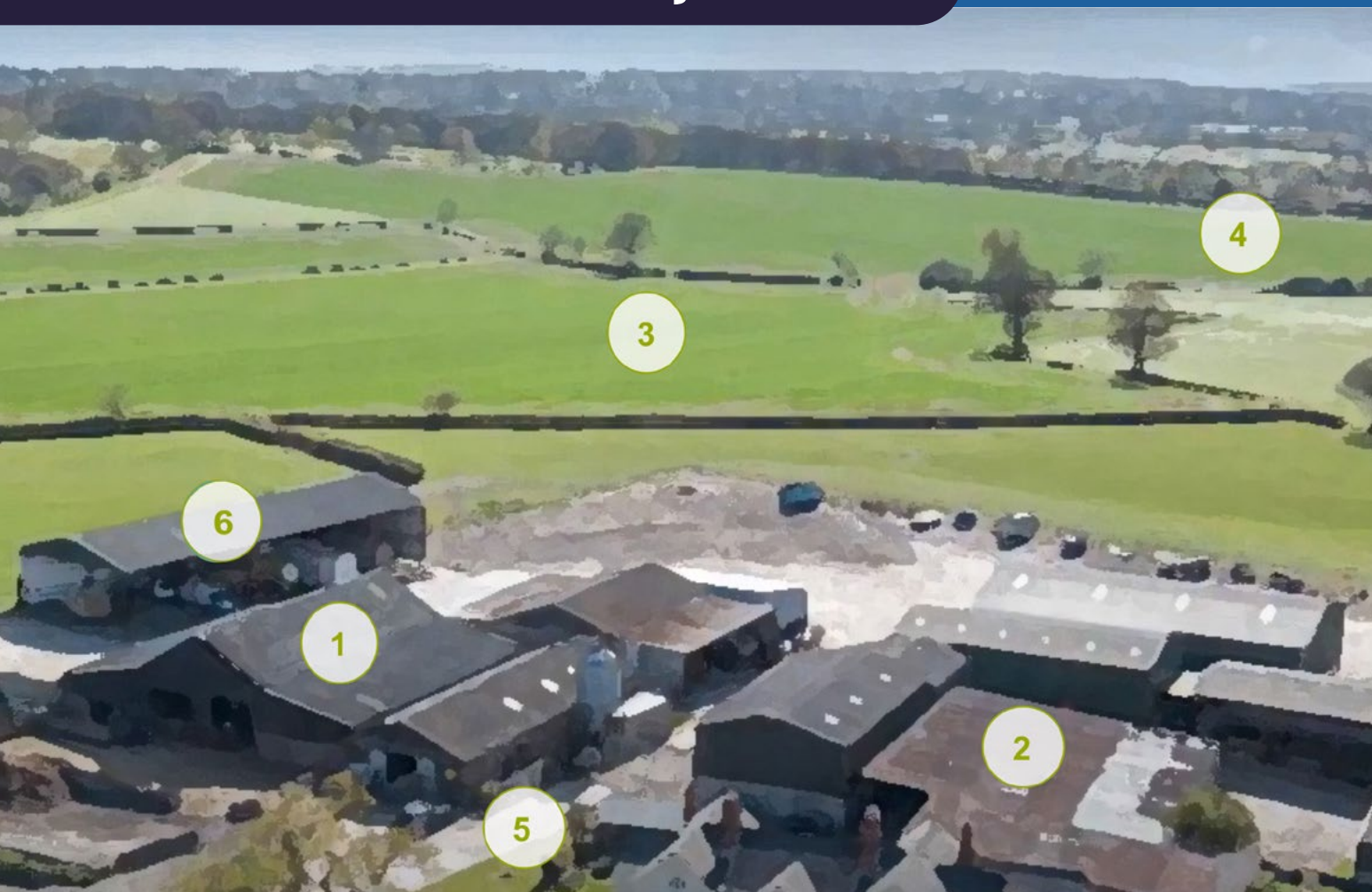
The holdings will usually be in smaller clusters of well equipped and well maintained farms. These farm will be let in accordance with Part III of the Agriculture Act 1970.

These assets will include other property types which are closely linked including cottages, bare land and small paddock lettings.



Commercial Assets will be a mixture of farms where the farming enterprise has diversified from purely agriculture as well as other commercial lettings such as golf clubs and garden centres. These assets are most likely to have previously formed part of our Green Belt Estate where land was purchased to stop the spread of villages within the M25. However the role to protect the Green Belt is now performed by Districts and Boroughs through their planning policies.

## Commercial Asset Objectives



Our vision and objectives for a Commercial Asset are:

1. The income from the letting is not purely agricultural and that any diversification provides rural employment opportunities alongside rental income
2. The council's repair liability is reduced
3. The tenant has adopted agri-environment schemes or environmental improvements
4. We work with tenants to maximise environmental and sustainable benefits of the holding, such as improving hedgerows, or restoring lost habitats
5. The rural character of the asset is maintained
6. Opportunities for renewable energy solutions are considered such as solar panels on roofs

The Environmental Assets will mainly be in hand land (land without an occupier) such as woodlands and open spaces. The long term vision is that sites being used to meet the Sustainable Hertfordshire actions, such as biodiversity net gain and carbon sequestration will also form part of this classification.

## Environmental Assets

### We will...

- Ensure all in-hand land has a management plan in place to improve nature by 20%
- Protect existing woodlands and prioritise natural regeneration
- Support and facilitate renewable energy schemes to help the council meet its 2030 net zero targets
- Through a soil carbon baseline assessment explore if any sites could be used for carbon sequestration (the process of capturing and storing atmospheric carbon dioxide in soils, plants and trees) schemes through improving soil quality
- Seek to accommodate the council's Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) requirements where possible. BNG is an approach to development, and/or land management, that aims to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was beforehand
- Facilitate the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and other green and blue corridors
- Improve public access to the countryside
- Identify sites for appropriate tree planting in line with the HCC Tree and Woodland Strategy
- Improve engagement with communities and inspire their interest in nature by increasing the number of interpretation boards and involving them in local schemes
- Continue to implement improvements from the Rural Estate Pollinator Action Plan
- Manage woodlands in our control in line with the HCC Tree and Woodland Strategy



Environmental Assets will include land that is managed in-hand (has no tenant) such as woodlands and old railway lines. It may also include sites that are held in stewardship schemes or for BNG.

## Environmental Asset Objectives



Our vision and objectives for an Environmental Asset are:

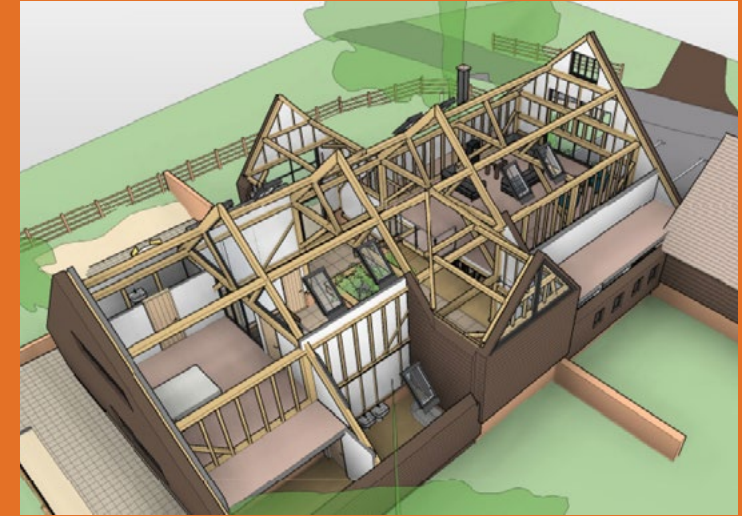
1. Assets are managed to protect and enhance existing habitats such as National Nature Reserves (NNRs) Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and other priority habitats as identified in the LNRS.
2. Public access is improved where appropriate and signage is installed to engage and educate communities.
3. Opportunities are explored for woodland planting where appropriate and existing woodlands are protected and managed in line with the HCC Tree and Woodland Strategy and have a management plan in place.
4. Best endeavours are used to ensure the assets are cost neutral by applying for stewardship schemes, and if possible bring an income into the county council e.g. by selling BNG credits.

The Strategic Assets will comprise assets identified as part of the strategic land promotion report that was commissioned to identify areas across the Rural Estate that may contribute to meeting housing and employment land supply requirements across Hertfordshire. It will also include assets identified for disposal, small scale development opportunities as well as future service delivery and key strategic projects

## Strategic Assets

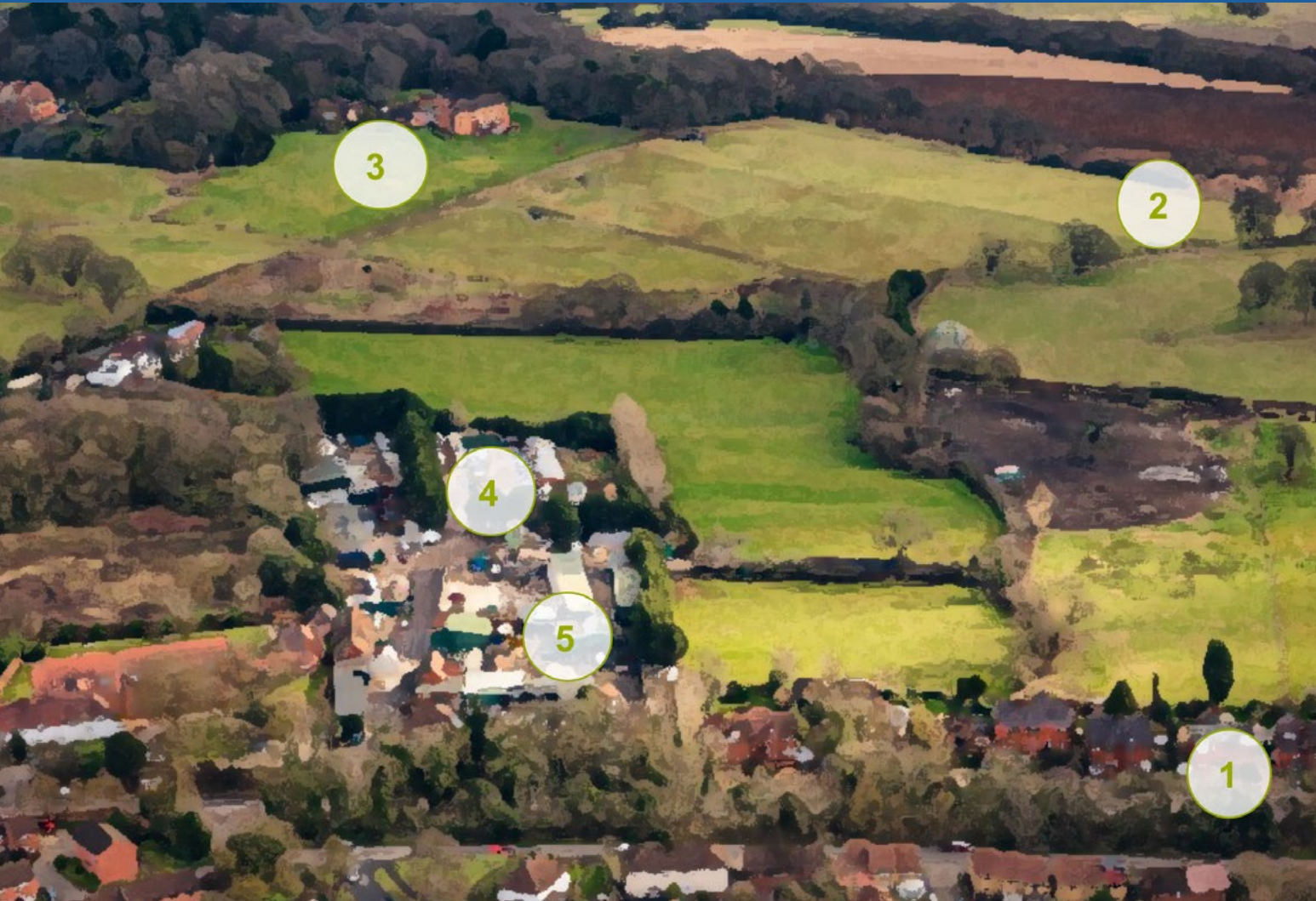
### We will...

- Manage these assets with the key objective of eventual disposal and capital receipt to the Council
- Look for opportunities for small scale farmyard developments
- Seek to protect key environmental assets
- Seek to reinvest the agricultural value of developments back into the Rural Estate
- Keep land farmed for as long as possible prior to development
- Seek to provide land for other service uses and key strategic projects such as improving transport links
- Support Local Plan promotions



Strategic Assets will include land that has been identified for development or future service use, it will also include smaller sites where we are looking to sell part of the site for development.

## Strategic Assets Objectives



Our vision and objectives for a Strategic Asset are:

1. Land that is located close to existing settlements and has been identified for residential development through the Local Plan process.
2. Land and assets are let on short term agreements to allow flexibility and easy access onto the land for investigations and surveys.
3. We work with tenants to allow assets to be farmed for as long as reasonably practical.
4. We will ensure repairs are undertaken to meet our legal duty but no major capital investment is undertaken.
5. Opportunities for other service uses and small farmyard development schemes are explored.



# Asset Management Plans

Asset Management Plans will provide key asset information and outline how each asset will help to meet the vision, mission and objectives set out in this strategy.

They are vitally important to ensure that assets are used for the right purpose and all parts of the Rural Estate Strategy can be delivered on.

The Asset Management Plans will provide transparent and consistent decision making across the Estate and provide clear actions and directions. This strategy will provide the agreed direction to develop the individual asset management plans.



# A Sustainable Rural Estate

To operate  
sustainably

To support strategic  
opportunities

A diversified  
commercial Estate

To protect and  
enhance nature

A modern Small  
Holding service

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