

**Draft Report on Public Engagement,
Local Development Framework Draft Core Strategy,
October to December 2010**



1. Introduction

Public engagement on the draft Core Strategy for the Local Development Framework has been designed and co-ordinated by the four Area Development Teams working closely with the Spatial Planning Team. A brief (see Appendix 1) and budget were agreed in July 2010 to set a framework for this consultation. Simplified materials were drawn up over the late summer period as soon as the draft Core Strategy was made available. In designing the public engagement, the main focus has been on:

- Fulfilling the requirements of the adopted and approved Statement of Community Involvement - <http://www.southsomerset.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/planning-policy/local-development-framework>
- Complying with the requirements of Planning Policy Statement 12 and Statutory Instrument 2008/1371 Town and Country Planning (Local Development) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2008.
- A cost effective programme that maximised broad public engagement and that would augment the formal consultation process.
- Actively seeking online responses through the iNovem system, whilst clearly accommodating other response methods, so as not to exclude key groups of people who otherwise may not participate.

The strategy was finally approved for public consultation, at Full Council on 16 September 2010, with a launch on 8 October for an 8-week period, closing on 3 December 2010.

This followed an extensive period of testing of the emerging growth proposals.

- Firstly with Parish Councils and other key stakeholders through cluster group meetings based around towns and their catchment areas across the district. This was conducted in the late Autumn and early Spring of 2009/10 and led by Spatial Policy Team in liaison with the Area Development Teams.
- This was followed up by discussion of both the overall growth proposals and also the draft key policies, under the five themes contained in the Core Strategy, by the Council's corporate officer group and by the Council's Area Committees in open meetings. The second period of testing ran from June to August 2010.
- The consultation materials were scoped in June and July 2010 and then developed over the August to September period. A special event was held in Chard, 9 September, to engage residents in proposals developed through the Chard Regeneration Framework. This attracted 400 people and was used to link these detailed plans with the emerging Core Strategy.

2. Main Elements of Consultation Programme

1. Household leaflet

The main element of the engagement plan was a simple, easy to read summary, in a colour A4 format, distributed via the Royal Mail to all domestic addresses across the whole district. This document (see Appendix 2) was designed to say: what the strategy was; the stage it had reached; a central spread with the main highlights from the strategy; all dates of the main public exhibitions plus other locations where it was available for inspection; how to make online and written responses to the document and finally the timetable for completion and adoption.

This leaflet was circulated at the end of September (the consultation started on 8 October) and circulation was staggered across the district to try to achieve about two weeks notice in advance of local exhibitions.

Generally speaking the leaflet was well received. Some people missed it, and in certain instances we received reports that some homes did not receive delivery, despite all of the reported problems being from homes that were within postcode sectors that we had booked for delivery by Royal Mail. (Some reports were contested by neighbours who said they did indeed get the leaflet). An ample overrun was done, however to enable copies to be available in all our public offices and at exhibitions and as “lead in” materials to a wide range of discussion groups held with specific sub sets of the population. In this way, the broadest possible awareness raising was given to the public about the importance of the draft Core Strategy.

The leaflet was supplementary to many other forms of communication and was seen as ‘above and beyond’ what was required, particularly as many other authorities simply advertised the consultation on their websites only.

2. Website

A web area was developed on the South Somerset District Council’s website enabling interested parties to see the full document online and make their comments on any section that interested them via the web tool iNovem. In addition, the website pages were constructed in such a way that all the consultation summaries and materials were available via the website, including the summary leaflet and all the summary panels explaining the different elements within the strategy. This was linked back to the home page of the website via an easy access route, so that the profile of the strategy consultation has been maintained throughout the consultation period.

The substantial evidence base underlying the draft Core Strategy’s preparation was also readily available for inspection on the web site and had previously been publicised to Town and Parish Councils and made available for inspection at a number of “data room exhibitions”.

In addition to the above, the strategy was featured on YouTube with links provided via Twitter and Facebook to encourage broader access, by young people in particular.

3. Public Relations Campaign

An extensive and sustained PR campaign was maintained in the run up to the consultation period and throughout the consultation period. The Communications Officer was a key person in developing the summary leaflet, exhibition materials and web areas. Media releases were targeted at different geographical areas timed to coincide with the run up to the public exhibitions. Specialist releases were done to interest the business community. The press articles run during the consultation, including those aimed to boost attendance are set out in Appendix 3.

The Portfolio Holder for Spatial Planning participated in numerous interviews for radio and press purposes and also attended many of the public meetings, exhibitions and discussion groups to enable a clear and sustained message from politicians about the role and purpose of the Core Strategy and the importance of public engagement to improve the final document. All District Councillors were briefed and asked to talk to their constituents about the importance of the consultation and encourage them to get involved and make a response if they so wished.

As the campaign advanced, further releases were issued to showcase the success of earlier exhibitions and encourage people to make their comments in the remaining time available. The final tally of responses is around 2770 from 927 respondents. However, a further consultation is taking place with those respondents whom have commented about transport issues around Yeovil, which will increase the number of responses received.

4. Formal Consultees

The Spatial Policy Team maintain a database consisting of 1292 consultees, this includes all relevant Specific and General Consultation Bodies and Other Consultees, as well as those individuals/agents/bodies who have asked to be added and those who had made responses to the earlier consultations on the Issues and Options document (March 2008). Letters/emails detailing where the document could be viewed, commented upon and copies of and/or links to the Draft Core Strategy were sent to all those on that database in the week commencing 4 October 2010.

Formal notices were placed in the following publications:

- Blackmore Vale Magazine
- Chard and Ilminster News
- Western Gazette
- Yeovil Express
- Fosse Way Magazine

Copies of the consultation document, including the Draft Core Strategy and Sustainability Appraisal were placed in all local libraries and the District Council Offices.

5. Public Exhibitions

A total of 18 exhibitions were pre-planned, in all of the main centres across the district, focusing on Yeovil and the market towns. In addition, special events were held in the villages of Barwick and East Coker, the areas most likely to be affected by green field growth proposals for Yeovil. As noted earlier, the Chard Regeneration Framework event was held prior to the consultation period, giving residents an important opportunity to give in-depth consideration to the major growth proposals for the town.

These consultation events were supplemented by further events arranged in response to feedback as needed. This led to an additional event held in Somerton and a special, rurally focused event held in North Cadbury. Most events were held in the late afternoon through into the evening, although some were also held on Saturday mornings in the bigger towns and attendances were mainly in the fifty to one hundred people range with 200 and upwards attending exhibitions at East Coker and Somerton.

Each took the form of a drop-in exhibition with around twenty specially developed exhibition panels. Most of these were generic boards that explained what the exhibition was about, gave a simple summary of the main elements of the Core Strategy, the growth proposals, sustainability appraisal method, the main features of the policy areas and growth strategy. In addition, each exhibition carried specific panels covering the settlements in that area giving a summary of the main characteristics of market towns and rural centres, the headline growth proposal for those places and, where appropriate, maps showing the preferred areas for growth.

People attending exhibitions were greeted by Area Development staff and, encouraged to take an exhibition feedback form to complete and leave this in the box provided before they left the exhibition. At least two members of the Spatial Planning team attended each event to enable visitors to talk in-depth about any particular aspect that interested them. After each event feedback forms were analysed by Area Development staff. This gave an instant snapshot of numbers attending, where people came from, how they found the exhibition, whether they agreed broadly with the proposals and canvassed, whether they planned to submit a formal response to the strategy. This quick overview enabled us to plan and refine future events. A summary of feedback from each event is contained in Appendix 4, along with a copy of the feedback form. In total 1581 people were recorded attending these exhibitions, which is a conservative figure as accurate recording was difficult at the most popular exhibitions and at the most popular times. Of those who completed feedback forms we can note that:

- Apart from the Yeovil Town Centre events, the majority of people lived in the town, where the exhibition was being held.
- Overall 64% found the summary information at the exhibition useful and informative, 19% found it a bit helpful and 17% found it unhelpful.
- Overall 55 % indicated that they intended to submit detailed comments, with 27% saying they might do and 18% not to submit comments.

Area Development staff were in charge of choosing venues, timings and hosting these events, based on their experience of successful consultations on other topics. They also used contacts with local groups and organisations to encourage attendance at the exhibitions e.g. local business associations, local schools and youth groups, representatives from black and ethnic minority communities resident in the area etc.

The exhibition material was used to hold a further event for South Somerset District Council's staff, which was attended by 43 people. This served the dual purpose of raising awareness amongst staff that live in the district, whilst also encouraging service teams to think about the implications of the LDF policies for their professional areas and formulate a response if appropriate.

6. Reaching Minority Groups

In addition to the broad programme of public events some special discussion groups were held with a range of groups who we felt were unlikely to attend the exhibition.

1) Young People

A series of events were held in November 2010 at schools and colleges. The method chosen was to meet with groups of young people and hold a structured discussion around the overall growth proposal, a more in-depth look at key policies and seek some specific feedback on local growth proposals in the catchment area of the school.

Four such events were held in schools at Yeovil, Castle Cary/Ansford and Huish Episcopi chosen to enable coverage of urban, market town and more rurally based students.

- Ansford School, Castle Cary, 80 pupils across Years 7, 8 and 9
- Bucklers Mead School, 30 pupils from Year 8
- Yeovil College, 15 students studying A-level geography
- Huish Episcopi Academy, Langport, 30 pupils from Year 11

Each of these sessions has been written up and submitted as separate evidence as part of the consultation process. These are presented as Appendix 5.

2) Black and Minority Ethnic Groups

This was arranged through the Somerset Racial Equality Council and consisted of a discussion group held with 16 representatives from black and ethnic communities across South Somerset. Good representation was achieved from different ethnic groups from across a wide geographical area. This followed a focus group format using a topic guide where participants had been sent a copy of the summary leaflet and paper copies of the exhibition boards (which summarised the contents of the strategy) in advance. There was then a facilitated discussion going through the main aspects of the strategy and pausing to record views on any particular aspect that interested the participants. These again were written up as a separate piece of evidence and have been submitted as part of the consultation. These are presented at Appendix 6.

3) **Gypsy and Traveller**

A focus group was held with a group of Gypsy and Traveller representatives from across the district. Participants had received a copy of the summary leaflet in advance of the meeting and on the day there was a discussion about the housing needs of gypsy and traveller people and views were sought on the draft policy for Gypsy and Traveller pitch development. The feedback has been written up and submitted as a separate piece of evidence as part of the consultation. This is presented at Appendix 6.

4) **South Somerset Equalities Steering Group**

A discussion group was held with representatives groups from the Equalities Steering Group, which includes disability groups, groups representing young people, faith groups, black and minority ethnic representation etc This discussion group was held in the same format as that with black and minority ethnic groups, detailed above and the feedback from the groups has been submitted as separate evidence as part of the consultation and this is presented at Appendix 6.

3. Resources

A summary of the main elements of additional costs incurred in running this consultation exercise, are shown in Appendix 7. These were well within the budget set.

4. Conclusions and Lesson Learned

Some of the main ones from this exercise are:

- Despite going to considerable efforts to simplify and summarise the material contained in the draft Core Strategy, many members of the public found the language and complexity of the document difficult to follow. The presence of expert planning officers to advise and discuss the content with the public was a positive response to this natural difficulty.

- There was a general appreciation of the effort made to discuss the Core Strategy with the wider community at this stage in the process; however, there was also a degree of scepticism about the likelihood of local views and evidence having any effect on the proposals in the final document. For this reason, it will be important to follow statutory regulations in considering and responding to every specific point made by representees and making these responses available for inspection as a part of the report on the Core Strategy representations and further evidence that is scheduled for October 2011 that will seek to finalise the Core Strategy for publication and submission for examination.
- Representees will be informed, in advance, of when the Area Committees, District Executive and Full Council are to consider the report on representations that will be presenting the revised Core Strategy for publication and subsequent submission for examination.
- The summary document was well worth producing and distributing broadly across the district, however the narrative of the simple summary, the more in-depth exhibition summary and the actual document itself would benefited from further refinement to draw people into increasing levels of detail and helping their understanding of how final recommendations had been arrived at.
- *Testing the main elements of a document of this complexity takes time. Completion of a plain English version, telling a clear and coherent story before developing the consultative materials would have further improved the public consultation process and resulted more benefit, in terms of reaching into the wider community, as a result of involvement of Area Development Teams.*
- The range of discussion groups held with harder to reach groups was a requirement of the Planning regulations and has certainly led to some different perspectives being feed into the overall body of consultation responses.

5. Broader Corporate Observation

More collaboration could occur with Area Development and other services on a wider range of community consultation and engagement that is corporately important, to develop the quality and depth of communication with the public and to make better use of resources and expertise. To operate at its best the basis of this needs to be agreed at the outset and form part of a comprehensive corporate engagement plan

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