

South Somerset's settlement hierarchy workshop discussion paper April 2011,
REPORT 4 – Review of Somerton's status as a Market Town

Introduction

The Settlement Role and Function study recommended that Somerton should be considered a Market Town, based upon the criteria set out in Development Policy B of the RSS Proposed Changes:

- There is an existing concentration of business and employment and realistic potential for employment opportunities to be developed and enhanced;
- There are shopping, cultural, faith, education, health, and public services that can be provided to meet the needs of the settlement and the surrounding area;
- There are sustainable transport modes that can be maintained or developed to meet identified community needs in the settlements and the surrounding area.

I have broadly categorised the issues raised during the consultation period according to these three criteria i.e. employment, services and facilities, sustainable transport.

Summary of issues

Apart from Yeovil, Somerton received the highest volume of comments during the Core Strategy consultation period, with many of these comments referring to Somerton's status as a Market Town.

There was some support from consultation responses for Somerton being classified a 'Market Town,' and that the resulting level of development would help to ensure the future prosperity of the town. However, the majority of comments submitted during public consultation objected to Somerton's status as a 'Market Town' and instead felt the settlement should be a 'Rural Centre'. Most respondents felt Somerton was more comparable to the other Rural Centres (e.g. Martock, Langport/Huish Episcopi, Bruton, South Petherton) in terms of employment levels, existing services and facilities, and sustainable travel opportunities.

Some comments questioned the findings of the Settlement Role and Function study, stating that Chard, Crewkerne, Wincanton and Ilminster are self evidently the only Market Towns based upon their level of employment provision, economically active population, employment density; level of retail, services and infrastructure; and self containment and sustainable travel opportunities. Somerton was ranked on the criteria used to determine a settlements' position in the hierarchy in the Role and Function study, and compared with the other settlements – this highlighted that Somerton ranked 6th-12th on employment criteria, joint 4th-13th on financial services, and 5th-13th in relation to travel and self containment.

Linked to the employment criterion, it was commented that Somerton does not have sufficient self containment to be classed as a Market Town as it has one of the lowest levels of job containment in the district with more than half its economically active residents work outside the town, and that adding another huge swathe of housing will not rectify this without other local services being improved first.

In terms of services and facilities, many comments felt that Somerton did not contain the range of 'strategic' community facilities to be considered a Market Town, as it lacks a secondary school, large supermarket, and sports hall/swimming pool (and a hospital). There were also comments pointing out the lack of a petrol station in Somerton. It was commented that all of these facilities are located in nearby

Langport/Huish Episcopi which is classed as a Rural Centre. The only strategic facilities in Somerton are a library, small supermarket, building society and bank; and the banks are there for commercial reasons and could relocate to other settlements at any time.

Some comments did suggest that although a number of facilities are present in Somerton that may put it on a par with other Market Towns, the layout of the settlement and lack of suitable sites means that none of these can be expanded into more modern facilities.

Transport concerns were also raised in relation to Somerton's position in the hierarchy, with some comments submitted that Somerton should not be classed as a Market Town due to poor transport links, and it clearly not having a 'Market Town' standard of public transport to build on. The Baker Report ranked Somerton as bottom of a dozen South Somerset settlements for "public transport opportunities," and it does not have a rail station like some other Market Towns.

One of the arguments used to justify Somerton's status as a Market Town in the Core Strategy was that it needed the consequent scale of development to ensure the future prosperity of the settlement, and help promote growth in the northern part of the district which Langport/Huish Episcopi was too constrained by flooding issues to accommodate. However some consultees felt there is no evidence to support the proposal that Somerton will be disadvantaged and will not have enough future development to support its current level of services if it is not a Market Town i.e. does not accept locally significant development.

Potential cross boundary issues were also raised in relation to Somerton's role and function, with comments disagreeing that Somerton should be classed a Market Town, because Street in Mendip district serves this function in the locality.

Response to issues

Consultation responses on the draft Core Strategy incorporating preferred options raised some concerns as to the status of Somerton as a Market Town. I have based my response to these issues around the three criteria required to be a Market Town in RSS Development Policy B, where relevant.

There are 1,300 jobs in Somerton, representing 2% of the total employment within the district, placing it 7th, so there is potential debate as to whether this constitutes "an existing concentration of business and employment" as required by RSS Development Policy B; although Baker Associates considered this to be a concentration. Given that there is little commercial demand for additional employment land to justify a specific allocation,¹ there is limited potential for employment opportunities to be enhanced (also required of a 'Market Town' in Policy B). Somerton also has relatively low level of self containment of 37% which ranks it joint 14th in the district, and lower than the South Somerset average of 51%.

The second criterion in Policy B requires shopping, cultural, faith, education, health and public services that can be provided to meet the needs of the settlement and the surrounding area. Somerton has a good provision of retail uses and services to meet the day to day needs of local residents, with a reasonably healthy, well kept and attractive town centre containing a range of independent stores, such as a small supermarket and specialist food stores.² Somerton is classed as one of the smaller

¹ BNP Paribas comment in Employment Land Review.

² South Somerset Retail Study update 2010.

centres in retail terms alongside Ansford/Castle Cary and Langport/Huish Episcopi, where the natural catchment and expenditure capacity will limit the potential for large scale additional provision.³ Other services/facilities in Somerton include a surgery, pharmacy, two dentists, three banks/buildings society's library, infant school, junior school, and sports pitches. But there are some 'strategic' facilities such as a secondary school, swimming pool/sport's hall and a hospital, which are not located in Somerton. Given the close proximity of the larger settlements of Street and Glastonbury and their inevitable impact on the role and function of Somerton, and the presence of a secondary school and swimming pool/sport's hall in nearby Langport/Huish Episcopi, it is felt that there is a limit to the potential 'strategic' facilities that Somerton will be able to viably provide.

Thirdly, regarding concerns about sustainable travel opportunities; Somerton does have a relatively good bus service, with an hourly frequency to the nearby main settlements of Yeovil, Taunton and Wells (via Glastonbury and Street). However, recent cuts have meant there will no longer be a service during the evenings and at weekends. Somerton is not served by 'demand responsive transport,' and does not have a train station. There is a national cycle route that passes through the settlement. The Settlement Role and Function study does not identify Somerton as having self-containment and sustainable travel opportunities.

Regarding the comment that Somerton required a Market Towns' level of development to sustain the settlement, and help promote growth in the north of the district, it is difficult to comment on what level of future development is required to support Somerton's level of services. A key issue is the projected reduction in household size – the Settlement Role and Function study identifies that this will cause Somerton's population to reduce by around 350 people in 20 years, if no additional housing development was permitted in the town. This could be a negative issue for the provision of community facilities. Around 170 houses would be required to maintain Somerton's current population in order to offset the forecast reduction in household size. The scale of development at Somerton is discussed in a separate paper. Infrastructure issues will be considered in further detail upon receipt of the Infrastructure Delivery Plan later in 2011.

Recommendation

Retain Somerton as a Market Town.

³ South Somerset Retail Study update 2010, para 6.24.