

South Somerset's settlement hierarchy workshop discussion paper March 2011 – Response to comments seeking re-instatement of Development Areas and infilling policy

Introduction

This paper considers those responses to the draft CS consultation that sought a re-instatement of Development Areas (in line with the existing Local Plan), and an infilling policy for those rural settlements not currently identified as Rural Centres. This paper should be read alongside the 'response to objections to SS2' briefing paper in discussing the core strategy approach to dealing with the smaller, rural settlements in the district.

Summary of issues

- Existing villages should be retained and clearly defined with settlement boundaries which should be reviewed and enable growth up to 2026, otherwise growth will be ad hoc rather than planned in appropriate locations, taking into account environmental constraints and by imposing suitable policies to ensure a mixture and type of development required by that community is delivered on appropriate sites. Development boundaries should be retained, so that a handful of sites can come forward to aid the sustainability of villages.
- With more than 50% of the existing population living outside the main urban areas, the strategy of concentrating all development within 14 urban and rural centres is over simplistic, too crude and not reflective of how the District has grown and its wider economic, environmental and community needs. Does not mean that past patterns of dispersed growth should be repeated, but it is not appropriate to exclude development that can help to sustain places.
- No distinction between substantial villages and the open countryside - recommend that the 45 villages listed in the adopted South Somerset Local Plan as "appropriate locations for development" remain so, or that a much more detailed, robust explanation of why these villages not acceptable for development be added.
- The rationale for redefining so many villages (approx 45) as open countryside needs to be made more explicit and supported by evidence - relying on the now revoked RSS is not acceptable. The only explanation is that "development elsewhere in smaller villages is likely to be less sustainable" - if this is because of the reliance on the car the Core Strategy needs to spell this out, as any development that could address car usage to a reasonable level may then be acceptable.
- The proposed settlement hierarchy is too rigid, and would result in a large number of villages where development is currently allowed, in principle becoming open countryside. This is considered to be a short-sighted approach for a predominantly rural district. The provision of open market housing, employment and community facilities is vital in the rural villages otherwise they will become retirement havens for those who do not wish to see change. Provision for reasonable levels of growth can ensure that schools, shops, public houses, employment and other services continue to support these communities.
- It is suggested that an additional tier of settlement entitled Rural Settlements should be established between Rural Centres and Open Countryside, allowing the identification of rural settlements appropriate for growth, anticipated growth levels and the distribution of growth within these settlements; using the

Settlement Role and Function study. This approach would promote appropriate development to support rural communities, and allow a stricter policy stance regarding open countryside and those rural settlements considered inappropriate for growth.

- Where settlements are not Rural Centres, some limited infilling should be permitted e.g. Hambridge. Small developments in villages should be looked on more favourably.
- Retention of development boundaries would allow a few sites per village which would allow some limited growth to help sustain village services and feed the demand for individual plots. Current approach will remove a lot of opportunities. Not saying that all villages in the current Local Plan should be included, but there are a large number that could be retained for limited development opportunities including the other elements listed in SS2.
- Policy SS2 pre-supposes that growth will come about because the community will support it; this is naive as incomers will often not want their village to grow – without settlement boundaries future growth will depend on community support.

Response to issues

There is clearly significant concern regarding the loss of so many (approximately 50) development areas, and the in-principle objection against development in the rural settlements that would result. This is understandable given the predominantly rural nature of the district. As proposed, some relatively large villages would lose their development areas, such as Curry Rivel and Templecombe, and effectively be 'washed over' as countryside.

However, Policy SS2 does allow locally justified development in rural settlements that no longer have development area boundaries. Although not identifying them by name, Policy SS2 enables development in the rural settlements, subject to meeting the criteria set out in the policy. The current Local Plan approach of around 50 'village' development areas has led to 22% of new dwellings being completed in 'rural settlements' between 2006-10, although this figure is 13% if houses under construction, committed, and allocated are taken into account (largely due to key site commitments not started e.g. at Yeovil and Chard). Policy SS2 aims to ensure the development needs of the rural settlements can be met, whilst restricting the scale of such growth to ensure development is concentrated at Yeovil, Market Towns and the Rural Centres.

Recommendation

Development area boundaries of the Rural Settlements to be removed (excluding Yeovil, Market Towns and Rural Centres which will retain their current development areas); and replaced by the approach set out in Policy SS2.