

LDF PMB and MAG Officer Group

Core Strategy Workshop 3 – Yeovil growth, 14th June 2011

Purpose of Report: – Appraising alternatives to Yeovil scale of development options

Recommendation

- Continue with the 'preferred options' approach of around 50% of new development at Yeovil, and 50% elsewhere in South Somerset.

Why is there a need to appraise alternatives to Yeovil scale of development?

Until summer 2010, the emerging Core Strategy approach to the scale and broad location of new development was based upon the Regional Spatial Strategy 'Proposed Changes'. After the Coalition Government announced the revocation of Regional Spatial Strategies in July 2010, (subsequently overturned in the High Court) it was necessary to revisit work that had been carried out on the 'draft Core Strategy incorporating preferred options' from late 2009-mid 2010, particularly the scale and distribution of new housing. This resulted in a lowering of the district-wide housing figures from 19,700 dwellings to 16,600 dwellings, nearly all of which was removed from the Yeovil figure. Throughout the emerging Core Strategy process, around half of new development has been directed towards Yeovil, ranging from 58% to 49% of the overall district-wide housing figure, culminating in the 49:51 split between Yeovil and elsewhere in the District that was sustainably appraised in the 'preferred options'.

Various options for the overall district-wide housing figures were sustainably appraised, as these were included in the Core Strategy 'issues and options'. Alternatives for the distribution of development across the district outside Yeovil have also been appraised (i.e. concentration vs. dispersal); but these alternatives did not include Yeovil as this was previously 'fixed' in the RSS. Therefore, it is now considered necessary to sustainably appraise alternatives to the proportion of development at Yeovil, particularly given the following:

- The impending revocation of RSSs when the Localism Bill is enacted.
- Consultation comments on the 'draft Core Strategy incorporating preferred options' proposing both a lower and higher proportion of development at Yeovil.
- The recent publication of the report 'Housing requirement for South Somerset and Yeovil' (January 2011) which identified the potential for higher development at Yeovil.
- Review of the recent (March 2011) High Court judgement which quashed Forest Heath's Core Strategy policies for being in breach of the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive, as reasons for rejecting alternatives for housing growth at an urban extension were not clear.

What 'reasonable alternative(s)' should be appraised?

Given that previous appraisals were all 'Yeovil-focussed', it is considered that a lower proportion of development at Yeovil should be subject to sustainability appraisal in order to ensure that all 'reasonable alternatives' have been appraised. Greater development at Yeovil is also a potential 'reasonable alternative', following public consultation comments and the 'Housing requirement for South Somerset and Yeovil' Baker Associates report.

Therefore, some potential options for both higher and lower development at Yeovil are outlined in the following tables.

Option A: Greater concentration of development at Yeovil

Tier in hierarchy	Scale of new housing (district total is 17,700 dw 2006-28 as set out in revised Policy SS4)	Proportion of district total
Yeovil	13275 (existing commitments, plus 9900)	75%
Elsewhere	4425	25%

Option B: Low proportion of development at Yeovil

Tier in hierarchy	Scale of new housing (district total is 17,700 dw 2006-28 as set out in revised Policy SS4)	Proportion of district total
Yeovil	4425 (existing commitments, plus 1050)	25%
Elsewhere	13275	75%

Option C: Medium-scale development at Yeovil

Tier in hierarchy	Scale of new housing (district total is 17,700 dw 2006-28 as set out in revised Policy SS4)	Proportion of district total
Yeovil	6550 (existing commitments, plus 3170)	37%
Elsewhere	11150	63%

There are many variations that could be applied, but it is only necessary to focus on 'reasonable alternatives,' and the 'likely significant effects' of the overall approach of differing proportions of development at Yeovil, rather than every detailed permutation of the numerous potential options.

Option A reflects the maximum theoretical potential identified in the 'Housing requirement for South Somerset and Yeovil' of 74% of the district total. Option B considers a much smaller proportion of development at Yeovil; whilst Option C is presented as it is halfway between 25% in Option A, and the 49% proposed in the 'draft Core Strategy incorporating preferred options.'

How to appraise the lower proportion of development at Yeovil?

The differing proportions of development at Yeovil have been appraised against the 14 SA objectives, identifying the likely significant effects at Yeovil and the rest of the district that would result from these alternatives. The SA was carried out using the same approach undertaken in the Core Strategy 'issues and options' and 'preferred options.'

Key SA findings

The full SA results are set out in a separate document. Overall, Options A and B perform least well of the three options in sustainability terms – neither of these two options are supported from a sustainability perspective. Option C scores better overall, but would still result in some negative effects, including a forecast imbalance of homes and jobs at Yeovil. The key findings of each option are set out below:

Option A – Several positive sustainability benefits of a greater focus of development at Yeovil due to the presence of (by far) the widest range of community facilities, shops and services of any settlement in the District. Also there would be greater potential to help regenerate the town through new development and help alleviate some of the most deprived areas in South Somerset, which are located in Yeovil. However, under this scenario the potential benefits of new development would not be

felt across the wider District, Yeovil's economy would be unable to generate enough jobs to match the number of homes, and there are potential for significant adverse environmental effects at Yeovil arising from such a large scale development.

Option B – The scenario of a low proportion of development at Yeovil would bring limited sustainability benefits. Although district-wide housing need would be met, it would not be in the most sustainable location (i.e. Yeovil) in terms of access to key services and facilities, meeting affordable housing need, economic growth, and the need to reduce travel in general. Also there would be less opportunity to help regenerate the deprived parts of Yeovil. Lower loss of best and most versatile agricultural land is a benefit of limited growth at Yeovil, but large amount of development elsewhere means greater potential for adverse impact on the character of the wider rural area.

Option C – Some positive effects on meeting housing need and helping to alleviate poverty through the benefits of new development, but potential for several negative environmental effects. Potential negative economic effects as the scale of development at Yeovil is likely to be too low compared to job creation, making it more difficult for people to access local jobs, and leading to increased in-commuting to the town.

Comparison with the 'preferred option'

It is useful to compare these findings with the 'draft Core Strategy incorporating preferred options' which sought a 49:51 split of development between Yeovil and elsewhere; although a direct comparison is difficult in some cases e.g. updated household projections are lower.¹ Option A performs better in terms of access to services, but less well in supporting a strong economy, and has a worse environmental impact. Option B scores less well generally, largely due to a more dispersed approach to development that would mean a negative environmental effect, less economic support, and increased need to travel. Option C has generally similar impacts to the 'preferred option' but performs less well on the economy – the main difference is the more positive economic benefits of the 'preferred option' due to a balance of jobs and homes, whilst still supporting the role of Yeovil as the District's economic driver.

Conclusion

Overall it is recommended that the approximate 50:50 split set out in the 'draft Core Strategy incorporating preferred options' continues to be pursued as this has the most economic benefits, enables a good level of accessibility to services and facilities, and helps to meet housing need where it is greatest at Yeovil. Negative environmental effects are likely from all options, and mitigation measures are proposed to overcome these, but a focus of development at Yeovil should reduce the need to travel, offers greater potential to use alternatives to the car, and would avoid the character of the wider rural area being too adversely affected.

¹ Latest household projection for South Somerset reduced from 22,000 to 16,000 homes (2006-26), published in November 2010.