

LDF PMB and MAG Combined Group

Core Strategy Workshop 7

September 14th 2011 – ‘Small Market Towns’ update report Report by Keith lane – Policy planner

The three ‘small’ Market Towns of Somerton, Langport/Huish Episcopi and Ansford/Castle Cary have been subject to much local debate as to their status and scale of growth and raised by Members at the Area Workshops. The purpose of this paper is to provide an update on issues that have arisen at these settlements since previous PMB meetings.

Somerton issues

Somerton Town Council wrote to the District Council in July stating that, following a majority vote at the Town Council meeting on July 12th, they are formally requesting that Somerton be reclassified as a Rural Centre (‘C’ settlement) and the total housing allocation be reduced to 258. The reason for this proposal is the clear messages from members of the public in Somerton made during the two public consultations: the draft Core Strategy consultation (October 2010), and the consultation carried out between July 2010 and March 2011 for the Somerton Community Plan (in which nearly 20% of the community responded). 90% of respondents to the Community Plan consultation said they wanted either no development or a slower rate of development and on average no more than 39 new homes (on top of the 219 already allocated, hence a total of 258). There was particular concern in relation to infrastructure capacity.

Response

It is clear that there is a weight of public opinion from local residents in favour of reclassifying Somerton as a Rural Centre, and reducing the level of development that should be located at the settlement. However, the Settlement Role and Function study (April 2009) recommends Somerton should be a Market Town as it has a strong employment, retail and community role – this was agreed at PMB on May 26th.

The same PMB agreed to a reduction in the scale of housing from 500 to 400 dwellings at Somerton between 2006-28, considering its smaller scale compared to the ‘larger’ Market Towns, reduction of bus service, and to avoid excess housing provision across the district. Given that 226 dwellings have already been built, under construction, committed, or allocated, this leaves 174 to be identified, which is considered deliverable and acceptable for a settlement of Somerton’s size and status. At the time of writing, infrastructure concerns have not been borne out by the findings of the emerging Infrastructure Delivery Plan.

Langport/Huish Episcopi issues

The PMB of May 26th agreed to change Langport/Huish Episcopi’s status from a Rural Centre to Market Town, and a subsequent increase in the scale of growth from 300 to 400 dwellings. Given the proposed increase in the scale of development at Langport/Huish Episcopi, and to be consistent with the other Market Towns, it was necessary to consider potential directions of growth.

The PMB of July 5th agreed a broad direction of growth to the north east, east and south east of the town, but were made aware of the potential requirement for further consultation given that direction of growth options had not previously been subject to consultation. Therefore it was agreed that further engagement should take place with Langport Town Council and Huish Episcopi Parish Council. A meeting was held

with the councils' on August 8th during which they expressed concern at the proposal to change the settlement to a Market Town, as they opined Langport/Huish Episcopi was more suited to be a Rural Centre and did not meet the criteria to be considered a Market Town. The councils' felt the scale of development was too high, with proposed increase of 100 dwellings felt to have little benefit to the community. They raised concerns about infrastructure capacity (particularly foul sewer capacity), although there was support for the provision of additional employment land. Concerns were also raised in the meeting that the direction of growth indicates coalescence with Wearne.

These concerns were reiterated in a letter from the two Councils dated August 29th, which concluded that Langport/Huish Episcopi should be a Rural Centre.

Response

The Settlement Role and Function study recommended that Langport/Huish Episcopi should be a Market Town based upon its strong employment, retail and community role. The draft Core Strategy incorporating preferred options stated that Langport/Huish Episcopi is considered too constrained by flooding issues near its centre to sustainably take the level of growth expected of a Market Town, and therefore considered more suited to Rural Centre status. However, further analysis of potential sites, along with additional sites proposed for potential development by an agent, indicate that there is potential to development outside areas of high flood risk and deliver a 'Market Town' level of development. In addition, there is a 'strategic' level of service provision (e.g. secondary school, sports centre, swimming pool, supermarket) located in Langport/Huish Episcopi compared to some of the other Market Towns, and in particular Somerton. The level of employment in Langport/Huish Episcopi also compares to the Market Towns of Somerton and Ansford/Castle Cary (within 100 jobs of both settlements).

The emerging Infrastructure Delivery Plan will consider the infrastructure concerns in more detail, and recommend mitigation measures as necessary. The consultants have been specifically requested to explore the issue of foul sewer capacity at Langport/Huish Episcopi in further detail.

Coalescence with Wearne should be avoided due to adverse landscape impact and to protect the character of the hamlet – the Core Strategy should make this clear, and this should be indicated on the map by reducing the length of the direction of growth lines.

Ansford/Castle Cary issues

At the PMB held on July 5th clear support was given to Option 1: the preferred option as the direction of growth at Ansford/Castle Cary. However, the issue was raised about the need for a road between Torbay Road industrial estate and Station Road, which members wished to be explored further.

Further investigation discovered that comments received in consultation on the draft Core Strategy incorporating preferred options included the submission of a site within Option 1 for housing and employment development, consistent with the scale proposed at Ansford/Castle Cary. This submission included supporting information for the site and an outline masterplan, which showed the provision of a new vehicular link between Torbay Road and Station Road. The supporting text explained that this link would enable HGV traffic to use Station Road to reach Torbay Road industrial estate without impacting on the residential area of Torbay Road, and would also remove the HGV movements from the narrow sections of Blackworthy Road.

At the Area workshop there were Member concerns about Ansford/Castle Cary's status as a Market Town, with concerns that the ensuing development would adversely impact on the town centre by potentially enabling the viability of a superstore in the centre.

Response

It is considered that the initial commitment of the agent to incorporate a link road provides sufficient certainty and level of detail necessary at this stage, given that is a direction of growth, rather than specific site. Therefore, it is expected that the link road is viable.

The concerns about development enabling a superstore are considered to be illogical – the role and function of Ansford/Castle Cary as a Market Town means that it is expected to see a scale of development to support its role, which may include a superstore. The viability of the existing shops and services in the town could be adversely affected by not allowing development of an appropriate scale.

This point is reflective of a general issue relating to all three 'small' Market Towns that the settlements are reluctant to take growth, yet want to maintain their current facilities and status. However, a level of development is needed just to maintain facilities, and it is a decision Members have to make between leadership and delivery of what locals seek and local views and expectation.

Recommendations

- Retain Somerton as a Market Town, but reduce housing figure to 400 dwellings to better reflect the scale of the town as previously agreed.
- Propose Langport/Huish Episcopi as a Market Town, with a subsequent increase to 400 dwellings, and a broad direction of growth to the north east, east and south east of the town.
- The Core Strategy supporting text should make clear that coalescence with Wearne should be avoided, and the direction of growth lines shortened to reflect this.
- Maintain contact with the promoter of land within Option 1 at Ansford/Castle Cary, ensuring an appropriate scheme comes forward consistent with the content and timescale of the Core Strategy i.e. upon its adoption. Incorporate the reference to a potential road link in the Core Strategy proposals for Ansford/Castle Cary.