

South Somerset District Council: Local Plan 2006 – 2028

Independent Examination, May 2013

South Somerset District Council Hearing Statement

Issue 14

Rural Centres and the Countryside

April 2013

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Issue 14 Rural Centres and the Countryside

Question 14.1

Is the policy for growth and change in each of these settlements and in the countryside appropriate and justified, including in relation to national guidance and local needs, and in terms of economic, social and environmental impact? Is the level of growth in each rural centre sufficient to help retain existing services, such as schools? Will an appropriate balance between jobs and homes in these settlements be achieved?

- 1.1 The Councils Settlement Role and Function Study (CD 35, paragraphs 6.23-6.25) identifies the Rural Centres as settlements that have a retail and community service role. They are settlements that are important in the District as they act as focal points for surrounding settlements for retail and strategic community facility provision. Martock, South Petherton and Bruton also exhibit lower levels of employment function. The six settlements the study identifies are:
- Ilchester
 - South Petherton
 - Martock
 - Bruton
 - Milborne Port
 - Stoke Sub-Hamdon
- 1.2 The settlements provide a range of retail or community services to meet the needs of the local area. They are well placed to meet local housing needs given their geographical distribution across the district and some perform a valuable employment provision role for the surrounding area. All other settlements in a lower classification to that of Rural Centres in the settlement hierarchy are classified as Rural Settlements.
- 1.3 The notes of the Council's Local development Framework Project Management Board Workshop 1 [CD 115] show that there was little public response to the review of the Rural Centres and that no other settlements were to be added to the Rural Centres classification in the settlement hierarchy.
- 1.4 The Proposed Submission South Somerset Local Plan (PSSSLP) [CD3] focuses new development at the most sustainable locations in the district, Yeovil, the Primary Market Towns, the Local Market Towns and the Rural Centres. However the rural nature of the district means that there are numerous smaller settlements scattered across South Somerset that do not meet the criteria to be considered a Market Town or Rural Centre, but where development to enhance their sustainability would be acceptable. The settlements in this tier of the hierarchy are known as Rural Settlements.
- 1.5 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) establishes a presumption in favour of sustainable development which for plan-making means positively seeking

opportunities to meet the development needs of the district, with the Local Plan meeting objectively assessed needs with sufficient flexibility to adapt to rapid change.

- 1.6 Greg Clark's ministerial introduction to the NPPF emphasises that planning must be a creative exercise in finding ways to enhance and improve the places in which we live our lives and that from now on the planning process should include rather than exclude local people and communities. Paragraph 1 of the NPPF states that the NPPF provides a framework in which local people and their Council can produce their own distinctive plans which local needs and priorities.
- 1.7 It is considered that the documents which form the basis of the PSSSLP Policies SS1: Settlement Strategy and SS2: Development in Rural Settlements are consistent with the key objectives of the NPPF and particularly address the Core Planning Principles set out in paragraph 17 of the NPPF.
- 1.8 In accordance with paragraphs 18 to 22 of the NPPF the proposed levels of development set out in policies SS3 and SS5 of the PSSSLP as amended [CD3b, M34 & M74] promote the sustainable economic growth of the Rural Centres and Rural Settlements, together with offering a choice of high quality homes¹ in accordance with paragraph 47 of the NPPF (1,133 dwellings within the Rural Centres and 2,242 within the Rural Settlements across the plan period). Policy SS6 of the PSSSLP enables the Council to secure the provision of a range of infrastructure to support development which will, in accordance with paragraph 70 of the NPPF, fulfil a social role and contribute towards strong and healthy communities with access to the facilities to support their needs.
- 1.9 The cluster workshops undertaken between November 2009 and March 2010 (CD 131, paragraph 3.9-3.11) allowed for early and meaningful engagement and collaboration with the local community, as encouraged by paragraph 155 of the NPPF, and was an important consideration in determining the appropriate levels of growth for the Rural Centres. The cluster workshops involved the Parish and Town Councils, together with a range of stakeholders suggested by the Parish and Town Councils. This enabled the identification of the context for and implications of decisions, the local community to develop their vision for the town based on the Sustainable Community Strategy (CD 32) and growth needs, as well as enabling the early involvement of local Councillors in the decision making process.
- 1.10 Policy SS5 of the Proposed Submission South Somerset Local Plan (PSSSLP) as amended (CD 3b, M74) supports the development of residential development in the Rural Centres across the plan period
 - Ilchester – 141 dwellings (1 commitment, 140 residual requirement)
 - South Petherton – 229 dwellings (151 commitments, 78 residual requirement)
 - Martock – 230 dwellings (106 commitments, 124 residual requirement)
 - Bruton – 203 dwellings (103 commitments, 100 residual requirement)
 - Milborne Port – 279 dwellings (202 commitments, 77 residual requirement)

¹ Including affordable housing

- Stoke Sub-Hamdon – 51 dwellings (7 commitments, 44 residual requirement)
- 1.11 The level of housing growth proposed for the Rural Centres has been derived from the Housing Requirement for South Somerset and Yeovil (CD 30) report which developed an overall housing provision requirement for the district. Modifications and updates were subsequently undertaken by the Council including:
- BRES data (2010 and 2011 data) updated on two occasions (taking the base data for the economic calculation forward to 2011 and replacing the assumption adopted by Bakers to derive a 2010 base date)
 - Two updates to population projections (from which household requirements were derived) to reflect 2010 based Population Projections and ONS Population Projections to 2021 (and extended to 2028) to reflect early consideration of the 2011 census.
- 1.12 The distribution of the overall housing provision requirement for the district amongst the identified Strategically Significant Town, Primary Market Towns, Local Market Towns and Rural Centres was determined using the following assessment criteria:
- Sustainability of distribution options
 - Balance of jobs with homes
 - Settlement hierarchy
 - Land availability (demonstrated by Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment); and
 - Local (settlement based) factors including:
 - Economic performance of settlements
 - Size and self-containment
 - Existing saved Local Plan proposals
 - Indicative growth appropriate for settlement types
 - Need to assimilate past growth
 - Environmental/archaeological and flooding constraints
 - Policy aspirations for Rural Settlements
 - Existing commitments; and
 - Market delivery as exemplified by the housing trajectory
- 1.13 Workshop 1 of the Local Development Framework Project Management Board meetings (CD 115) reviewed the scale of growth proposed in the Rural Centres:
- Ilchester:
No change to scale of housing growth but review this once the Strategic defence review is complete.
 - South Petherton:
Increase the housing provision to 245 dwellings to contribute towards creating a more sustainable and self-contained settlement.
 - Martock:
Increase the housing provision to 275 dwellings to reflect the extension of the plan to 2028 and contribute towards creating a more sustainable and self-contained settlement.

- Bruton:
No change in approach.
 - Milborne Port:
Increase the housing provision to 330 dwellings to reflect the extension of the plan to 2028 and contribute towards creating a more sustainable and self-contained settlement.
 - Stoke Sub-Hamdon:
No change in approach.
- 1.14 The figures attributed to the Rural Centres and Rural Settlements through Policy SS5 of the PSSSLP as amended (CD 3b, M74) were subsequently amended in light of representations made on the Proposed Submission South Somerset Local Plan and the content contained in Business Requirement Employment Survey information and ONS population projections through discussions in the Local Development Framework Project Management Board meetings 21-23 (CD 117 & CD 118). The Council's Housing Topic Paper [CD 14] provides full details of how the scale and distribution of residential growth and change was arrived at.
- 1.15 The quantum of employment land provision made within the Rural Centres and Rural Settlements has been derived through a three stage Employment Land Review (ELR) process. The first stage identified an overall gross and net supply at April 2010 with the second stage then looking to rationalise the employment land provision provided for in Policy HMA13 of the Proposed Modifications to the Regional Spatial Strategy and apply that rationale to local conditions to create a robust picture of future land requirements. Stage two also identified that the employment land allocations in the Core Strategy would not be sufficient to meet the districts employment land requirements over the plan period and that there was a need/demand for approximately 104 ha of employment land to 2026. The third stage brought together the conclusions of the previous two stages and refined a final requirement of 107.43 ha, taking into account future housing growth and qualitative factors such as geography, type of employment land available and required in each settlement and the views of the Town and Parish Councils.
- 1.16 The levels of employment land provision for the rural centres in Stage 3 of the ELR (CDi, page 30) were established to support self-contained population growth and create more sustainable settlements. The recommended levels per settlement were:
- Ilchester – 1 ha
 - South Petherton - None
 - Martock – 1 ha
 - Bruton – 1 ha
 - Milborne Port – 2 ha
 - Stoke Sub-Hamdon – 0.5 ha
- 1.17 It is acknowledged that this differs from the employment land requirements identified for these settlements in the PSSSLP as amended (CD 3b, M34). The justification and reasoning for this is that the Local development Framework Project Management Board Workshop 2 (CD 115, Employment Land Report page 11) identified that a combined jobs figure had been identified for the Rural Centres based on Nomis. In

order to identify land requirements for 'B' uses in these settlements, a minimum viability site size was identified in consultation with the Council's Economic Development officers to provide scope for development to kick-start employment growth. This was considered to be 2 ha in the Rural Centres. Provision of larger employment land requirements provides scope for additional employment opportunities to be provided in order to reduce the level of out-commuting from the Rural Centres and aims to ensure that the housing and economic potential of settlements are appropriately balanced. The Council's Employment Topic Paper [CD 11] provides full details of how employment land requirements were arrived at.

- 1.18 Assessments of the environmental, social and economic implications of the application of PSSSLP Policy SS1: Settlement Hierarchy, Policy SS5: delivering New Housing Growth and Policy SS2: Development in Rural Settlements were undertaken through formal Sustainability Appraisal (SA) [CD 16c, Appendix 7]. The SA identified that:
- The balanced approach to the distribution of development has many advantages over a more dispersed approach by ensuring better access to jobs, shops and facilities and services. This should help reduce the need to travel in the district. The Focus upon Yeovil, Market Towns and Rural Centres will allow housing need in the larger settlements to be met, whilst limiting new housing in rural settlements where there is generally poor access to jobs and services. The landscape and townscape of rural settlements should be better protected than a more dispersed approach.
 - There are several positive social and economic benefits of development in Rural Settlements. Mitigation measures have resulted in changes to policy, or are included in the plan policies.
- 1.19 The PSSSLP as amended [CD 3b, M70] sets out the importance of sustainable growth within the Rural Settlements whilst restricting the total level of growth across these settlements to ensure that excessive provision does not occur and undermine their standing in the settlement strategy. The evidence in the Council's Annual Monitoring Report 2010-11 indicates a significant drop in the provision of additional housing in the Rural Settlements so the PSSSLP makes provision for 2,242 dwelling in Rural Settlements across the plan period and there is clear evidence from the SHLAA that there are sufficient sites that could come forward in Rural Settlements to deliver this level of provision.
- 1.20 The PSSSLP as amended [CD 3b, M64] looks to deliver more sustainable and self-contained communities through balancing the projected environmental performance with housing needs. Figure 5: Balancing Jobs and Homes illustrates the balance between the percentage of new jobs and the percentage of new homes in Rural Centres as 9% and 7% respectively, and for Rural Settlements 10.5% new jobs against 14% new homes, demonstrating a balanced approach to growth.
- 1.21 Paragraphs 4.97 to 4.100 of the PSSSLP as amended [CD3a, paragraphs 4.111 to 4.115] set out the local settlement based factors influencing growth. For Bruton, Martock/Bower Hinton and Milborne Port, the housing requirements reflect their

status as Rural Centres and provide opportunities to maintain and enhance local services and facilities. In Ilchester there are opportunities to support town centre services, whilst noting that growth is limited due to environmental constraints in the form of archaeological remains and flooding. South Petherton's growth aims to aid self-containment and support local services, whilst Stoke sub Hamdon's growth reflects the scale and nature of the settlement.

- 1.22 The PSSSLP Housing Trajectory as amended (Cd 3b, M75) illustrates the rate at which the quantum of growth projected in the plan is anticipated to be delivered and it is considered that this, combined with the level of employment land requirements, provides sufficient growth across the Rural Centres and the Rest of the District to assist in the retention of existing services.
- 1.23 The Council considers that the policy for growth and change in the Rural Centres and the Rural Settlements is appropriate and justified. It is commensurate with the settlements standing within the settlement hierarchy and the level of growth and change proposed over the plan period is considered to be sufficient to maintain the settlements functions, sustaining and enhancing their roles at levels appropriate to their size, accessibility, character and physical identity. The local community in each settlement helped to shape the level of growth and change proposed through early engagement through the cluster workshops. This provided local knowledge and understanding of each settlement which has helped to determine the appropriate levels of growth to maintain the role and function of the Rural Centres within the settlement hierarchy.
- 1.24 The economic, social and environmental impacts of the proposed level of growth and change have been assessed through Sustainability Appraisal with issues identified able to be addressed through the application of policies within the PSSSLP.
- 1.25 The levels of employment growth proposed make allowance for additional land to be made available to provide scope for development to kick-start employment growth, enabling the creation of new employment opportunities within the settlements, reducing out-commuting and increasing levels of self-containment. In addition to which the increased quantum of employment land provision in the Rural Centres will help to provide a greater balance between jobs and homes.
- 1.26 Overall the policy for growth and change is considered to be appropriate to the scale of these settlements within the settlement hierarchy, their ability to extend the range of services to better meet the needs of each settlement and its immediate surrounds, and their ability to meet identified needs.

Question 14.2

Have appropriate assessments of infrastructure requirements, drainage, highway safety and employment provision been undertaken?

- 2.1 The Council's Report on Infrastructure Planning (CD 36) distinguishes between infrastructure that is required to cover existing deficiencies, that which is related to new development and that which responds to the areas aspirations. It breaks infrastructure into three distinct groups, physical, social and green infrastructure and takes each area in turn, examining the infrastructure items within each area. The study identified the level of capacity that each of the infrastructure types has to meet current and future needs and identifies that the only settlement with critical infrastructure requirements within the rural centres and countryside settlement classifications is Martock where fluvial flood risk defences are identified for which funding is anticipated to be provided by the Environment Agency.
- 2.2 For the purposes of clarity, critical infrastructure is defined as infrastructure that without which development cannot commence. Policy SS6: Infrastructure Delivery, of the Local Plan (CD 3a) establishes that the Council will secure the provision of (or financial contributions towards) a range of physical, social and green infrastructure which the Council considers necessary to enable development to proceed which will be secured through Planning Obligations and/or CIL.
- 2.3 The Report on Infrastructure Planning (CD 36) was developed in close consultation with service providers using the projected growth figures for the rural centres and countryside set out in the Proposed Submission Draft Local Plan (PSDLP) as a basis for assessing future requirements. The report sets out (CD 36, paragraphs 7.26-7.32) the infrastructure requirements of the Rural Centres and rural areas based upon this:
- Bruton:
There is a risk of flooding along the course of the river and its tributary Combe Brook which places constraints upon locations for development. Two specific physical infrastructure schemes are identified, including improvements at Bruton railway station and flood alleviation measures at Combe Brook. The study also identifies several community, leisure and health requirements over the plan period
 - Ilchester:
Growth is constrained by flood risk and noise contours from RNAS Yeovilton. No physical infrastructure requirements were identified whilst social and green infrastructure requirements relate to leisure and community schemes including extending community hall provision.
 - Martock:
The Hurst Brook presents flood risk issues that constrain the location of development. The study also identifies several open space and leisure requirements as well as a requirement for extended community hall facilities.
 - Milborne Port:
Areas of flood risk run through the centre from the north to the south. A number of open space and leisure requirements were also identified.
 - South Petherton:

There are areas of flood risk to the north of the town. The study also identified several open space and leisure requirements as well as a requirement for extended community hall facilities.

- Stoke Sub-Hamdon:
A number of open space and leisure requirements were identified.
- Rural Areas:
A range of open space and leisure facilities were identified, as well as replacement facilities for Church View surgery, a new medical centre at Merriott and eighteen new community halls across the plan period.

2.4 Drainage requirements were assessed through liaison with the relevant officers at South Somerset District Council and the Environment Agency (EA) to understand the infrastructure implications for new development. The Report on Infrastructure Planning (CD 36, paragraph 4.15) identifies locations where mitigation will be required to prevent any increased flood risk:

- Bruton:
While there is flood risk in the middle of the town this is protected by an EA dam. Development to the north east of the town would run off downstream of the dam so this will need to be mitigated by SUDS. The EA has identified a need for future work on the Combe Brook, which may require investment in the future.
- Ilchester:
There is a flood risk in relation to the River Yeo running through the town this is protected by an embankment. The EA has indicated that these defences will require reinforcement in the future. There is surface flooding in the Meads which will need improvement in the future, but this is not in the locations for future development. Development to the north will be on higher ground but there is an increased risk for development to the south and south west.
- Martock:
The Hurst Brook has significant flood issues and so should be avoided by development. Development to the south east should be on the edge of the flood plain and will require SUDS. The EA has identified a need for new flood mitigation to protect new development at the costs to developers.
- Milborne Port:
Generally free from flooding issues except to the south east outside the settlement limits.
- South Petherton:
No significant flooding issues although as it will drain to the Parrett it will require SUDS.
- Stoke Sub-Hamdon:
While there are no significant flooding issues although as it will drain to the Martock system it will require SUDS.

The findings of the Report on Infrastructure Planning [CD16] were reported to the Local Development Framework Project Management Board at Workshop 11 [CD 116] on the 18th January 2012 and endorsed.

The Somerset Future Transport Plan (CD 22) informed the transport infrastructure requirements set out in the Report on Infrastructure Planning (CD 36) and Somerset

County Council as the highway authority were closely involved in the development of the requirements set out in the report. Somerset County Highways did not raise any specific major issues relating to the highway safety in relation to the Rural Centres and Rural Settlements.

- 2.6 The explanation of the appropriate assessment of employment provision for the Rural Centres and Countryside is set out in paragraphs 1.15 to 1.17 of Question 14.1.
- 2.9 The Council considers that appropriate assessments of infrastructure requirements, drainage, highway safety and employment provision have been undertaken. The implications on infrastructure, drainage and highway safety have been considered through the Council's Report on Infrastructure (CD 36) which assessed spare capacity and the likely requirements arising from new development proposed in the Rural Centres and countryside. Martock was the only area where a critical infrastructure requirement was identified with the EA identified as the funding source for this requirement through the report. A number of the other Rural Centres have requirements for necessary infrastructure and these are largely considered to be deliverable through the application of PSDLP Policy SS6: Infrastructure Delivery.
- 2.10 Appropriate assessment of the quantum of employment provision in these settlements has been undertaken through the Employment Land Review and subsequent amendment through the Local Development Framework Project Management Board Workshop Employment Land report (CD 115) which resulted in a minimum viability site size being established through consultation with the Council's Economic Development Officers to provide scope to kick-start growth.
- 2.11 Overall the Council considers that appropriate assessments of these requirements have been undertaken which have enabled the formulation of proposed levels of growth and change appropriate to the scale of these settlements within the settlement hierarchy.

Question 14.3

What is the Council's approach towards the re-use and extension of rural buildings and is it justified?

- 3.1 The draft Core Strategy (incorporating Preferred Options) [CD 1] included Policy EP4: Conversion or Re-use of Buildings in the Countryside. In summary the policy adopted a sequential approach to the re-use of rural buildings, focusing firstly on a business or community re-use, prior to residential use.
- 3.2 On 27th March 2012, the NPPF was published. Para 55 of the NPPF seeks to avoid isolated new homes in the countryside unless there are special circumstances, such as the development re-using redundant or disused buildings and leading to an enhancement to the immediate setting.

- 3.3 PMB Workshop 14 paper "National Planning Policy Framework and its Implications for the Emerging Core Strategy" [CD 133] which reviews the NPPF and its implications for the Local Plan, explains that in light of para 55 of the NPPF the re-use of redundant and disused buildings in rural areas for residential use is now to be permitted as it constitutes "special circumstances".
- 3.4 The District Council is of the opinion that the policy approach taken in the NPPF is directly at odds with the policy approach proposed in Policy EP4 which sought to put business or community re-use first and resist residential use unless every reasonable attempt had been made to secure suitable business use or live/ work use. The District Council felt that the policy approach in EP4 could not be maintained in the light of NPPF and the policy was deleted from the emerging Local Plan 2002 - 2028. Policy EP4: Conversion or Re-use of Buildings in the Countryside and its supporting text was deleted by Full Council on 23rd April 2012.
- 3.5 The PSSSLP [CD 3] contains guidance for the expansion of buildings in the countryside - Policy EP4: Expansion of Existing Businesses in the Countryside and HG8: Replacement Dwellings in the Countryside are both supportive of appropriately scaled development, which is considered consistent with the NPPF (para 28 and 55). PSSSLP [CD 3] Policy EP15: Protection and Provision of Local Shops, Community Facilities and Services, guides the re-use of community uses which is also consistent with the NPPF. The PSSSLP [CD 3] Policy EP5: Farm Diversification also supports the re-use of appropriately located existing buildings for development for the purpose of farm diversification.
- 3.6 The District Council considers that these policies, supported by the guidance contained in para 55 of the NPPF is robust and justified, ensuring sufficient policy to assess planning decisions for the re-use and extension of rural buildings.