

South Somerset District Council: Local Plan 2006 – 2028

Independent Examination, May 2013

South Somerset District Council Hearing Statement

Issue 17

Environmental Quality and Sustainable Development

April 2013

Issue 17: Environmental Quality and Sustainable Development

Contents	Page
Question 17.1	
Question 17.2	
Question 17.3	
Question 17.4	
Question 17.5	
Question 17.6	
Question 17.7	

Issue 17 Environmental Quality and Sustainable Development

Question 17.1

Will the local plan be effective in protecting the District's environmental and heritage assets? Is it sufficiently robust particularly with regard to protecting sites of biodiversity and/or geological importance? Is sufficient protection given to the setting of the District's towns and villages?

- 1.1 South Somerset District Council recognises the importance of the environmental and heritage assets of the District. Between policies EQ2, EQ3, EQ4 and EQ5 there is a requirement for consideration to be given against planning application proposals, for the impact on the environment, wildlife, biodiversity, natural habitats, geological interest, the character of the landscape and local distinctiveness.
- 1.2 Proposed modifications M163 – M168 (CD 3b) have been put forward by the Council following further consideration of the comments submitted during the consultation process. These particularly reflect and allay concerns of English Heritage and were mutually agreed through continual dialogue with English Heritage (CD 13, appendix 2a).
- 1.3 To further protect our environmental and historic assets there is a policy requirement to have regard to South Somerset's published advice and guidance. In that context and in line with the principles of the NPPF, the District Council is committed to the production of the additional Supplementary Planning Documents; The Landscape Strategy, the Heritage Strategy and the Green Infrastructure Strategy. These are established in the LDS (CD 27).

Question 17.2

Is the overall approach to design appropriate and will it result in distinctive development that will add to the character of the District?

- 2.1 South Somerset covers an area of 370 square miles and has a distinctive variation in form, local building designs and materials. Settlements arose and evolved for a range of diverse functions. This included agriculture, industrial and quarrying, influencing the form and setting of the towns and villages, resulting in variations from linear developments to settlements built around the village square.
- 2.2 Fundamentally there are 9 different distinctive naturally occurring building materials within the District, from Blue Lias in the north, to Chert and Flint in the west, Ham Stone to the south and Cucklington Oolite to the east. The variety of quality building materials results in different forms and characters of settlements.
- 2.3 Furthermore there are 5 National Character Landscape Areas, Blackmoor Vale, Yeovil Scarplands, Somerset Levels and Moors, Mid Somerset Hills and the

Blackdowns, each of which also plays an important role in the form and character of South Somerset settlements.

- 2.4 EQ2 is to be applied in the context of and in concert with NPPF paras 56 – 68. In view of the significant variations which influence the character of the area and each settlement, it is not considered appropriate to apply one prescriptive design standard across the district. In line with the requirements of para 59 of the NPPF, policy EQ2 is not considered over prescriptive but requires developments to have regard to key aspects as local distinctiveness and character of the area. This is in particular expressed in the policy references to
- Creating Quality Places
 - Conserving and enhancing the landscape character of the area
 - Reinforcing local distinctiveness and respect local context
 - Local area character
 - Site specific considerations
- 2.5 South Somerset has produced a number of design guides that were listed in conjunction with the Draft Core Strategy. These design guides will be reviewed and revised, where necessary, during the plan period to allow greater flexibility. A Heritage Strategy and a Landscape Strategy (which will be adopted as Supplementary Planning Documents) have also been timetabled into the LDS (CD 27). Conservation Area appraisals are also being undertaken. Like the specific references to policy EQ2 the policy and supporting text refers to these proposed SPD's demonstrating commitment to distinctive character adding to the character of the District.

17.3 Is policy EQ1 consistent with the relevant national guidance on climate change? Is the policy overly prescriptive?

- 3.1 The Council consider that Policy EQ1 is fully consistent with national guidance on climate change, by helping to secure radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, minimising vulnerability and providing resilience to climate change impacts, and supporting the delivery of renewable and low carbon energy (NPPF, para 93). As well as the NPPF, national legislation (Climate Change Act 2008), policy (e.g. UK Renewable Energy Strategy 2009), and standards (e.g. Code for Sustainable Homes, BREEAM, Building Regulations) clearly support the need to address climate change [CD3, para 12.4, 12.9, 12.13 – 12.15]. Policy EQ1 clearly supports proposals that demonstrate how climate change mitigation and adaptation will be delivered.
- 3.2 The reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is primarily covered by the first three bullet points of Policy EQ1. The first of these outlines that new development should minimise carbon dioxide emissions through energy efficiency measures, renewable and low carbon energy, and where necessary Allowable Solutions. This is consistent with the NPPF, paragraphs 95 and 97. There is currently some uncertainty on what will constitute an Allowable Solution, as this has yet to be announced by the Government – this is explained in the local plan [CD3, para 12.13].

- 3.3 The second bullet point sets out sustainable construction standards. This is consistent with paragraph 95 of the NPPF, as the timing for requiring Code for Sustainable Homes standards is in line with the gradual improvements to the energy standards in the Building Regulations and the Government's zero carbon buildings policy [CD3, para 12.13 – 15], and the Code for Sustainable Homes and BREEAM are nationally described standards. The policy gives some flexibility by not requiring these standards where it is proven not to be feasible or viable. Research suggests that the cost of meeting the energy requirement of the Building Regulations represents a significant proportion of total build cost.¹ Evidence on development viability has considered the extra build costs of meeting Code for Sustainable Homes standards set out in Policy EQ1, and indicate that this should not inhibit delivery of the plan, consistent with the NPPF (para 173 – 174) [CD35, para 3.27, and Appendix 1]. The additional BREEAM costs are also considered in development viability calculations [CD35, Appendix 2].
- 3.4 The third bullet point encourages renewable and low carbon energy provided there are no significant adverse impacts; and the fourth bullet point is included as a recommendation from the Habitats Regulations Assessment in order to ensure that internationally protected biodiversity species receive adequate protection [CD8]. This is consistent with paragraph 97 of the NPPF.
- 3.5 The bullet points in Policy EQ1 (5 – 7) relating to flood risk are all consistent with paragraphs 100 – 104 of the NPPF. These apply the Sequential and Exception Tests in order to steer new development away from areas at highest risk, and making development safe. The incorporation of sustainable drainage systems is in line with the NPPF, paragraph 103 which states that development should give priority to their use.
- 3.6 The penultimate bullet point of Policy EQ1 relates to incorporating design measures that will help ensure new development is able to mitigate and adapt to climate change. This reflects national guidance in paragraphs 93 – 96 of the NPPF, outlining the importance of mitigation and adaptation measures, such as taking account of landform, layout, building orientation, massing and landscaping to minimise energy consumption (para 96, NPPF).
- 3.7 The final bullet point seeks to ensure that the impacts of climate change upon biodiversity are considered in new development. This is consistent with the NPPF, particularly paragraph 99, which makes clear that changes to biodiversity as a result of climate change should be considered, new development should be planned to avoid increased vulnerability to climate change impacts, and adaptation included where necessary. Policies EQ4 and EQ5 set out the general approach to biodiversity and green infrastructure.
- 3.8 The Council do not consider Policy EQ1 to be overly prescriptive. Given the range of issues that climate change covers, it is acknowledged that Policy EQ1 is relatively long. As explained above, the policy is considered to be consistent with national guidance, which clearly advocates the importance of meeting the challenge of climate

¹ Cost of buildings to the Code for Sustainable Homes – updated cost review, DCLG, August 2011.

change. The policy includes caveats to ensure that the delivery of development is not impeded by requiring unrealistic expectations of sustainable construction standards, in not requiring these standards where it is not feasible or viable.

17.4 Is the Council's approach to the alleviation of flood risk and to water management sufficiently robust? Is sufficient weight attached to the need to protect water resources?

- 4.1 The approach to the alleviation of flood risk is set out in Policy EQ1 and its supporting text [CD3, para 12.16 – 20]. As explained in paragraph 3.5 above, policy on flood risk is consistent with the NPPF. The PSSSLP provides further detail on the application of the Sequential Test, relating to the 'area of search,' in order to usefully amplify national guidance [CD3, para 12.18 and Policy EQ1].
- 4.2 In terms of water management, Wessex Water have been consulted in preparing the local plan, and specifically regarding evidence on water infrastructure that is required to deliver the plan [CD36, para 4.24 – 34]. This evidence makes clear that the extension of Wessex Water's grid network will enable better use of water resources, avoiding abstraction from sources that can affect river flows during very dry weather, that will guarantee water supply for 2026 and beyond [CD36, para 4.27]. Additional sewerage capacity may be required at Yeovil, Chard and Crewkerne, which will be funded by Wessex Water [CD36, para 4.28 – 30].
- 4.3 The PSSSLP highlights that hotter and drier summers as a result of climate change could mean reduced levels of water supply [CD3, para 12.8]. Although evidence on infrastructure planning [CD36] and in the Water Resources Management Plan (Wessex Water, 2010) does not indicate that 'water stress' (potential lack of water supply) is a particular issue in South Somerset, climate change and population growth will require more efficient use of water, as reflected in the measures set out in the plan [CD3, para 12.14 and Policy EQ1].
- 4.4 In terms of protecting water resources, as highlighted above, Wessex Water have confirmed that water infrastructure will be able to support new development in the local plan, in an environmentally acceptable manner. The impact of the policies in the local plan upon water quality has also been an important consideration through the SA process [CD16]. The review of other relevant plans which informed the SA included consideration of those relating to protecting water resources, such as the EC Water Framework Directive, the South West River Basin Management Plan, and the Water Resources Management Plan (highlighted above) [CD16c – Appendix 1]. There is a specific SA objective relating to minimising pollution, which seeks to maintain and improve water quality, and the plan policies have been considered against this objective. In addition, the Council have proposed a minor modification to include reference to ensure that protection of water quality is specifically included in Policy EQ7 [CD3b, M170].

17.5 Should the local plan include reference to waste management?

- 5.1 The Council consider that the local plan does include sufficient reference to waste management. Waste planning policy is identified as an important influence on the local plan, which has informed the policies and proposals in the plan [CD3, figure 2]. The Council has inputted into the production of the Somerset Waste Core Strategy, which sets out the planning approach to waste management, by making representations at consultation stages and through informal on-going dialogue.
- 5.2 The need for additional waste infrastructure as a result of local plan growth proposals is identified where necessary, indicating that a new Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC) is required alongside the growth at Yeovil, and an extension should be made to Chard HWRC [CD36, para 4.46 – 54; CD3, para 5.40].
- 5.3 The importance of efficient waste management is particularly highlighted for the Yeovil Sustainable Urban Extension (SUE). One of the standards that this development should achieve is to include a sustainable waste and resources plan [CD3, para 5.43]. In pursuance of this, three studies have been prepared that seek to deliver a waste resources plan for the SUE, which will be considered in further detail in producing the forthcoming AAP [CD137a, b, and c; CD3, para 5.44].
- 5.4 In addition, the local plan highlights that the policy seeking sustainable construction standards will help to minimise waste [CD3, para 12.14 and 12.31].
- 4.5 and population growth will require more efficient use of water, as reflected in the measures set out in the local plan [CD3, para 12.14 and Policy EQ1].

Question 17.6

Is the Council's approach to the provision and protection of green infrastructure sound?

- 6.1 The Council's approach to Green Infrastructure provision and protection is based upon an extensive evidence base provided by a number of departments within the Council and working with external partners. Crucially the Strategy aims to preserve key elements of existing green infrastructure in the planning of developments, improve existing green space within urban areas and provide enhanced connectivity between these spaces. We also believe, in line with the requirements of the NPPF, this is essential for the planning of sustainable forms of drainage, mitigation of climate change, promotion of biodiversity and the health and wellbeing of local residents.
- 16.2 A Green Infrastructure Strategy is timetabled in the LDS (CD27) and its nature, coverage and delivery are presented as an initial profile.
- 16.3 It is worth noting that there were no objections in principle to this policy and SSDC considers the approach to the provision of green infrastructure is sound.

Question 17.7

Will an appropriate balance between environmental quality and viability be achieved?

- 7.1 The CIL evidence base (CD 35) indicates development to be broadly viable at present. Development standards should not be compromised even in the tough trading conditions. Quality of development is not a negotiable matter. Viability is addressed at SSDC via a review of planning obligations. The Council has a planning obligation protocol to this effect. This is referred to in proposed modification M173 (CD3b) footnote 287, that identifies the potential to review where upon demonstration that obligations are adversely impacting viability, obligations may be reasonable paired back to make sites viable.
- 7.2 The approach taken through Landscape and policies EQ2, 3, 4 and 5 and the further clarification the Historic Heritage, GI Strategies enables focus on environmental quality at no additional cost to the viability of the sites. The forthcoming SPD's will be opportunities to address more closely deliverability issues.
- 17.4 With regard to viability in the context of the requirements for EQ1, I would refer to the answer given under question 17.3.