

South Somerset Local Plan (2006 – 2028) – Examination Hearing Sessions

Policy SS3: Delivering New Employment Land – Explanation of the Figure for Rural Settlements

Introduction

The Council has been asked to provide an explanation for the employment land figure identified for 'Rural Settlements' under Policy SS3.

South Somerset is one of the largest rural districts in the south west, and accounts for a third of Somerset's area, covering 958 sq.km (370 sq.miles). Over 40% of the district's population live in settlements of fewer than 2,500 residents and the district is made up of a mixture of sparsely inhabited rural areas, a network of villages, a number of market towns of varying size and influence, and the main urban centre of Yeovil. The Local Plan Vision for 2028 is that the villages and rural settlements will be able to provide for local provision of jobs, and the Council believes that the policy provides the basis to articulate this vision.

The Rural Settlements have an important economic role and function within the district - providing small scale employment opportunities for the resident population. The Council's monitoring confirms this, with 79% of employment development in Rural Settlements between 01.04.06 - 30.09.13 comprising sites of less than 0.1 hectares, and 93% of those sites employing fewer than 10 people.

Concerns were raised at the Examination Hearing Session that including a target figure for employment land in Rural Settlements would result in large-scale, speculative development in the countryside. The Council disagrees with this view and suggests that the Local Plan policy framework provided by Policy SS2, EP4 and EP5; as well as the Main Modifications to Policy SS3 and Policy SS5 will deliver sustainable economic development in rural areas, with safeguards provided through the Development Management process. The Council also highlights that the monitoring data on employment land delivery in rural areas does not support the idea that large-scale development will occur.

Explanation of 13.99 hectares "target" for Rural Centres

The figures as presented in proposed Main Modification 4 are identified below:

Table 1: Policy SS3 as updated by Main Modification

Settlement	Local Plan 2006-2028 Employment Land Requirement (a)	Existing Employment Land Commitments (as at April 2011) (b)	Additional Employment Land Provision Required (total employment land less existing commitments) (c)	Total Jobs to be Encouraged 2006-2028 (d)	B Use jobs (e)
Rural Settlements	13.99	7.86	6.13	1181	720

Policy SS3 states that there is a requirement for 13.99 hectares of employment land in the Rural Settlements over the plan period, this is generated by combining together the existing employment land commitments (b) (7.86 hectares) and the additional employment land required as a result of the need generated by the B use jobs (c) (6.13 hectares).

The existing commitments comprise land with planning permission but not started, land under construction and completed developments.

The Council's monitoring data has been updated for this exercise. The historic rate of development provides a sense of perspective as to the scale and type of economic development that occurs in rural areas.

Table 2: Economic Development in Rural Settlements between 01.04.06 and 30.09.13

Hectares of completed employment land (Generating approximately 262 jobs)	9.53
Hectares of employment land under construction (as at 30.09.13) (Generating approximately 32 jobs)	1.33
Hectares of employment land granted planning permission but development has not commenced (as at 30.09.13) (Generating approximately 80 jobs)	2.10
Total hectares of employment land commitments (as at 30.09.13) (Generating approximately 374 jobs)	12.96

There is currently 12.96 hectares of employment land committed in the Rural Settlements, generating approximately 374 jobs¹. This is a ratio of 1 job per 0.03 hectares. This indicates that employment density ratios can vary considerably in rural areas, and more importantly, so do the uses and the types of development. Typically in the Rural Settlements development comes forward via barn conversions, agricultural diversification schemes, extensions to existing small scale development - schemes that assimilate into the countryside and support the role of function of rural areas.

Based upon this trend and a practical analysis of the type and nature of South Somerset's economy it is prudent to continue to support this type of economic growth. There will be more jobs delivered over the rest of the plan period, and these will require land, and so the figure of 6.13 hectares has been retained. The inclusion of no further land would not convey the correct message to the market, nor would it recognise the nature of planning applications being submitted to enable the diversification of agricultural and other land-based industries, and support sustainable tourism. The Council maintains that this approach is in accordance with Paragraph 28 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which is supportive of sustainable economic growth in rural areas.

Scale of Development

The concerns expressed during the Examination Hearing Session regarding the policy leading to larger scale development in the Rural Settlements are not supported by the current evidence. The data illustrates that whilst there are instances of larger scale development: Aircraft production facility at Henstridge Airfield (3.2 hectares and approximately 75 jobs); Land at Lopen Head (0.87 hectares and approximately 125 jobs); and Nursery Business Park for additional facilities at the existing Thales at Templecombe (0.13 hectares and approximately 20 jobs) these are in locations where the principle of

¹ Note: this information has been obtained from the planning applications, hence the approximation.

development has already been accepted. The majority of development in the Rural Settlements is very small scale between 0.05 and 0.1 hectares and under 10 employees. It is the Council's belief that the planning policy context offered through the Local Plan will support this smaller scale development and there is no reason to constrain economic opportunities by providing a reduced level of employment land within Policy SS3.