

Farming around Sturminster Newton

Meeting held 22 October 2015 in the NFU office, Sturminster Newton

Attendance:

Farming community: Les Tuffin, Terry Fox, Liz Tite
NFU: Louise Stratton and Matthew Price
Neighbourhood Plan group: Chris Spackman and Jo Witherden (Dorset Planning Consultant)

Discussion centred on:

- The pressures on farming and how it may change in the future
- Examples of successful schemes to address these pressures
- The planning issues and barriers local farmers are facing, and what the neighbourhood plan could do to help

Changes in Farming

Decreasing number of dairy farms/farmers.

Increasing number of holdings being bought up by non-farmers – either being taken out of production or farmed by agreement by neighbouring farms

Dairy farms in active use generally converting to livestock (rather than arable)

Working farms generally becoming larger and more commercially driven – bulk buying, use of contractors etc.

Larger machinery, larger herds and animal welfare requirements needing larger, more modern buildings.

These trends considered likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Examples of successful schemes to address these pressures

There were no schemes cited in the area - the impression locally is that planners have not been supportive of farmers and tend to look for reasons to say 'no' to any proposals.

Current planning system, issues and barriers

There are redundant buildings that could be re-used in a more productive way – which could be beneficial not only to farmers but in terms of supporting broader economy through providing attractive places for people to live and/or work.

Farmers welcomed general direction of government policy – opening up opportunities through permitted development rights

Appreciation that tourism in the area is dependent on the attractiveness of the town and countryside – and therefore important to ensure any diversification does not undermine this economy.

Permitted development rights

New permitted development rights were recently introduced (April 2015) for the change of use of agricultural buildings to either

- a “flexible commercial use” (A1 shop / A2 service / A3 food / B1 business / B8 warehouse / C1 hotel / D2 leisure) - for total floorspace of < 500m²
- up to 3 new houses (capped) – for total floorspace < 450m² and cannot be extended or rebuilt
- an educational use (school or nursery) – for total floorspace < 500m²

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There is much more detail in the legislation, in terms of exclusion (eg Listed Buildings), prior approval requirements (eg last use has to be agricultural, no substantial structural changes, location / siting cannot be impractical / undesirable) etc

Noted that in Rural Dorset 65% of the 46 agricultural to residential schemes in requiring prior approval have been refused in the first 15 months of these new rights coming into effect.

The Local Plan

The policies in the emerging Local Plan provide little scope outside of the new permitted development rights, as new employment is limited to existing sites which have already diversified, and there are 'need' tests for new rural worker's dwelling or tourist accommodation. Furthermore, the re-use of buildings for housing is only allowed where other employment or community uses are proven to not be possible, and some uses (such as live-work units, shops or education) are not specified as options.

How could the Neighbourhood Plan help?

The current permitted development rights for the re-use of agricultural buildings were general considered to form a useful basis for schemes that would support the farming community, without substantially altering the character of the rural area. However the limitations could be relaxed to provide greater flexibility – particular as some of the limitations (for example, the fact that modest changes to an existing building are not allowed) could be beneficial both in terms of the functional use, and the aesthetic appearance of the buildings. It should be possible to achieve this through a mix of policies and neighbourhood development orders (which are a local form of permitted development rights). This would have the additional benefit of not then being subject to change at a national level, and bring local planning policies more in line with the national permitted development rights.

The limitation restricting the change of use to 'last used as agricultural' stops buildings that were in agricultural use for much of their life but have diversified (for example, to provide storage or holiday accommodation) from changing again. It would seem fairer and less restrictive to simply require that the building was once an agricultural building (even though its last use may not have been as such). It may be appropriate to specify a minimum length of time in which it was in continued agricultural use.

The limitation that the floorspace should be no more than 500m² (or 450m²) and no more than 3 dwellings is similarly based on arbitrary figures that could be lifted. The key issue here is that the building/s to be re-used make (or would make with appropriate alterations) a positive contribution to the character of the area.

Because the permitted development rights are limited to change of use and those alterations reasonably necessary for the building to function as a dwelling house, the current system does not allow any extensions of alterations to be considered as part of the scheme. However such alterations may result in a more appropriate design of building, and therefore a scheme that incorporated such changes should be treated favourably.

It was considered that live-work units could provide a real benefit in terms of the population mix and economic benefits in the area, and could be specifically encouraged.

Solar panels and renewables

There was some discussion on renewable energy, as the permitted development rights now in place generally allow Solar Photovoltaics (PV) subject to prior approval (in particular issues associated with glare). It was generally accepted that stand-alone solar farms and wind farms may have a detrimental impact on the tourist / visitor experience, and that this negative impact should be weighed in the planning balance.