



Topic Paper

**Spatial Strategy for
North Dorset**

**Version 2
December 2012**

Contents

Contents	2
1.0 Purpose	4
2.0 Introduction	5
3.0 National, Regional and Local Policy	6
4.0 Issues Arising from Stakeholder and Community Consultations	13
5.0 Issues from the Evidence Base	21
6.0 The Way Forward	28
7.0 Conclusions	30

1 Purpose

- 1.1 This document is one of a number of topic papers produced to support the Draft Core Strategy and Development Management Policies Development Plan Document (DPD) (also known as the New Plan for North Dorset)¹. It provides a general overview of the Council's overall spatial strategy for the distribution of development in North Dorset. It summarises those parts of the evidence base which informed the spatial policies in the draft Core Strategy and Development Management Policies DPD. It also sets out the policy background – at national, regional and local levels – against which plans are prepared.
- 1.2 The topic paper is a working document which will be updated as evidence is acquired and the consultation process proceeds. Version 1 of the Spatial Strategy for North Dorset Topic Paper was published in August 2009.
- 1.3 This revision takes into account changes to national planning policy, notably through the provisions of the Localism Act, which was enacted in November 2011² and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which was published in March 2012³.

¹ The draft DPD, which was published in March 2010, can be viewed here -

<http://www.dorsetforyou.com/media.jsp?mediaid=147729&filetype=pdf>

² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents/enacted>

³ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/2116950.pdf>

2. Introduction

- 2.1. North Dorset is a rural district of 61,000 hectares located close to the south-eastern edge of the South West region. The District had an estimated resident population of 64,225⁴ in mid-2010, 50% of whom lived in the four main settlements of:
- Blandford (Forum and St Mary) (10,760);
 - Gillingham (11,110);
 - Shaftesbury (7,100): and
 - Sturminster Newton (3,835).
- 2.2. These four market towns are the main service centres in North Dorset and provide a focus for housing, employment, shopping and other services. Blandford is the main service centre in the south and Gillingham and Shaftesbury, which are less than 5 miles apart, are the main service centres in the north. Sturminster Newton is located towards the western edge of the District and is close to the small market town of Stalbridge. There are many villages scattered across the rural area, the largest being Marnhull, near Sturminster Newton.
- 2.3. Nearby cities and towns exert an influence over the area. The southern part of the District is influenced by the South East Dorset conurbation, which lies 15 miles south-east of Blandford. The northern part of the District is influenced by Yeovil in Somerset (16 miles to the west of Sturminster Newton) and by Salisbury in Wiltshire (20 miles to the north-east of Shaftesbury). Dorchester, which lies 17 miles south-west of Blandford, also exerts some limited influence over the south-west of the District.
- 2.4. In relation to the spatial strategy that is being developed for North Dorset, this paper sets out:
- The national and regional policy context;
 - Issues arising from stakeholder and community consultations;
 - Issues arising from evidence and research studies; and
 - Conclusions and implications for future policy.

⁴ ONS Mid-year home population estimates 2010

3. National Regional and Local Policy

The Changing National and Regional Policy Context

- 3.1. The national and regional policy context has changed considerably since the draft Core Strategy was produced in March 2010. These changes, together with the introduction of neighbourhood planning, offer the Council the opportunity to reconsider its spatial approach to growth.
- 3.2. Most national planning policy, in the form of Planning Policy Statements (PPSs) and Planning Policy Guidance Notes (PPGs), was replaced with immediate effect when the NPPF was published. A full list of the national policy documents replaced is given in Annex 3 of the NPPF (pages 58 and 59).
- 3.3. The Localism Act, which received Royal assent in November 2011, provides the legislative basis for the abolition of regional planning (and the introduction of neighbourhood planning). These changes are explained in more detail below.

National Policy

- 3.4. Prior to the reforms of the planning system, paragraph 34 of PPS 3: Housing indicated that it was the role of regional spatial strategies to set out the level of overall housing provision for a region and to show how this level of provision should be distributed amongst the constituent Housing Market Areas (HMAs) and local authority areas. The 'emerging' Regional Spatial Strategy (the 'emerging' RSS) relevant to North Dorset was the Draft Revised Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West Incorporating the Secretary of State's Proposed Changes, which was published in 2008.
- 3.5. Now that regional strategies are going to be abolished⁵, it is clear that their draft housing provision figures are not going to be adopted. It has now become the role of individual local planning authorities to set housing provision figures for their area. Such figures need to be set in the context of the NPPF's 'presumption in favour of sustainable development', which indicates that when plan-making "*local planning authorities should positively seek opportunities to meet the development needs of their area*".
- 3.6. The spatial strategy in the Draft Core Strategy was prepared with regard to guidance in paragraph 3 of PPS 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas, which stated that "*away from larger urban areas, planning authorities should focus most new development in or near to local service centres where employment, housing (including affordable*

⁵ The Regional Strategy relevant to Dorset (which will be revoked) consists of: Regional Planning Guidance for the South West (RPG 10), which was published by the Government Office for the South West (GOSW) in September 2001; and The Regional Economic Strategy for South West England 2006 – 2015, published by the South West Regional Development Agency (SWRDA) in May 2006

housing), services and other facilities can be provided close together. This should help to ensure these facilities are served by public transport and provide improved opportunities for access by walking and cycling. These centres (which might be a country town, a single large village or a group of villages) should be identified in the development plan as the preferred location for such growth.”

- 3.7 PPS 7 has since been replaced by the NPPF and paragraph 17 requires planning to “*focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable*”. More specific guidance for rural areas is given in paragraph 55, which states that “*To promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. For example, where there are groups of smaller settlements, development in one village may support services in a village nearby. Local planning authorities should avoid new isolated homes in the countryside unless there are special circumstances such as:*
- *the essential need for a rural worker to live permanently at or near their place of work in the countryside; or*
 - *where such development would represent the optimal viable use of a heritage asset or would be appropriate enabling development to secure the future of heritage assets; or*
 - *where the development would re-use redundant or disused buildings and lead to an enhancement to the immediate setting; or*
 - *the exceptional quality or innovative nature of the design of the dwelling.”*
- 3.8 The NPPF also recognises the importance of taking local factors into account in plan making. Paragraph 10 states “*plans and decisions need to take local circumstances into account, so that they respond to the different opportunities for achieving sustainable development in different areas*”.

Regional Policy

- 3.9 The approach to the spatial distribution of development set out in PPS 7 was taken forward in Chapter 3 of the ‘emerging’ RSS. This set out the ‘Core Spatial Strategy’ (CSS) for the scale and location of development across the region. Individual local authorities were required to apply the ‘spatial hierarchy’ of Development Policies A, B and C to the settlements in their local areas in their core strategies. This regional approach was seen as a key tool to delivering a more sustainable pattern of development across the region.
- 3.10 Development Policy A defined a series of Strategically Significant Cities and Towns (SSCTs) across the South West, none of which are in North Dorset. Development Policy B set criteria to be used by local authorities to identify ‘market and coastal towns’ in their Districts, which

should be *“the focal points for locally significant development including provision for the bulk of district housing provision outside the SSCTs”*. Development Policy C set criteria for development in ‘small towns and villages’, which the emerging RSS indicated should be *“the primary focus for development in the wider countryside away from A and B Settlements”*.

- 3.11 The ‘emerging’ RSS made provision for at least 7,000 dwellings to be built in North Dorset between 2006 and 2026 at an average annual rate of 350 dwellings per annum (dpa). The ‘emerging’ RSS envisaged that housing growth would be distributed within the District in accordance with the regional spatial hierarchy, but provided no specific detail on where these dwellings should be located. The ‘emerging’ RSS also provided some guidance on the future need for jobs and employment land. These issues are discussed in more detail in the updated topic papers on housing and the economy.
- 3.12 In the light of the Government’s intention to revoke regional strategies, the ‘emerging’ RSS is no longer being taken forward. Previous legislation made it a requirement for core strategies to be ‘in general conformity’ with the relevant RSS and with the expectation that the ‘emerging’ RSS would be adopted soon, the draft Core Strategy was prepared to be ‘in general conformity’ with the Secretary of State’s Proposed Changes. Once the process of revoking the regional strategy has been completed, conformity with regional policy will no longer be an issue.
- 3.13 Although the regional tier of planning policy is being removed, local councils and other public bodies will still need to plan strategically across local boundaries. To ensure this happens the Government has introduced a statutory ‘duty to cooperate’ in the Localism Act. The NPPF makes it clear that *“the Government expects joint working on areas of common interest to be diligently undertaken for the mutual benefit of neighbouring authorities”*.⁶

The Introduction of Neighbourhood Planning

- 3.14 The Localism Act introduced a new tier of planning policy at the local level. Communities are now able to prepare neighbourhood plans to address local issues relating to the development and use of land in their area. Once adopted, neighbourhood plans will become part of the ‘Development Plan’ and consequently will have an important role in decision making.⁷ However, they must be ‘in general conformity’ with

⁶ Paragraph 178 of the NPPF

⁷ The glossary in the NPPF states that the Development Plan *“includes adopted Local Plans, neighbourhood plans and the London Plan, and is defined in section 38 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004”*. Paragraph 11 of the NPPF (on page 3) states that *“planning law requires that applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise”*.

the 'strategic policies' for an area⁸, which in the case of North Dorset will be those set out in the revised Core Strategy.

Draft Core Strategy Policies

- 3.15 The draft Core Strategy and Development Management Policies Development Plan Document (The New Plan for North Dorset) was produced in March 2010. The main policies where the influence of the spatial policies in 'emerging' RSS was felt were draft Core Policies:
- 3 – Core Spatial Strategy for North Dorset;
 - 4 – Housing (including Affordable Housing) Distribution;
 - 19 – Stalbridge and the Larger Villages; and
 - 20 – The Countryside (including Smaller Villages).
- 3.16 **Draft Core Policy 3: The Core Spatial Strategy for North Dorset** set out the overall strategic approach to the distribution of development, which aimed to focus it at the District's main towns and at the larger villages that functioned as local service centres. It also sought to protect the countryside from non-essential development.
- 3.17 Draft Core Policy 3 identified Blandford (Forum and St Mary), Gillingham and Shaftesbury as the District's main service centres and 'RSS Development Policy B settlements'. The Draft Core Strategy recognised the role of Sturminster Newton as a local, rather than a main service centre and although it was classified as a RSS Development Policy C settlement it was given its own specific policy in the plan along with the above mentioned three main towns.
- 3.18 Elsewhere in the District a distinction was made between Stalbridge and certain larger villages where infilling and small scale expansion was considered appropriate and the more rural areas of North Dorset. Those larger villages were selected as 'RSS Development Policy C settlements' primarily on the basis of their population and range of facilities⁹ which provided local residents with access to day-to-day services.
- 3.19 Draft Core Policy 3 envisaged that the 18 villages selected as 'RSS Development Policy C settlements' would: function as local service centres; be the main focus for sustainable growth outside the main service centres; and form a network of sustainable rural communities providing local services to meet day-to-day needs. The 18 villages were Bourton, Charlton Marshall, Child Okeford, East Stour, Fontmell Magna, Hazelbury Bryan, Iwerne Minster, Marnhull, Milborne St Andrew, Milton Abbas, Motcombe, Okeford Fitzpaine, Pimperne,

⁸ As explained in paragraph 184 on page 44 of the NPPF

⁹ As evidenced in the Assessment of Settlements Based on Population and Community Facilities – Supporting Document to the Core Strategy: Issues and Options Paper – North Dorset District Council (May 2007) and Topic Paper: Spatial Strategy for North Dorset – Version 1 (August 2009)

Shillingstone, Stourpaine, Winterborne Kingston, Winterborne Stickland and Winterborne Whitechurch.

- 3.20 **Draft Core Policy 4: Housing (Including Affordable Housing)**
Distribution explained how the 7,000 new homes proposed in 'emerging RSS' would be distributed. Table 2.4.1 showed that 71% of the proposed housing (5,000 units) would be provided in the RSS Development Policy B settlements (i.e. Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury), with 29% (2,000 units) provided in the remainder of the District. The policy provided a further breakdown of provision, as follows:
- RSS Development Policy B settlements – 71% (5,000 homes);
 - RSS Development Policy C settlements – 25% (1,700 homes);
 - and
 - Countryside (including 'smaller villages') – 4% (300 homes).
- 3.21 For the RSS Development Policy C settlements, the more detailed breakdown was:
- Sturminster Newton – 7% (500 homes); and
 - Stalbridge and 18 larger villages – 18% (1,200 homes).
- 3.22 The 'smaller villages', where countryside policy would apply, were typically settlements with populations of less than 400 and a limited range of community facilities. The 300 homes proposed in these areas were made up of existing unimplemented planning permissions and an allowance for other housing to meet potential needs, such as rural exceptions affordable housing and agricultural workers' dwellings.
- 3.23 The draft Core Strategy did not allocate any specific sites for development, but 'inset diagrams' for Blandford, Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton showed the broad location of areas for growth, including housing. The intention was to allocate these sites in a subsequent 'Site Allocations DPD'.
- 3.24 **Draft Core Policy 19 – Stalbridge and the Larger Villages** set out a strategic approach to development in these settlements, but did not include any 'inset diagrams'. The supporting text here stated that *"in some villages, there is significant potential for infilling and redevelopment within settlement boundaries. Where it is considered that additional housing is needed, though, sites will be identified in the Site Allocations DPD, drawing on the information in the Council's SHLAA"*.
- 3.25. Draft Core Policy 19 envisaged the retention of the current Local Plan settlement boundaries for Stalbridge and the larger villages until new, more detailed policies were put in place. The supporting text stated *"in order to accommodate the level of growth set out in the emerging RSS, the current settlement boundaries will be reviewed during the*

production of the Site Allocations DPD. In the meantime, the settlement boundaries around Stalbridge and the larger villages, as set out in the Local Plan, will continue to be used for development management purposes”.

- 3.26 **Draft Core Policy 20 – The Countryside (Including Smaller Villages)** (and draft Core Policy 3) envisaged the removal of settlement boundaries from the smaller villages. Draft Core Policy 3 indicated that these settlements would be *“treated as part of the countryside for development management purposes until their boundaries are formally removed through the subsequent Site Allocations DPD”*. Draft Core Policy 20 set out an overall strategy for the countryside, which was *“to adopt an overall policy of restraint, whilst also enabling essential rural needs to be met”*.

Implications of the Policy Changes

- 3.27 The reforms of the planning system fundamentally change the nature of the overall planning policy framework in England. They significantly reduce the extent of ‘higher level’ (i.e. national, regional and county) policy and give more emphasis to locally-based (i.e. district, town and parish) policy giving more power to local communities to take an active role in shaping the place in which they live, work or have an interest.
- 3.28 Decision-making will be made much more on the basis of local policy and in North Dorset this new local policy framework will consist of:
- Any documents jointly produced by local authorities in Dorset to address cross-boundary issues under the Duty to Cooperate;
 - The ‘new style’ Local Plan produced at the District level. In North Dorset that will comprise the revised Core Strategy (including a strategic site allocation at Gillingham) and a Site Allocations DPD; and
 - Neighbourhood Plans produced by local communities, but adopted by the District Council to become part of the statutory development plan for the area.
- 3.29 Once regional strategies and structure plans are revoked the only ‘higher level’ policy document that will need to be taken into account in local decision-making is the 59-page NPPF. In terms of guiding the spatial distribution of development in North Dorset, the NPPF provides a much less rigid ‘higher level’ framework than the policies in various PPGs and PPSs and Development Policies A, B and C in the ‘emerging’ RSS.
- 3.30 In the draft Core Strategy, the Council sought to apply the ‘spatial hierarchy’ of the ‘emerging’ RSS to the settlements of North Dorset (in draft Core Policy 3). How the Council went about this and how the RSS ‘Development Policy B and C Settlements’ were identified in North Dorset is explained in Version 1 of the Spatial Strategy Topic Paper,

which was published in August 2009. This is now no longer required and the Council has the opportunity to develop an approach to the spatial distribution of development which better reflects the circumstances in North Dorset.

- 3.31 In the draft Core Strategy, the Council also sought to distribute the level of housing growth envisaged in 'emerging' RSS in accordance with the spatial hierarchy (as set out in draft Core Policy 4). The impending abolition of regional planning has given the Council the opportunity to re-assess the overall need for housing growth and it has worked with all other local authorities in Dorset to produce an updated Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) for the Bournemouth and Poole HMA. The updated SHMA envisages a lower average annualised rate (of 280 dpa) in North Dorset. This equates to 4,200 dwellings between 2011 and 2026), which is effectively the level of housing that will need to be located in accordance with any new approach to the spatial distribution of development established by the Council.
- 3.32 The introduction of neighbourhood planning offers communities a range of tools to deal with local issues, which were not available when the draft Core Strategy was prepared. The Council also has the opportunity to consider how its draft strategic policies (i.e. those in the draft Core Strategy) could be revised to give neighbourhood planning a role in delivering growth.

4.0 Issues Arising from Stakeholder and Community Consultations

Consultation 2007 – ‘Issues and Options’

- 4.1 The community’s views on the key issues arising out of the national and the then emerging regional policy framework were first sought when the Council undertook consultation on the issues and options¹⁰ for a ‘stand- alone’ Core Strategy in June – July 2007. The consultation issues and options discussions were based on the draft RSS, which was published in June 2006.
- 4.2 In consultation the Council suggested that Blandford (including both Blandford Forum and Blandford St Mary), Gillingham and Shaftesbury should have RSS Development Policy B status and that Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and a limited number of larger villages should have RSS Development Policy C status and that the level of development elsewhere (i.e. in the District’s smaller villages and the countryside) should be very limited.
- 4.3 In general terms respondents supported the proposed settlement hierarchy and the need to try and attain higher levels of self- containment in the towns. However, there were concerns at the time that an attempt to pursue more sustainable patterns of development could lead to ‘overdevelopment’ in the towns and ‘underdevelopment’ of the villages.
- 4.4 Although some respondents felt that only these three towns merited RSS Development Policy B status, others felt that Sturminster Newton should also fall within that category. Despite this, there was general support for the concept of making Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and a limited number of larger villages the main focus for development outside the three main towns. However, there were a variety of views on which villages merited RSS Development Policy C status and which didn’t.¹¹
- 4.5 At the time of the Issues and Options consultation 5,100 homes were proposed for North Dorset between 2006 and 2026 with 2,900 to be built before 2016 and 2,200 to be built thereafter. The Council sought views on how development should be distributed between the three main towns (Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury) and the rest of the District in the two 10-year periods 2006 – 2016 and 2016 – 2026.
- 4.6 The Council suggested that a minimum of 65% of housing growth should be located at the three main towns (with 35% elsewhere) in the period up to 2016 on the basis that this was the percentage split proposed in the existing Local Plan and the thrust of the main spatial

¹⁰ Core Strategy: Issues and Alternative Options – North Dorset District Council (June 2007)

¹¹ The Council has produced a summary of the main findings of the 2007 consultation and a comprehensive analysis of responses on an issue-by-issue basis. These documents, together with the original responses, can be viewed at the following link http://www.north-dorset.gov.uk/index/living/building_planning/planning_policy/local_development_framework/core_strategy/core_strategy_2007_consultation.htm

strategy in RSS was to achieve greater concentration in the region's larger settlements. The Council also presented 70 / 30 and 75 / 25 percentage splits as possible options. All three options received similar levels of support (and objection) with no clear preference for any single option.

- 4.7 The feedback to consultation undertaken in 2007 needs to be considered in the context of the 'higher level' policy framework at the time. The principal aim of consultation on this issue was to seek views on how best to apply the spatial hierarchy in the draft RSS to North Dorset. Clearly people may have expressed different views on how development should be distributed in the absence of the 'emerging' RSS and the requirement for conformity with it.

Consultation 2010 – 'The Draft New Plan'

- 4.8 In March 2010 the Council published the draft Core Strategy and Development Management DPD for consultation. The draft Core Strategy was prepared in the context of regional policy at the time. Draft Core Policy 3 set out the 'core spatial strategy' for North Dorset and was based on the evidence gathered at the issues and options stage in June/July 2007. At this time and as part of the consultation exercise a supporting document was produced which assessed settlements on the basis of their population and level of provision of community facilities with a view to categorising them as RSS Development Policy B or C settlements.
- 4.9 Draft Core Policy 4 explained how the now higher housing number of 7,000 new homes identified for North Dorset in the Proposed Changes to the Revised RSS would be distributed.
- 4.10 Draft Core Policies 15, 16 and 17 related to the RSS Development Policy B settlements of Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury and Draft Core Policy 18 related to the RSS Development Policy C settlement of Sturminster Newton.
- 4.11 Draft Core Policy 19 considered how growth in Stalbridge and the larger villages should be approached. Draft Core Policy 20 sought to protect the countryside and 'smaller villages' that typically had populations of less than 400 and a limited range of community facilities.
- 4.12 1,657 individuals and organisations responded to the consultation and in total they made 5,734 comments on the draft Core Strategy and Development Management DPD. A full report was presented to Members of the Planning Policy Panel on 5 July 2012¹² that identified two overarching concerns relating to the spatial strategy. These were the overall level of housing growth and the inflexible top down approach of allocations in the villages and the distribution of growth in the District.

¹² <http://www.dorsetforyou.com/media.jsp?mediaid=174202&filetype=pdf>

- 4.13 In the responses to Draft Core Policy 3, opinions were clearly divided. In general growth at the three main towns of Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury was supported with a number of individuals suggesting that Sturminster Newton also should be identified as one of the main service centres.
- 4.14 The towns, parishes and residents of villages identified as RSS Development Policy C Settlements did not always agree with the assessment of the settlements based on population, community facilities and access to services. Many disagreed with the 'top down' housing figures that would be imposed through a subsequent Site Allocation DPD.
- 4.15 There was concern that the countryside policy of restraint, with its rural exceptions policy, maybe too restrictive and that smaller communities would be disadvantaged if draft Core Policy 3 was adopted.
- 4.16 For Draft Core Policy 4 Housing (including Affordable Housing) Distribution the overall level of housing growth had a similar level of support to objection. The provision of affordable housing, especially in rural areas, was supported. However, the high level of housing growth proposed in the rural area to enable its delivery was one of the main sources of objection.
- 4.17 The main themes in relation to the level of development in the villages were that numbers were too high and that the balance needed to be more towards the towns rather than the villages. Other concerns related to the mix and type of housing and the need to cater for all parts of the community including the elderly.
- 4.18 There were also conflicting views on the balance of development between the towns. Some responses suggested that there were too many houses proposed for Gillingham whereas others suggested that there were too many proposed for the other towns and that more should be assigned to Gillingham.
- 4.19 Suggestions as to a way forward included greater involvement of the parishes to enable the approach to housing to be locally driven and that the approach to affordable housing in rural areas should be a minimum.
- 4.20 There was general support for affordable housing provision especially in the rural area and that the rural affordable housing should be provided for local people. However, the target in the policy was seen as being too low and should be the minimum level of provision. The suggestion was that the viability of individual sites and proposals should be built into the affordable housing requirement of each site.
- 4.21 The level of affordable housing in locations that had few facilities and limited public transport was considered an important issue as too was the impact of the quantum of housing on the landscape, traffic and roads, community facilities and utilities infrastructure. People were of the opinion that all of these issues needed to be considered carefully before a final housing number were settled upon.

- 4.22 There were many objections to Draft Core Policy 19 and not all were related to the policy. For a large number of residents their concerns were associated with the suitability of individual settlements, and in some cases specific SHLAA sites, to accommodate growth rather than on the policy itself.
- 4.23 Core Policy 19 focused on meeting housing and employment needs and retail provision in Stalbridge and Marnhull, but only provided general policy guidance on the provision of grey, social and green infrastructure. In particular, it proposed that new housing growth be met through infilling and redevelopment within defined settlement boundaries and the development of additional sites through a Site Allocations DPD. From the comments received infilling and redevelopment within settlement boundaries appeared to be supported, but it should be borne in mind that such comments were made in the context of 1,200 being proposed for Stalbridge and 18 larger villages.
- 4.24 Core Policy 19 proposed that employment needs in Stalbridge and the larger villages be met through the development of vacant sites and redevelopment of occupied sites on existing industrial estates, the retention of existing employment sites and the development of additional employment sites through a Site Allocations DPD. There were no objections to this principle.
- 4.25 There were no objections to the proposal to permit new convenience and comparison shopping development in Stalbridge or the policy to retain and enhance the facilities in Marnhull. Although some individuals quoted lack of services as reasons why their particular settlement should or should not have any proposed growth.
- 4.26 Draft Core Policy 20: The Countryside (Including Smaller Villages) sought to apply an overall policy of restraint whilst enabling essential rural needs to be met through a series of 'exceptions'. Over half of the comments made on draft Core Policy 20 were supportive of the countryside policy of restraint with rural exceptions being guided by Development Management Policies.
- 4.27 A small number of individuals objected to Core Policy 20 and would prefer greater choice for smaller settlements.
- 4.28 The feedback to this consultation also needs to be considered in the context of the 'higher level' policy framework at the time. Views were expressed on how the Council intended to apply the spatial hierarchy in the RSS Proposed Changes to North Dorset and also how the Council intended to accommodate the proposed higher housing numbers put forward in that document. Clearly people may have expressed different views on how development should be distributed in the absence of the 'emerging' RSS. It should also be noted that despite the unavoidable

statutory requirement for general conformity with the 'emerging' RSS, many people still objected to its 'top-down' approach.

Consultation 2011 - Town and Parish Councils

- 4.29 Shortly after the consultation on the draft New Plan in March 2010 the new Coalition Government came into power and sought to radically change the way we plan. It also introduced the concept of localism in which new powers and responsibilities were to be devolved to a more local level. Rather than 'top down' prescription from a national and regional level, there was to be a more 'bottom up' approach from local authorities and local communities.
- 4.30 In November 2011 the Localism Bill was enacted that gave local communities new rights and powers to prepare neighbourhood plans and at the same time the 'draft' NPPF was published. These changes gave the Council an opportunity to develop a more flexible locally based approach to development in the District
- 4.31 Emerging national policy still requires the Council to plan strategically, to support economic growth, to improve people's quality of life and to protect the natural environment, but there are a number of policy options that would allow greater choice at the local level in particular for Stalbridge and the villages.
- 4.32 Choice at this local level was the subject of a further round of consultation with the towns and parishes in the District at the end of 2011. The consultation materials reiterated the Council opinion that growth in the four main towns of Blandford Forum, Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton was strategically important and that they will continue to set out strategic policies in emerging policy to ensure sufficient homes, jobs and community facilities are provided. However, there were three possible options for establishing a new strategic policy approach to development in Stalbridge and the villages.
- 4.33 These options, based on draft guidance and primary legislation at the time, were:

Option 1 - The Council gives a strong strategic steer in Stalbridge and the larger villages with greater choice elsewhere

This option is similar to the draft Core Policy 3. The Council will:

1. Identify Stalbridge and up to 20 'sustainable' villages for growth;
2. Define overall levels of housing provision for Stalbridge and the 'sustainable' villages (in the draft Core Strategy this was 1,200 homes over 20 years in Stalbridge and 18 villages);
3. In partnership with local communities identify suitable sites for housing and other uses in Stalbridge and the 'sustainable' villages in a subsequent Site Allocations Document to meet the level of provision proposed;

4. Give no strategic steer for the remaining less sustainable villages that will be washed over with countryside policy that restricts development.

Option 2 - The Council gives a strong strategic steer in Stalbridge and a more limited number of larger villages with greater local choice elsewhere

For this option the Council will:

1. Identify Stalbridge and a more limited number of 'more sustainable' villages for growth, perhaps less than 10;
2. Define overall levels of housing provision for Stalbridge and a more limited number of 'more sustainable' villages;
3. In partnership with local communities identify suitable sites for housing and other uses in Stalbridge and a more limited number of 'more sustainable' villages in a subsequent Site Allocations Document to meet the level of provision proposed;
4. Give no strategic steer for the remaining less sustainable villages that will be washed over with countryside policy that restricts development.

Option 3 - The Council gives 'light touch' strategic guidance only with greater local choice in Stalbridge and all villages

The draft NPPF indicates that significant development should be focused in locations which are, or can be made sustainable and that housing in rural areas should not be located in places distant from local services. Option 3 would see the new style Local Plan providing some guidance on the general distribution of development in the District by indicating those settlements (outside of the four main towns) that, in the Council's view, are more sustainable. However, this 'light touch' approach would be for guidance only and the scale and type of housing and other uses, such as employment, in Stalbridge or any village would ultimately be a matter for local communities to determine through the production of a neighbourhood plan or a community right to build project.

In summary for this approach the Council will:

1. Set out an 'indicative framework' for guidance purposes only highlighting those settlements that are more or less sustainable in terms of population size, facilities and accessibility to services;
 2. Not set any overall housing provision figures for Stalbridge or the villages in the new style Local Plan;
 3. Not identify any sites for housing or other uses in Stalbridge or the villages in the Site Allocations Document.
- 4.34 In November 2011 the Council consulted with the towns and parishes on these three options. Their views were sought on their preferred option for taking forward growth and at the same time the Council sought to ascertain the local appetite for neighbourhood planning. A

full report on the results of the consultation was presented to Members on 7 March 2012.

- 4.35 In total 26 reply forms from 35 parished areas were completed and returned. 25 (71%) indicated that Option 3 was their preferred approach for taking forward growth in Stalbridge and the villages. Just two parished areas expressed a preference for Option 2 and only Gillingham Town Council expressed a preference for Option 1.
- 4.36 The same consultation also asked the question 'Is your local community interested in preparing a neighbourhood plan? Thirty three parished areas responded to this question of which 17 (52%) said yes.
- 4.37 Of those 17 parished areas saying 'yes' one was Gillingham Town Council who were subsequently awarded front runner funding and on 20 August were the first parish to have their application for a neighbourhood area approved. Ten of the parished areas responding at the time were what the Council currently consider to be the more sustainable settlements of Blandford Forum, Bourton, Child Okeford, Fontmell Magna, Hazelbury Bryan, Iwerne Minster, Marnhull, Pimperne, Stalbridge and Winterborne Stickland.
- 4.38 Fourteen parished areas said 'no' to neighbourhood planning citing that it was not the right time for them or that there was no evidence of community enthusiasm in their area.
- 4.39 As part of the consultation with the parishes the Council also sought to establish what type of issues local communities would like to consider in their neighbourhood plan. Many simply ticked all of the issues listed:
- Housing
 - Affordable housing
 - Shops
 - Employment
 - Green energy
 - Village hall
 - Local green spaces
 - Design and character guidelines
- 4.40 This feedback demonstrated that Towns and Parish Councils preferred Option 3, where the Council would provide a 'light touch' strategic steer giving greater local choice for communities in Stalbridge and all villages to meet their needs. It also demonstrated that local communities were keen to pursue neighbourhood planning, which they saw as an opportunity to consider and address a range of issues.
- Consultation 2012 – Key Issues for the Revision of the Draft Core Strategy***
- 4.41 Despite a great deal of work being undertaken to try and apply the regional 'spatial hierarchy' to North Dorset, there was a high level of

objection to draft Core Policy 3, especially outside the District's main towns. The main concerns with this approach were that:

- The assessment of settlements was 'broad brush' and did not look in detail at more 'fine-grained' local sustainability issues;
- The assessment required a simple 'yes / no' judgement to be made on whether individual settlements were considered to be sustainable or not; and
- It was intended to use this 'one-off' sustainability judgement as the basis on which to decide which villages would receive growth and which wouldn't.

4.42 The consultation with Town and Parish Councils in 2011 sought views on whether the approach in draft Core Policy 3 should continue to be taken forward or whether a 'light touch' approach should be taken. The clear preference was for a 'light touch' approach.

4.43 The feedback from Town and Parish Councils helped to inform the Autumn 2012 consultation document on key issues. This sets out in more detail how an effective policy framework might be put in place to deliver the 'light touch' approach that has been sought. The consultation will also enable other bodies and individuals to express their views on this issue, in advance of the revised Core Strategy being produced.

5.0 Issues from the Evidence Base

- 5.1 The previous version of this topic paper sought to show how evidence on population, facilities and accessibility could be used to respond to the challenge of applying the regional 'spatial hierarchy' to North Dorset. Since the draft Core Strategy was produced in March 2010, national policy has changed considerably; the 'emerging' RSS is no longer being taken forward; and neighbourhood planning has been introduced.
- 5.2 How the evidence base is interpreted and used to guide policy needs to be reconsidered in the context of these changes. It is no longer necessary to try and draw up a sustainability 'league table' for all the towns and villages in North Dorset with a view to assigning them to categories set by regional policy. Instead the Council needs to consider how the evidence can be used differently within the context of more flexible 'higher level' policies to achieve sustainable outcomes at the local level.

Defining the Key Strategic Settlements in the District

- 5.3 A key point to consider is the fact that individual local planning authorities are to set housing provision figures for their area and that such figures need to be set in the context of the NPPF's 'presumption in favour of sustainable development', which indicates that when plan-making "*local planning authorities should positively seek opportunities to meet the development needs of their area*".
- 5.4 In the Autumn 2012 consultation, the Council continues to define the 'main towns' in the District as Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury, but also suggests that Sturminster Newton should be added to this category. Brief profiles of these towns are given below.¹³

Blandford (Estimated mid-2010 Population 10,760)

- 5.5 Blandford is the main service centre in the south of the District, serving a comparatively large rural hinterland. It has one of the finest Georgian town centres in England, supporting a good range of shops and other key town centre uses. There are a number of large employment sites within the town and many local people are also employed at Blandford Camp, a large military site located just to the east of the by-pass. The town also has a secondary school and a community hospital.

Gillingham (Estimated mid-2010 Population 11,110)

- 5.6 Gillingham and Shaftesbury are the main service centres in the north of the District, which together serve a rural hinterland extending into Wiltshire. Gillingham has been one of the fastest growing towns in the South West over the past twenty years. Housing growth has been matched by employment growth, as the town has been successful in

¹³ Version 1 of the Spatial Strategy Topic Paper included data from the 2001 Census and the former Local Transport Plan on commuting patterns. This data is now somewhat out-of-date and has been omitted from Version 2. Commuting data from the 2011 Census was not available at the time Version 2 was written.

retaining and attracting a variety of new businesses to a number of employment sites. The provision of infrastructure and community facilities has not always kept pace with the rate of growth and although the town has a large and successful secondary school, the town centre has a low number and a limited range of shops.

Shaftesbury (Estimated mid-2010 Population 7,100)

- 5.7 Shaftesbury supports Gillingham in serving the needs of the northern part of the District and the parts of Wiltshire immediately east of the town. Shaftesbury's historic core occupies a hilltop location and its attractive town centre supports a good range of shops and is a tourist destination. Beyond the historic core, the town has expanded onto the flat plateau land to the north and east, although it has expanded much more slowly than Gillingham in recent years. The town has two large industrial estates, a secondary school and a community hospital.

Sturminster Newton (Estimated mid-2010 Population 3,835)

- 5.8 One of the issues the Council considered when producing the draft Core Strategy was how to categorise Sturminster Newton, which did not fit easily into either the RSS Development Policy B or C categories. This issue was discussed at some length in the draft Core Strategy's Initial Sustainability Appraisal Report and a compromise was reached where the town was identified as a RSS Development Policy C settlement, but given its own draft Core Policy (18), setting out proposals for future growth, including 500 homes.

- 5.9 The NPPF now provides a much less rigid 'higher level' policy framework compared to RSS Development Policies A, B and C only requiring planning to "*focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable*". Since there is little dispute that Sturminster Newton is a sustainable location and its future growth is clearly a strategic issue for the District, it is proposed that it will be defined as a 'main town' (alongside Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury) in the revised Core Strategy. Since proposals for the future development of the town (including 500 homes) are already set out in some detail in draft Core Policy 18, it is considered that the proposed change of status would have no significant implications for the revision of the draft Core Strategy or for the town itself.

Stalbridge and the Villages

- 5.10 The impending abolition of regional planning means that there is no longer a requirement for Stalbridge and the District's villages to be categorised according to RSS Development Policies B and C. However, any revision to policies will still need to reflect the provisions of the NPPF (including the presumption in favour of sustainable development and the 'tests of soundness') and provide sufficient strategic direction to guide future development.

- 5.11 In particular, paragraph 55 of the NPPF states that "*To promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located*

where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. For example, where there are groups of smaller settlements, development in one village may support services in a village nearby. Local planning authorities should avoid new isolated homes in the countryside unless there are special circumstances”.

- 5.12 The original evidence used to identify the ‘more sustainable’ settlements comprised three main elements, which were: population; range of services; and proximity to services. This evidence is still relevant to local communities when making judgements about what might help to make their town or village more sustainable, but these ‘strategic’ factors need to be considered together with local issues in order to develop solutions that are more suited to meeting local needs. This approach reflects national policy in paragraph 10 of the NPPF, which states *“plans and decisions need to take local circumstances into account, so that they respond to the different opportunities for achieving sustainable development in different areas”.*

Population

- 5.13 The Council undertook an initial assessment of settlements¹⁴ based on population and facilities as part of the early work on the Core Strategy. A more detailed assessment was undertaken for the draft Core Strategy. A graph showing population by settlement was included in Version 1 of this topic paper and is reproduced as Figure 1 below. The evidence also showed that settlements could be grouped into a number of ‘size-classes’ with fairly distinct ‘cut-off points’ at different intervals (see Figure 2 below). These seven notional ‘size-classes’ were:
- 11,000+ to 7,000+ population – the three main towns of Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury;
 - 3,500+ to c. 2,000 population - Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and Marnhull, the District’s largest village;
 - 1,200 to 1,000+ population - the five next largest villages of Shillingstone, Charlton Marshall, Child Okeford, Motcombe and Milborne St. Andrew;
 - 900+ to c. 800 population – the five villages of Pimperne, Iwerne Minster, Bourton, Okeford Fitzpaine and Milton Abbas;
 - c.700 to 450+ population - the eight villages of Winterborne Whitechurch, Hazelbury Bryan, Winterborne Kingston, Stourpaine, Winterborne Stickland, Spetisbury, East Stour and Fontmell Magna;
 - c.400 to 200+ population – the eight villages of Durweston, Iwerne Courtney, Stourton Caundle, Stour Row, Kington Magna, Bryanston, Tarrant Keyneston and Hinton St. Mary; and
 - c.200 or less population – 24 villages.

¹⁴ Assessment of Settlements Based on Population and Community Facilities - Supporting Document to the Core Strategy: Issues and Options Paper – North Dorset District Council (May 2007)

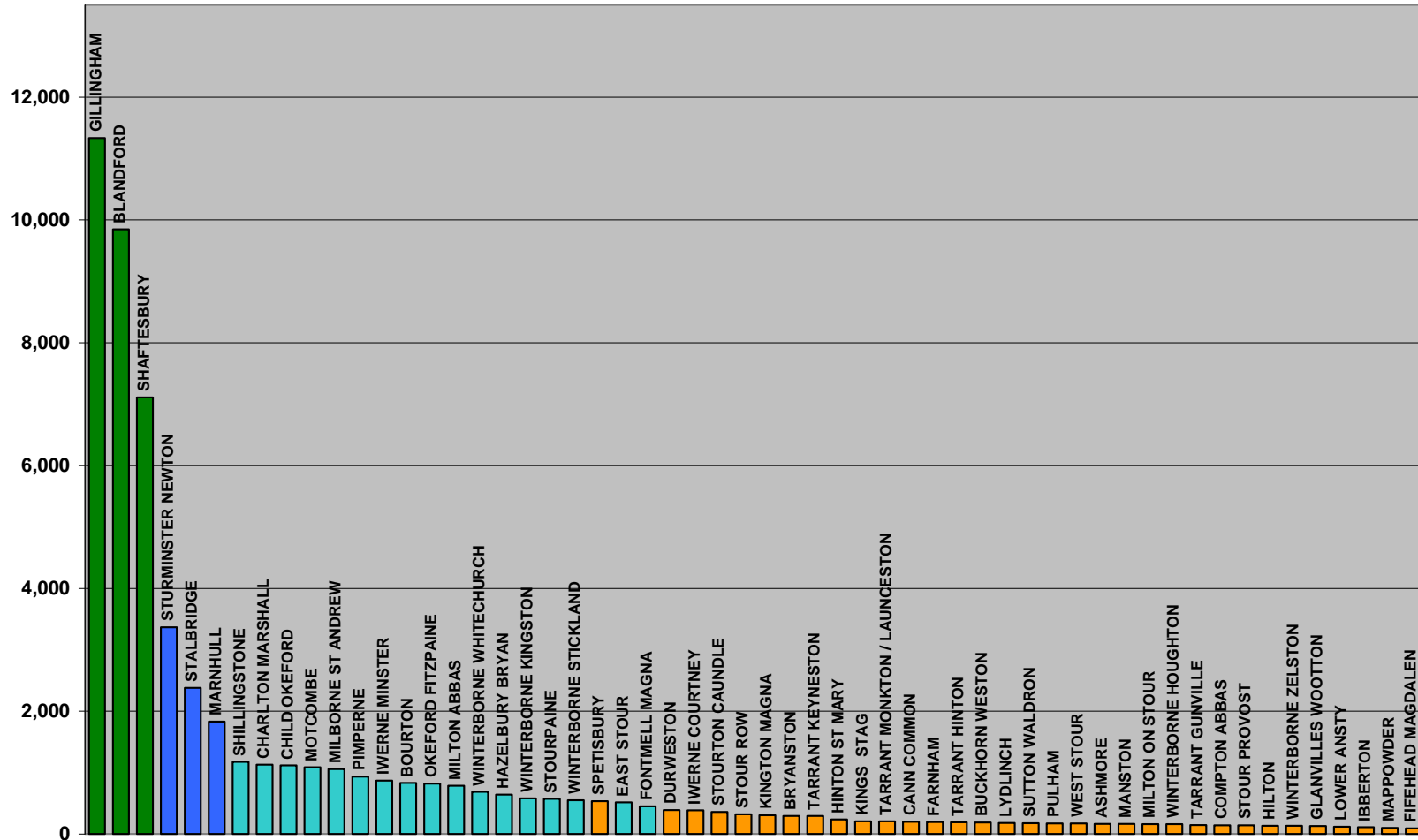


Figure 1 – Population: All Settlements with a Defined Settlement Boundary in the 2003 Local Plan

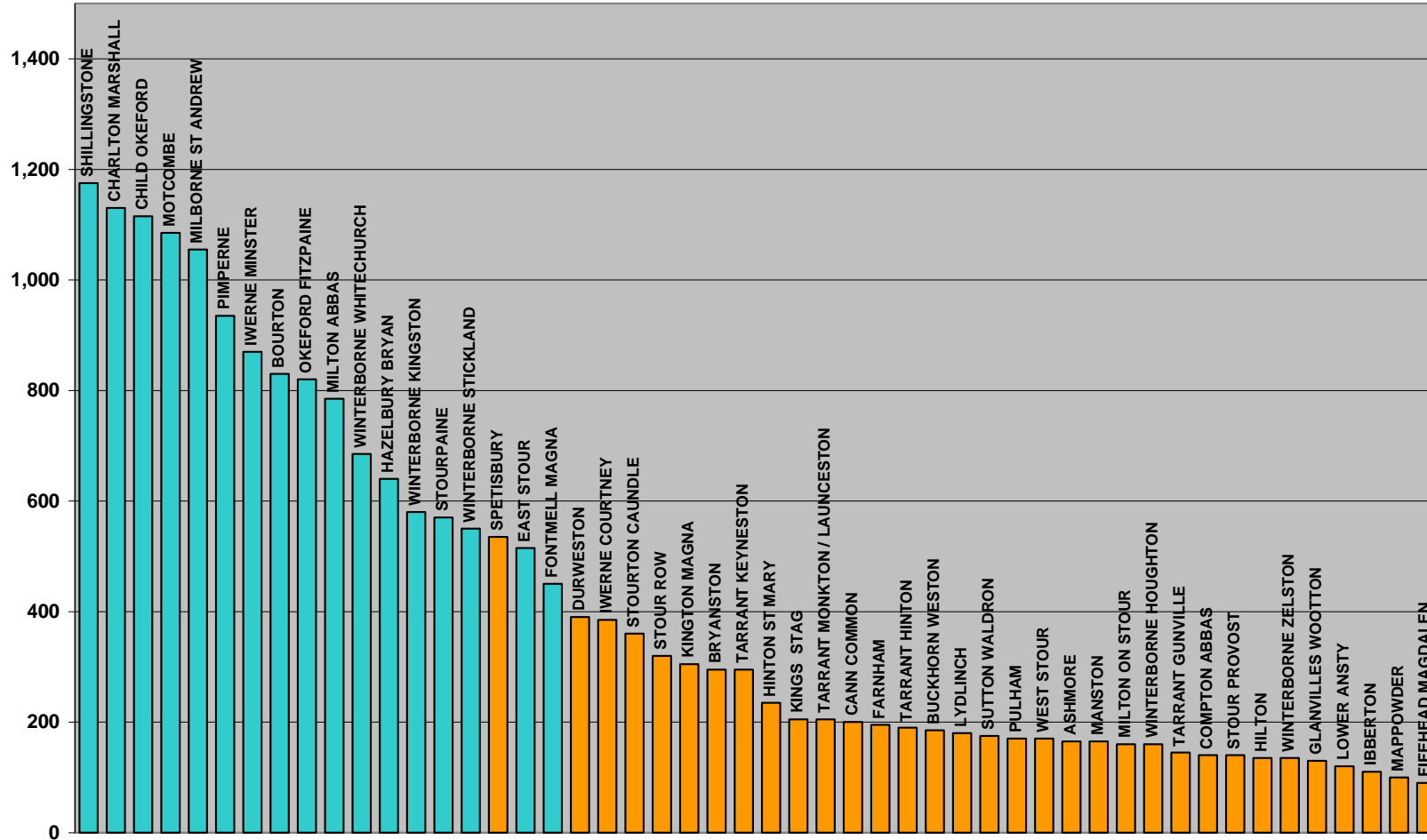


Figure 2 – Population in Smaller Settlements

Range of Services

- 5.14 The Council produces an annual monitoring report (AMR) each year and up until 2010 it included a table indicating which rural facilities were present within the settlement boundaries of each village¹⁵. This information is no longer included, as it quickly becomes out of date and excludes any facilities that are located outside a settlement boundary. The AMR does, however, continue to include information on planning applications for the change of use or loss of a village facility.
- 5.15 Information on the range of facilities in villages was used to assess the relative sustainability of villages when preparing the draft Core Strategy and to determine whether they should be categorised as RSS Development Policy C settlements.
- 5.16 This analysis looked at how many of seven key facilities (primary school, employment site, general store, post office, community hall, public house and doctor's surgery) were within 1 kilometre of the centre of each settlement.
- 5.17 On the basis of the analysis it was concluded that a settlement was 'more sustainable' (and therefore potentially a RSS Development Policy C settlement) if it had: a population of between 400 and 650 with four or more of the seven frequently used facilities; or a population greater than 650 with at least three of the seven frequently used facilities.
- 5.18 Obviously facilities can (and do) come and go and over time such changes would give a different perspective on any assessment of the relative sustainability of settlements. However, the categorisation of settlements in draft Core Policy 3 was based on a 'one-off' sustainability judgement, which would not allow for future changes to be taken into account. This problem was a major reason for objections to the draft Core Strategy. Local communities were concerned that if village shops or pubs closed, they would no longer have the range of facilities to support housing growth, but it would still be required by policy.

Proximity to Services

- 5.19 In 2008 the Council mapped overall proximity to services across the District. This analysis shows that relative proximity to services is high around the three main towns, but it is also high in the north-western part of the District where Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and Marnhull (the District's largest village) are clustered together (see Figure 3 below).

¹⁵ The current and past annual monitoring reports can be viewed here - <http://www.dorsetforyou.com/AMR/north>

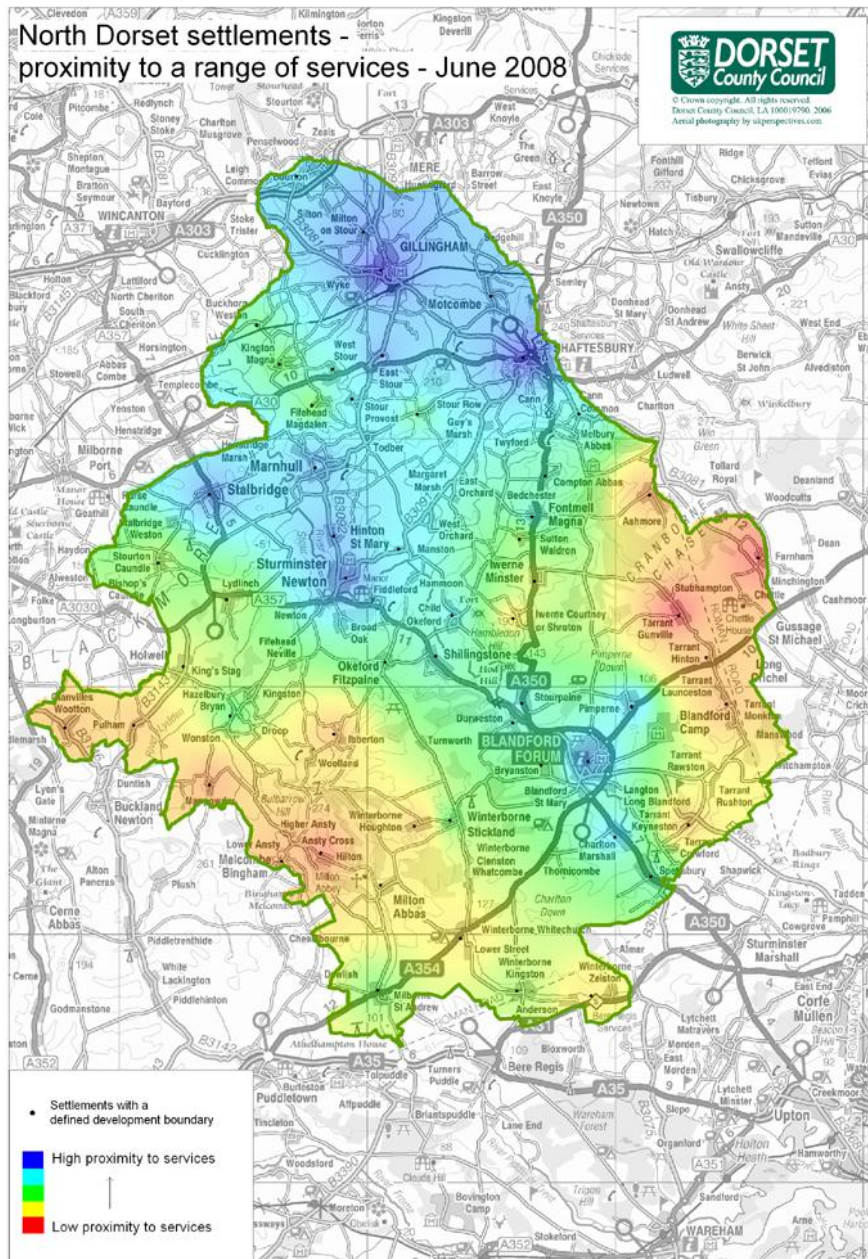


Figure 3 – Map Showing Proximity to Services in North Dorset

5.20 Paragraph 55 of the NPPF recognises that “where there are groups of smaller settlements; development in one village may support services in a village nearby”. The map above provides a strategic overview of proximity to services highlighting both those areas that are more remote and those areas where services nearby could help to meet day-to-day needs.

6.0 The Way Forward

- 6.1 In the past, the way in which the concept of sustainability was applied to settlements in the rural area was based on population size, level of provision of community facilities and proximity to services. Settlements were assessed against these criteria and either included or excluded in the RSS Development Policy C Settlement category. This simple 'yes / no' judgement about the sustainability of individual villages was of great concern to residents in those settlements as it was felt that this broad brush assessment masked the 'finer grained' issues.
- 6.2 Changing national policy and revised housing numbers for the District enable the Council to consider a different approach. A strategic policy framework is still required, but the intention is not to set a housing provision figure for the rural area or to categorise settlements on the basis of a strategic assessment of a limited number of criteria in order to accord with regional policy.
- 6.3 A more flexible approach was explored in 2011 when consultation was undertaken with Town and Parish Councils. Option 3 of the consultation described a more responsive and flexible framework that would set out an 'indicative framework' for guidance purposes only highlighting those settlements that are more or less sustainable in terms of population size, facilities and accessibility to services. This approach was clearly supported by local communities at that time.
- 6.4 The Council has sought to change the focus of any sustainability assessment for Stalbridge and the larger villages from one which is aimed primarily at facilitating a proportion of strategic housing growth, to one which is aimed at identifying the actions that need to be taken locally to make settlements more sustainable. More sustainable could mean towns and villages improving accessibility or securing community facilities, rather than just the provision of market housing.
- 6.5 This proposed 'light touch' strategic approach does not require 'one-off' judgements to be made about the sustainability of individual settlements and breaks the 'automatic link' between any such judgement of a settlement's sustainability and the requirement to take a quantum of housing to contribute towards meeting strategic needs.
- 6.6 This lighter touch approach is an opportunity to embrace new methods of delivery that have been introduced at a national level giving local communities more choice and control. It is envisaged that neighbourhood plans will have a key role to play as once adopted, they will form part of the Development Plan for the area.
- 6.7 Other options for delivery will still be available. In particular, the Council is suggesting that communities could have the option of 'opting in' to a

Site Allocations DPD, if they felt that was the best approach for them. Other non-statutory options (which would carry less weight in the decision-making process), that could be pursued by local communities (depending on what issues they are seeking to address) include:

- Parish Plans;
- Village Design Statements; or
- Design and Development Briefs.

6.8 The NPPF makes it necessary for any neighbourhood plan in North Dorset to be 'in general conformity with' the strategic policies in the revised Core Strategy. By making its strategic policies as 'light touch' as possible, the District Council will maximise the extent to which local communities will be able to use neighbourhood plans to shape their local areas. The evidence of the consultation with Town and Parish Councils shows a considerable appetite for the production of neighbourhood plans. It is hoped that the 'light touch' strategic approach set out above will facilitate their production.

7.0 Conclusions

7.1 The key conclusions from this topic paper are:

- In the light of changes to national policy: the impending abolition of regional planning; and the introduction of neighbourhood planning, it is appropriate to seek to revise the draft Core Strategy to reflect the new, less rigid 'higher level' policy framework and the localism agenda;
- Any revision to policies in North Dorset should accord with the NPPF, which seeks to focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable;
- Evidence base studies identify Blandford, Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton as the District's main towns;
- Evidence base studies indicate that 4,200 new homes are required in the District over a 15-year period (2011 to 2026);
- It is likely that Blandford, Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton could together accommodate virtually all of the identified strategic housing need, with the greatest potential being at Gillingham;
- The provision of this level of growth at the four main towns would enable a more flexible approach to be taken in Stalbridge and the villages;
- The Core Strategy will establish the overall level of development that will need to be provided in the four main towns, but the quantum and location of future development in Stalbridge and individual villages will be determined primarily through neighbourhood planning having regard to local needs and priorities.