

# NORTH DORSET DISTRICT COUNCIL

## PLANNING POLICY PANEL

**Date of Meeting:** 7 March 2012

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**REPORT TITLE:** **MOVING FORWARD WITH THE SPATIAL STRATEGY FOLLOWING AN INITIAL CONSULTATION WITH THE PARISHES ON THE OPTIONS FOR GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING**

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr Deborah Croney

**Report Author:** Sarah Jennings, Planning Policy Officer

<b>Purpose of Report:</b>	To update Members on the response of town and parish councils to the proposed options for growth in Stalbridge and the villages and report on the local appetite for neighbourhood planning. To consider further targeted consultation on a revised Option 3a that offers greater certainty in terms of delivery whilst maintaining maximum choice for local communities.
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**Statutory Authority:** Localism Act 2011, Planning & Compulsory Purchase Act 2004

**Financial Implications:** No direct implications

**Consultations required/undertaken:** Undertaken: A letter was sent to all town and parish councils on 28 November 2011 outlining the options for taking forward growth in Stalbridge and the villages and neighbourhood planning. A drop in session took place on 18 January 2012 where town and parish members had the opportunity to have a one to one chat with officers about the options, neighbourhood planning and the implications for their villages.  
Required: Further targeted consultation on a revised Option 3a.

**Recommendations:** Members note the feedback from the towns and parishes on the options for taking forward growth in Stalbridge and the villages. To acknowledge the appetite of local communities for neighbourhood planning and support further targeted consultation on a revised Option 3a that offers greater certainty in terms of delivery whilst maintaining maximum choice for local communities.

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## **Background**

1. In June 2011 Cabinet considered a report that identified the main priorities and actions that were needed to respond to the changing planning system. One priority was to continue to take forward the Core Strategy and the need to embrace the Localism Bill. The Bill has subsequently become an Act and neighbourhood planning has become a reality. To ensure our spatial strategy not only reflects changing Government policy but the views of local communities it was agreed at Planning Policy Panel on 11 October to consider new options for the spatial strategy and to engage with local communities as to their preferred choice. The options for taking forward growth in Stalbridge and the villages were worked up in more detail and the consultation documentation and method of engagement were agreed at Planning Policy Panel on 6 November 2011.
2. The consultation documentation included:
  - a letter that explained why we were consulting with the parishes;
  - a hand out explaining the options, the interim position, what a neighbourhood plan was and the stages in preparing a plan, their funding and support that is available;
  - A reply form.
3. The letter, hand out and reply form were sent to all town and parish councils on 28 November 2011. The letter also included an invitation to a drop in session on 18 January 2012 where local town and parish council members could have a one to one chat with a Planning Policy Officer as to the implications of the options on their particular village and how a neighbourhood plan could work for them. Reply forms were to be completed and returned to the Planning Policy Team by 29 February 2012.

## **Summary of the options**

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

4. This option is basically the approach taken in the draft Core Strategy, which was developed on the basis of the emerging RSS. The ‘top down’ approach was deemed necessary in the draft Core Strategy in order to ensure that local policy was in general conformity with the spatial approach and housing numbers set in the emerging RSS. For Option 1 the Council would:
  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.

5. With this option Stalbridge and the larger villages would have to conform to the overall housing figures allocated in the Core Strategy, with the quantum of development for each village being determined through the subsequent Site Allocations DPD.
6. This option would allow Stalbridge and the villages to prepare a neighbourhood plan but any plan for housing or employment would as a minimum have to reflect the level of development proposed in the Site Allocation DPD, although it could allocate more.

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

7. Effectively what is proposed under this option is to give a strong strategic steer to development in a limited number of larger villages, but to give greater local choice to development in smaller villages. The number of villages to which a strong strategic steer is given could be less than the 19 ‘sustainable’ villages identified in the draft Core Strategy. For Option 2 the Council would:
  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.
8. The advantages of Option 2 are that the Council would retain an element of control of housing figures and would work with those identified larger villages to prepare a Site Allocations DPD. This approach ensures the larger villages get the growth they need to continue in their role as local service centres, but local communities can still prepare a neighbourhood plan for other issues or to allocate more land for housing if they want.

**Option 3 – The Council gives ‘light touch’ strategic guidance only with greater local choice in Stalbridge and all villages**

9. 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 Core Strategy 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 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 would:
  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 Core Strategy;
  3. Not identify any sites for housing or other uses in Stalbridge or the villages in the Site Allocations Document.
10. Those settlements considered to be 'more' sustainable will be encouraged (but not required) to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan and those villages that are less sustainable will be discouraged (but not excluded) from preparing a Neighbourhood Plan or Community Right to Build Order.
  11. Once the Council's Core Strategy and Development Management Development Plan Document (The New Plan for North Dorset) and the Site Allocations Development Plan Document were adopted the default policy position for Stalbridge and all villages if no Neighbourhood Plan was to be adopted would be one of restraint as countryside policy (Draft Core Policy 20) that restricts development would apply.
  12. There are a number of issues associated with the light touch approach of Option 3. One is that not all town or parish councils may want to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan and as such there is a lack of control over housing numbers leading to uncertainty about the level of delivery outside the main towns in the longer term.
  13. The second is the onus on local communities to prepare Neighbourhood Plans. Neighbourhood plans are a long term investment in terms of time and resources and are subject to certain statutory requirements. Neighbourhood plans could take years to prepare and adopt and require a united community, but when allocating land communities could become divided.

### **Consultation with the towns and parishes**

14. In order to discuss the issues identified with the various options a consultation with town and parish councils was organised.

### **Drop In**

15. There are 12 parish meetings, 33 parish councils, 9 grouped councils and 5 town councils in North Dorset<sup>1</sup> forming the first tier of local government. In total representatives from 21(28%) of parished areas attended the drop in session and benefitted from a one to one chat with a Planning Policy Officer. Appendix 1 - Map showing those parishes who were represented.
16. Many parishes took this as an opportunity to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each option in relation to their particular village and asked how a neighbourhood plan could work for them, if one was needed at all. Officers answered questions to the best of their knowledge in terms of new legislation and based on draft regulations and limited official guidance at this time.
17. For a number of parishes it was important to explain that the default position of being 'washed over' with countryside policy did not mean no development as some forms of development would still be permitted to help support the rural economy and meet essential rural needs.

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<sup>1</sup> In total there are 74 individually parished areas and as the Localism Act gives each area the opportunity to prepare a neighbourhood plan the following facts and figures are based on this total.

18. For a more limited number of individuals officers also described what a Neighbourhood Development Orders was and what a Community Right to Build scheme could actually achieve.
19. During the drop in session many questions were asked and it was decided in advance to collate these and produce a Frequently Asked Questions hand out to be distributed after the event. A copy of the FAQ (Appendix 2) was sent to all the parishes on 10 February 2012 and a copy was also uploaded on to the website under the heading of 'Moving forward' in the new planning system. <http://www.dorsetforyou.com/neighbourhoodplanning/north>.
20. The FAQs were sent out in advance of the deadline for consultation (29 February) to enable local town and parish members to review the questions prior to submitting their response as to their preferred option for growth and their interest in preparing a neighbourhood plan.

### Reply Form

21. **Options** - To date<sup>2</sup> 17 reply forms representing 26 parished areas have been completed and returned. Option 3 has been the most popular choice with 21(81%) towns and parishes selecting this as their preferred option for taking forward growth in Stalbridge and the villages. Appendix 3 – Map showing the preferred option for each parished area.
22. Two parished areas (8%) have expressed a preference for Option 2 where the Council gives a strong strategic steer in Stalbridge and a more limited number of larger villages with greater local choice elsewhere. The remaining three parished areas have been classified as 'Other'. One parish council did not feel that they had sufficient information on which to make a decision and the remaining two parished areas, a joint parish council, did not indicate a preferred choice on the reply form. No parished area identified Option 1 as their preferred choice for moving forward.
23. **Neighbourhood plans** - To gain an insight in to the likely appetite for neighbourhood plans town and parish councils were asked – Is your local community interested in preparing a neighbourhood plan? The covering letter clearly stated that if the answer was no at this time that it did not preclude them from preparing one in the future.
24. Twenty four parished areas responded to this question. Twelve (50%) of the parished areas expressed an interest in preparing a neighbourhood plan. Appendix 4 – Map showing those parished areas interested in preparing a neighbourhood plan. It also includes Gillingham although the town council have not to date returned their reply form the town council have confirmed their intention to preparing a neighbourhood plan.
25. Of those 12 parished areas 7 are what the Council currently consider to be the more sustainable settlements of Bourton, Child Okeford, Fontmell Magna, Hazelbury Bryan, Iwerne Minster, Marnhull and Pimperne.
26. Twelve parished areas have said 'no' to neighbourhood planning at this time or that there is no evidence of community enthusiasm in their area. Many

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<sup>2</sup> Due to democratic procedures this report has been published prior to the closing of the consultation period. A verbal update will be given to Members on 7 March 2012.

appear to be support being washed over with countryside policy where development will be restricted.

**27. Likely issues to be addressed by a neighbourhood plan** - The reply form listed 9 issues that local communities could possibly address through a neighbourhood plan. Those parished areas who had expressed an interest in preparing a neighbourhood plan were then asked to indicate the likely issues they may cover. A majority of those saying yes to neighbourhood planning then proceeded to tick all issues listed:

- Housing
- Affordable housing
- Shops
- Employment
- Green energy
- Village hall
- Local green spaces
- Design and character guidelines

28. It would appear that local communities see neighbourhood plans as an opportunity to consider a range rather than isolated issues. A number of communities also added to the list and suggested that their neighbourhood plan may seek to address traffic management, health facilities, communications, schools and wildlife issues.

**29. Neighbourhood development orders** - There was a mixed response to the question 'Is your local community interested in preparing a neighbourhood development order?' with 7 parishes saying yes, 8 parishes saying no, 7 saying maybe and 2 having no preference. Appendix 5 – Map showing those local communities interested in preparing a neighbourhood development order.

**30. District based guidance note** - When asked the question 'Should the Council produce a District based guidance note for neighbourhood plans?' the response was an overwhelming 'yes'.

### **What does this mean for moving forward with the spatial strategy?**

31. In summary Option 1 offers certainty of policy and delivery but less choice for the villages, Option 2 offers certainty of policy and delivery but less choice for a smaller number of villages and Option 3 offers the least certainty of delivery but will ensure maximum choice for local communities.

32. From the initial consultation there is overwhelming support from town and parish councils for Option 3 where the Council give a 'light touch' strategic steer and there is greater local choice in Stalbridge and all villages. Clearly there is no support for Option 1 that offers the most certainty but gives the least choice for local communities as not one town or parish council selected this as their preferred option. Two parishes considered Option 2 with its certainty of delivery in a smaller number of more sustainable villages as the most sensible way forward.

33. Moving forward with Option 3 we need to carefully consider the implications of the policy on the towns, parishes and the Council itself.

### Implications of Option 3

34. Option 3 is clearly the preferred approach of local communities for moving forward with the spatial strategy, but officers are concerned that not all of the parishes have fully appreciated the default position prior to a neighbourhood plan coming into force, where settlement boundaries would be removed and the countryside policy of restraint would apply. In summary the advantages and disadvantages of Option 3 are:

#### Advantages:

- It is what local communities want. They do not want to be told how many houses are required they want to decide and plan for themselves.
- There is a clear appetite for neighbourhood plans.

#### Disadvantages

- Less certainty of delivery in terms of housing numbers as neighbourhood plans are initiated by local communities not the Council.
- Resource implications for local communities. The countryside policy would 'wash over' all settlements other than the four main towns. If a local community wanted any growth at all, other than rural exceptions, they would need to prepare a neighbourhood plan that can take a long time and cost a significant amount of money. The removal of settlement boundaries precludes any infill development until a neighbourhood plan is brought into force.
- Resource implications for the Council. If a large number of villages want to prepare a neighbourhood plan there are concerns about capacity within the Planning Policy Team to be able to support and advise as required under the legislation. There are also cost implications for the examination and referendum.

#### How can we overcome these disadvantages?

35. The following section considers each disadvantage in turn and proposes a solution to the problem that would enable Option 3, the preferred choice of the towns and parishes, to be taken forward in policy terms.

Problem: Certainty of delivery

Solution: Working together with the towns and parishes

Justification: There is clear evidence that local communities are interested in preparing neighbourhood plans. Nearly all consider housing to be one of the main issues their neighbourhood plan should address. Working together with the towns and parishes the Council could encourage and support those local communities in preparing their neighbourhood plan and identifying suitable sites for housing growth. Guiding and supporting could ensure delivery from the bottom up rather than imposing top down housing figures. Many of the larger more sustainable villages have expressed an interest in preparing a neighbourhood plan.

Problem: Resources implications for local communities

Solution: Retain settlement boundaries

Justification: Retaining settlement boundaries around the more sustainable villages would enable infill development to continue, as at present. If at some stage a local community wanted to prepare a neighbourhood plan, it would only have to review the retained settlement boundary, rather than having to re-introduce it, which would be the case under Option 3 as currently drafted. The retention of settlement boundaries around the more sustainable villages essentially means that currently adopted policy would be the starting point for neighbourhood plans which should reduce the work required at the local level. It would not, however, reduce local choice as local communities would be able to: (a) re-draw the settlement boundary more tightly to restrict development; (b) maintain it as at present; or (c) re-draw it to include additional areas for development.

Problem: Resources implications for the Council

Solution: Provide guidance on how to prepare a neighbourhood plan

Justification: The resource implications on officer time will be reduced if guidance on how to prepare a neighbourhood plan was produced. From the consultation it is clear that local communities appreciate our guidance notes as there was an overwhelming yes to this question. Also by retaining settlement boundaries the number of communities wanting to prepare a neighbourhood plan may also be reduced. For many the growth they could accommodate within existing settlement boundaries may be sufficient in the short term.

### **A revised Option 3a**

36. The above solutions for moving forward with Option 3 have been incorporated into a revised Option 3a. Option 3a retains the principle of maximum choice for local communities, that is clearly supported by the towns and parishes, but the issues of delivery and resources have been mitigated to some extent.

For Option 3a the Council would:

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. Retain the settlement boundaries around the more sustainable settlements allowing infill development;
  3. Remove the settlement boundaries around the less sustainable villages and allowing the countryside policy of restraint to be applied;
  4. Not set any overall housing provision figures for Stalbridge or the villages in the Core Strategy (other than an estimate of infill potential within settlements where boundaries had been retained);
  5. Not identify any sites for housing or other uses in Stalbridge or the villages in the Site Allocations Document.
37. Those settlements considered to be 'more' sustainable would be encouraged (but not required) to prepare a neighbourhood plan. They would also be able to



benefit from infill development within existing settlement boundaries. Some communities may be concerned that this would put their open spaces at risk, but Local Plan Policy 1.9 Important Open/Wooded Areas (IOWA) has been 'saved'. It would continue to apply until such time as it is superseded by either a neighbourhood plan or the Green Infrastructure Strategy that will follow the adoption of the Core Strategy and Site Allocations DPD. Local communities in preparing a neighbourhood plan may consider reviewing individual IOWAs and designating 'green spaces'.

38. Those villages that are less sustainable will be discouraged (but not excluded) from preparing a neighbourhood plan. The default policy position for these villages if no neighbourhood plan was adopted would be one of restraint as the countryside policy (Draft Core Policy 20) would apply.

### **The next step**

39. The next step in moving forward with the options for growth in Stalbridge and the villages is to undertake a further round of targeted public consultation on a revised Option 3a. It is anticipated that this will be part of a wider targeted public consultation together with the other key areas that were identified in the report to Cabinet on 13 June 2011. All revised policies, of which Option 3a will be just one, will be subject to Sustainability Appraisal (SA). A revised SA to support the Core Strategy will also be part of the targeted consultation and a further report will be submitted to Planning Policy Panel on this topic in due course.
40. The recommendation of this report is that Members note the feedback from the towns and parishes on the options for taking forward growth in Stalbridge and the villages. That they acknowledge the appetite of local communities for neighbourhood planning and support further targeted consultation on a revised Option 3a that offers greater certainty in terms of delivery whilst maintaining maximum choice for local communities.

### **OPTIONS**

Members can:

1. Agree to take Option 3a for further targeted consultation
2. Agree to take Option 3a, but with some amendments, for further targeted consultation
3. Not to agree to take Option 3a for further targeted consultation, but to consult further on the original Option 3.

### **COSTS**

41. The cost of actions set out in this report can be met from existing budgets.

### **DIVERSITY AND CUSTOMER FOCUS**

42. There are no diversity or customer focus issues relating to this report.

### **HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS**

43. None relating directly to this report.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

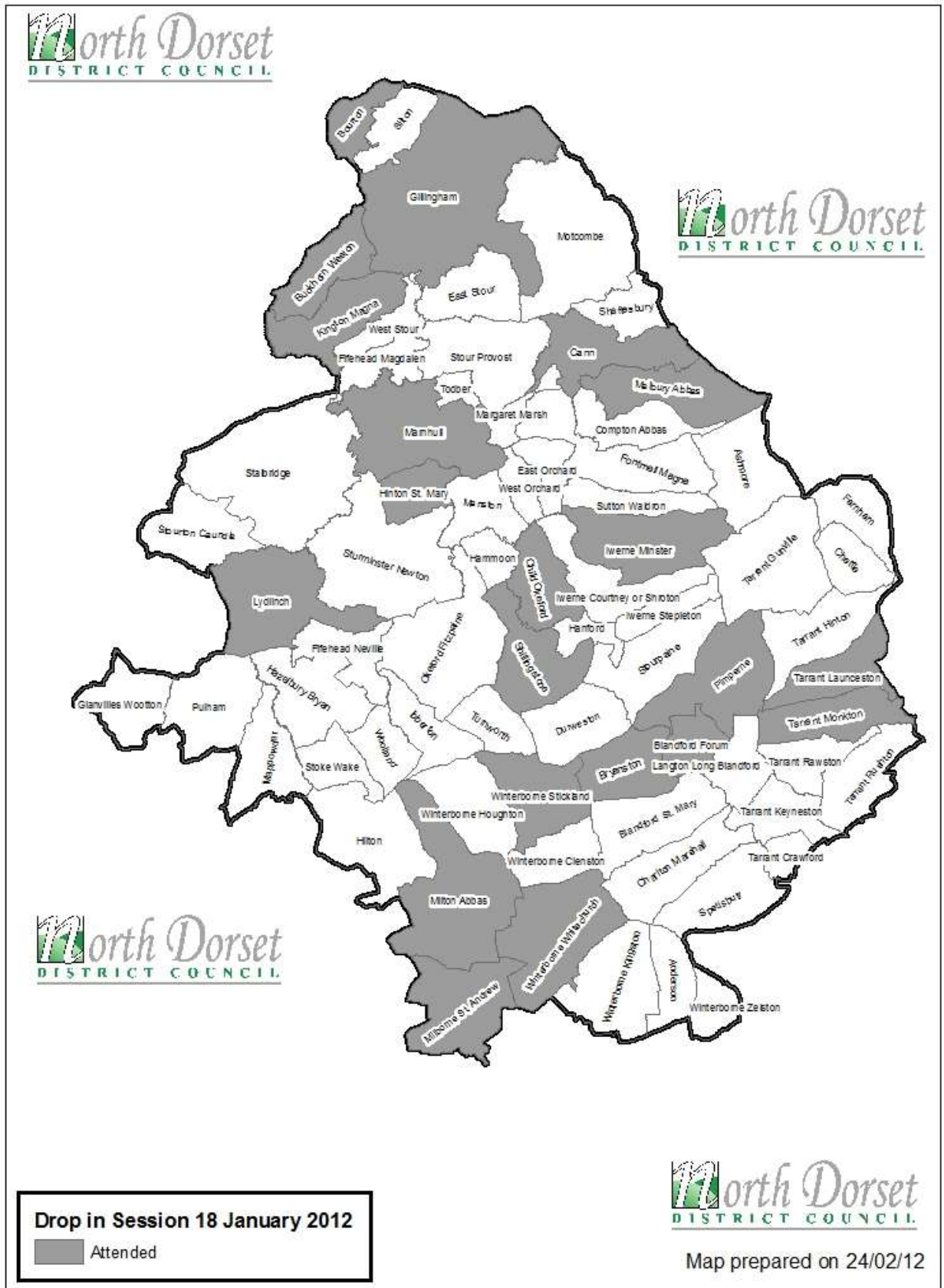
44. Members note the feedback from the towns and parishes on the options for taking forward growth in Stalbridge and the villages. To acknowledge the

appetite of local communities for neighbourhood planning and support further targeted consultation on a revised Option 3a that offers greater certainty in terms of delivery whilst maintaining maximum choice for local communities.

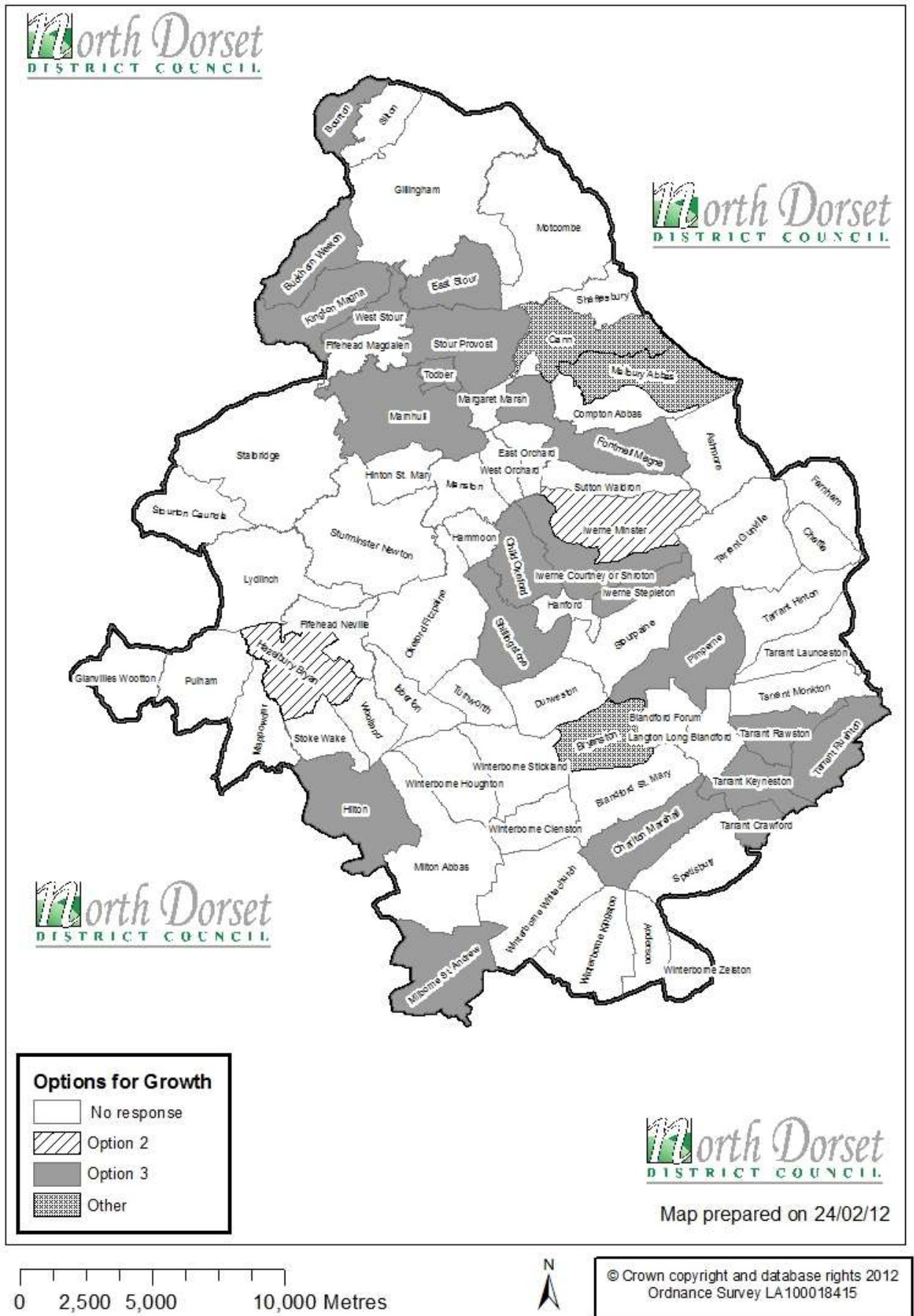
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Appendix 1



Appendix 3







Appendix 5

