

Taking forward growth in the towns and villages of North Dorset

The Government is changing the way we plan. On 15 November the Localism Bill received royal assent and became an Act giving local communities new rights and powers to prepare neighbourhood plans and neighbourhood development orders. In summary the 'top down' approach is going and it will be up to local councils to decide where growth takes place and to set housing targets in a new style Local Plan. Local communities are being encouraged to take an active role in neighbourhood planning.

These changes, together with the publication of the Draft National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), have given the Council an opportunity to try and develop a more flexible, locally based approach to development in the District. There is still need to plan strategically to support economic growth, improve people's quality of life and protect the natural environment but there are a number of policy options that will give a greater choice at the local level, particularly in Stalbridge and the villages. The background to the policy and the options are detailed below. The Council would welcome the views of town and parish councils as to their preferred choice. At the same time the Council would also appreciate an insight into the appetite of local communities for getting involved in neighbourhood planning.

Options for the strategic growth of the District

The emerging NPPF suggests that when preparing a new style Local Plan, councils should set out a clear strategy for allocating land and that planning policies should actively manage patterns of growth to focus significant development in locations that are or can be made sustainable.

The Council's current approach is set out in the Draft Core Strategy and Development Management Policies Document (or New Plan) as published for consultation in March 2010. Draft Core Policy 3: Core Spatial Strategy seeks to locate the majority of the District's growth in the three main towns of Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury with a limited amount of growth in Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and 18¹ identified larger villages. Outside the defined boundaries of these settlements the remainder of the District is treated as countryside where development is strictly controlled unless it is required to enable essential rural needs to be met.

The Council continues to consider growth at the main towns of Blandford, Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton to be strategically important and will set out strategic policies in emerging policy to ensure sufficient homes, jobs and community facilities are provided. However, there are three possible options for establishing a strategic policy approach to development in Stalbridge and the District's villages which range from a strong strategic steer to a light touch framework to encourage growth that we would appreciate your views on.

¹ Bourton, Charlton Marshall, Child Okeford, East Stour, Fontmell Magna, Hazelbury Bryan, Iwerne Minster, Marnhull, Milborne St Andrew, Milton Abbas, Motcombe, Okeford Fitzpaine, Pimperne, Shillingstone, Stourpaine, Winterborne Kingston, Winterborne Stickland and Winterborne Whitechurch

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 current approach described above. 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.

What does Option 1 mean for my village and neighbourhood planning?

Stalbridge and the 'sustainable' villages identified will still be able to prepare a neighbourhood plan to take forward their overall vision, but land for housing and other uses such as employment will have already been allocated in the Site Allocations Document. A neighbourhood plan could allocate additional sites, but could not be used to oppose growth.

For villages where the countryside policy would apply local communities will be able to prepare a neighbourhood plan to enable growth, but if no plan is prepared the default policy of restraint (as set out in the new style Local Plan) will apply.

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.

What does Option 2 mean for my village and neighbourhood planning?

Stalbridge and the smaller number of 'more sustainable' villages will still be able to prepare a neighbourhood plan to take forward their overall vision, but land for housing and other uses such as employment will already have been allocated in the Site Allocations Document. A neighbourhood plan could allocate additional sites, but could not be used to oppose growth.

For villages where the countryside policy would apply local communities will be able to prepare a neighbourhood plan to enable growth, but if no plan is prepared the default policy of restraint (as set out in the new style Local Plan) will apply.

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.

What does Option 3 mean for my village and neighbourhood planning?

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. Once the Council's new style Local Plan is adopted the default policy position for Stalbridge and all villages if no neighbourhood plan is adopted is one of restraint as countryside policy that strictly controls development will applied.

The changing planning system

The Government are changing the way we plan and all three options outlined have been based on draft guidance and primary legislation so some specific details may change when secondary legislation and regulations are introduced or when the final NPPF is published.

In the absence of an up-to-date new style Local Plan, the draft NPPF states that planning applications should be determined in accordance with national policies. The draft NPPF lists a number of core principles to underpin both the plan-making and decision-making process. One principle is that 'planning policies and decisions should actively manage patterns of growth to make the fullest use of public transport, walking and cycling, and focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable'.

The Council consider Draft Core Policy 3 of the New Plan, to embrace this principle as it identifies the towns and larger villages most suitable for growth and applies a policy of restraint in the countryside. For development management purposes Draft Core Policy 3 is the 'interim position' of the Council in relation to spatial strategy for the District prior to the new style Local Plan being adopted.

The policy states that the settlement boundaries around the main towns² and Stalbridge and the larger villages³, as listed in the policy will be retained until such time as they are reviewed through either the Site Allocations Document, or depending on the option selected, a neighbourhood plan.

For those smaller villages⁴ not identified in Draft Core Policy 3, but with a defined settlement boundary, as identified in the current Local Plan, the countryside policy of restraint will be applied until the boundaries are formally removed in the new style Local Plan. Local communities in these smaller villages will have the option to resurrect their settlement boundaries through the neighbourhood planning process if they so wish.

² Main towns - Blandford (Forum and St Mary), Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton

³ Stalbridge and the larger villages - Bourton, Charlton Marshall, Child Okeford, East Stour, Fontmell Magna, Hazelbury Bryan, Iwerne Minster, Marnhull, Milborne St Andrew, Milton Abbas, Motcombe, Okeford Fitzpaine, Pimperne, Shillingstone, Stalbridge, Stourpaine, Winterborne Kingston, Winterborne Stickland and Winterborne Whitechurch

⁴ Smaller villages - Ashmore, Bryanston, Buckhorn Weston, Cann Common, Compton Abbas, Durweston, Farnham, Fifehead Magdalen, Glanvilles Wootton, Hilton, Hinton St Mary, Ibberton, Iwerne Courtney (Shroton), Kings Stag, Kington Magna, Lydlinch, Manston, Mappowder, Melcombe Bingham, Upper and Lower Ansty, Milton on Stour, Pulham, Spetisbury, Stour Provost, Stour Row, Stourton Caundle, Sutton Waldron, Tarrant Gunville, Tarrant Keyneston, Tarrant Monkton, West Stour, Winterborne Houghton and Winterborne Zelston

What is a neighbourhood plan?

Neighbourhood planning is a new way for communities to decide the future of the places where they live and work. A neighbourhood plan will set out a vision for an area and planning policies for the use and development of land. They will consider local rather than strategic issues and will establish general planning policies for the development and use of land in the neighbourhood. For example a neighbourhood plan could suggest where new shops, offices or homes should go, what they should look like and what green spaces should be protected. The neighbourhood plan needs to be compatible with national policies and the policies in the new style Local Plan. Importantly a neighbourhood plan should focus on guiding development rather than stopping it.

Neighbourhood plans can also include **neighbourhood development orders**. These can grant planning permission for specified developments in a neighbourhood area, for example, household extensions, shop fronts, or 'green energy' proposals. If a neighbourhood development order is in place local residents and developers would not need to apply to the Council for planning permission for the development it covers.

Neighbourhood planning can also include **community right to build orders** that are similar to the above. Appropriately constituted community groups will be able to identify land for new, small scale development such as new homes, shops or other community facilities.

What issues will a neighbourhood plan cover?

There is no defined list of issues for a neighbourhood plan to consider. All communities are different, but issues currently being addressed by local communities who are part of the Government's 'front runner' project include:

- Levels and location of affordable housing
- Mix and balance of housing within a settlement
- The provision of community facilities
- Town and village centre enhancements
- Preserving the character of a village (physical fabric and architecture)
- Protecting green spaces and play areas
- Traffic management
- Retention of local shops

This list is not exhaustive; it merely gives an indication of the wide range of topics a neighbourhood plan could cover.

How do you prepare a neighbourhood plan?

Neighbourhood planning is optional, not compulsory. No-one has to do it if they don't want to, but local communities may wish to take the opportunity to influence the place where they live or work.

The regulations for neighbourhood planning are currently out to consultation, but the guiding principle for the government when drafting the regulations was that they should be workable and proportionate to their purpose. There are five stages to neighbourhood planning.

Stage 1: Defining the neighbourhood

The draft regulations establish that in areas with town and parish councils (such as North Dorset) they will take the lead on neighbourhood planning as they are experienced in working with and representing local communities. Care should be taken to ensure that other stakeholders, such as local residents, community organisations, businesses, landowners and developers are involved in the process. Importantly town and parish councils should not develop a neighbourhood plan in isolation from the rest of the community.

Neighbourhood plans can cover part or all of the parish area, but only one neighbourhood plan per parish can be prepared. Where towns and parishes are closely linked a neighbourhood plan can cover more than one area. The parish or town council will need to apply to the Council to prepare a neighbourhood plan and the Council will need to agree and publicise the application.

Stage 2: Preparing the plan

Local people will begin by collecting their ideas together and drawing up their plans. They can choose to draw up either a neighbourhood plan, or a neighbourhood development order, or both. It is entirely up to local communities. Neighbourhood plans can be as detailed or as general as local people want, but:

- They must generally be in line with local policies in the new style Local Plan and with national policies such as the NPPF.
- They must be in line with other laws. For example neighbourhood plans will require sustainability appraisals under European legislation.
- If the local planning authority says that an area needs to grow, then communities cannot use neighbourhood planning to block the building of new homes and businesses. They can, however, use neighbourhood planning to influence the type, design, location and mix of development.

Stage 3: Independent check

Once a neighbourhood plan has been prepared an independent examiner will check if it meets the right basic standards.

Stage 4: Community referendum

To ensure the community has the final say on whether a neighbourhood plan comes into force the Council will organise a referendum. People living in the neighbourhood who are registered to vote in local elections will be entitled to vote in the referendum. The draft regulations propose that if more than 50% of people voting in the referendum support the plan then the local planning authority must bring it into force.

Stage 5: Legal force

Once a neighbourhood plan is in force it will carry real legal weight. Decision makers will be obliged to take what it says into account when they consider proposals for development in the neighbourhood. A neighbourhood order will grant planning permission for development that complies with the order.

Funding and support

There are several sources of advice and support for communities who are interested in doing neighbourhood planning and the Council will be obliged by law to help people draw up their neighbourhood plans by providing technical advice and support. In the past the Council have also produced planning guidance notes on how to prepare town and village design statements and parish plans. Initial feedback from local groups is that this locally based advice has been invaluable and the Council would be more than happy to provide specific advice on neighbourhood plans if there is a demand.

In terms of funding for neighbourhood plans government advice is to approach developers, landowners and local businesses who may be interested in sponsoring or taking a leading role in neighbourhood planning, alternatively local town or parish councils funds can be used. In addition the Government has committed £50m until March 2015 to support local councils in making neighbourhood planning a success. They have already provided £3m to four community support organisations to help communities in their neighbourhood planning. They are:

The Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment

Tel: 020 7613 8587

<http://www.princes-foundation.org/our-work/supporting-communities-and-neighbourhoods-planning>

CPRE in partnership with NALC

Tel: 020 7981 2832

<http://www.planninghelp.org.uk>

Locality

Tel: 0845 458 8336

<http://buildingcommunity.org>

RTPI

Tel: 0203 206 1880

<http://www.rtpi.org.uk/planningaid>

Other important links

Localism Act - <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/20/contents/enacted>

A Plain English Guide to the Localism Act -

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/localismplainenglishupdate>

What happens next?

The Localism Act gives local communities the right to prepare a neighbourhood plan and neighbourhood development orders and secondary legislation is scheduled to be in place by April 2012.

In the meantime the Council would like to gain an understanding of the likely demand for neighbourhood plans in the District in order to work out how best to allocate resources. Can you please complete the attached form indicating the preferred option for taking forward the spatial strategy and your interest in preparing a neighbourhood plan and return it to the Planning Policy Team by **29 February 2012**. If the answer is 'yes' to a neighbourhood plan then it would be extremely useful if you could give us an indication as to the likely issues that your town or parish seeks to address.

Growth Options and Neighbourhood Planning Reply Form

Name of town or parish council

What is your preferred option for taking forward growth in Stalbridge and the villages? *(Please tick one option)*

- Option 1 – The Council gives a strong strategic steer in Stalbridge and the larger villages with greater choice elsewhere
- Option 2 – The Council gives a strong strategic steer in Stalbridge and a more limited number of larger villages with greater local choice elsewhere
- Option 3 – The Council gives 'light touch' strategic guidance only with greater local choice in Stalbridge and all villages

Is your local community interested in preparing a neighbourhood plan?

- Yes
- No

If you answered yes to the above question can you please select from the following list the issue(s) your neighbourhood plan may address?

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Housing | <input type="checkbox"/> Village hall |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Affordable housing | <input type="checkbox"/> Local green spaces |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shops | <input type="checkbox"/> Design and character guidelines |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employment | <input type="checkbox"/> Transport |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Green energy | <input type="checkbox"/> Other <i>(please specify)</i> |
-

Is your local community interested in preparing a neighbourhood development order?

- Yes
- No

Should the Council produce a District based guidance note for neighbourhood plans?

- Yes
- No

Please return completed forms to the Planning Policy Team by **29 February 2012** at North Dorset District Council, Nordon, Salisbury Road, Blandford Forum DT11 7LL. Any questions please call 01258 484201 or email planningpolicy@north-dorset.gov.uk