



Topic Paper

**Spatial Strategy for
North Dorset**

**Version 1
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Contents

1.0	Purpose	3
2.0	Introduction.....	4
3.0	National, Regional and Local Policy Context.....	5
4.0	Issues Arising from Stakeholder and Community Consultations	7
5.0	Issues from the Evidence Base	9
	Defining RSS Development Policy B Settlements	9
	Gillingham (Estimated mid-2006 Population 11,110)	10
	Shaftesbury (Estimated mid-2006 Population 7,100).....	10
	Other Potential RSS Development Policy B Settlements	11
	Defining RSS Development Policy C Settlements.....	14
	Distribution of Development at RSS Development Policy B Settlements	19
	Delivery against the Local Plan and ‘Oversupply’	21
	RSS EiP Panel Report	22
	Implications of the RSS EiP Panel Report for North Dorset	23
	Other Evidence Base Studies.....	24
	Distribution of Development Elsewhere Within the District.....	26
	Policies for the Countryside.....	27
6.0	Conclusions.....	29

Purpose

- 1.1. This is one of five topic papers that provide a general overview of North Dorset and this one focuses on the Council's overall spatial strategy for the distribution of development. It sets out the policy framework at national and regional levels and summarises the evidence base which has been used to inform the spatial policies of the Core Strategy and Development Management Policies DPD. It is a working document which will be updated as new evidence is acquired and the consultation process proceeds.

2.0 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 66,710 in mid-2006, 43% of whom lived in the three main settlements of:
- Blandford (Forum and St Mary) (10,760);
 - Gillingham (11,110); and
 - Shaftesbury (7,100).
- 2.2. These three 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. The two smaller towns, of Sturminster Newton and Stalbridge are located towards the western edge of the District. There are many villages scattered across the rural area, the largest being Marnhull, near Sturminster Newton.
- 2.3. A number of nearby Strategically Significant Cities and Towns (SSCTs)¹ 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.

¹ The region's SSCTs are defined in Development Policy A of the Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West (June 2009)

3.0 National, Regional and Local Policy Context

- 3.1. The Government sees local authorities as ‘place shapers’ which should bring together sectors of the community and private enterprise *“to create a vision of how to respond to and address a locality’s problems, needs and ambitions and build a strategy to deliver the vision in a coordinated way.”*² The Government considers that ‘spatial planning’ *“plays a central role in the overall task of place shaping and in the delivery of land, uses and associated activities.”*³ One key aspect of spatial planning is the establishment of a ‘spatial strategy’, which should aim to guide the distribution of development and activities to particular locations.
- 3.2. National planning policy sets out how development should be distributed in rural areas like North Dorset stating 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 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.”*⁴
- 3.3. This overall approach is echoed in the ‘Core Spatial Strategy’ for the region which is *“designed to respond to and manage development needs in the most sustainable way; improving quality of life in the region and safeguarding the quality of the environment”*⁵. The Core Spatial Strategy states that *“to accommodate and manage growth in the most sustainable way, most new development will be provided for at Strategically Significant Cities and Towns (SSCTs). Provision for more limited development will be made at market and coastal towns and in small towns and villages where this will increase self-containment and promote stronger communities.”*⁶
- 3.4. Development Policy A of the Proposed Changes to the RSS specifically identifies the region’s 21 SSCTs, none of which are located in North Dorset. Development Policy B sets out the criteria that define ‘market

² Paragraph 1.1, PPS 12: Local Spatial Planning – Department for Communities and Local Government (June 2008)

³ Paragraph 2.3, PPS 12: Local Spatial Planning – Department for Communities and Local Government (June 2008)

⁴ Paragraph 3, PPS 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas – Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004)

⁵ Paragraph 3.1.1, Draft Revised Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West – Government Office for the South West (July 2008)

⁶ Policy CSS 3 – Core Spatial Strategy, Draft Revised Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West Incorporating the Secretary of State’s Proposed Changes – Government Office for the South West (July 2008)

- and coastal towns' (in terms of the RSS Proposed Changes) and Development Policy C sets out the criteria that define 'small towns and villages' (in terms of the RSS Proposed Changes).
- 3.5. Section 4 of the RSS Proposed Changes includes a series of sub-regional policies based on Housing Market Areas (HMAs). North Dorset is placed entirely within the Bournemouth and Poole HMA (but outside the South East Dorset SSCT and beyond the South East Dorset Green Belt), to which Policy HMA 7 relates. This policy establishes that provision should be made for 7,000 net additional homes in North Dorset between 2006 and 2026, but provides no further guidance on how these dwellings should be distributed.
 - 3.6. In the light of national and emerging regional policy, the key challenge for North Dorset is to identify the most sustainable distribution of development within the District in the context of RSS Development Policies B and C.
 - 3.7. National policy establishes that *"new building development in the open countryside away from existing settlements, or outside areas allocated for development in development plans, should be strictly controlled; the Government's overall aim is to protect the countryside for the sake of its intrinsic character and beauty, the diversity of its landscapes, heritage and wildlife, the wealth of its natural resources and so it may be enjoyed by all."*⁷
 - 3.8. The RSS Proposed Changes also states that *"development in open countryside, particularly of housing, will be strictly controlled in accordance with national policy."*⁸
 - 3.9. National planning policy⁹ makes it clear that, in principle, certain types of use are appropriate in the countryside including: the re-use of existing buildings; the replacement of existing buildings; agricultural and forestry development; farm diversification; certain tourism and leisure uses; and equine-related developments. National Policy also indicates that local planning authorities should develop policies in their planning documents setting out the circumstances when developments of this nature may be permitted.

⁷ Paragraph 1(iv), PPS 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas– Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004)

⁸ Paragraph 3.5.3, Draft Revised Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West Incorporating the Secretary of State's Proposed Changes – Government Office for the South West (July 2008)

⁹ The Government's overall approach to development in rural areas is set out in PPS 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas– Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004)

4.0 Issues Arising from Stakeholder and Community Consultations

- 4.1. The community's views on the key issues arising out of the national and emerging regional policy framework were sought when the Council undertook consultation on the issues and options¹⁰ for a 'stand alone' core strategy in June – July 2007¹¹. The consultation took place well before the RSS Proposed Changes were produced and the issues and options discussed were based on the draft RSS¹².
- 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. It also suggested 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 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.¹³
- 4.5. At the time of the Issues and Options consultation, only 5,100 homes were proposed for North Dorset between 2006 and 2026 in draft RSS, with 2,900 to be built before 2016 and 2,200 to be built thereafter. The

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

¹¹ Since this consultation the Council has now decided to produce a Development Plan Document (DPD) containing both the Core Strategy and a limited number of development management policies. Details of this (and other DPDs) can be found in the Council's Local Development Scheme 2009

¹² The Draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West 2006 – 2026 – South West Regional Assembly (June 2006). It should be noted that although the overall regional spatial approach remains very similar (i.e. the hierarchy of SSCTs, Development Policy B Settlements and Development Policy C Settlements appears in both the draft RSS and the RSS Proposed Changes), the overall level of growth proposed for North Dorset has increased (from 5,100 net additional dwellings in draft RSS, to 7,000 net additional dwellings in the RSS Proposed Changes). The community views on the spatial distribution of growth expressed in 2007 need to be seen in this context.

¹³ 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_policy/local_development_framework/core_strategy/core_strategy_2007_consultation.htm

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. In the light of the uncertainty about future housing numbers (for a variety of reasons), the Council produced a background paper as part of the Issues and Options consultation which examined the implications of four different scenarios, where total housing numbers over 20 years ranged from 5,100 to 6,500¹⁴.
- 4.7. 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 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.
- 4.8. The Council has not yet sought the community's views on how the level of housing provision in the RSS Proposed Changes (i.e. 7,000 homes between 2006 and 2026) should be accommodated in North Dorset. Whilst it is helpful to have regard to the views expressed in 2007, it must be borne in mind that these views were made in response to a significantly lower level of proposed development. Clearly people may feel differently about how a higher overall level of development should be distributed.

¹⁴ The Implications of the Regional Spatial Strategy for the Level and Distribution of Housing Development in North Dorset – Supporting Document to The Core Strategy: Issues and Options Paper – North Dorset District Council (May 2007)

5.0 Issues from the Evidence Base

- 5.1. This section explains the evidence that has been used to respond to the issues arising from the national and regional policy framework, which can be summarised as:
- Which settlements in North Dorset meet the criteria in Development Policy B of the RSS Proposed Changes to be defined as ‘market or coastal towns’;
 - Which settlements in North Dorset meet the criteria in Development Policy C of the RSS Proposed Changes to be defined as ‘small towns and villages’ where more limited development will increase self-containment and promote stronger communities;
 - How should growth be distributed between the RSS Development Policy B Settlements and the RSS Development Policy C Settlements; and
 - How should a positive policy framework be developed for North Dorset’s countryside, which enables essential rural needs to be met, whilst also ensuring that development is ‘strictly controlled’ to maintain rural character.

Defining RSS Development Policy B Settlements

- 5.2. The RSS Proposed Changes indicates that Development Policy B Towns “*should be focal points for locally significant development including provision for the bulk of district housing provision outside the SSCTs. Local authorities should base their proposals for development at these towns on a clear, evidence-based understanding of their changing roles and functions, particularly for work and service delivery.*”
- 5.3. The consultation on Issues and Options in 2007 was supported by a background paper¹⁵ which assessed all the settlements in the District on the basis of their population and community facilities. This analysis identified Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury as ‘likely Development Policy B Settlements’. Several different studies¹⁶ on issues such as housing, employment, retailing and transport have also been undertaken, which support this initial view. The role and function of these main towns are briefly described below.

¹⁵ 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)

¹⁶ Most studies are available on the Evidence Base page of the Council’s website at the following link http://www.north-dorset.gov.uk/index/living/building_planning/planning_policy/local_development_framework/evidence_gathering.htm

Blandford (Estimated mid-2006 Population 10,760)

- 5.4. 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.
- 5.5. Although the town lies outside the South East Dorset SSCT, it nevertheless looks towards the conurbation for higher level services, such as comparison shopping, leisure, further education and healthcare. Despite this, and the relatively good road links from the town, the Local Transport Plan¹⁷ shows that Blandford is relatively self-contained with only marginally more out-commuting than in-commuting.

Gillingham (Estimated mid-2006 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 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.
- 5.7. The Local Transport Plan shows that Gillingham is relatively self-contained with slightly more in-commuting than out-commuting. 2001 Census data showed that the vast majority of trips were car-based with only 4.4% of commuters from Gillingham using the railway. However, more recent data indicate that the number of passenger journeys on this part of the rail network has grown in recent years and is forecast to grow further in the period up to 2016¹⁸.

Shaftesbury (Estimated mid-2006 Population 7,100)

- 5.8. 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

¹⁷ Commuter patterns in rural Dorset are discussed in paragraphs 6.25 – 6.29 on pages 98 – 100 of The Dorset (Excluding South East Dorset) Local Transport Plan 2006 – 2011 – Dorset County Council (2006)

¹⁸ Connecting Local Communities – Route Plans 2009: Route 4 – Wessex Routes produced by Network Rail in March 2009 indicates that the number of passenger journeys per year on trains operated by Stagecoach South West Trains on this part of the network had grown by 22% over the past six years. Demand is also forecast to rise by a further 20% on this part of the network in the period up to 2016.

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.

- 5.9. The Local Transport Plan shows that out-commuting from Shaftesbury significantly exceeds in-commuting. However, the 2001 Census showed that levels of car use by commuters were the lowest in rural Dorset (60% car drivers from the town compared with 75% in the rural County as a whole) and levels of walking were the highest (26% in the town compared with just 6% in the rural County as a whole).

Other Potential RSS Development Policy B Settlements

- 5.10. Sturminster Newton and Stalbridge are both towns and therefore could potentially be considered as RSS Development Policy B Settlements. However, it is considered that this status is not merited by virtue of their size, role and function.
- 5.11. With an estimated population in mid-2006 of 3,800, Sturminster Newton is just over half the size of Shaftesbury, the smallest of the District's three main towns. Stalbridge is smaller still, with an estimated mid-2006 population of just 2,570. Their much smaller size means that they are not well suited to accommodating a significant proportion of "the bulk of district housing provision", which is a role envisaged for RSS Development Policy B Settlements by the RSS Proposed Changes.
- 5.12. The Council has examined the proximity of settlements to a range of services and has 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 1 below).
- 5.13. Although North Dorset is not deprived in general terms, it is deprived (as is the rest of rural Dorset) in terms of access to services and this is identified as a key issue for the area in the Dorset sustainable communities strategy¹⁹. The cluster of Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and Marnhull plays a key role in addressing the access to services issue by making proximity to services relatively high in this part of the Blackmore Vale. It is considered that they function more as RSS Development Policy C Settlements by contributing to more self-contained and stronger communities in the rural area, rather than as RSS Development Policy B Settlements, which should be the main focus for growth in the District.
- 5.14. The Core Strategy and Development Management Policies DPD will need to include separate policies for each of the three main towns setting out how each of them will grow and provide for the bulk of

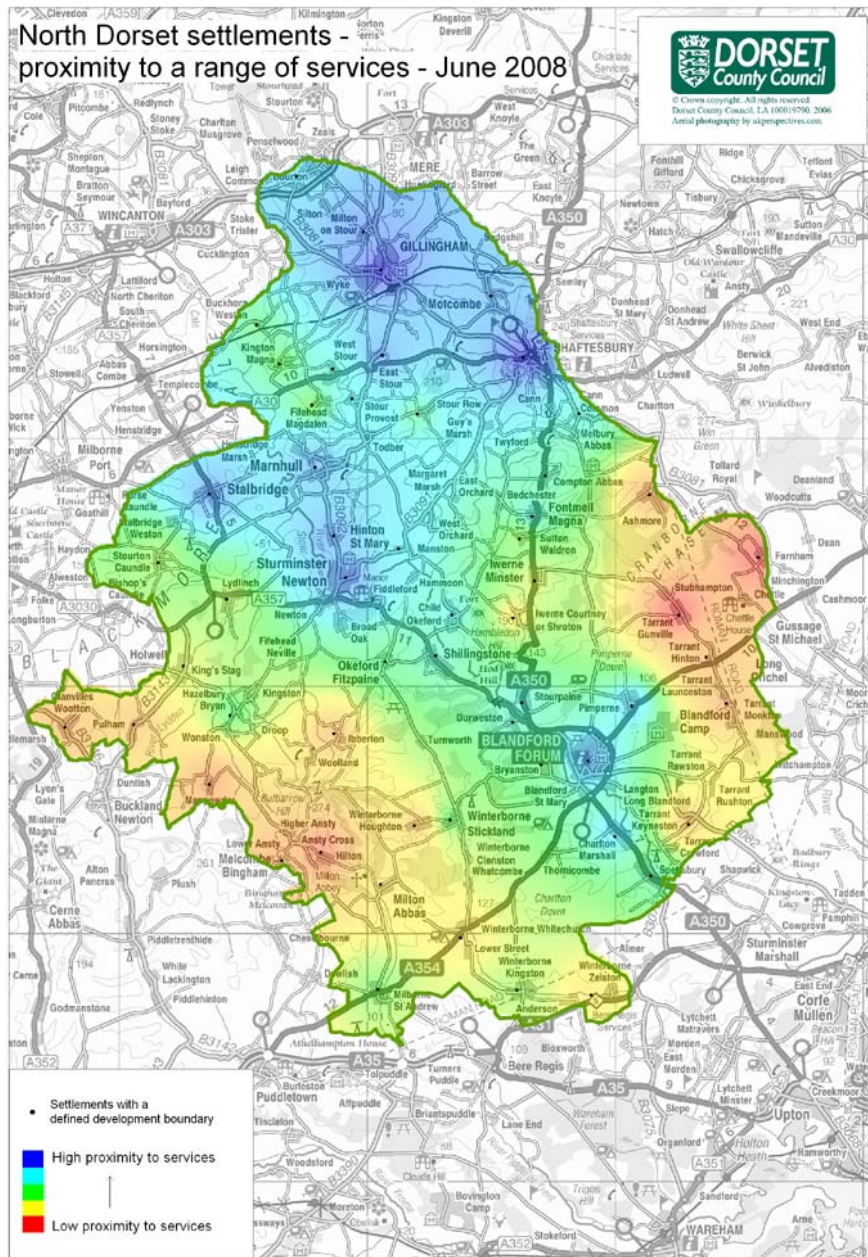
¹⁹ Section 3.5 of Shaping Our Future – The Community Strategy for Dorset 2007 – 2016 – Dorset Strategic Partnership (June 2007)

district housing need. Although it is not considered to merit RSS Development Policy B Settlement status, it is considered that a separate policy would be appropriate for Sturminster Newton, as the largest of the RSS Development Policy C Settlements. The Sturminster Newton Town Design Statement²⁰ identifies a 'central regeneration area' within the town and SturQuest (the Local Community Partnership) have also prepared a design and development brief for part of that area²¹. A separate core policy for Sturminster Newton will show how these (and other) community-based initiatives can enhance the role and function of the town.

²⁰ Sturminster Newton Town Design Statement: Supplementary Planning Document prepared for SturQuest by Matrix Partnership (July 2008)

²¹ Station Road Area Design and Development Brief prepared for SturQuest by Matrix Partnership (April 2008)

Figure 1 – Map Showing Proximity to Services in North Dorset



Defining RSS Development Policy C Settlements

- 5.15. The Council undertook an initial assessment of settlements²² based on populations within defined settlement boundaries and facilities as part of the early work on the Core Strategy. This identified ten 'likely RSS Development Policy C Settlements' and a further ten 'possible RSS Development Policy C Settlements'.
- 5.16. The identified 'likely RSS Development Policy C Settlements' were:
- Sturminster Newton;
 - Stalbridge;
 - Marnhull;
 - Child Okeford;
 - Shillingstone;
 - Pimperne;
 - Hazelbury Bryan;
 - Motcombe;
 - Okeford Fitzpaine; and
 - Milborne St. Andrew.
- 5.17. The identified 'possible RSS Development Policy C Settlements' were:
- Winterborne Stickland;
 - Bourton;
 - Fontmell Magna;
 - Iwerne Minster;
 - Stourpaine;
 - Charlton Marshall;
 - Winterborne Kingston;
 - East Stour;
 - Winterborne Whitechurch; and
 - Spetisbury.
- 5.18. The initial study raised the issue of how Hazelbury Bryan should be assessed since it is comprised of (at least) three discrete settlements (Pidney, Wonston and Kingston). As one single village, it would be assessed as a 'likely RSS Development Policy C Settlement'. However, as three separate settlements, it is unlikely that any one of them would be assessed as a 'RSS Development Policy C Settlement' on its own. Given that the three settlements are located very close together and collectively they increase accessibility to local services to this part of the District, it is considered that its assessment as one single village is the most appropriate approach.
- 5.19. Although the initial study generally gave a good indication of the relative sustainability of settlements, the technique of estimating population from within settlement boundaries produced an anomaly in relation to Milton Abbas. Although the village has a reasonable range of

²² 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)

facilities, the initial study indicated that the population was relatively small. However, this is not a true reflection of the situation on the ground. The settlement boundary in the Local Plan (see Inset Map 31) is only drawn around the Catherine's Well area and excludes other parts of the village, notably The Street. If this additional population is factored into the assessment, Milton Abbas would fall within the 'possible RSS Development Policy C Settlement' category.

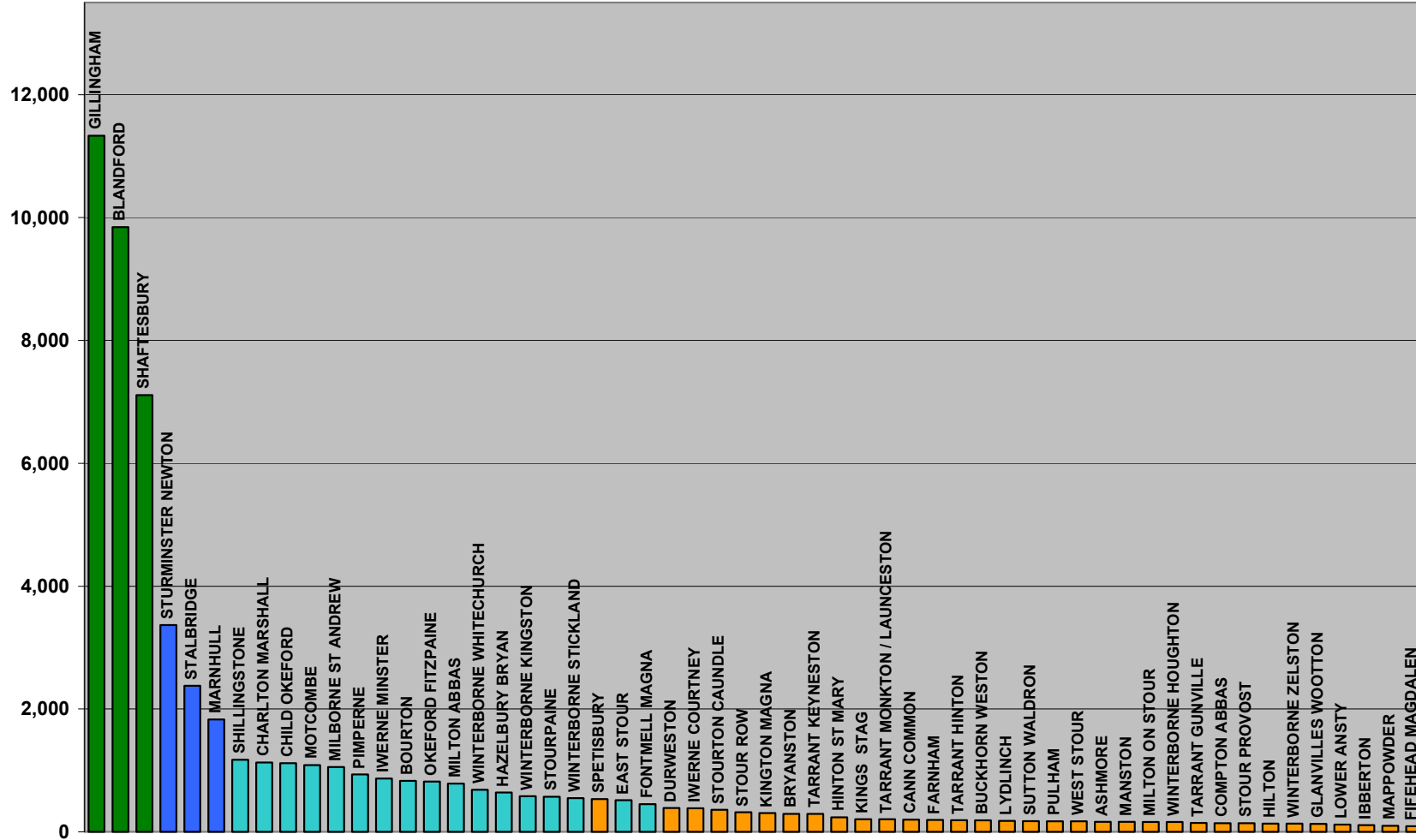
- 5.20. A more detailed assessment of settlements has now been undertaken based on: more up-to-date and accurate population information; overall population levels rather than estimates of population within settlement boundaries; and a relative weighting of facilities giving more importance to services that are frequently used.
- 5.21. A more detailed analysis of population showed that settlements can be grouped into a number of 'size-classes' with fairly distinct 'cut-off points' at different intervals, as shown in Figures 2 and 3 below. These seven notional 'size-classes' are:
- 11,000+ to 7,000+ population – the three main market towns of Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury;
 - 3,500+ to c. 2,000 population - the two small towns of Sturminster Newton and 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.
- 5.22. The more detailed analysis also 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.
- 5.23. Figure 2 shows that Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury have significantly larger populations than the other settlements in the District. This coupled with the facilities they offer support their identification as RSS Development Policy B Settlements. The next largest three settlements, Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and Marnhull, which also have a good range of facilities, are grouped together, both in terms of size and as a geographical 'cluster' in the north-west of the District.

- 5.24. The RSS indicates that *“the scale and nature of development in rural communities needs to be managed more carefully than has been the case over the last 20 years if the most sustainable approach to development is to be delivered across the region.”*²³ This statement, coupled with national policy on the distribution of development, suggests that the Council should seek to concentrate development in those villages that are capable of functioning as ‘local service centres’.
- 5.25. The more detailed analysis indicated that even some relatively small villages support a reasonable range of frequently used facilities, but in general terms those with populations of less than 400 didn’t. This suggests that the cut-off point at the lower end of the RSS Development Policy C Settlement category should be around this population level. Villages were then selected if:
- They had a population of between 400 and 650 and four or more of the seven frequently used facilities; or
 - They had a population of more than 650 and at least three of the seven frequently used facilities.
- 5.26. The villages at the bottom end of the range were examined in more detail.
- 5.27. The only village with a population between 400 and 500 in North Dorset is Fontmell Magna. Despite its small population, the village has a good range of facilities, suggesting that categorisation as a RSS Development Policy C Settlement is appropriate. Two villages have populations of just fewer than 400, namely Durweston and Iwerne Courtney. The initial analysis suggests that Durweston has a good range of facilities within 1 kilometre of its centre. However, closer inspection shows that some of these facilities are in Stourpaine, on the other side of the River Stour. Iwerne Courtney supports fewer than four of the seven frequently used facilities. This suggests that Durweston and Iwerne Courtney should not be categorised as a RSS Development Policy C Settlements
- 5.28. Of the villages with populations over 500, but less than 650, Spetisbury is the only one with fewer than four of the frequently used community facilities. It is a linear village set between the floodplain of the River Stour and the former railway, with little potential for development within the existing built-up area. In view of these factors it is suggested that categorisation as a RSS Development Policy C Settlement is not appropriate.
- 5.29. On the basis of the updated analysis it is considered that the Council should take forward a policy identifying the following villages as RSS Development Policy C Settlements: Bourton; Charlton Marshall; Child Okeford; East Stour; Fontmell Magna; Hazelbury Bryan; Iwerne

²³ Paragraph 3.5.2, Draft Revised Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West Incorporating the Secretary of State’s Proposed Changes – Government Office for the South West (July 2008)

Minster; Marnhull; Milborne St. Andrew; Milton Abbas; Motcombe; Okeford Fitzpaine; Pimperne; Shillingstone; Stalbridge; Stourpaine; Sturminster Newton; Winterborne Kingston; Winterborne Stickland; and Winterborne Whitechurch.

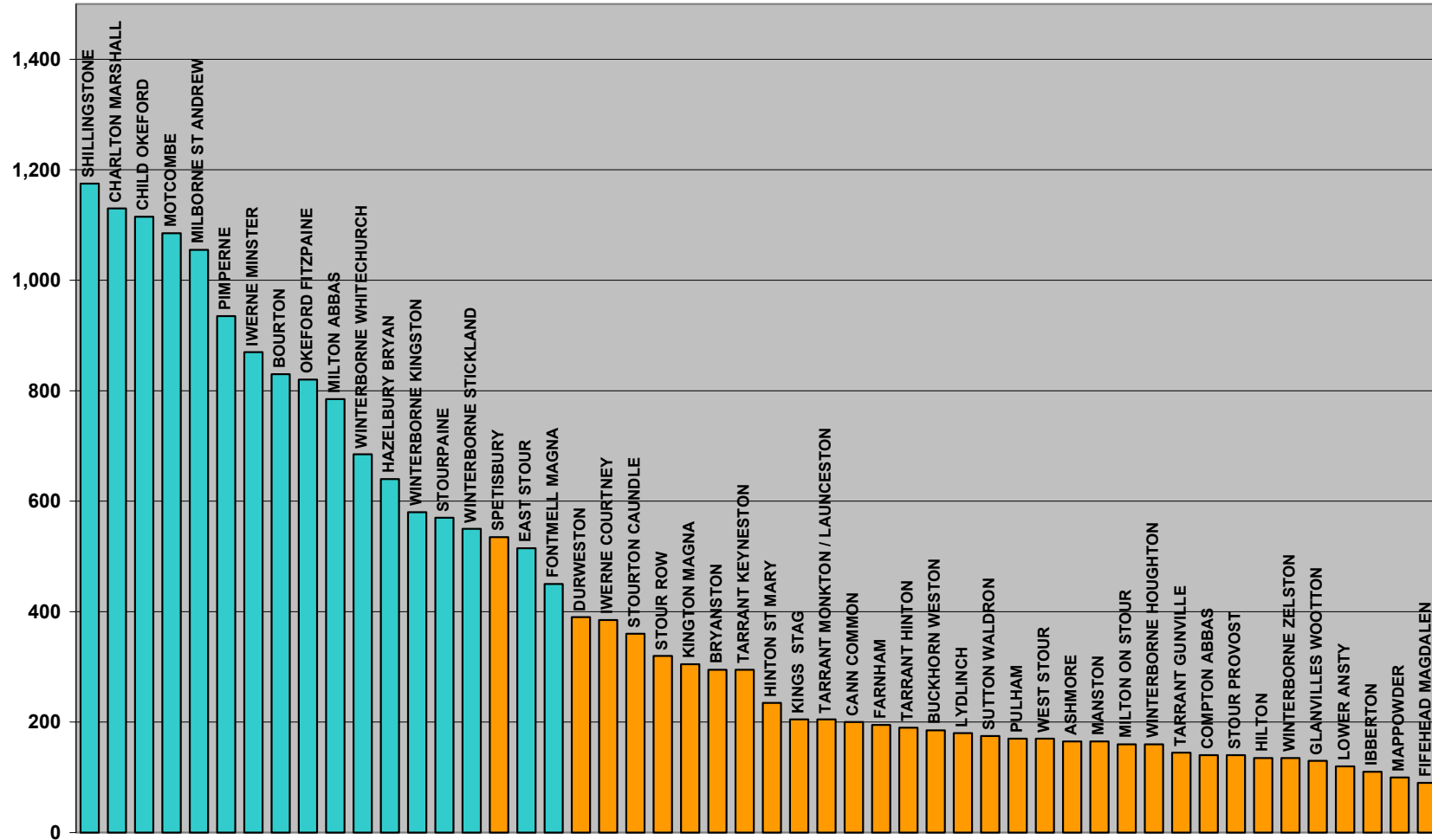
Figure 2 – Population – All Settlements



Distribution of Development at RSS Development Policy B Settlements

- 5.30. Although national and regional policies seek to concentrate development in larger settlements, there is little policy guidance on how growth should be distributed between the three main towns and other settlements in the District.
- 5.31. The region's SSCTs are promoted as the primary focus for growth in the South West. Since most new jobs in the region will be located at these 21 settlements, it is argued that they should also receive the bulk of the proposed housing development. This approach not only seeks to match housing to jobs, but also makes it easier to provide a range of community facilities and public transport. The text that supports RSS Development Policy B applies a similar logic, but recognises that for 'market and coastal towns' growth will be on a smaller scale.
- 5.32. The provision of housing is a key aspect of growth and proposed levels of housing provision are often used to assess the need for other forms of development, notably employment land, retailing, community facilities and infrastructure. There are five main sources of information that need to be taken into account when considering the most appropriate distribution of housing (and consequently growth generally) in North Dorset and these are:
- The planned distribution of housing in the current Local Plan;
 - The actual historic rate of delivery of housing and the implications that has had on local communities;
 - The debate on the distribution of development that has taken place through the preparation of the RSS;
 - Community views on options for the distribution of growth expressed during early consultation on the core strategy (as previously discussed in Section 4); and
 - Evidence based studies including those examining the potential for housing in different locations, the potential for economic growth and environmental constraints

Figure 3 – Population in Smaller Settlements



Delivery against the Local Plan and 'Oversupply'

- 5.33. The Local Plan sets out the current strategy for accommodating growth over the period from 1994 to 2011 and in terms of housing it outlines the approximate scale and rate of housing that should be achieved in Blandford, Gillingham, Shaftesbury, Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and 'rural settlements' (i.e. the rest of the District).
- 5.34. Of the 5,900 dwellings proposed over the 17 year period, the Local Plan indicates that 3,830 should be provided at the three main towns (1,050 at Blandford, 1,610 at Gillingham and 1,170 at Shaftesbury) representing 64.9% (i.e. about 65%) of the total. However, in terms of actual delivery only 58.5% of housing was delivered in these towns (1,133 at Blandford, 1,722 at Gillingham and 518 at Shaftesbury) during the period 1994 to 2007.
- 5.35. The average annual rate of development for all of North Dorset during this period was 444 dwellings per annum (dpa), which exceeded the planned average annual rate of 347 dpa by 28%. The average annualised rate of delivery in the 'rural settlements' (i.e. outside the three main towns, Sturminster Newton and Stalbridge) was 127 dpa, which was 72% above the planned rate of 74 dpa.²⁴
- 5.36. The issue of 'oversupply' caused concern with the Audit Commission when they undertook an inspection of the Council's Planning Service in May 2006. Their report, which was produced in July 2006, assessed the Council as providing a fair, one-star service that had promising prospects for improvement and stated that *"the Council provides a fair planning service because of the Council's previously relaxed approach to residential development which has led to housing oversupply and undermined the sustainability policies in the local plan."* The Council has subsequently sought to address the issue of oversupply (including oversupply in rural areas) through the production of a supplementary planning document²⁵.
- 5.37. The debate about oversupply clearly establishes that delivering below 65% in the main towns (or above 35% in the rest of the District) raises sustainability issues. Given the concerns expressed in the RSS about the scale and nature of development in rural areas, it also suggests that a greater degree of concentration ought to be sought. The community's views on higher levels of concentration are set out in Section 4.

²⁴ A full breakdown of housing delivery over the period 1994 to 2007 is given in Table 4.1 of Managing Housing Land Supply in North Dorset: Supplementary Planning Document – North Dorset District Council (July 2007). It should be noted that all housing figures in the Local Plan are gross (reflecting the approach in the Structure Plan), but housing figures to meet RSS targets are net, reflecting the approach now taken across the region. Paragraph 6.30 of the Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole Structure Plan, indicates that the housing provision figure of 5,900 gross dwellings for North Dorset equates to about 5,700 net additional dwellings.

²⁵ Managing Housing Land Supply in North Dorset: Supplementary Planning Document – North Dorset District Council (July 2007)

RSS EiP Panel Report

- 5.38. Although the RSS Proposed Changes do not give any guidance on how development should be distributed in North Dorset, this issue was debated during the preparation of the RSS. It was raised as an issue at the Examination in Public (EiP) in summer 2007 and was discussed in the subsequent EiP Panel Report²⁶. The implications of the EiP Panel's Report were fully discussed at the Council's Planning Policy Panel on 13th February 2008²⁷ and the key points are outlined below.
- 5.39. The EiP Panel's Report suggested that the overall level of housing development in North Dorset for the period 2006 to 2026 should be increased from 5,100 to 7,000 dwellings. The EiP Panel suggested a general increase of about 15% in non-SSCT areas across the region to take account of the implications of new household formation rates²⁸. The EiP Panel felt that these factors justified an increase in the overall level of development in North Dorset to 6,000 net additional dwellings
- 5.40. The EiP Panel also considered the implications of migration-led growth. The 2003 DCLG population projections suggested that there might be a need for as many as 8,376 dwellings in North Dorset. However, the EiP Panel felt that this very high projection was likely to reflect, at least in part, non employment-led migration, such as retirement.
- 5.41. The overall emphasis of the RSS is for employment-led growth and so the Panel examined to what extent additional housing provision was required to support this. The EiP Panel was concerned about the possibility of additional commuting from Blandford to the South East Dorset conurbation and so did not suggest any further increase in this area to meet employment-led migration needs. The EiP Panel recognised that the Gillingham / Shaftesbury area is located outside the effective influence of the conurbation, and felt that an additional 1,000 dwellings could be justified to support employment-led growth in this area.
- 5.42. The possibility of allocating a 'strategic level of development' to the Gillingham / Shaftesbury area was also considered by the EiP Panel, but they rejected this idea both as a result of concerns about economic potential and in the light of road infrastructure issues²⁹.

²⁶ Draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West: Panel Report (December 2007)

²⁷ The agenda and minutes of this meeting are available to view or download from the 'Minutes and Agendas' section of the Council's website

²⁸ Paragraph 4.0.10, Page 51, Draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West: Panel Report (December 2007)

²⁹ These issues are discussed in Paragraphs 4.7.48 to 4.7.50 on Pages 141 – 142 of the Draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West: Panel Report (December 2007). A numerical summary how the proposed increase in housing numbers in North Dorset is derived is set out on Page A16 of Appendix A (iii) of the same report

Implications of the RSS EiP Panel Report for North Dorset

- 5.43. The report to Planning Policy Panel on 13 February 2008 took account of the 'broad brush' recommendations of the EiP Panel and local factors to give an indication of what might be an appropriate spatial distribution of development for the three main towns and the rest of the District.
- 5.44. For Blandford, there are not only strategic concerns about high levels of growth leading to additional commuting to the South East Dorset conurbation, but also significant environmental constraints. Blandford is sandwiched between the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) to the west and the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB to the north and east. The floodplain of the River Stour also limits the potential of Blandford Forum for growth to the west and south.
- 5.45. Although the evidence submitted to the EiP³⁰ focussed primarily on the potential for growth at Gillingham, the EiP Panel expressed their recommendations in terms of the potential of the Shaftesbury / Gillingham area. The reasons for this are unclear, but it may reflect the potential for expansion to the east of the town already identified in the current Local Plan³¹. Shaftesbury experienced a relatively low rate of development during the period 1994 to 2007 (only about 40 dpa). This reflects both the limited potential for development within the town and the delay in bringing forward the land to the east of the town due to a call-in inquiry.
- 5.46. Once the land to the east of the town has been developed, there will only be limited potential for further expansion. The Local Plan recognises that the town may be approaching its 'environmental capacity' once this area has been developed for a variety of reasons, but particularly in view of landscape constraints³². Shaftesbury is a hill-top town and there are steep slopes dropping away to the north, west and south of the historic core. The town has expanded on the flatter plateau land to the east, but continued growth in this direction raises issues both in terms of environmental impact (on AONB landscapes and potentially water levels and quality in the catchment of the River Avon Special Area of Conservation) and accessibility to facilities (particularly those in the town centre).
- 5.47. In contrast Gillingham has experienced a much higher level of growth historically (132 dpa during the period 1994 to 2007) and has been

³⁰ Including the Dorset Strategic Planning Authorities' advice to the South West Regional Assembly - Implications of the 2003 Revised Household Projections: Section 4(4) Advice – Bournemouth Borough Council, Borough of Poole and Dorset County Council (December 2006)

³¹ Policies SB 8 to SB 12 of the North Dorset District Wide Local Plan (January 2003) propose the development of about 30 hectares of land to the east of the town for housing and employment development. Policy 2.4 of the Local Plan indicates that this area should provide a minimum of 680 dwellings.

³² This is explained in more detail in paragraphs 37.2.1 to 37.2.3 on page 120 of the Local Plan

successful in attracting and retaining businesses on a number of employment sites. The 4(4) Authorities advice also recognised the relatively unconstrained nature of the land around the town. Apart from the floodplains of the River Stour, the River Lodden and Shreen Water that pass through Gillingham and the Scheduled Ancient Monuments at King’s Court Palace and Slaughtergate, the land around the town is not subject to any other national planning constraints.

5.48. A table in the Planning Policy Panel report compared past rates of development and possible future rates based on the EiP Panel’s report and the local factors outlined above. This table is reproduced below.

Figure 4 – Historic and Possible Future Rates of Development in North Dorset

	Historic Development Rates In North Dorset			Possible Development Rates in North Dorset		
	Comps 94/07	Ann. rate 94/07	% of total	Total proposed 06-26	Proposed ann. rate 06-26	% of total
Blandford	1,133	87	19.5%	1,000 - 1,500	50 - 75	14 - 21%
Gillingham	1,722	132	30%	2,000 - 2,600	100 - 130	29 - 37%
Shaftesbury	518	40	9%	1,000 – 1,500	50 - 75	14 - 21%
% Policy B settlements	-	-	58.5%	-	-	57 - 80%
Remainder of District	1,646	185	41.5%	1,400 - 3,000	70 - 150	20 - 43%
Totals	5,778	444	100%			

5.49. The report to Planning Policy Panel recognised that the Council would need to develop a more definitive view on the most appropriate split through the Core Strategy process. Although the table suggests that it may be appropriate to provide as little as 57% of all development in the three main towns, the Planning Policy Panel report pointed out that it may be difficult to argue for less than 65% in these towns (and consequently 35% in the rest of the District), as this is the ‘planned split’ in the Local Plan and the emerging RSS suggests that a more concentrated approach is required.

Other Evidence Base Studies

5.50. Since the EiP a number of more detailed evidence base studies have been undertaken in North Dorset including studies relating to growth (covering issues such as the availability of housing land³³, the need for employment land³⁴ and retailing and other town centre uses³⁵) and the

³³ The North Dorset District Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment – North Dorset District Council (February 2009)

³⁴ Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole Workspace Strategy – GVA Grimley (2008)

³⁵ Joint Retail Assessment for Christchurch Borough and East, North and Purbeck Districts – Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners (March 2008)

environment (covering issues such as landscape character³⁶ and flooding³⁷). A study has also been undertaken to look at the long term growth potential of Gillingham, which took account of the potential impacts of such growth on the surrounding area, particularly Shaftesbury³⁸.

- 5.51. The three main towns (and Sturminster Newton) all have opportunities for regeneration on brownfield sites close to their existing town centres. Although these opportunities will enable certain needs to be met, particularly those for retailing, community facilities and some employment uses, they will not be sufficient to meet all needs, particularly the need for additional housing.
- 5.52. A significant proportion of the need for new development at Blandford and Shaftesbury can be met from sites that are already allocated in the current Local Plan or on sites that already have planning permission for development. However, further greenfield sites are likely to be required, especially in the period after 2016, to meet longer term needs. The Council's Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) confirms that further potential at Blandford and Shaftesbury is limited and by 2026 much of the capacity for growth within environmental constraints will have been used up.
- 5.53. At Gillingham nearly all of the sites allocated for housing in the Local Plan have been built out, but the SHLAA shows that there are extensive areas of potentially developable land adjoining the town. The study of Gillingham confirms that the town has the economic potential to support further growth, but also recognises that impacts on existing infrastructure (such as additional traffic on the A303) and the provision of new infrastructure (such as improved shopping facilities) are issues that need to be addressed. At Gillingham there is sufficient suitable land on which to expand both up to 2026 and beyond. However, growth will need to be taken forward in a way which addresses these issues.
- 5.54. The evidence suggests that it would be possible to accommodate more than 65% of development at the three main towns in the period up to 2026, focussing on bringing forward sites and Blandford and Shaftesbury in the early part of the plan period, with a greater emphasis on Gillingham in the future as sites around the town are taken forward through the development plan and planning application processes.

³⁶ Landscape Character Area Assessment – North Dorset District Council (March 2008)

³⁷ Bournemouth, Christchurch, East Dorset, North Dorset and Salisbury SFRA – Halcrow Group (February 2008)

³⁸ Assessing the Potential for Growth and the Future Role of Gillingham, Dorset – Atkins (in preparation)

Distribution of Development Elsewhere Within the District

- 5.55. In the event that 65% of the 7,000 dwellings proposed for North Dorset were located at the three main towns, this would require the remaining 35% (i.e. 2,450 dwellings) to be located in the rest of the District. The evidence suggests that there is the potential for more than 65% of housing to be accommodated at the three main towns and such greater concentration is sought by the RSS. However, the key question is whether greater concentration would still enable the communities in the rural area to meet their own needs.
- 5.56. The existing Local Plan proposes 'moderate growth' for Sturminster Newton. It recognised that some growth was needed to support its role as a service centre, but that in the longer term the strategy would be to "*limit further large scale development*"³⁹. The closure of the livestock market and creamery has required action to be taken to try and establish a new role for the town with a focus on regeneration. This process is well underway with the construction of the new Exchange building and the building out of most of the former Livestock Market site.
- 5.57. Further opportunities still exist in the Station Road area (which is subject to a design and development brief), on land to the north of the former Livestock Market (which is allocated for housing in the Local Plan), and on a few other smaller sites. The detailed work that has been undertaken locally means that a fairly accurate estimate of the potential for housing development can be made. It is estimated that about 350 dwellings can be provided in these areas and since most of these are either allocated or have planning permission, it is likely that they will be built out by 2016.
- 5.58. Regeneration has and will continue to promote greater self-containment and build stronger local communities. However, once these opportunities have been exploited, there is no clear justification for significant additional development at Sturminster Newton. The evidence suggests that the potential for further greenfield development is limited. The floodplain of the River Stour is a constraint to expansion to the south and west and there are landscape issues, as detailed in the Town Design Statement⁴⁰. The SHLAA Report shows few potentially developable sites around the town. Even if further small-scale sites are identified to meet the town's needs after 2016, it is unlikely that more than 500 dwellings will be provided at Sturminster Newton in total in the period up to 2026.
- 5.59. The existing Local Plan includes annualised housing rates for Stalbridge (10 dpa) and the rest of the rural area (74 dpa), totalling 84

³⁹ Paragraph 1.40, page 12, North Dorset District Wide Local Plan – North Dorset District Council (January 2003)

⁴⁰ Sections 02.02 and 03.07, Sturminster Newton Town Design Statement: Supplementary Planning Document – Prepared for SturQuest by the Matrix Partnership (July 2008)

dpa. In the event that 35% of all housing was provided outside the three main towns, with 500 dwellings at Sturminster Newton, that would leave 1,950 dwellings to be provided in the rest of the District at an annualised rate of 97.5 dpa (i.e. well above the current planned rate). This demonstrates that a greater degree of concentration (i.e. above 65% of all housing) could be achieved in the three main towns, without undermining the potential of the rural areas to meet their own needs. The SHLAA Report also shows that the District's RSS Development Policy C Settlements would have the capacity to accommodate this level of development as a large number of potentially developable sites have been identified.

- 5.60. The Core Strategy is a strategic document and is likely to set out the level of development that should be provided in the three main towns and Sturminster Newton. It will define the other RSS Development Policy C Settlements that will accommodate the bulk of housing provision elsewhere, but it will not determine the quantum and location of future development for individual villages. This will be done through the Site Allocations Development Plan Document (DPD), having regard to local needs and priorities.
- 5.61. The Council has a strong commitment to community planning and has encouraged local communities to develop community plans for their own town or village. Consequently local needs and priorities are well understood in most of the 20 proposed RSS Development Policy C Settlements. As at July 2009, 14 of them have completed town or parish plans, a further two are in development and only four villages are not taking them forward⁴¹.

Policies for the Countryside

- 5.62. The current Local Plan identifies 'settlement boundaries' or 'village envelopes' around over 50 settlements, within which infill development is permitted. The identification of so many settlement boundaries, including boundaries around some very small villages, is one of the reasons why the Council has had problems with 'oversupply' in the rural area. The removal of many of these settlement boundaries, leaving only those around the identified RSS Development Policy B and C Settlements, will help to achieve a more managed approach to development in rural areas, as advocated in the emerging RSS. In effect many small settlements will be 'washed over' by the countryside designation where development, including new housing development, will be strictly controlled.

⁴¹ Information on town and parish plans in North Dorset can be viewed at the following link
http://www.north-dorset.gov.uk/index/about_your_councils/north_dorset/community_planning/parish_and_town_plans.htm

5.63. Although the emphasis of policy in the countryside will be on restraint, it is important that some forms of development are permitted in order to support the rural economy and meet essential rural needs. For that reason it may be appropriate to still permit rural exceptions affordable homes, within or adjacent to the built-up areas of smaller villages. Also a policy framework will need to be developed that permits essential community facilities, such as new village halls, in or adjacent to the built-up area of smaller villages. National policy supports the rural economy in the countryside through: the re-use of existing buildings; the sensitive small-scale redevelopment or expansion of existing employment sites; and farm diversification. The local policy framework will need to reflect national policy to enable such uses to take place.

6.0 Conclusions

6.1 The key conclusions from this topic paper are:

- National and regional policy seeks: to focus development at settlements that are capable of functioning as local service centres and; to strictly control development in the countryside;
- Regional policy indicates that local planning authorities should identify 'market and coastal towns' (i.e. RSS Development Policy B Settlements), which should accommodate the bulk of housing and other development outside the region's main cities and towns;
- 'Small towns and villages' (i.e. RSS Development Policy C Settlements) should also be identified to be the primary focus for development outside the 'market and coastal towns';
- The role and function of Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury support their identification as RSS Development Policy B Settlements;
- Sturminster Newton and Stalbridge are not considered to be RSS Development Policy B Settlements. However, it is recognised that they (together with Marnhull) play a key role in providing access to local services in the north west of the District;
- Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and 18 villages can be identified as RSS Development Policy C Settlements. Their population and range of day-to-day facilities suggest that they are capable of functioning a local service centres;
- The draft RSS proposed 5,100 dwellings in North Dorset in the period 2006 – 2026. An increase to 7,000 dwellings was recommended by the EiP Panel and has been put forward in the RSS Proposed Changes;
- The existing Local Plan indicates that 65% of housing development should take place in the three main towns during the period 1994 to 2011. RSS policy and concerns about 'oversupply', particularly in rural areas, suggest that this or a greater degree of concentration should take place in the future;
- It is likely that Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury could together accommodate more than 65% of the proposed housing growth, with the greatest potential being at Gillingham. Separate policies need to be developed for each of the three main towns to show how this could be done;
- The provision of this level of growth at the three main towns would not undermine the ability of Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and the villages to meet their own needs. A separate policy needs to be developed for Sturminster Newton to show how regeneration and other key proposals will be taken forward;
- The Core Strategy will establish the overall level of development that will need to be provided in the RSS Development Policy C

Settlements (other than Sturminster Newton), but the quantum and location of future development in individual villages will be determined through the Site Allocations Development Plan Document (DPD), having regard to local needs and priorities;

- Settlement boundaries will be removed from many smaller villages in the District and they will be subject to policies to protect the countryside. These policies need to be drafted to ensure that essential rural needs (including the needs for rural exceptions affordable housing, essential village facilities and rural businesses) can be met.