

**NORTH DORSET LOCAL PLAN 2011 – 2026 PART 1**

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY**

**BACKGROUND PAPER**

**November 2013**

This Background Paper is intended to be read and used in conjunction with the other background papers that support the Local Plan Part 1

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# 1. Purpose

- 1.1 This document is one of a number of background papers produced to support Part 1 of the North Dorset Local Plan that sets out the strategic policies for the District for the period 2011 to 2026.
- 1.2 The Local Plan Part 1 has been developed from the draft Core Strategy and Development Management Policies Development Plan Document (DPD) (that was also known as the New Plan for North Dorset)<sup>1</sup>, which was published in March 2010. The Local Plan Part 1 has been drafted to reflect the major reforms to the planning system and to have regard to the recent global economic downturn.
- 1.3 In light of these changes the Council has investigated different ways of delivering positive outcomes for local communities through planning policy and has reassessed the need for future development, particularly housing and employment development.
- 1.4 Public consultation in autumn of 2012 on key issues for the revision of the draft Core Strategy took into consideration the reassessed needs and reforms. This consultation was ‘targeted’ on three main areas:
  - Options for the overall level of growth proposed for the District and the main towns;
  - The approach to taking forward development in Gillingham through a Strategic Site Allocation; and
  - The approach to development in Stalbridge and the District’s villages revisiting both the spatial strategy and the level of housing provision.
- 1.5 The North Dorset Local Plan Part 1 has been prepared having regard to the results of this consultation and all previous consultations, including the responses made to the draft Core Strategy.
- 1.6 The background paper provides a general overview of the Council’s overall spatial strategy for the distribution of development in North Dorset. It summarises those parts of the evidence base which informed the spatial policies and also sets out the policy background – at national, regional and local levels – against which the plan was prepared.
- 1.7 The background paper is a working document which will be updated as evidence is acquired and the consultation process proceeds. It is based on previous topic papers on the same issue that were originally published in 2009 to support the draft Core Strategy and updated in 2012 to take into account changes to national planning policy, notably through the provisions of the Localism Act and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) that was published in March 2012.

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1 The draft DPD, which was published in March 2010, can be viewed here - <http://www.dorsetforyou.com/media.jsp?mediaid=147729&filetype=pdf>

- 1.8 This background paper has been prepared to support the pre-submission publication of the North Dorset Local Plan Part 1.

## 2. Introduction

2.1 North Dorset is a rural district of 61,000 hectares located close to the south-eastern edge of the South West region. The 2011 Census figures show that the resident population was 68,600 with just over 50% of the population living in the four main market towns of:

- Blandford (Forum and St Mary) (11,836);
- Gillingham (11,756);
- Shaftesbury (7,314); and
- Sturminster Newton (4,292).

2.2 The District's population has grown by 10% (6,700) over the last 10 years with most of this growth being focused around the four main market towns.

2.3 These four market towns are the main service centres in North Dorset and provide a focus for housing, employment, shopping and other services. Blandford is the main service centre in the south and Gillingham and Shaftesbury, which are less than 5 miles apart, are the main service centres in the north. Sturminster Newton is located towards the western edge of the District and is close to the small market town of Stalbridge. There are many villages scattered across the rural area, the largest being Marnhull, near Sturminster Newton.

2.4 Nearby cities and towns exert an influence over the area. The southern part of the District is influenced by the South East Dorset conurbation, which lies 15 miles south-east of Blandford. The northern part of the District is influenced by Yeovil in Somerset (16 miles to the west of Sturminster Newton) and by Salisbury in Wiltshire (20 miles to the north-east of Shaftesbury). Dorchester, which lies 17 miles south-west of Blandford, also exerts some limited influence over the south-west of the District.

2.5 In relation to the spatial strategy for North Dorset, this paper sets out:

- the national and previous regional policy context;
- issues arising from stakeholder and community consultations;
- issues arising from evidence and research studies;
- how the spatial strategy has moved forward; and
- the resulting policies in Part 1 of the North Dorset Local Plan.

## 3. National, Regional and Local Policy

### National Policy

- 3.1 Most national planning policy, in the form of Planning Policy Statements (PPSs) and Planning Policy Guidance Notes (PPGs), was replaced with immediate effect when the NPPF was published in March 2012. A full list of the national policy documents replaced is given in Annex 3 of the NPPF (pages 58 and 59).
- 3.2 Prior to the reforms of the planning system, paragraph 34 of PPS 3: Housing indicated that it was the role of regional spatial strategies to set out the level of overall housing provision for a region and to show how this level of provision should be distributed amongst the constituent Housing Market Areas (HMAs) and local authority areas. The ‘emerging’ Regional Spatial Strategy (the ‘emerging’ RSS) relevant to North Dorset was the Draft Revised Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West Incorporating the Secretary of State’s Proposed Changes, which was published in 2008.
- 3.3 Regional strategies are now abolished<sup>2</sup> and it is clear that the draft housing provision figures for local authorities in the South West are not going to be adopted. It is now the role of individual local planning authorities to set housing provision figures for their area. Such figures need to be set in the context of the NPPF’s ‘presumption in favour of sustainable development’, which indicates that when plan-making ‘local planning authorities should positively seek opportunities to meet the development needs of their area.’
- 3.4 The spatial strategy in the draft Core Strategy was prepared with regard to guidance in paragraph 3 of PPS 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas, which stated that ‘away from larger urban areas, planning authorities should focus most new development in or near to local service centres where employment, housing (including affordable housing), services and other facilities can be provided close together. This should help to ensure these facilities are served by public transport and provide improved opportunities for access by walking and cycling. These centres (which might be a country town, a single large village or a group of villages) should be identified in the development plan as the preferred location for such growth.’
- 3.5 PPS 7 has since been replaced by the NPPF and paragraph 17 requires planning to ‘focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable’. More specific guidance for rural areas is given in paragraph 55, which states that ‘To promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located

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<sup>2</sup> The Regional Strategy relevant to Dorset (which has now been revoked) consisted of: Regional Planning Guidance for the South West (RPG 10), which was published by the Government Office for the South West (GOSW) in September 2001; and The Regional Economic Strategy for South West England 2006 – 2015, published by the South West Regional Development Agency (SWRDA) in May 2006



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

- the essential need for a rural worker to live permanently at or near their place of work in the countryside; or
- where such development would represent the optimal viable use of a heritage asset or would be appropriate enabling development to secure the future of heritage assets; or
- where the development would re-use redundant or disused buildings and lead to an enhancement to the immediate setting; or
- the exceptional quality or innovative nature of the design of the dwelling.'

3.6 The NPPF also recognises the importance of taking local factors into account in plan making. Paragraph 10 states 'plans and decisions need to take local circumstances into account, so that they respond to the different opportunities for achieving sustainable development in different areas.'

## Regional Policy

3.7 The approach to the spatial distribution of development set out in PPS 7 was taken forward in Chapter 3 of the 'emerging' RSS. This set out the 'Core Spatial Strategy' (CSS) for the scale and location of development across the region. Individual local authorities were required to apply the 'spatial hierarchy' of Development Policies A, B and C to the settlements in their local areas in their core strategies. This regional approach was seen as a key tool to delivering a more sustainable pattern of development across the region.

3.8 Development Policy A defined a series of Strategically Significant Cities and Towns (SSCTs) across the South West, none of which are in North Dorset. Development Policy B set criteria to be used by local authorities to identify 'market and coastal towns' in their Districts, which should be 'the focal points for locally significant development including provision for the bulk of district housing provision outside the SSCTs'. Development Policy C set criteria for development in 'small towns and villages', which the emerging RSS indicated should be 'the primary focus for development in the wider countryside away from A and B Settlements'.

3.9 The emerging RSS made provision for at least 7,000 dwellings to be built in North Dorset between 2006 and 2026 at an average annual rate of 350 dwellings per annum (dpa). The 'emerging' RSS envisaged that housing growth would be distributed within the District in accordance with the regional spatial hierarchy, but provided no specific detail on where these dwellings should be located. The 'emerging' RSS also provided some guidance on the future need for jobs and employment land. These issues are discussed in more detail in the updated

Meeting Housing Needs and Supporting Economic Development background papers.

- 3.10 In the light of the Government's revocation of regional strategies, the emerging RSS is no longer being taken forward. Previous legislation made it a requirement for core strategies to be 'in general conformity' with the relevant RSS and with the expectation that the 'emerging' RSS would be adopted soon, the draft Core Strategy was prepared to be 'in general conformity' with the Secretary of State's Proposed Changes. Now the regional strategy has been revoked, conformity with regional policy will no longer be an issue.
- 3.11 Although the regional tier of planning policy is being removed, local councils and other public bodies will still need to plan strategically across local boundaries. To ensure this happens the Government has introduced a statutory 'duty to co-operate' in the Localism Act. Paragraph 178 of the NPPF makes it clear that 'the Government expects joint working on areas of common interest to be diligently undertaken for the mutual benefit of neighbouring authorities.'
- 3.12 A Duty to Co-operate Statement has been produced to support the pre-submission publication of the North Dorset Local Plan Part 1. This document provides an overview of how the duty to cooperate has been followed. It sets out:
- the arrangements for joint working between North Dorset District Council, other neighbouring local authorities and other key stakeholders;
  - joint working on planning policy and other policy documents;
  - joint working on 'evidence base' studies and reports;
  - potential duty to co-operate issues;
  - monitoring how the duty is met.

## Local Policy

- 3.13 The reforms of the planning system have fundamentally changed the nature of the overall planning policy framework in England. They have significantly reduced the extent of 'higher level' (i.e. national, regional and county) policy and given more emphasis to locally-based (i.e. district, town and parish) policy in turn giving more power to local communities to take an active role in shaping the place in which they live, work or have an interest.
- 3.14 For decision-making the new locally-based policy framework for North Dorset consists of:
- any documents jointly produced by local authorities in Dorset to address cross-boundary issues under the Duty to Co-operate;
  - the 'new style' Local Plan produced at the District level. In North Dorset Part 1 of the Local Plan sets out the strategic policies for the District and Part 2 will allocate specific sites for housing and employment growth in the main towns

and will include a review of other land allocations and settlement boundaries;  
and

- neighbourhood plans produced by local communities, but adopted by the District Council to become part of the statutory development plan for the area.

- 3.15 As the regional strategies and structure plans are now revoked the only 'higher level' policy document that will need to be taken into account in local decision-making is the 59-page NPPF. In terms of guiding the spatial distribution of development in North Dorset, the NPPF provides a much less rigid 'higher level' framework than the policies in various PPGs and PPSs and Development Policies A, B and C in the 'emerging' RSS.
- 3.16 In the Draft Core Strategy, the Council sought to apply the 'spatial hierarchy' of the 'emerging' RSS to the settlements of North Dorset (in draft Core Policy 3). How the Council went about this and how the RSS 'Development Policy B and C Settlements' were identified in North Dorset is explained in Version 1 of the Spatial Strategy Topic Paper, which was published in August 2009.
- 3.17 With the revocation of regional strategies this is now no longer required and the Council has taken the opportunity to develop a new approach to the spatial distribution of development which better reflects the circumstances in North Dorset. The Council has taken the opportunity to consider how its draft strategic policies could be revised to give neighbourhood planning a role in delivering growth.
- 3.18 In the Draft Core Strategy, the Council also sought to distribute the level of housing growth envisaged in emerging RSS in accordance with the spatial hierarchy. The abolition of regional planning has given the Council the opportunity to re-assess the overall need for housing growth and it has worked with all other local authorities in Dorset to produce an updated Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) for the Bournemouth and Poole HMA and updated projections for the future need for employment land.

## 4. Issues Arising from Stakeholder and Community Consultations

### Consultation 2007 – ‘Issues and Options’

- 4.1 The community’s views on the key issues arising out of the national and the then emerging regional policy framework were first sought when the Council undertook consultation on the issues and options<sup>3</sup> for a ‘stand- alone’ Core Strategy in June – July 2007. The consultation issues and options discussions were based on the draft RSS, which was published in June 2006.
- 4.2 In consultation the Council suggested that Blandford (including both Blandford Forum and Blandford St Mary), Gillingham and Shaftesbury should have RSS Development Policy B status and that Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and a limited number of larger villages should have RSS Development Policy C status and that the level of development elsewhere (i.e. in the District’s smaller villages and the countryside) should be very limited.
- 4.3 In general terms respondents supported the proposed settlement hierarchy and the need to try and attain higher levels of self-containment in the towns. However, there were concerns at the time that an attempt to pursue more sustainable patterns of development could lead to ‘overdevelopment’ in the towns and ‘underdevelopment’ of the villages.
- 4.4 Although some respondents felt that only these three towns merited RSS Development Policy B status, others felt that Sturminster Newton should also fall within that category. Despite this, there was general support for the concept of making Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and a limited number of larger villages the main focus for development outside the three main towns. However, there were a variety of views on which villages merited RSS Development Policy C status and which didn’t.<sup>4</sup>
- 4.5 At the time of the Issues and Options consultation 5,100 homes were proposed for North Dorset between 2006 and 2026 with 2,900 to be built before 2016 and 2,200 to be built thereafter. The Council sought views on how development should be distributed between the three main towns (Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury) and the rest of the District in the two 10-year periods 2006 – 2016 and 2016 – 2026.

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<sup>3</sup> Core Strategy: Issues and Alternative Options – North Dorset District Council (June 2007)

<sup>4</sup> The Council has produced a summary of the main findings of the 2007 consultation and a comprehensive analysis of responses on an issue-by-issue basis. These documents, together with the original responses, can be viewed at the following link [http://www.north-dorset.gov.uk/index/living/building\\_planning/planning\\_policy/local\\_development\\_framework/core\\_strategy/core\\_strategy\\_2007\\_consultation.htm](http://www.north-dorset.gov.uk/index/living/building_planning/planning_policy/local_development_framework/core_strategy/core_strategy_2007_consultation.htm)

- 4.6 The Council suggested that a minimum of 65% of housing growth should be located at the three main towns (with 35% elsewhere) in the period up to 2016 on the basis that this was the percentage split proposed in the existing Local Plan and the thrust of the main spatial strategy in RSS was to achieve greater concentration in the region's larger settlements. The Council also presented 70 / 30 and 75 / 25 percentage splits as possible options. All three options received similar levels of support (and objection) with no clear preference for any single option.
- 4.7 The feedback to consultation undertaken in 2007 needs to be considered in the context of the 'higher level' policy framework at the time. The principal aim of consultation on this issue was to seek views on how best to apply the spatial hierarchy in the draft RSS to North Dorset. Clearly people may have expressed different views on how development should be distributed in the absence of the 'emerging' RSS and the requirement for conformity with it.

## Consultation 2010 – The Draft Core Strategy

- 4.8 In March 2010 the Council published the Draft Core Strategy and Development Management DPD for consultation. The Draft Core Strategy was prepared in the context of emerging regional policy at the time. Draft Core Policy 3 set out the 'core spatial strategy' for North Dorset and was based on the evidence gathered at the issues and options stage in June/July 2007. At this time and as part of the consultation exercise a supporting document was produced which assessed settlements on the basis of their population and level of provision of community facilities with a view to categorising them as RSS Development Policy B or C settlements.
- 4.9 Draft Core Policy 4 explained how the now higher housing number of 7,000 new homes identified for North Dorset in the Proposed Changes to the Revised RSS would be distributed.
- 4.10 Draft Core Policies 15, 16 and 17 related to the RSS Development Policy B settlements of Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury and Draft Core Policy 18 related to the RSS Development Policy C settlement of Sturminster Newton.
- 4.11 Draft Core Policy 19 considered how growth in Stalbridge and the larger villages should be approached. Draft Core Policy 20 sought to protect the countryside and 'smaller villages' that typically had populations of less than 400 and a limited range of community facilities.
- 4.12 1,657 individuals and organisations responded to the consultation and in total they made 5,734 comments on the draft Core Strategy and Development Management DPD. A full report was presented to Members of the Planning Policy Panel on 5 July 2012<sup>5</sup> that identified two overarching concerns relating to the spatial strategy.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.dorsetforyou.com/media.jsp?mediaid=174202&filetype=pdf>

These were the overall level of housing growth and the inflexible top down approach of allocations in the villages and the distribution of growth in the District.

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

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



## Consultation 2011 – Town and Parish Councils

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

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

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

- Identify Stalbridge and up to 20 ‘sustainable’ villages for growth;
- 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);
- 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;
- Give no strategic steer for the remaining less sustainable villages that will be washed over with countryside policy that restricts development.



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

For this option the Council will:

- Identify Stalbridge and a more limited number of 'more sustainable' villages for growth, perhaps less than 10;
- Define overall levels of housing provision for Stalbridge and a more limited number of 'more sustainable' villages;
- 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;
- Give no strategic steer for the remaining less sustainable villages that will be washed over with countryside policy that restricts development.

- 4.34 The draft NPPF indicated 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. The Council's proposed 'Option 3' indicated that the 'new style' Local Plan would provide 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.

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

For this option, the Council will:

- 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;
- Not set any overall housing provision figures for Stalbridge or the villages in the new style Local Plan;
- Not identify any sites for housing or other uses in Stalbridge or the villages in the Site Allocations Document.

- 4.35 In November 2011 the Council consulted with the towns and parishes on these three options. Their views were sought on their preferred option for taking forward growth and at the same time the Council sought to ascertain the local

appetite for neighbourhood planning. A full report on the results of the consultation was presented to Members on 7 March 2012.

- 4.36 In total 26 reply forms from 35 parished areas were completed and returned. 25 (71%) indicated that Option 3 was their preferred approach for taking forward growth in Stalbridge and the villages. Just two parished areas expressed a preference for Option 2 and only Gillingham Town Council expressed a preference for Option 1.
- 4.37 The same consultation also asked the question 'Is your local community interested in preparing a neighbourhood plan? Thirty three parished areas responded to this question of which 17 (52%) said yes.
- 4.38 Of those 17 parished areas saying 'yes', one was Gillingham Town Council who were subsequently awarded front runner funding and on 20 August were the first parish to have their application for a neighbourhood area approved. Ten of the parished areas responding were what the Council considered to be 'more sustainable' settlements, based on the technical work undertaken on population, facilities and accessibility (see Section 5). These were: Blandford Forum, Bourton, Child Okeford, Fontmell Magna, Hazelbury Bryan, Iwerne Minster, Marnhull, Pimperne, Stalbridge and Winterborne Stickland.
- 4.39 Fourteen parished areas said 'no' to neighbourhood planning citing that it was not the right time for them or that there was no evidence of community enthusiasm in their area. As part of the consultation with the parishes the Council also sought to establish what type of issues local communities would like to consider in their neighbourhood plan. Many simply ticked all of the issues listed:
- Housing;
  - Affordable housing;
  - Shops;
  - Employment;
  - Green energy;
  - Village hall;
  - Local green spaces; and
  - Design and character guidelines.
- 4.40 This feedback demonstrated that Towns and Parish Councils preferred Option 3, where the Council would provide a 'light touch' strategic steer giving greater local choice for communities in Stalbridge and all villages to meet their needs. It also demonstrated that local communities were keen to pursue neighbourhood planning, which they saw as an opportunity to consider and address a range of issues.

## Consultation 2012 – Key Issues

- 4.41 Despite a great deal of work being undertaken to try and apply the regional ‘spatial hierarchy’ to North Dorset, there was a high level of objection to draft Core Policy 3, especially outside the District’s main towns.
- 4.42 The main concerns with this approach were that:
- The assessment of settlements was ‘broad brush’ and did not look in detail at more ‘fine-grained’ local sustainability issues;
  - The assessment required a simple ‘yes / no’ judgement to be made on whether individual settlements were considered to be sustainable or not; and
  - It was intended to use this ‘one-off’ sustainability judgement as the basis on which to decide which villages would receive growth and which wouldn’t.
- 4.43 The consultation with Town and Parish Councils in 2011 sought views on whether the approach in draft Core Policy 3 should continue to be taken forward or whether a ‘light touch’ approach should be taken. The clear preference was for a ‘light touch’ approach.
- 4.44 The feedback from Town and Parish Councils helped to inform a further autumn 2012 consultation document on key issues. This sets out in more detail how an effective policy framework might be put in place to deliver the ‘light touch’ approach that has been sought. This consultation with the wider community also enabled other bodies and individuals to express their views on this issue, in advance of the revised Core Strategy (i.e. now the Local Plan Part 1) being produced.
- 4.45 In total 28 questions were asked. Four (Questions 1 to 4) were in relation to the spatial approach and four (Questions 23 to 27) were in relation to the policy approach to development in Stalbridge, the villages and the countryside in general.
- 4.46 The spatial approach questions were:
- Question 1 - Do you agree that Sturminster Newton should be identified as a ‘main town’ alongside Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury?**
- Question 2 - Do you agree that the Council should concentrate the vast majority of housing growth at the District’s four ‘main towns’ with specific sites (except the SSA at Gillingham) being taken forward primarily through a Site Allocations DPD?**
- Question 3 - Do you agree that in Stalbridge and the villages the focus should be on meeting local (rather than strategic) needs, which will be delivered primarily through neighbourhood planning?**
- Question 4 - Do you agree that communities in Stalbridge and all villages should have the option to ‘opt in’ to the Council’s Site Allocations DPD as an alternative to meeting local needs through neighbourhood planning?**

- 4.47 From the four questions posed in relation to the proposed spatial approach for growth in the District there was a general consensus to:
- Identify Sturminster Newton as a ‘main town’;
  - Allocate the vast majority of housing growth in the District in the four main towns with specific sites being taken forward primarily through a Site Allocations DPD (with the exception of the SSA at Gillingham);
  - Meet local (rather than strategic) need in Stalbridge and the villages primarily through neighbourhood planning; and
  - Include an option for Stalbridge and the villages to ‘opt in’ to the Council’s Site Allocations DPD as an alternative to meeting local needs.
- 4.48 In relation to Sturminster Newton becoming one of the four main towns an overwhelming 84% of those responding to the consultation agreed with this approach. There was little dispute that Sturminster Newton was a sustainable location and in fact proposals for the future development of the town (including housing) had already been set out in some detail in Draft Core Policy 18. The change of status sought only to address the policy vacuum resulting from the loss of the RSS and its settlement hierarchy.
- 4.49 Question 2 proposed a far more fundamental change in spatial policy for the District. Reduced housing numbers and the introduction of neighbourhood planning enabled the Council to propose a spatial approach to growth that sought to meet the vast majority of the strategic growth needed in the District at the four main towns without identifying any additional sites.
- 4.50 Although 61% of those responding to the consultation agreed with this approach over a third did not or just made a general comment. Town and parish councils appeared to be satisfied as top down targets for many had been removed whilst local agents representing landowners and some residents voiced their concern. Many referred to the NPPF and the duty for local planning authorities to use their evidence base to ensure that their Local Plans met the full, objectively assessed needs for market and affordable housing in the housing market area. They also referred to the requirement that housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities, a concern raised by a number of residents.
- 4.51 In response to Question 3 the ‘light touch’ strategic approach in Stalbridge and the villages, that gives local communities greater choice in deciding how to meet their future development needs, was embraced. Concerns raised by Dorset County Council and the Highways Agency about criteria and guidance as to ‘local need’ and what constitutes the upper level of development over which it would be considered strategic have subsequently been addressed in the policies.
- 4.52 Finally, Question 4 and the option to ‘opt in’ to the Site Allocation Document was considered by many as an essential tool and helpful safety net for the parishes and the Council. In particular it was seen as an effective way of involving communities

and giving them choice, although a small number were concerned that the decision to 'opt in' was not via a referendum, but the decision of an elected minority.

4.53 The questions in relation to the policy approach in Stalbridge, the villages and the countryside in general were:

**Question 23 - Do you agree that an overall housing provision figure should not be set for Stalbridge, the Villages and the Countryside?**

**Question 24 - Do you agree that the future development needs of Stalbridge and all villages should be met primarily through neighbourhood planning?**

**Question 25 - Do you agree that countryside policy (a policy of restraint) should be applied to Stalbridge and all villages prior to, or in the absence of, the production of neighbourhood plans?**

**Question 27 - In the event that countryside policy is applied to Stalbridge and all villages do you agree that the policy should be amended to permit essential community facilities within or adjoining Stalbridge and all the villages?**

4.54 From the four questions posed in relation to the proposed approach for growth in Stalbridge, the villages and the countryside there appears to be a general consensus to:

- not set an overall housing provision figure for Stalbridge, the villages and the countryside;
- meet the future development needs in Stalbridge and all villages primarily through neighbourhood planning;
- apply the countryside policy (i.e. a policy of restraint) to Stalbridge and all villages prior to, or in the absence of, the production of neighbourhood plans; and
- amend the countryside policy to permit essential community facilities within or adjoining Stalbridge and all the villages.

4.55 For Questions 24 and 26 over 80% of those responding were in support of neighbourhood plans and a more flexible countryside policy to allow essential community facilities within or adjoining Stalbridge and all the villages.

4.56 For neighbourhood plans concerns were limited to the cost of production (but the Government has since made available grants of up to £7,000 per parished area to help with the costs of preparing a neighbourhood plan) to compliance with the NPPF and the requirement for local planning authorities to plan positively for development. Meeting the future development needs in Stalbridge and all villages primarily through neighbourhood planning was discussed with DCLG's neighbourhood plans team and they are not opposed to the approach being taken. Indeed a similar approach has been adopted by West Dorset where local communities will be able to make local choices through the neighbourhood planning process.

- 4.57 In relation to the countryside policy (Question 26) concerns of both those supporting and objecting to the policy centred on what was an 'essential community facility' and how this needed to be clarified in the policy.
- 4.58 Question 23 sought views on not setting an overall housing provision figure for Stalbridge, the villages and the countryside. Many parishes including Stalbridge Town Council were in favour of this approach and one parish even suggested setting an upper limit to protect against over development. However, the towns did not share the view of the rural area.
- 4.59 Agents opposed to the lack of housing numbers in the countryside were concerned about the vitality and viability of the villages and quoted Paragraph 28 of the NPPF that requires the local planning authority to support a prosperous rural economy. In their opinion by not setting a housing figure the Council were not planning positively for the District and therefore the proposed approach could be considered to be contrary to national policy. In contrast local residents and the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB were concerned that by not setting a target the result could be over provision in the rural areas.
- 4.60 Question 25 sought opinions on applying the countryside policy (i.e. a policy of restraint) to Stalbridge and all villages prior to, or in the absence of, the production of neighbourhood plans. Although 65% of those responding supported this approach a number of parishes raised concerns but stopped short of objecting to the policy. Many of those disagreeing were concerned that development would be delayed in coming forward and that this in turn would impact on the vitality and viability of the villages. A number suggested that settlement boundaries should be retained to allow for infilling.

## 5. Issues from the Evidence Base

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

### Reduced Housing Numbers

- 5.3 Another key point to consider is the fact that individual local planning authorities now set housing provision figures for their area in the context of the NPPF's 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' and its guidance that when plan-making 'local planning authorities should positively seek opportunities to meet the development needs of their area'.
- 5.4 The NPPF identifies that a Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) is a key piece of evidence that should be used to establish housing requirements at the District level. It also indicates that local planning authorities should work with neighbouring authorities where housing market areas cross administrative boundaries.
- 5.5 The SHMA should identify the scale and mix of housing and the range of tenures that the local population is likely to require over the plan period which:
- meets household and population projections, taking account of migration and demographic change;
  - addresses the need for all types of housing, including affordable housing and the needs of different groups in the community (such as families with children, older people, disabled people, service families and people wishing to build their own homes); and
  - caters for housing demand and the scale of housing supply necessary to meet this demand.
- 5.6 In January 2012 JG Consulting (in association with Chris Broughton Associates) produced an update of the 2008 SHMA, which was prepared in compliance with the 2007 DCLG practice guidance and Planning Policy Statement 3 – Housing (PPS 3), which formed part of national planning policy at the time.

- 5.7 The SHMA Update Report suggests an annualised rate of housing provision from 2011 onwards of 280 dpa. Over the 15 year period from 2011 to 2026 that equates to 4,200 homes. This level of provision is below the numbers proposed in the Draft Core Strategy for the period from 2006 to 2026 (i.e. 7,000 homes over 20 years or 350 dpa), but reflects more up-to-date ONS population projections.
- 5.8 The reduction in the projected future need for new homes also provided the Council with the opportunity to reconsider not only the spatial approach in the draft Core Strategy, but also the proposed future level of housing provision. Taking these two factors together, the Council has sought to broadly maintain the growth proposed in the four main towns, as these are the most sustainable locations for development, whilst giving more flexibility and local choice elsewhere with an emphasis on meeting local needs.

## Defining the Key Strategic Settlements in the District

- 5.9 A brief overview of the characteristics of the four main towns in North Dorset is given below, demonstrating that on the basis of their population, employment opportunities and range of higher level facilities that they are the most sustainable locations in the District.

### **Blandford (Census 2011 Population 11,836)**

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

### **Gillingham (Census 2011 Population 11,756)**

- 5.11 Gillingham and Shaftesbury are the main service centres in the north of the District, which together serve a rural hinterland extending into Somerset and 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.

### **Shaftesbury (Census 2011 Population 7,314)**

- 5.12 Shaftesbury supports Gillingham in serving the needs of the northern part of the District and the parts of Wiltshire immediately east of the town. Shaftesbury's historic core occupies a hilltop location and its attractive town centre supports a



good range of shops and is a tourist destination. Beyond the historic core, the town has expanded onto the flat plateau land to the north and east, although it has expanded much more slowly than Gillingham in recent years. The town has two large industrial estates, a secondary school and a community hospital.

### **Sturminster Newton (Census 2011 Population 4,292)**

- 5.13 One of the issues the Council considered when producing the Draft Core Strategy was how to categorise Sturminster Newton, which did not fit easily into either the RSS Development Policy B or C categories. This issue was discussed at some length in the draft Core Strategy's Initial Sustainability Appraisal Report and a compromise was reached where the town was identified as a RSS Development Policy C settlement, but given its own draft Core Policy (18), setting out proposals for future growth, including 500 homes.
- 5.14 The NPPF now provides a much less rigid 'higher level' policy framework compared to RSS Development Policies A, B and C only requiring planning to "focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable". Since there is little dispute that Sturminster Newton is a sustainable location and its future growth is clearly a strategic issue for the District, the town was defined as a 'main town' (alongside Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury) in the Local Plan Part 1. Since proposals for the future development of the town were already set out in some detail in draft Core Policy 18, it is considered that the proposed change of status would have no significant implications for the Local Plan Part 1 or for the town itself.

## **The New Approach for Stalbridge and the Villages**

- 5.15 The abolition of regional planning means that there is no longer a requirement for Stalbridge and the District's villages to be categorised according to RSS Development Policies B and C, as the draft Core Strategy attempted to do. However, any revision of those policies (i.e. the policies in the Local Plan Part 1) needs to reflect the provisions of the NPPF, including the presumption in favour of sustainable development and the 'tests of soundness'. Local communities also require sufficient strategic direction to guide future development.
- 5.16 Some strategic direction is provided in paragraph 55 of the NPPF, which states that 'to promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. For example, where there are groups of smaller settlements, development in one village may support services in a village nearby. Local planning authorities should avoid new isolated homes in the countryside unless there are special circumstances'.
- 5.17 In rural areas, the NPPF places the emphasis on enhancing or maintaining the vitality of existing rural communities, such as those in existing villages, and broadly seeks restraint on the provision of new homes elsewhere, unless there are special circumstances.

- 5.18 Within this context, the Council now envisages that the original evidence used to identify the ‘more sustainable’ settlements and apply a ‘top down’ approach to growth to contribute to meeting wider strategic needs, should be used to inform a ‘bottom up’ approach to growth based on providing bespoke solutions to meeting local needs. This new approach envisages a key role for neighbourhood planning in achieving delivery, which consultation shows is supported by local communities, also with the option of communities being able to ‘opt in’ to the Council’s Local Plan Part 2.

## Population, Range of Services and Proximity to Services

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

### Population

- 5.21 The Council undertook an initial assessment of settlements<sup>6</sup> based on population and facilities as part of the early work on the Core Strategy and a more detailed assessment was undertaken for the Draft Core Strategy. A graph showing population by settlement was included in previous versions of this background (topic) paper and is reproduced as Figure 1 below. The evidence also showed that settlements could be grouped into a number of ‘size-classes’ with fairly distinct ‘cut-off points’ at different intervals (see Figure 2 below). These seven notional ‘size-classes’ were:
- 11,000+ to 7,000+ population – the three main towns of Blandford, Gillingham and Shaftesbury;
  - 3,500+ to c. 2,000 population - Sturminster Newton, Stalbridge and Marnhull, the District’s largest village;
  - 1,200 to 1,000+ population - the five next largest villages of Shillingstone, Charlton Marshall, Child Okeford, Motcombe and Milborne St. Andrew;
  - 900+ to c. 800 population – the five villages of Pimperne, Iwerne Minster, Bourton, Okeford Fitzpaine and Milton Abbas;

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<sup>6</sup> 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)

- 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.

### Range of Services

- 5.22 The Council produces an annual monitoring report (AMR) each year and up until 2010 it included a table indicating which rural facilities were present within the settlement boundaries of each village<sup>7</sup>. This information is no longer included, as it quickly becomes out of date and excludes any facilities that are located outside a settlement boundary. The AMR does, however, continue to include information on planning applications for the change of use or loss of a village facility.
- 5.23 Information on the range of facilities in villages was used to assess the relative sustainability of villages when preparing the Draft Core Strategy and to determine whether they should be categorised as RSS Development Policy C settlements. This analysis looked at how many of seven key facilities (primary school, employment site, general store, post office, community hall, public house and doctor's surgery) were within 1 kilometre of the centre of each settlement.
- 5.24 On the basis of the analysis it was concluded that a settlement was 'more sustainable' (and therefore potentially a RSS Development Policy C settlement) if it had: a population of between 400 and 650 with four or more of the seven frequently used facilities; or a population greater than 650 with at least three of the seven frequently used facilities.
- 5.25 Obviously facilities can (and do) come and go and over time such changes would give a different perspective on any assessment of the relative sustainability of settlements. However, the categorisation of settlements in draft Core Policy 3 was based on a 'one-off' sustainability judgement, which would not allow for future changes to be taken into account. This problem was a major reason for objections to the draft Core Strategy. Local communities were concerned that if village shops or pubs closed, they would no longer have the range of facilities to support housing growth, but it would still be required by policy.

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<sup>7</sup> The current and past annual monitoring reports can be viewed here - <http://www.dorsetforyou.com/AMR/north>

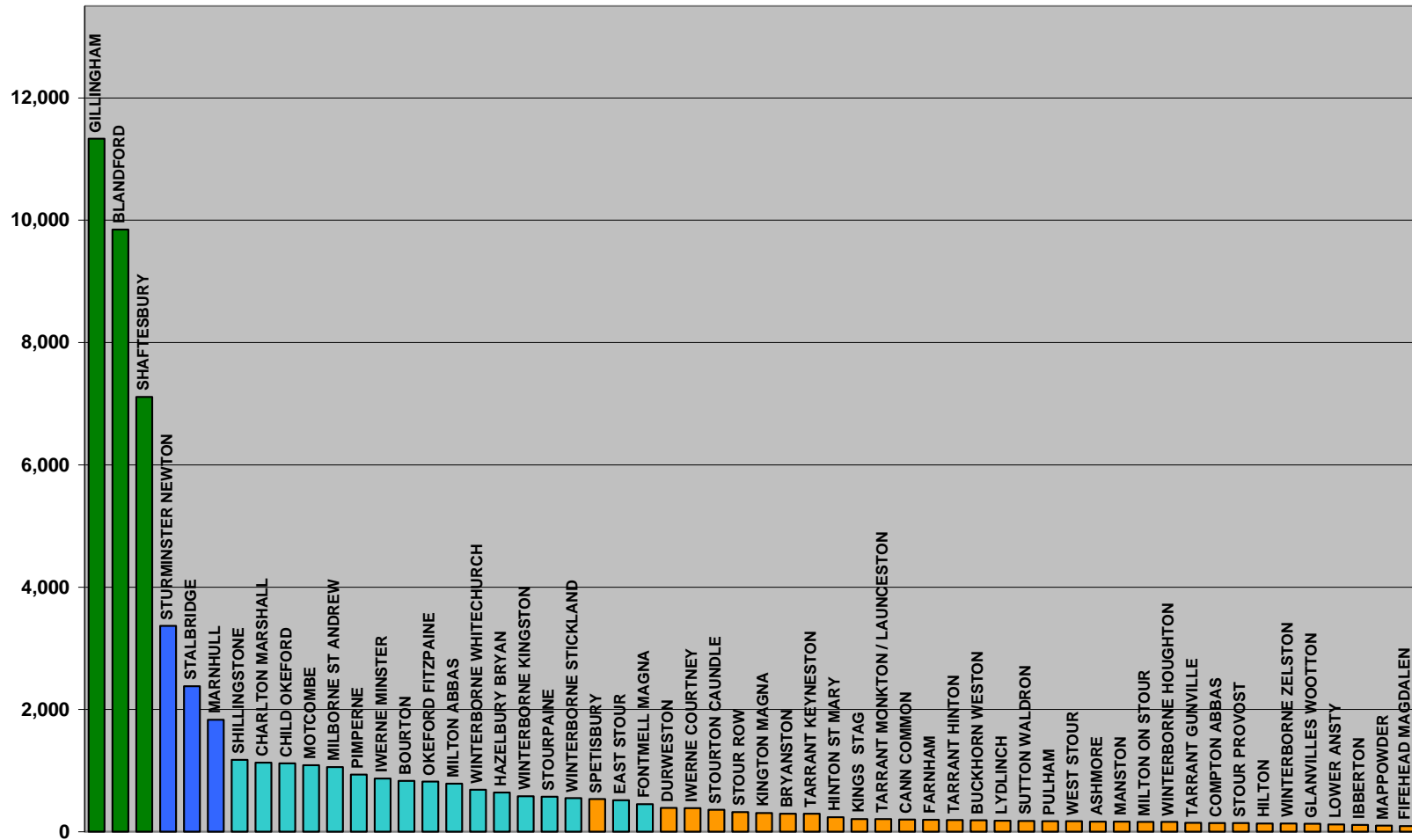


Figure 1 – Population: All Settlements with a Defined Settlement Boundary in the 2003 Local Plan

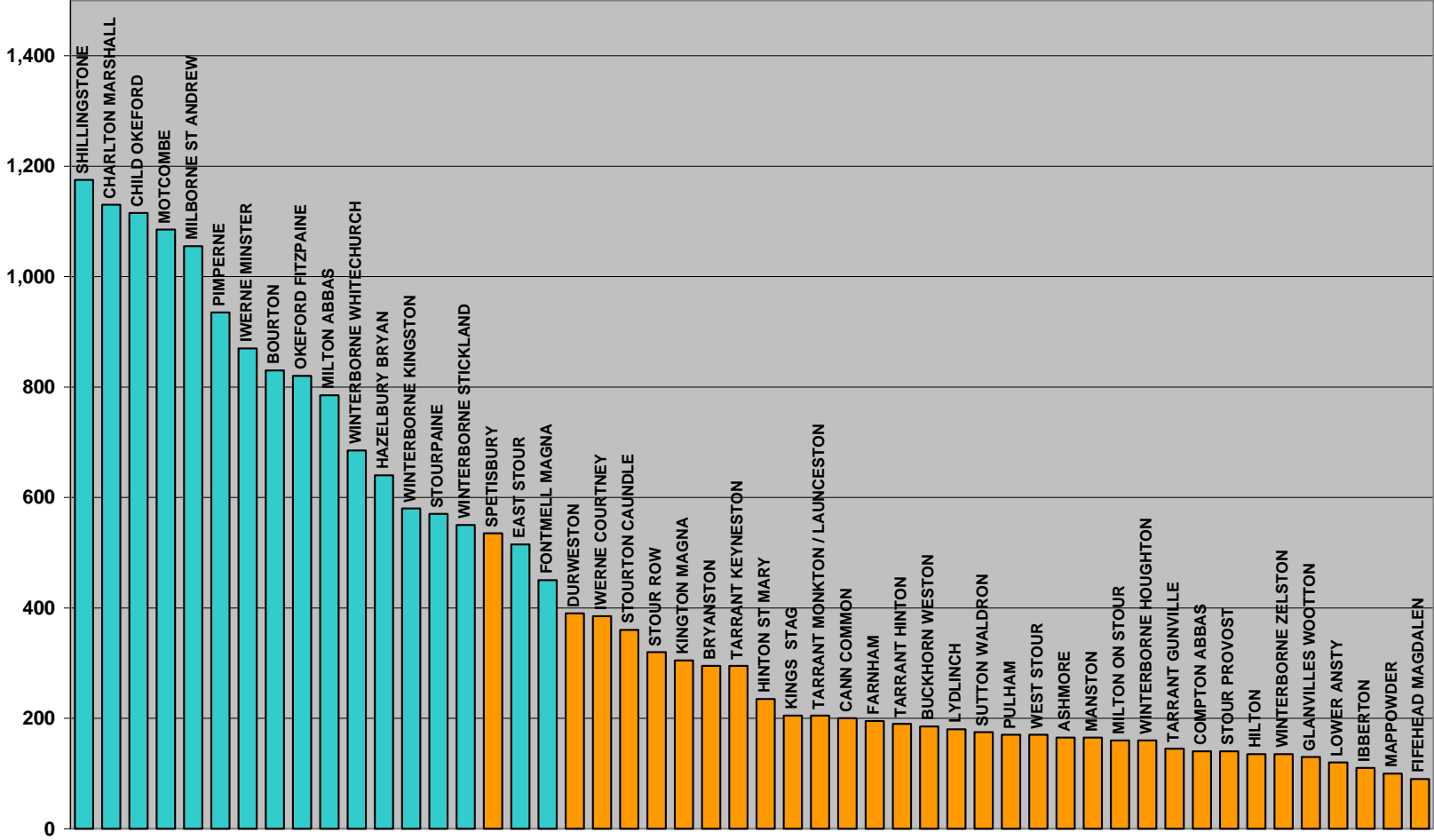


Figure 2 – Population in Smaller Settlements



## Proximity to Services

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

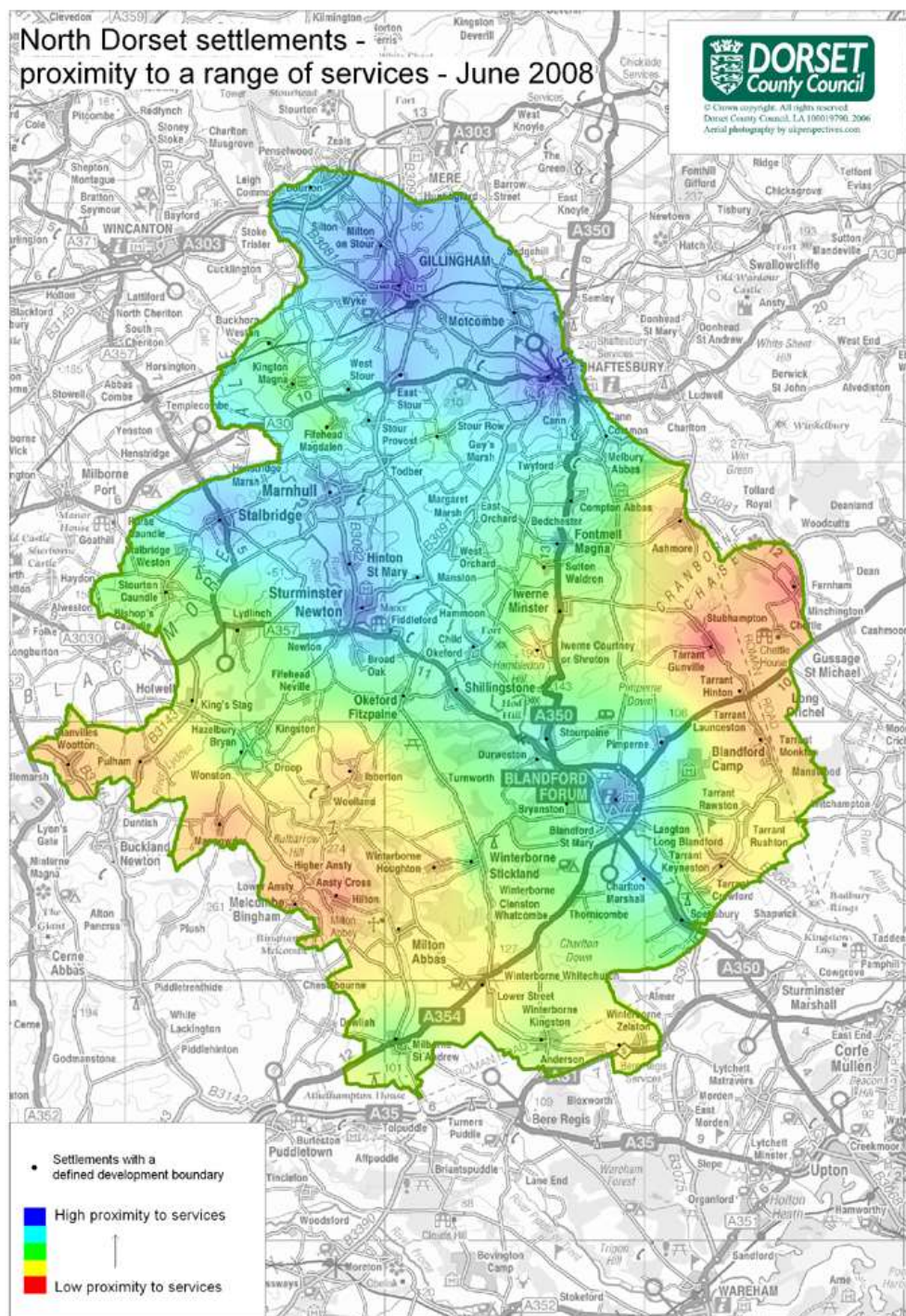


Figure 3 – Map Showing Proximity to Services in North Dorset

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

## 6. Moving Forward

- 6.1 The national and regional policy context has changed considerably since the draft Core Strategy was produced in March 2010. These changes, the reduced housing numbers in the 2012 SHMA Update Report, together with the introduction of neighbourhood planning have informed the Council's review of its spatial approach to growth. A strategic policy framework is still required, but it is no longer necessary to set a housing provision figure for the rural area or to categorise settlements on the basis of a strategic assessment of a limited number of sustainability criteria in order to accord with regional policy.
- 6.2 The Council continues to believe the continued expansion of the District's main towns (i.e. Blandford, Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton) is a strategic issue, which requires some detail in policy. However, the approach to development elsewhere is seen as a less strategic issue and the Council now suggests a more flexible approach to development in the rest of the District within a 'light touch' strategic policy framework.
- 6.3 Developing a more flexible approach was first explored in 2011 when consultation was undertaken with town and parish councils. Option 3 of the consultation described a more responsive and flexible framework that was clearly supported by local communities. Local communities also showed support for taking up neighbourhood planning.
- 6.4 In the past, the way in which the concept of sustainability was applied to settlements in the rural area was based on population size, level of provision of community facilities and proximity to services. Settlements were assessed against these criteria and either included or excluded in the RSS Development Policy C Settlement category. This simple 'yes / no' judgement about the sustainability of individual villages was of great concern to residents in those settlements as it was felt that this broad brush assessment was a 'one size fits all' approach that masked the 'finer grained' issues.
- 6.5 The Council has sought to change the focus of any sustainability assessment for Stalbridge and the larger villages from one which is aimed primarily at facilitating a proportion of strategic housing growth, to one which is aimed at identifying the actions that need to be taken locally to make settlements more sustainable. More sustainable could mean towns and villages improving accessibility or securing community facilities, rather than just the provision of market housing.
- 6.6 This proposed 'light touch' strategic approach outside the four main towns is an opportunity to embrace new methods of delivery that have been introduced at a national level giving local communities more choice and control. It is envisaged that neighbourhood plans will have a key role to play as once adopted, they will form part of the Development Plan for the area.



6.7 Other options for delivery will still be available. In particular, the Council is suggesting that communities could have the option of 'opting in' to a Site Allocations DPD, if they felt that was the best approach for them. Other non-statutory options (which would carry less weight in the decision-making process), that could be pursued by local communities (depending on what issues they are seeking to address) include:

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

6.8 The NPPF makes it necessary for any neighbourhood plan in North Dorset to be 'in general conformity with' the strategic policies in the Local Plan Part 1. By making its strategic policies as 'light touch' as possible, the District Council will maximise the extent to which local communities will be able to use neighbourhood plans to shape their local areas. The evidence of the consultation with Town and Parish Councils shows a considerable appetite for the production of neighbourhood plans and it is hoped that the 'light touch' strategic approach set out above will facilitate their production.

## 7. North Dorset Local Plan Part 1

7.1 The revised sustainable development strategy for North Dorset:

- has regard to the presumption in favour of sustainable development in the NPPF;
- reflects the new, less rigid 'higher level' policy framework and the localism agenda;
- accords with the NPPF which seeks to focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable;
- is based on evidence studies that identify Blandford, Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton as the District's main towns;
- incorporates an updated housing market assessment for 4,200 new homes in the District over a 15-year period (2011 to 2026);
- makes provision for growth at the four main towns to largely meet the identified need for future housing provision and, as such, enables a more flexible approach to be taken in Stalbridge and the villages;
- allows the amount and location of future development in Stalbridge and individual villages to be determined primarily through neighbourhood plans that have regard to local needs and priorities.

7.2 In summary, the strategic policies for the sustainable development strategy are:

### Policy 1 – Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development

7.3 This sets out how the Council will take decisions in the context of 'the presumption' and the supporting text provides guidance on how this will be applied in North Dorset, particularly in relation to:

- The Council's 'positive approach' to considering development proposals;
- 'working proactively' with applicants jointly to find solutions;
- Approving planning applications 'without delay' (unless material considerations indicate otherwise); and
- Decision-taking where there are 'no relevant policies' or 'relevant policies are out-of-date'.

### Policy 2 – Core Spatial Strategy

7.4 This policy establishes the 'core spatial strategy' for North Dorset. It identifies Blandford (Forum and St Mary), Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton as the key strategic settlements in the District and seeks to concentrate the vast majority of the District's growth at these 'four main towns'. It also establishes that outside the four main towns development will be more strictly controlled with an emphasis on meeting local and essential needs.

- 7.5 The core spatial strategy envisages neighbourhood planning playing a key role in meeting local needs in the countryside, but neighbourhood plans are also being produced by communities in the towns. National policy clearly establishes that neighbourhood plans cannot be used to undermine strategic policies, so a neighbourhood plan for one of the four main towns would have to accord with the proposals for the growth of that town, as set out in the Local Plan Part 1.
- 7.6 A neighbourhood plan for one of the four main towns could not promote less development than is identified in the Local Plan Part 1, but it could allow greater levels of growth (by allocating additional sites for development) or include specific policies or guidance on how new development should be designed.
- 7.7 Outside the defined boundaries of the four main towns, the remainder of the District (including Stalbridge and all the District's villages) will be subject to countryside policies where development will be strictly controlled unless it is required to enable essential rural needs to be met.
- 7.8 In addition to countryside policies, at Stalbridge and all the District's villages, the focus will be on meeting local (rather than strategic) needs, which will be delivered primarily through neighbourhood planning. Communities in Stalbridge and all the District's villages will be able to 'opt in' to the site allocations in Part 2 of the Local Plan, as an alternative to meeting local and essential rural needs through countryside policies and neighbourhood planning.

## Policy 20 – The Countryside

- 8.1 Core Spatial Strategy (Policy 2 above) establishes that in the countryside (including Stalbridge and all the villages) the focus is on meeting local, rather than strategic, needs. The Council considers that this 'light touch' approach in the rural areas is appropriate, given that the growth to meet local needs will be largely 'additional' to the strategic growth in the District's four main towns. This approach enables a 'fine grained' assessment of the needs of Stalbridge and the villages to be made by local communities, which can then be addressed primarily through neighbourhood planning.
- 8.2 Although the emphasis of policy in the countryside is on restraint, the Council will permit some forms of development to support the rural economy and meet essential rural needs in line with the strategic policies for the District as a whole.
- 8.3 This will be achieved by:
- identifying, as far as possible, those types of development that may be appropriate in the countryside and where necessary developing more detailed policies to ensure that certain types of development are carefully managed; and
  - establishing a test of 'overriding need' which any other form of development would need to meet in order to be acceptable in principle in the countryside.

## Policies 16 to 19 and 21 - Town Policies

- 7.9 For each of the four main towns there is a separate policy that broadly identifies the location for future housing and other uses such as employment (Policies 16 to 19). There is also a Strategic Site Allocation for the southern extension of Gillingham (Policy 21).
- 7.10 Within these towns the Council supports local communities in taking an active role in shaping the places in which they live and work because local people know best what local needs are and how they can be met and as such it encourages the production of neighbourhood plans. In fact Gillingham is already a designated neighbourhood area and plans are progressing well on its neighbourhood plan.

## Development Management Policies

- 7.11 The development management policies in the Local Plan Part 1 form part of the strategic policy framework. They provide more detail for decision making in relation to particular issues and assessing the acceptability of certain types of development.
- 7.12 A number of policies (28 to 33) provide greater detail on how proposals for development in the countryside should be carefully managed to enable essential rural needs to be met without undermining the general policy of restraint that applies.