



Representations on West Somerset's Local Plan 2012-2032

Land off Bratton Lane, Minehead

Report for Mr C Shapland FRICS

March 2015

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1. Policy

1.1 In the preparation of this document we have paid particular attention to the National Planning Policy Framework.

2. Background

- 2.1 On behalf of our client, Mr C Shapland FRICS, we make representations to West Somerset District Council's Draft Local Plan to 2032 on land comprising 2.6 Ha (6.5 acres) to the north of Bratton Lane, Minehead (please see map attached as Appendix 1).
- 2.2 The site lies adjacent to the eastern part of the Built up Area Boundary (BUAB) of Minehead which has been identified by the Council as the town where the majority of growth to serve the District should occur very much in line with best planning practice of focusing development around existing urban areas where the vast majority of physical, social and community, transport and green infrastructure exists.
- 2.3 The land is vacant and was identified in West Somerset's Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) of March 2010 (Ref: MIN 15). The SHLAA did not comment on the availability, achievability or the likely timescales of development on it but it did note that the site was divorced from the edge of Minehead (but it is not; it is adjacent to it) and that it was not suitable for inclusion in the SHLAA simply because access could not be achieved.
- 2.4 Our client completely disagrees with this assessment. Firstly, access can be achieved. Secondly, the site is suitable for residential development. Thirdly, it is available now. And finally, about 55 dwellings could be achieved on it. In other words our client feels that the site should have been assessed as being suitable, available and achievable for residential development of around 55 dwellings and should have been included in the SHLAA. As an aside, it is close to 2 other SHLAA sites (Ref: MIN4 and Ref: MIN5) which have been assessed as being suitable, available and achievable in a timescale of 11- 15 years.
- 2.5 In general, there are many aspects of the Local Plan which are reasonable and which should be supported, however, the document does raise a number of issues of concern. We highlight our client's views on all of these issues commenting to this effect herein.

3. Section 2 Spatial Portrait

Section 2: A Spatial Portrait of the West Somerset Local Plan Area

- 3.1 Paragraph 2.4 says "The largest settlement is the Victorian seaside resort town of Minehead with c.12,000 population. It is the main service centre for the District, having a community hospital, a sixth form college, middle school and a substantial shopping centre. It is also the location of a Butlins holiday centre, which in the peak holiday season is home to up to c.6,000 visitors at a time. Its service centre role relates to a wider area including much of Exmoor and parts of North Devon."
- 3.2 Paragraph 2.4 says: "Minehead lies some 25 miles / 45 minutes' drive from M5 J25 at Taunton via the A358 and A39 and 27 miles / 50 minutes' drive from M5 J24 at Bridgwater via the A39. At peak hours these timings increase significantly. Journey times to settlements away from the main roads increase considerably depending on the additional distance involved. Many parts of the minor road network, besides being narrow and winding, are severely constrained by the local geography and a lack of permeability on some parts of the historic road network. The use of walking as a means of transport is inhibited in some of the local settlements by the lack of safe footways in key locations. Minehead however has a good level of access to its services and facilities by a range of transport modes including walking and cycling."
- 3.3 The draft plan says that the District lies within two overlapping housing market areas (HMA's): Taunton and South Somerset HMA (T&SSHMA) and The Northern Peninsula HMA. Regarding the T&SSHMA paragraph 2.5 says: "whilst there was a high overall degree of self-containment within the HMA in relation to the main centres of employment, Taunton and Bridgwater (a 70% travel to work self-containment level) this applied rather less in South Somerset where there was more internal self-containment focused on Minehead."
- 3.4 In terms of land use and economy paragraph 2.7 says: "The two major sources of employment within the District are agriculture and tourism, in particular the Butlins holiday centre in Minehead. ... As a consequence of the age profile of the District, social care is also a growing employment sector, [but] like tourism and farming it is not particularly well paid."

Observations on Section 2: A Spatial Portrait of the West Somerset Local Plan Area

- 3.5 Our client feels that this section highlights what Minehead's role in West Somerset is and how important it is to the District. It outlines that the town benefits from a good level of access to its services and facilities by a range of transport modes including walking and cycling and it sets the scene as to why housing provision (and affordable housing provision, hence) has been, and is, an issue for the area; the population profile is ageing whilst the economically active population tend to be employed in low paid jobs.

¹Nuclear power generation at Hinkley Point is also a significant employer with c.600 workers at the existing power station. This is likely to increase significantly in the future with the proposed development of the Hinkley Point C Power Station.

4. Key Issues

The Key Issues identified during the Plan Preparation Process

- 4.1 Section 4 is about the key issues that West Somerset's Local Plan should address. Paragraph 4.1 states that housing and community issues include:
- The provision of significantly more affordable housing;
 - The provision of appropriate facilities for older people;
 - The provision of sport and recreation facilities;
 - The provision of facilities for young people; and
 - addressing the issue of fuel poverty.
- 4.2 In relation to settlement hierarchy and distribution of development, paragraph 4.2 states that "identifying a hierarchy of settlements within West Somerset in terms of their functions, the need to maintain and increase the self-containment of West Somerset settlements, and the identification of the most appropriate locations for new development" are the key issues.
- 4.3 In terms on transport paragraph 4.3 states that key issues include "increasing the proportion of non-private car travel within the District."
- 4.4 Paragraph 4.4 tries to encapsulate the key issues and they include:
- "The extreme degree of disparity between average house prices and average earnings, with consequent high level of unmet affordable housing need;
 - The need to provide c. 2,000 dwellings during the period 2012 to 2032;
 - The demographic imbalance in the area, with its low proportion of 19 – 45 year olds, and high proportion of 50+ age group;
 - The narrow base of the economy, and the predominance of low income jobs in agriculture, tourism and social care;
 - Poor level of accessibility between the West Somerset communities and the M5 corridor;
 - Reducing the relatively high per capita level of CO2 production within West Somerset; and,
 - The importance of protecting the West Somerset landscape."

Observations on the Key Issues identified during the Plan Preparation Process

- 4.5 This part of the plan, whilst reiterating Minehead's place at the top of a settlement hierarchy and the aspiration for self-containment there, builds on matters alluded to in Section 2. It stresses the need for around 2,900 dwellings in the 20 year period to 2032 and the "extreme degree of disparity between average house prices and average earnings" as well as the demographic imbalance in the area.
- 4.6 This all leads to the identification of the key issues that the area has to deal with which, in our client's view, in a nutshell are:
- Focusing development in and around Minehead (which is where our client's land is) where the vast majority of goods and service are located leading to self-containment and the promotion of sustainable transport modes;
 - Reducing per capita CO2 emissions in the interests of abating the speed of climate change;
 - Delivering open market housing to deliver affordable housing;

- Raising the number of higher paid jobs whilst maintaining the levels of lower paid jobs; and,
- Addressing the demographic imbalance by encouraging economically active people to remain in the area and by encouraging others into the area;

all whilst protecting the landscape.

5. Vision

The Spatial Vision for West Somerset showing how the area and places in it should develop

5.1 Paragraphs 5.1 to 5.3 of the plan state the vision for the District as follows:

"5.1 ECONOMY - By 2032 the area's main service and employment centre Minehead....will be...[part]...of a thriving and increasingly varied local economy within West Somerset, aided by the provision of super-fast optical broadband access, all of which will enable more people to work close to, or in their homes. People will have the skills to enable them to work and thrive in this more diverse economy. The tourism industry will also have diversified with a wider range of sustainable enterprises..."

5.2 HOUSING – By 2032 there will have been a significant increase in the amount of affordable housing provided in the area. More people will be able to afford housing which is appropriate to their circumstances. New housing development will have been delivered in locations which will help to secure a reduction in transport demand and more self-contained settlements. About 2,900 additional houses will have been provided in the Local Plan area, the largest part of these being provided at Minehead."

5.3 ENVIRONMENT – By 2032 there will be a marked increase in the low carbon economy locally. Biodiversity will have been strengthened..."

Observations on the Spatial Vision for West Somerset showing how the area and places in it should develop

5.2 Our client welcomes the overall tone of the vision which includes the Council attempting to focus development in and around Minehead (which is where our client's land is), delivering cutting edge IT solutions to allow people to work in their homes, facilitating the change to a low carbon economy, and delivering more affordable housing to meet a growing demand. However, it has to be acknowledged that affordable housing delivery is nearly always dependent on the delivery of open market housing and that development only occurs where it is viable. The plan does not do this.

6. Strategic Objectives

Strategic Objectives for West Somerset focusing on the key issues to be addressed

6.1 Paragraph 6.1 says: "Strategic objectives for the area based on the key issues identified in the initial Regulation 18 consultation exercise [include]: strengthening the role and function of Minehead as the District's main service centre...[the] implementation of types and quantities of development in locations appropriate to meet the requirements of the Strategy based on the evidence and engagement...[increasing] self-containment within Minehead...[making]...a step change in the provision of affordable housing to meet identified local needs...[making]...a significant reduction in Co2 emissions for the Local Plan area...[creating]...an aspirational, enterprising and entrepreneurial culture within West Somerset...[protecting and enhancing]...biodiversity in the Local Plan area...[and conserving and enhancing]...the character of historic settlements, buildings and landscapes."

Observations on Strategic Objectives for West Somerset focusing on the key issues to be addressed

6.2 This Section builds on Sections 2, 4 and 5 of the plan and very much in line with the Council our client believes that most development should be steered to Minehead where the greatest amount of services, employment and public transport exist (and where by far the greatest amount of new infrastructure and investment in the plan period will go) and which, if properly planned for, would deliver housing (and affordable housing) and jobs, self-containment, per capita CO2 reductions and ultimately help sustain and enhance the economy of West Somerset. However, there are related issues of concern to us and we refer to them elsewhere herein.

7. Policies

7.1 The plan sets out various policies under headings. We comment under each heading below.

8. Presumption in favour of Sustainable Development

Policy SD1 Presumption in favour of Sustainable Development

8.1 Policy SD1 reflects the National Planning Policy Framework in that it says that there will be a presumption in favour of Sustainable Development.

Observations Policy SD1 Presumption in favour of Sustainable Development

8.2 Our client supports the gist of this policy

9. Sustainable Communities

Policy SC1 Hierarchy of Settlements

- 9.1 This policy says that "new development will be concentrated in the District's main centre, Minehead."
- 9.2 The purpose of the policy is stated as being "to achieve a beneficial distribution of new development within the Core Strategy area, so as to maintain or strengthen the current service roles and functions of the various settlements."
- 9.3 It is assumed that "directing new development proportionately to the area's larger settlements which currently provide most of the retail, employment, education and other service facilities within the area will help to maintain and enhance their attractiveness to service providers...[which in turn will help]... to maximize the number of trips to service destinations which are completed within the local area and, particularly, within the main settlements...[to maintain or increase]...the number of service sector jobs provided in the local area [and allow for]...quality of life benefits [to be] experienced by the local population through maintaining or improving the range of services which are available within the local area"

Observations on policy SC1 Hierarchy of Settlements

- 9.4 In line with the foregoing our client believes that most development should be steered to Minehead where the greatest amount of services, employment and public transport exist (and where by far the greatest amount of new infrastructure and investment in the plan period will go) and which, if properly planned for, would deliver housing, including affordable housing, and jobs to help sustain and enhance the economy of the sub region.

Policy SC2 Strategic Development

- 9.5 This policy is about housing delivery rates. It says that housing will be delivered at a minimum average rate of 145 dwellings per year with an average of 81 dwellings at Minehead which, it says, is in line with past trends.

Observations on Policy SC2 Strategic Development

- 9.6 Unfortunately, we must OBJECT to this policy. Notwithstanding that it is our understanding that the Council does not have a 6 year land supply set against this is its own evidence which would appear to suggest that a delivery rate of 145 dwellings per annum would not even meet the affordable housing requirement never mind the overall housing requirement.
- 9.7 The plan has an under supply of strategic sites and an over-reliance on windfall sites to meet its housing target in Minehead, with the vast majority of its housing needs proposed to be met through windfall sites rather than strategic allocations. The plan details that an average of 43 dwellings per year are expected to be provided by windfall developments in Minehead/Alcombe, Watchet and Williton compared to only 38 dwellings a year being expected to be provided at Minehead/Alcombe at strategic sites.
- 9.8 We reemphasise here that our client believes that most development should be steered to locations in and around Minehead where the greatest amount of services, employment and public transport exist and which, if properly planned for, would deliver housing and affordable housing. Nevertheless, our client considers that the current

approach proposed in the Local Plan flies in the face of the Council's own evidence and in any case is over-reliant on a few housing sites coming forward.

- 9.9 We suggest that a more robust approach would be to provide for a number of alternative sites in appropriate locations predominantly around Minehead. Furthermore, that this provision be made through the allocation of a significant number of more modestly sized sites because such a revised approach would help to ensure that there would be a greater number of more easily deliverable schemes available to meet the Council's overall objectives.
- 9.10 In addition to these concerns, our client also considers that the current approach is flawed in that it fails to make adequate provision for alternative sites to come forward should the few sites that have been earmarked for housing development by the Council fail to deliver. If that happened the Council would fail to meet its (questionable) housing targets which reinforces our client's view that the current approach in the Local Plan is inflexible; it does not make provision for alternative sites to come forward even as a contingency and given the risks associated with the low housing figures in the plan and current over-reliance on a few sites, such provision is considered appropriate and necessary.
- 9.11 It is also our client's view that the failure to make adequate alternative provision in the draft Local Plan potentially exposes the Council to having to accept speculative housing schemes in the future, resulting in a failure to demonstrate an adequate housing supply. This would clearly be contrary to the principles of good plan making. Given that there is already a very significant undersupply in housing delivery in the District, this makes the need to have a robust housing pipeline particularly important.
- 9.12 Essentially, we say that more land should be identified for development in and around Minehead. Our client is of a view that their land should be allocated because it is suitable for housing development and where there are constraints these can be overcome. Development of this land could help the delivery of required physical, social and community infrastructure via financial contributions as well as up to 35% affordable housing which would be provided as part of the development.

Policy SC4 Affordable Housing

- 9.13 Policy SC4 states that "where residential development is proposed, provision should be made for affordable housing to meet the needs of those... who cannot afford to access the open housing market...[and in Minehead a threshold of 8 or more dwellings is set]... [at a] minimum ratio of 35 affordable units for every 65 open-market (pro-rata) based on the total number of dwellings to be provided in the development. [It says that these are to be built proportionately on a]...like for like basis in terms of house type with a minimum of 2 bedrooms...to the minimum Homes and Communities Agency standard sizes... [and to] ... Code 3... [or higher] ... "help secure a significant percentage of affordable housing...[with a target of 35%]...[and it assumes that]...the provision of additional affordable housing as part of the costs of development is one of the means of improving access to a decent home...[for those in need]."

Observations on Policy SC4 Affordable Housing

- 9.14 To be read in conjunction with what we have said about SC2, whilst our client supports the concept of development providing for affordable housing when it is viable for it to do so, unfortunately without evidence to support the 35% figure our client must OBJECT to this policy in its current form. The affordable housing requirement does not appear to be derived from an assessment of whether it is viable and, consequently, the delivery of the plan must be questioned.
- 9.15 The Council says that one of its top priorities is to deliver affordable housing given that it has an acute affordable housing issue. In this regard for various reasons, from the evidence that is available, the Council has not been

remotely close to attaining 35% affordable housing of all housing development in the past decade much of which was during the biggest property boom in living memory and therefore it has to provide evidence to show that 35% is viable and reasonable and achievable now and in the plan period.

9.16 There is little doubt that a key issue is the delivery of affordable housing and a scheme for at least 50 dwellings on our land would hit right at the heart of this issue because, subject to viability considerations (as the policy highlights), it would deliver up to 35% of the units as affordable dwellings. In any case the plan has to acknowledge that affordable housing is nearly always a by product of open market housing development and it doesn't do this.

Policy SC5A Self Containment of Settlements

9.17 Policy SC5A is about improving land uses in settlements to minimise transport use leading to self-containment, we presume, in the interests of sustainability.

Observations on Policy SC5A Self Containment of Settlements

9.18 Our client supports this policy.

10. Settlement Policies

Policy MD1 Minehead Development

10.1 This policy is about development in Minehead and it says, inter alia, that proposals must "support and strengthen [its] role as the main service and employment centre in West Somerset...and...give appropriate treatment to the town's surroundings in the context of national designations".

Observations on Policy MD1 Minehead Development

10.2 Our client endorses the gist of this draft strategy and in particular the principle of large scale development around Minehead but for reasons stated herein more housing should be allocated in this area; our client's land is suitable for residential development and should be allocated.

Policy MD2 Strategic Development around Minehead

10.3 This policy outlines where Minehead's strategic growth will occur in the plan period. It also outlines the quantum of development for Minehead in the plan period.

Observations on Policy MD2 Strategic Development around Minehead

10.4 Echoing what we say on MD1, our client endorses the gist of this draft strategy and in particular the principle of large scale development around Minehead but for reasons stated herein more housing should be allocated in this area; our client's land is suitable for residential development and it should be allocated. We feel that a range of sites should be allocated so that the Council's housing and affordable housing requirements are to stand a chance of being met.

11. Economy

Policies EC1 Widening and strengthening the Local Economy and EC6 Work/Live developments

11.1 EC1 is about strengthening the local economy generally and EC6 says that the Council will support proposals for work/live developments [including] through new build... [provided]..."there is no generation of significant additional traffic movements to and from the premises as a result of the new business activity."

Observations on policies EC1 Widening and strengthening the Local Economy and EC6 Work/Live Developments

11.2 Our client supports the inclusion of these policies in the plan. However, we take it that the caveat to EC6 ("there is no generation of significant additional traffic movements to and from the premises as a result of the new business activity") has a residential trip baseline otherwise how could the Council support new build work/live units?

12. Transport

Policy TR2 reducing reliance on private car

12.1 TR2 states: "Development should be located and designed to maximise the attractiveness of modes of transport other than the private car where appropriate."

Observations on policies TR2 reducing reliance on private car

12.2 We are aligned with the Council and we bear in mind that Minehead, which is where the majority of development in the plan period should and will occur to, inter alia, reduce the reliance on the private car, benefits from a good level of access to its services and facilities by a range of transport modes including walking and cycling, indicating why it should have more housing allocated to it than is currently shown in the plan.

13 Community Facilities and Public Health

CF2 Planning for Healthy Communities

13.1 CF2 says that proposals should be designed to encourage walking and cycling to access services and facilities as well as to encourage exercise.

Observations on CF2 Planning for Healthy Communities

13.2 Again, we are aligned with the Council here and again we bear in mind that Minehead benefits from a good level of access to its services and facilities by a range of transport modes including walking and cycling which as we have stated elsewhere, is an indication why it should have more housing allocated to it than is currently shown in the plan.

14 Climate Change

CC1 Carbon Reduction

14.1 This policy states "development proposals which assist in the development of a low or zero carbon economy will be supported."

Observations on CC1 Carbon Reduction

14.2 Our client supports this policy.

15 Historic and Natural Environment

NH2 Landscape Character Protection NH3 Nature Conservation and the protection and enhancement of Biodiversity and NH4 Green Infrastructure

15.1 NH2 is about development being located and designed in such ways as to minimise landscape impacts. NH3 says that development should enhance biodiversity where possible. NH4 states that "the creation and enhancement of a green infrastructure network will be supported."

Observations on NH2 Landscape Character Protection NH3 Nature Conservation and the protection and enhancement of Biodiversity and NH4 Green Infrastructure

15.2 Our client endorses the essence of these policies.

16 Implementation

Policy ID1 Infrastructure Delivery

16.1 This policy says that "the planning and delivery of development should ensure efficient and effective use of existing infrastructure and should provide for the delivery of an appropriate level of justified new or improved transport, education, health, cultural, sport, recreation and green infrastructure in relation to the development proposed. The Council will work in partnership with service providers, neighbouring local planning authorities and Somerset County Council to identify necessary local infrastructure requirements for the fulfilment of the strategy." It also says that the Council will produce an Infrastructure Delivery Plan and it suggests that primarily Section 106 agreements are to be used to deliver the infrastructure.

Observations on Policy ID1 Infrastructure Delivery

16.2 Minehead, to which our client's land lies adjacent, is the principal town in the district wherein, and around which, development should occur which is in line with the Council's own evidence and best planning practice of focusing development around existing urban areas where the vast majority of physical, social and community, transport and green infrastructure exists and where the vast majority of new investment in which will take place in the plan period.

16.3 However, there must be serious question marks over the soundness of the plan in the round given that the Council's approach is to allocate land first then cost the infrastructure required. What if strategic development sites cannot support the infrastructure required? Surely, to prove that the Local Plan is deliverable, infrastructure costs have to be part of the front end of the policy making process so that it can inform the draft policy?

16.4 What about the role of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)?

17 Conclusions

17.1 As a result of the issues set out above, in our client's view, the Local Plan should be amended to:

- Make provision for a higher number of new homes, in line with its own evidence;
- Continue to focus development in and around Minehead and consequently identify other appropriate locations for housing development in and around Minehead in order to provide a greater range of development sites and thereby increase the flexibility of the proposed housing supply for the District; and
- allocate our client's land at Minehead, now, as part of the Local Plan, for residential use.