

Upper Marshwood Vale Neighbourhood Plan Progress Review

This note is intended to consider the progress made on the Upper Marshwood Vale Neighbourhood Plan, based on a review of early consultation meeting outcomes (Stoke Abbott and Blackdown events), the household questionnaire analysis (draft as supplied), and suggest the potential plan focus / choices and next steps.

1. Upper Marshwood Vale: key facts



The Upper Marshwood Vale Neighbourhood Plan area was designated in August 2015.

It covers the parishes of Marshwood, Stoke Abbott, Bettiscombe and Pilsdon, spanning about 30 square kilometres (11½ square miles), and a population of just under 600 people.

The main settlements in the area are Marshwood and Stoke Abbott (both with about 70 dwellings each). The closest town is Beaminster (east of Stoke Abbott), with Axminster in Devon (to the west) and Bridport and Lyme Regis (to the south) are about 5km (3 miles) outside of the Neighbourhood Plan area as the crow flies.

The 2011 Census provides the following information:

- **584 usual residents**, living in **262 households**. The average household size is 2.1 persons, and the average house size is 3 bedrooms (both fairly typical)

- **Sparse population** (an average population density of 0.2 persons per hectare, compared to 0.9 persons per hectare in West Dorset and 3.7 persons per hectare across England and Wales)
- **Ageing population** (average age 56 years compared to West Dorset average of 49 years, and 30% aged 65 + years compared to West Dorset average of 26%) – but this does not notably skew health conditions (20% of the population are affected by health conditions that limit their day to day activities (which is fairly typical)).
- **A comparatively high level of vacant homes** (total dwelling number was 340, giving a vacancy rate of 23% - particularly high in Stoke Abbott and Pilsdon parishes, compared to 10% for West Dorset)
- **More limited access to rented accommodation** (79% homes are owner occupied compared to West Dorset average: 70%)
- **High degree of car dependency** - most households have one if not two cars (55% of households have 2 or more cars compared to West Dorset average of 39%)
- **Good level of economic activity**, particularly **self-employed** (45% economically active are self-employed compared to West Dorset average of 22%, only 1.7% unemployed compared to 3.4% in West Dorset)

A brief review of key environmental factors provides the following information:

- The entire Neighbourhood Plan area lies within the **Dorset AONB** (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) – a **nationally designated landscape**, varying from the clay vale of the Marshwood Vale to the south, wooded hills of the Axe Valley Hills to the north and west, and undulating river valley of the Brit Valley to the east.
- In terms of settlement pattern and characteristics, these are described as:
 - **Marshwood Vale** – typified by dispersed small clustered hamlets with variety of vernacular building materials such as thatch and brick, plus Oolitic limestone, Blue Lias and Upper Greensand stone. Scattered, isolated farmsteads. Sunken, winding rural lanes with steep species rich verges.
 - **Axe Valley Hills** – typified by scattered dispersed settlements of golden limestone and thatch along the valley bottoms. Deep, narrow winding lanes with deep hedge banks. The local building stone consists of Upper Greensand chert and Inferior Oolite
 - **Brit Valley** - typified by scattered clustered settlements of predominantly oolitic limestone (Inferior Oolite) and thatch along the branching valley bottoms.
- **Lamberts' Castle SSSI** is a **nationally important wildlife site** in the west of the Neighbourhood Plan area. The site features a prominent landmark consisting of a flat-topped hill with an Iron Age hill fort from which it takes its name. Together with its flanks and adjacent lower slopes, which extend into Devon, this site comprises a range of grasslands and open heath, which are now both rare and threatened nationwide, with some scrub and secondary woodland.
- Four **scheduled monuments** – at Lambert's Castle, Marshwood Castle, Pilsdon Pen, Waddon Hill (and also visible is Lewesdon Hill fort in the adjoining Broadwindsor parish). All four are on the 'heritage at risk' register
- Some 88 **Listed Buildings** and structures, including the Church of St Mary (Pilsdon), and the Parish Church of St Mary (Stoke Abbott), both Grade I Listed.
- **Stoke Abbott** has been designated as a **Conservation Area**, for which a Conservation Area Appraisal was prepared in 2007.

2. Previous work – the 2010 Parish Plan

A Parish Plan was prepared by local residents and adopted by the Parish Council in 2010. Key themes and issues covered in the Plan included:

- Increasingly elderly population – and the need to combat isolation and make care and support available
- The number of second homes that stand empty for long periods
- Lack of local job opportunities and affordable housing for local people
- Lack of leisure facilities for the young
- Road safety concerns from the narrow roads and increasing traffic speeds and vehicle sizes
- The importance of the beauty and character of the landscape, the oak trees, wildlife, tranquillity and dark skies
- The importance and distinct identity of the various villages and hamlets
- The need to investigate would might be the most effective way to provide a bus service
- The variable quality of the communications / media networks

3. Early consultation events told us...

Drop-in events for the community were held in various locations across the parishes in early 2016. Key issues raised focused particularly around 'community' themes, but also included housing and protecting the wider environment. The most commonly cited issues being:

- Improvements to the church in **Marshwood** are needed to allow wider community use
- A sewage treatment works is needed in **Marshwood**
- A playground is needed (in **Marshwood** and **Stoke Abbott**)
- A community shop is needed in **Stoke Abbott**
- More housing is needed for rural workers and young people (local) – possibly though the release of agricultural occupancy conditions
- A safe walking route to school is needed (in **Marshwood**)
- A car park is needed in **Stoke Abbott** to reduce problems caused by on-street parking
- Better mobile phone coverage is needed across the whole area
- The AONB and Conservation Areas character should be protected

In general the retention of community facilities were supported – such as:

- the Bottle Inn in **Marshwood**
- the New Inn in **Stoke Abbott**
- The Shave Cross Inn
- the Community Shop and Post Office in **Marshwood**
- the Primary School in **Marshwood**
- the garage in **Marshwood**
- the Millenium Wood in **Stoke Abbott**
- the village hall in **Stoke Abbott**
- the village hall in **Bettiscombe**
- the churches in all four parishes (**Bettiscombe, Marshwood, Pilsdon** and **Stoke Abbott**)

4. The household questionnaire told us...

A questionnaire was sent to every household in December 2016, asking for their views on the future of the area, and the issues that matter to them. Just over 100 responses were received, primarily from those aged 46 or over (that represented about two-thirds of those responding). A high proportion (over 40%) had lived in the area for more than 30 years.

The first question on the survey asked about what makes the Upper Marshwood Vale special in terms of its natural environment. Answers focused on its distinctive landscape, views and scenery (agreed by almost all), together with its tranquillity, its dark skies, and its woodland, banks and hedgerows. Most people agreed that such elements should be protected, and that tree planting should be encouraged in new development and as screening for large-scale agricultural and similar buildings.

There was general agreement that guidelines on the design, size and location of new buildings would be appropriate to preserve the local character of buildings and settlements

There was general support to see some more housing over the plan period (compared to the 8 homes built in recent years), for a range of housing types including open market homes, shared ownership, self-build and affordable rents, with particular support for:

- removal of 'tied' status where a property is no longer part of a 'working farm'
- barn conversions
- sub-division of larger dwellings or farm buildings into several smaller homes
- converting outbuildings to provide annexes
- some new-build housing - semi-detached and 2 and 3 bedroom homes were generally more popular than other home types.

The responses indicated that slightly more people work locally (within 10 miles of home) than travel further afield, with many working from home. There was little obvious interest in a shared office facility. Use of the internet was considered to be important for local businesses, particularly working from home. There was support for converting barns to workspace, and tourist facilities such as pubs / restaurants / cafes and small hotels / B&Bs.

Most people use their car to get about on a daily basis. Although reduced speed and better footpaths could encourage some people to walk more often this would be unlikely to make much difference to most people's habits. Most people would support more passing places to make roads safer. There was no overall agreement on whether there is too much unnecessary road signs and clutter.

In terms of community facilities, the community shop / farm shop and post office, healthcare facilities and community halls were all general supported. There was general support for a new village / community shop or farm shop (suggested in the earlier consultation) and reasonable support for the provision of allotments and other amenity space (particularly woodland). The need to improve mobile phone coverage was also supported, with more people in favour of a mast (if required) than not.

In terms of renewable energy solutions, most people favoured roof-mounted solar panels and hydro-power, with very few supporting solar farms or large scale (25m or higher) wind turbines. Although the option of biomass was not specifically given as a form of renewable energy, it had reasonable support as a possible community initiative project.

5. What the Local Plan establishes

The 2015 Local Plan sets the strategy and planning policies for the area, and in the absence of a Neighbourhood Plan would direct development management decisions. So understanding the Local Plan context helps establish what policy areas may benefit from slight adjustments or further detail.

The four parishes of Marshwood, Stoke Abbott, Bettiscombe and Pilsdon are all classed as 'countryside' in terms of the Local Plan policies – and have no settlements of sufficient size to be listed as part of the settlement strategy. Policy SUS2 of the Local Plan therefore applies, which says that development will be strictly controlled in such areas, having particular regard to the need for the protection of the countryside and environmental constraints.

Policy ENV1 makes clear that development that would harm the character, special qualities or natural beauty of the Dorset AONB, including its characteristic landscape quality and diversity, uninterrupted panoramic views, individual landmarks, and sense of tranquillity and remoteness, will not be permitted. There are some supplementary publications (such as the landscape character assessments and conservation area appraisals) that provide further information on local character, where available. Other Local Plan policies refer to achieving high quality designs in new development - that it should be sympathetic to its surrounds, contribute positively to local identity and distinctiveness, and retain trees and other features that contribute to an area's distinctive character (ENV10 and ENV12), protect important wildlife habitats and species (ENV2), protect Listed buildings and their setting, and other heritage assets (ENV4).

Housing

In terms of housing, the Local Plan restricts new dwellings in the countryside to one of the following categories:

- affordable housing (and HOUS2 requires these to be small scale sites adjoining settlements),
- rural workers' housing (and HOUS6 requires evidence that there is an essential need for a worker to live at or near their place of work),
- open market housing through the re-use of existing rural buildings (and SUS3 requires these to be of permanent and substantial construction and been in existence in 2011, make a positive contribution to the local character, and adjoin an existing serviced residential building and be legally tied to the wider holding / main property (so it cannot be sold off).

Employment and Tourism

Policy ECON1 allows employment within or on the edge of a settlement (not limited to those listed in the Local Plan); through the intensification or extension of existing premises; as part of a farm diversification scheme; through the re-use or replacement of an existing building; or in a rural location where such a location is essential for that type of business. A village shop or farm shop would be supported in such locations. And policy ECON5 generally supports tourist facilities and attractions located within or close to established settlements, or where they make use of existing or replacement buildings, provided they are not 'major attractions'. New built tourist accommodation (of a scale appropriate to the area) would only supported through the re-use of an existing building (ECON6), as there are no settlements of 200+ population in the area. Caravan and camping sites must be well located in relation to existing facilities, and not have a significant adverse impact on the distinctive characteristics of the areas landscape, heritage or built environment (ECON7).

Policy ECON1 makes clear that proposals for live-work developments are only supported in locations considered suitable for open market residential development – so in the Upper Marshwood Vale this would be limited to the re-use of existing buildings unless more flexibility is provided through the Neighbourhood Plan.

Community facilities

Policies SUS2 and COM2 allow for new, replaced or improved local community buildings or structures within or adjoining an existing settlement, or where it involves the re-use of rural buildings. Policy COM4 is similarly supportive of recreation facilities on sites close to an existing settlement ((not limited to those listed in the Local Plan). Policies COM 3 and 5 secure their long-term retention, unless the facilities are not viable or surplus to requirement, or better alternative provision is made.

Renewable energy

There are now quite extensive permitted development rights for roof-mounted solar panels. Policy COM11 in the Local Plan is also supportive of renewable energy proposals in general providing that the benefits of the development, such as the contribution towards renewable energy targets, significantly outweigh any harm, and any adverse impacts such as on the local landscape, areas of historical interest, wildlife and residential amenity can be satisfactorily mitigated.

6. Potential Neighbourhood Plan focus and next steps

National guidance makes clear that a Neighbourhood Plan should set out the vision for the area. This can be drafted by the Neighbourhood Plan group in consultation with local residents, focusing on those qualities that resonate with most residents, and the main focus of change (if desired). The objectives for the Neighbourhood Plan can then be based on the issues and possible scope of the Plan.

There are a number of themes emerging from the consultation so far:

- (1) the **importance of the environment** – in particular the landscape and features that contribute to the area's unique character, the enjoyment of the area in terms of countryside access and views, the general tranquillity of the area and its dark skies. Also important is the design of the buildings and settlements, contributing to the area's character.
- (2) the **desire for some housing growth**, at a rate that relates to local needs and the generally rural nature of much of the area
- (3) the **desire to support tourism and home working** to strengthen the **local economy**, and provide further job opportunities
- (4) the **desire to support a range of community facilities** that can be sustained given the sparsity of the local population
- (5) the **rural character of local roads** that means many pedestrians don't feel safe using the roads – though this may not be readily resolved through the Neighbourhood Plan.

So what could the Neighbourhood Plan do? It could...

- provide further guidance on those features that make an important contribution to the distinctive character of the area and should be respected. It can identify, describe / photograph and map these features (if it is clear where these exist) – such as important woodlands, views, locally important buildings and landmarks, local green spaces etc. *Note: much of this work has to a degree already been provided for Stoke Abbott through the 2007 Conservation Area Appraisal*
- provide further guidance on the design of new housing and other buildings, in terms of what is expected in the quality and character of new development. This could include advice on appropriate materials, scale and form, architectural detailing, and could vary between the different settlements. Photos and illustrations of 'good practice' can assist in this type of

exercise. *Note: some of this has to a degree already been provided for Stoke Abbott through the 2007 Conservation Area Appraisal*

- define which areas might be considered to be ‘settlements’ in terms of the application of the Local Plan policies that would allow affordable housing, community facilities and employment (including built tourist accommodation)
- allocate sites for housing or other development, or define a settlement boundary and appropriate infill policies for the larger settlements where infill would be supported. *Note: depending on the scale of development considered, and possible locations, this may well trigger the requirement for a more detailed assessment and explanation of options considered (through a strategic environmental assessment process)*
- take a more flexible approach to allowing conversions, and provide guidance on the range of house types and sizes that might be supported
- identify and map the buildings or land that should be retained in community use, and where and what type of new provision would be supported,
- potentially allocate one or more sites for these new community facilities, or even permit such development through a neighbourhood development or community right to build order, possibly with some housing to help the viability of the scheme. *Note: few neighbourhood plan groups have attempted this additional step, but there is additional funding and technical support for those wishing to pursue this avenue.*
- identify the key areas where the rural nature of roads is causing the highest degree of local concerns and preventing walking to critical facilities (such as the school), and work with the highways authority and local landowners to identify a project / practical measures to improve the current situation, that could reasonably be delivered.

List of Documents Reviewed

- Neighbourhood Plan early consultation meeting notes outcomes ([Blackdown](#) and [Stoke Abbott](#))
- Neighbourhood Plan household questionnaire summary (draft supplied)
- [Upper Marshwood Vale Parish Plan](#) (2010)
- Census 2011 parish profiles ([DorsetForYou website](#))
- Heritage List and Heritage at Risk Register ([Historic England website](#))
- [Lamberts Castle SSSI designation](#) (1989)
- [Stoke Abbott Conservation Area Appraisal](#) (2007)
- [West Dorset Landscape Character Assessment](#) (2009)
- [West Dorset Weymouth and Portland Local Plan](#) (2015)

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