

Minutes of NP meeting held in Stoke Abbott village hall on Saturday 3

June at 10am

Present were :-

Mr S. Tiffin
Mr & Mrs V. Rus
Mr & Mrs S. Pagnamenta
Mr J. Fisher
Mr R. Hayden
Mrs I. House
Mrs C. Corson
Mrs A. Bartle-Tubbs
Mr A. Carey

Mr C. Somers
Mr D. Hitchcock
Mr A. Cameron
Mr M. Bowditch
Mrs S. Hudston
Mr C. Gray
Ms J. Witherden

1. Welcome by Matthew Bowditch, chairman of the Upper Marshwood Vale Parish Council.

2. Independent planning consultant for the NP, Jo Witherden, presented the findings of her report. She highlighted the following points as applying to Stoke Abbott in particular:
 - a. Sparse population of the area with 0.2 people per hectare. UK national average is 3.7 people.
 - b. An older population who own their own homes.
 - c. High car dependency.
 - d. High level of vacant homes (23%). The figure is 10% for West Dorset as a whole.
 - e. High level of self-employment (45%).

3. Charles Somers, chairman of the NP committee, introduced the NP and explained that it would be 2019 before the definitive plan was finished and adopted. He then outlined the responses to the questionnaires sent out at Christmas. 300 questionnaires were distributed, plus a further 100 to additional addresses within the parish boundary but with no corresponding names on the electoral register (some of these may be second homes or holiday lets) and a few others just beyond the parish boundary but adjacent to our main communities.

By mid February we had received 101 replies, a response rate of 34% of the 300 on the electoral register (or 25% of the 400 total).

4. Sara Hudston, NP committee member and editor of Beneath the Vale, presented the draft Vision and Goals. She stressed that these were summaries of the main findings in the questionnaire and were open to discussion and alteration. They were as follows:

GOALS

Main priorities that emerge from questionnaires and consultation sessions:

- **Housing.** Need for more affordable homes. (In practice this can be a mixture of solutions: both private and housing association rented, shared ownership, self-build, removal of AOCs where appropriate etc.)
- **Community facilities.** Existing facilities need to be protected and new facilities need to be provided. Existing facilities include pubs, Marshwood shop and post office, halls, churches, garage, the Millennium Woodland Marshwood Primary School. New facilities needed include play areas, a community shop in Stoke Abbott, sewage treatment works in Marshwood and toilets in Marshwood church.
- **Traffic.** Need a safe walking route to school in Marshwood, better parking in Stoke Abbott (possibly a car park), more passing places in the lanes.
- **Environment:** Protect the ecology of the natural environment and improve access to the network of rights of way.
- **Business:** support for converting buildings into workspaces or tourist facilities.

VISION

- **Housing:** The need for some housing growth at a rate that reflects local needs and the rural nature of the area. Where possible, we wish to provide for younger people with children, as well as older people needing to downsize.
- **Environment:** To protect 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 tranquility of the area and its dark skies. Also important is the design of the buildings and settlements, contributing to the area's character.
- **Economy:** Support home working, rural workshops and small-scale tourism to strengthen the local economy and provide further job opportunities.
- **Community:** Support a range of community facilities that can be sustained given the sparsity of the local population.

5. The meeting then took questions and comments from the floor.

Question: How long will the NP be in place?

Answer by Jo Witherden: The idea is to align with the Local Plan up to 2031, but the community has the option to set a review date sooner.

A Stoke Abbott resident spoke of the pace of change and how this is likely to change lives. Driverless cars could revolutionise the rural economy, making Stoke Abbott into a dormitory village. Technology needs to be part of the picture if we are to avoid being caught on the hop. Co-working needs to be considered for homeworkers as it brings better productivity and creativity. Could the plan include a business hub?

Charles Somers said the point to consider was 'do you want it and where?'

Housing was considered a controversial issue. Charles Somers said that the few sites put forward so far were all too big and would involve building on

green-field sites. He explained how Marshwood Community Land Trust provided 8 new affordable houses when the demand was recognised for 15. That demand had now dropped to 5 and if anything further is built it will be very small scale.

There was a suggestion from the floor that new housing should go on brownfield sites only.

Charles Somers explained that the NP could work to restrict the building of new homes if desired so that fewer were built. Jo Witherden added that the NP enabled communities to set the parameters for new build sites, specifying how many units and whether brown field or green field.

There then followed a short discussion about Willow Farm, which was deemed outside the scope of the NP.

Returning to the NP, a resident said that the biggest problem facing the community were the rotten communications; no DAB radio signal or FM signal where they lived, a poor mobile signal and terrible roads. Traffic and parking were not the issue, it was about how people could get there in the first place.

In response, Charles Somers suggested that now the area has superfast fibre broadband installed, the network could be used to put repeaters on church towers and other prominent places to boost the signal.

Parish Cllr Cassian Gray asked how the village could set its priorities. Charles Somers replied that the purpose of the meeting was to find out if people wanted the NP. The committee needed someone to represent Stoke Abbott and give them the village's views. He then outlined the NP process for the next 18 months, ending in a referendum. Cllr Gray joked that this was "Stexit".

Cllr Gray then suggested drawing up a list of what was contentious and what wasn't and voting on it with a show of hands. He thought that housing was

bound to be contentious as a lot of people would not want new homes to be built.

Jo Witherden explained the housing allocation in the Local Plan and how places were divided into 4 tiers. The top tier was the larger towns such as Bridport or Dorchester. The second tier was made up of the larger villages that had a defined development boundary. The third tier was the smaller, named settlements without defined development boundaries but with populations of 200 or more. Stoke Abbott and Marshwood belonged to the last tier of settlements that were not even named in the Local Plan and were considered open countryside as far as development was concerned. They would not be obliged to provide any new homes and it was up to the communities to decide how many new homes, if any, they wanted to have. They could if they wished specify in the NP that they didn't want any new homes at all.

David Hitchcock said that anyone who wanted to build new houses would have to prove there was a demand to expand the village. He couldn't see that the demand would cover more than a few houses, perhaps one or two every few years, and that this demand would be phased over the next 15-20 years. It was not likely that any single large scale developments would be approved.

Charles Somers said that West Dorset District Council was not looking to solve the housing problem by putting new houses in this area.

Cllr Gray asked if anyone wanted affordable housing in Stoke Abbott. One resident said that he was 'morally in favour' but the reality was that there were no facilities for families and it could be uneconomical for a developer to take on. Beaminster was so near and it was better suited for families' needs.

Cllr Bowditch asked the meeting to vote on whether Stoke Abbott should continue with the NP. The proposal was carried and it was agreed that the next step was to publish the progress to date in Beneath the Vale magazine and form steering groups for the various goals.