

**Somerset West
and Taunton**

LOCAL PLAN 2040

Issues document

Consultation Document

July 2019

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INTRODUCTION

A New Council, a New Local Plan

1. The new Somerset West and Taunton Council came into being on Monday 1 April 2019 and combined the former West Somerset Council and Taunton Deane Borough Council into a brand new District council.
2. This is an exciting time for our area and we are keen to keep up momentum and progress with a new Local Plan which will shape the future of our District for the next 20 years. We need your input to help us make the best decisions for our places.
3. Local Plans contain policies that are used when determining planning applications. Having an up-to-date Local Plan with strong policies means communities can have confidence and certainty about how and where new development can come forward and know what to expect in terms of the scale and type of change and the key locations where new major development will take place. They are also an opportunity to set out ambition and aspirations for the future and tackle the issues of the present.

What about our existing Local Plan documents?

4. The majority of policies and allocations for new development within our current West Somerset Local Plan and Taunton Deane Core Strategy, Site Allocations and Development Management Plan and Taunton Town Centre Area Action Plan and saved policies are still relevant and go a long way to addressing some of the key issues for our area. They include many allocations for new development, a number of which are now being or have been delivered. However,

some of the policies are dated and we need a coherent Plan covering the whole area.

5. Our existing Plans contain a large number of allocations for new housing and employment. We will use updated evidence to determine whether all of these are retained or if further sites are required. Existing Plans focus development in Taunton, Wellington, Minehead and major rural centres with limited development in villages.

Get involved

6. This consultation document is the first stage in preparing the Local Plan. A successful Local Plan is informed by local knowledge and an appreciation of what is important to local people and businesses as well as more technical evidence.
7. Whilst change can be daunting, we are not allowed to plan for no new development as we are expected to meet the forecast need for homes and jobs and supporting infrastructure and facilities such as shops and services. The government expects us to have an up-to-date Plan and it will need to go through independent examination by a planning inspector to make sure it is based on robust evidence.
8. Not everyone will get the outcome they want, but making sure your ideas or concerns are understood at an early stage helps make a better Local Plan. This is the first of several chances to have your say and help plan for the District for the next 20 years.



Look out for the question boxes which provide a guide as to what we'd like to hear your views on.

Have Your Say

We are really keen to hear your views on this consultation document. Your views are important as they will help shape the next stage of the plan.

Comments can be made from xxxx to xxxx.

You can make comments in a number of different ways, the easiest way is likely to be online through our consultation portal [\[link\]](#). Here you can also register your interest to be kept informed of the progress on the project.

Alternatively if you would prefer to send us your written comments you can download a comment form from the website (or phone us for a paper copy) and return to:

strategy@somersetwestandtaunton.gov.uk

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A PORTRAIT OF OUR PLACES

9. The Local Plan area covers the new District area of Somerset West and Taunton but excludes the area covered by Exmoor National Park Authority which has its own separate Local Plan.
10. Whilst we are a new Council covering two former District areas, our new Plan area contains diverse places each with their own character and individual issues and challenges. It is important for the Local Plan to continue to recognise this distinctiveness so that we can determine how the Local Plan should respond to development and community needs.

Map to be inserted (District boundary; neighbouring authorities; main settlements; main roads and rail)

Overview of Somerset West and Taunton District

11. The eastern part of the Plan area contains the main settlements of Taunton and Wellington which have good access to the transport network. The western part of our area is characterised by a series of coastal communities but a poor road network. This has influenced how the settlements have developed over time with housing and employment growth occurring in the more accessible locations.
12. The quality of the landscape and setting of our area is of a particularly high standard including the Blackdown Hills and Quantocks Hills Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Somerset Levels and Moors to the east and Brendon Hills in the west. Whilst Exmoor National Park is a separate planning authority, the remainder of the district has a close relationship with the Park and its setting.
13. Our area demonstrates a rich tapestry of wildlife habitats and sites. The Severn Estuary and Somerset Levels and Moors are recognised as Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Ramsar sites whilst there are also five Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) at Exmoor and Quantock Oakwoods, Severn Estuary, Hestercombe House, Quants and Holme Moor, Clean Moor. There are 25 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) including those referred to above as well as over 480 local/County wildlife sites within the District.
14. Our towns and villages have evolved and developed over centuries, resulting in a rich and diverse local character. This is reflected today by the recognition of 53 Conservation Areas, nearly 3,000 Listed Buildings, over 2,200 recorded archaeological sites, 87 Scheduled Monuments, 9 Registered Historic Parks and Gardens, and 73 areas of High Archaeological Potential.
15. Along the coast there are areas vulnerable to sea flooding between Blue Anchor and Minehead. There is also a risk of fluvial flooding across the District particularly from the Rivers Tone, Exe, Parrett and tributaries and a risk of extensive flooding in the Somerset Levels and Moors.
16. The population structure in the district shows a higher proportion of over 65s (33.7%) compared to the UK (22.2%) and Somerset (31.9%). Notably, within Somerset West and Taunton there is a marked difference between the former District areas. 29.3% of former Taunton Deane population are over 65 whilst 50.8% of former West Somerset are over 65¹. Population projections indicate that (based on previous trends) all age groups apart from the 65+ group will decline over the period up to 2039².
17. The overall crime rate is below the national average whilst 91% of residents perceive their areas as safe during the day and 59% do so after dark. The District is not particularly deprived in overall terms although there are small and quite pronounced pockets of deprivation both in an urban and rural sense. There are parts of Taunton and Wellington which fall within the most deprived parts of the country when measured against the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, whilst many of the rural areas perform poorly against barriers to services and housing indices.
18. The ratio of house prices to earnings is one measure of how affordable it is to buy a property. 'Lower quartile' price provides an indication of the entry level house price in a local market, typically those purchased by first-time buyers. The ratio of lower quartile house price to lower quartile earnings in 2016 in Taunton Deane was 8.02 and in West Somerset was 10.10, compared to 7.16 nationally³. The higher the ratio, the less affordable it is for households to get onto the property ladder.

19. Unemployment is low in both the former Taunton Deane (3.8%) and West Somerset (3%) areas over the plan period. Estimate for 2016 indicate that unemployment in both districts is below the national (4.89%) and regional rates (3.9%)⁴.

Taunton

20. Taunton is the major administrative, economic, cultural and retail centre in the county, as well as being the focus for many other services including health, education and leisure. Taunton has a wide retail catchment, including much of Somerset and north and east Devon.
21. Taunton town centre is characterised by an extended shopping centre that stretches from the railway station to the north, High Street to the south and East Reach to the east. The centre contains a good mix of national retailers and local independent traders. The town centre is generally very busy with low vacancy rates and good pedestrian footfall, although some vacancy clusters are emerging due to the challenges that high streets are facing from changing retail behaviours, including online shopping. Leisure and arts facilities are limited, restricting the range of evening activity within the town centre.
22. Traffic in the town centre can be particularly heavy, especially during the morning and evening peak hours. This can lead to congestion and delays also impact on the reliability and efficiency of local bus services. Taunton has two Air Quality Management Areas and congestion could adversely affect these areas. The town is served by the national rail network, with a station located on the northern fringe of the town centre.
23. The town centre is rich in built and natural heritage. There are many historically important buildings within the town centre, as well as Conservation Areas and areas of archaeological importance. Open spaces are abundant, with several parks and open areas within or adjacent to the town centre. The River Tone and the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal are home to several nationally protected species of wildlife. Green Wedges make access to open countryside easy and

convenient from the town centre, through either French Weir Park or Vivary Park.

24. Taunton's economy is broadly typical of the sub-region, but over the past 15 years it has experienced weaker growth than other nearby towns despite the locational advantages provided by junctions on the motorway network (M5). The former Taunton Deane area has significant reliance on public sector jobs with 37%⁵ of workforce jobs in public sector health, residential care, social work, education and public administration. There has been a large reduction in office based local government jobs and increases in non-office based education and healthcare jobs.
25. The Employment, Retail and Leisure Study⁶ concluded that if past trends were to be projected forward this would deliver continued stagnation for the size of Taunton's office and industrial economy in jobs and floorspace terms. Industrial stock reduced significantly in 2006, and this does not appear to have been replaced.
26. Taunton was designated by the Government as a 'Garden Town' in early 2017. The town is undergoing significant change with key developments like Monkton Heathfield, Staplegrove new community, Comeytrove/Trull/South West Taunton new community. The Local Plan will help support the delivery of the Garden Town Vision and help enable the Delivery Plan. A Town Centre Design Guide, Supplementary Planning Documents and Masterplans will shape new development in the town and their content will inform and be informed by the ongoing development of the Local Plan. The green wedges between built-up areas are a key principle of the Garden Town Vision and potentially one for the Local Plan as a whole.

Main issues in Taunton:

- The limited development that has taken place on regeneration sites within the town centre, particularly Firepool, and to understand why

commercial and industrial development has not taken place as envisaged;

- Rising levels of traffic congestion and the need to increase the use of public transport;
- The need to enhance the river corridor for its biodiversity and leisure value;
- The need to redefine the purpose of the town centre and the lack of a multi-purpose venue to enhance Taunton's function as a destination in the sub-region;
- The need to ensure new development is of high quality design to respect local character and heritage as well as of sustainable design and construction;
- The need to enhance the public realm, accessibility and enjoyment of the retail environment and enhancement of the night-time economy.

What is already happening in Taunton:

- Successfully awarded Garden Town status in 2017 attracting significant Government funding to support infrastructure and 13,000 homes. A draft Vision⁷ has been published. Approval of the Delivery Plan anticipated by the end of 2019;
- Adoption of a Local Development Order that streamlines the planning process for the Nexus 25 strategic Employment site at Junction 25 of the M5 that could deliver more than 3,500 jobs;
- Delivery of over 900 homes so far at the Monkton Heathfield Garden Community;
- Land purchased between the New Garden Communities of Monkton Heathfield and Nerrols Farm for the creation of a Green Country Park;
- £14.2m of Government funding secured for a new link road as part of the Staplegrove planned new Garden Community.

Wellington

27. Wellington is the sixth largest town in Somerset and the market town serves a rural hinterland which extends into Devon. The town occupies an attractive setting at the foot of the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
28. The settlement benefits from a rich heritage with a historic centre laid out around burgage plots, it also grew significantly during Victorian times with the construction of the Great Western Canal and with a thriving woollen trade. There is a high proportion of listed buildings which avoided demolition in the post-war years. It also benefits from high quality green spaces within the urban area, and there is a green wedge separating the town from its associated settlement of Rockwell Green and Westford.
29. Wellington contains a number of important heritage assets which are featured on Historic England's Risk Register. In 2017 a project officer was employed to work specifically on the heritage assets at risk within the town. This includes the Tonedale Mill, Toneworks, Wellington Monument and the Conservation Area. The Council are working in close liaison with Historic England to safeguard these assets into the future.
30. The town centre is characterised by numerous specialist independent shops and has fostered an image as a 'food town'. However it lacks the presence of many national retailers.
31. The economy of the town is still heavily influenced by manufacturing with two major local employers: Swallowfield and Relyon operating. There are new business parks situated on the fringes of the town, with the Chelston Business Park located to the east of the town in close proximity to Junction 26 of the M5.

32. There is a preference from office and industrial occupiers in the rural area to locate around Wellington as this area benefits from ease of access to the M5 motorway allowing good connectivity to the wider south west region. Demand is on a small scale and tends to be from existing businesses with space taken by local business such as solicitors and accountants and small industrial units.
33. Despite being a substantially sized settlement and being on the main railway line between Exeter and Bristol, Wellington does not currently have a mainline rail station. The aspiration to re-open the station is at an advanced stage and would bring wider sustainability benefits.

Main issues in Wellington:

- A risk posed to heritage assets in the town through development pressures;
- The need to improve the self-containment of the town to reduce the need to travel to Taunton by car;
- New employment development not coming forward;
- Improvements needed for walking and cycling to Chelston and Foxmoor employment sites and beyond to Taunton.

What is already happening in Wellington:

- The re-opening of a railway station in Wellington is at an advanced stage;
- All planned urban extensions are completed or under construction;
- A Wellington Place Plan is being considered.

Coastal communities

34. The largest settlement along the coast is the Victorian seaside resort town of Minehead together with the smaller adjacent settlement of Alcombe. It is the main service centre in the local area, having a community hospital, a community college, middle school and a

substantial shopping centre. It is 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. It serves a wider area including much of Exmoor and parts of North Devon. The historic port of Watchet and nearby Williton provide some local services.

35. Road links along the A39 from Minehead to Bridgwater, and the A358 from Taunton to Williton are both relatively narrow A roads with points of restricted headroom and narrowing.
36. Many parts of the minor road network, besides being narrow and winding, are severely constrained by the local geography. Walking is restricted 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.
37. The area's economy has considerably less traditional office and industrial employment space compared to the neighbouring authorities. This reflects the area's relative remoteness compared to Taunton and South Somerset. The biggest job sectors in the area are tourist related accommodation, food and recreation, the public sector and Hinkley Point. There is also a strength in the coastal towns as a result of their historic role as tourist resorts.

Main issues in our Coastal Communities:

- A very high proportion of older people and low proportion of young people;
- Enhanced risk of flooding and coastal change from the sea due to the climate crisis;
- Importance of retaining attractiveness of coast to increase tourism, whilst encouraging development to improve service levels and employment opportunities;

- Poor road, public transport, digital and mobile infrastructure networks;
- Lack of affordable housing;
- High reliance on tourism, food and retail sectors.

What is already happening in our Coastal Communities:

- The Council will be developing a Coastal Communities Strategy to bring together initiatives for the area;
- The Minehead Coastal Community Team created an Economic Plan⁸ to inform the development of future projects for the town and will be taking forward a development which aims to significantly raise the quality of the visitor offer in the town;
- The Watchet Coastal Community Team published an Economic Plan⁹ aims to secure a stronger future for Watchet through a series of regeneration projects, small and large, short and long term.

Rural communities

38. The majority of our area is rural. Minor rural centres have a basic range of facilities including shop(s), public house(s), a community centre / village hall, school and doctors' surgery but there villages and hamlets with no such facilities. Services are relatively thinly spread amongst the rural communities although some settlements are almost of a size that could support additional services.
39. Our rural communities are best characterised by the geographical diversity of the areas in which they sit. This diversity has greatly influenced not only the landscape character and setting of villages and hamlets but also the building materials used within them. The quality of both the natural and built environment in many of our rural communities contributes greatly to the quality of life enjoyed by its residents.

- 40. Our rural areas have a high quality natural and built environment which leads to high house prices. Coupled with low wages, this means that many local people are priced out of the housing market and find it necessary to move out of their communities to cheaper urban areas when moving out of home or requiring a bigger home.
- 41. Whilst the rural economy has diversified to a degree, many jobs remain unskilled and poorly paid. The mobile and broadband network in our rural areas is poor. Rural households are less able to access information and online services and businesses are less able to keep up with competitors, widen their customer base and are less attractive to new employees.
- 42. These accessibility issues mean that many rural villages are amongst the most deprived areas nationally when considered against barriers to housing and services indicators. For example, the rural area around Milverton falls within the top 10% of the country for barriers to access to housing and service provision whilst many smaller rural communities have extremely limited or no public transport provision.

Main issues in our Rural Communities:

- Poor road, public transport, digital and mobile infrastructure networks;
- Lack of affordable housing;
- Fuel poverty especially in off-gas grid areas;
- The need to balance the need for more housing to support the viability of local facilities/public transport against its impact on the landscape and environment.

What is already happening in our Rural Communities:

- Four adopted Neighbourhood Plans: Bishops Lydeard and Cothelstone; Trull & Staplehay; West Monkton & Cheddon Fitzpaine;

Stogumber. Four in preparation: Creech St Michael; Oake; Ruishton and Thornfalcon; Wiveliscombe

- A Rural Communities Place Plan is being considered.

Q1 Have we reflected the key **characteristics and issues of our places** in the District?

THE SCOPE OF THE NEW LOCAL PLAN

43. The Local Plan will need to consider changes in national policy since the current Local Plan documents were produced and other changes such as population growth, health, economic, climate, environmental, behavioural and technological changes.
44. The Local Plan will cover many land uses such as the need for and location of new homes, businesses, shops and leisure; the need for supporting community services, transport and infrastructure; how such developments should be designed to conserve and enhance our heritage, respect local character and deliver gains in biodiversity; and how we can adapt to and mitigate the climate crisis and flood risk through the location and design of development and through providing opportunities for infrastructure and behavioural change. These issues are set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).
45. The Local Plan will contain a vision for our District with objectives setting out our priorities which will link to the Corporate Plan objectives of the Council. It will proactively plan for new development where this is needed and contain new policies that planning proposals will be assessed against. Once adopted, the policies of the new Local Plan will replace those of the current Taunton Deane Core Strategy, SAADMP, old Local Plan saved policies and TTCAAP and the West Somerset Local Plan.

NATIONAL ISSUES

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

44. The NPPF sets out the government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied. Local Plans which are expected to be in line with the NPPF. There have been recent updates to the NPPF¹⁰ and our new Local Plan will be expected to address these:
 - A new method for calculating housing need;
 - A strict housing delivery test making evidence of deliverability of sites very important;
 - The need to use land more effectively and review allocations that are no longer deliverable, particularly employment land;
 - A requirement for 10% of housing to be on small sites (<1 hectare) to improve delivery rates;
 - Removal of the ability to seek affordable housing and other contributions from sites of 10 or fewer, except in designated rural areas;
 - The need for stronger policies to achieve high quality design;
 - The need to facilitate enough self-build housing plots to meet demand;
 - An emphasised protection for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty;
 - To ensure all new development delivers a net gain in biodiversity;
 - Emphasis on identifying improvements and mitigation to air quality issues.

Other national issues

45. There is also an increased awareness and evidence that has strengthened the public and political awareness on key topics which cut across many of Local Plan issues including:

- The urgent and critical need to address our climate crisis and mitigate global heating^{11 12};
- The impact of our behaviour and lifestyles on biodiversity including the need to reduce plastic waste¹³;
- The inaccessibility of 'millennials' to home ownership¹⁴;
- The importance of people's mental health¹⁵;
- The need to keep working at improving equality, opportunity and accessibility for disadvantaged groups¹⁶;
- The impact of poor air quality on our health, especially children¹⁷.

- 1.5 million jobs at risk of automation²²;
- The need to decarbonise the national electricity and gas grids and increase their capacity and resilience through development of smart energy infrastructure²³;
- The need for residents, businesses, energy and transport infrastructure to access high quality, speed, capacity and resilient digital connectivity²⁴.

Q2 Have we captured all the key **national issues** that are relevant to our Local Plan?

Q3 How do you think the new Local Plan should respond to these issues?

Behavioural and technological changes

46. There will continue to be changes in our behaviour and technology that will impact on how we live our lives and interact with our places. The Local Plan needs to recognise these changes and consider in what ways it could:

- The impact of online shopping and other factors on the health and vitality of our town centres¹⁸;
- The decrease in car ownership and driving licences especially in young people¹⁹;
- The increase in electric car ownership with all new cars and vans effectively zero emission by 2040 and the fast-paced development of connected autonomous vehicles (CAV)²⁰;
- Improved mobility through real-time bus monitoring, ticketing apps, contactless payments, wifi on public transport and an increase in dockless bikes, on-demand and ride sharing services²¹.

Local issues

47. Considering the characteristics of our areas and the national issues discussed, we have set out what we believe are the key issues for our Local Plan. It is important to note that we have not made any decisions on how we deal with these issues but have presented ideas to stimulate discussion and comment. The next stage of the Local Plan will contain options for how we address these issues and your comments will help develop the options
48. We have a lot of background evidence relating to our existing Plans that remain relevant but we will need to update and gather further evidence to inform the new Local Plan. This list is not exhaustive but new evidence is likely to relate to:
 - An assessment of housing need including an option for higher economic growth scenario;
 - Sustainability Appraisal;
 - Habitats Regulation Assessment;
 - Gypsy and Traveller Needs Assessment update;
 - Strategic Flood Risk Assessment;
 - Whole Plan viability assessment (to also inform the Community Infrastructure Levy Charging Schedule review);
 - Infrastructure Delivery Plan;
 - Issue-specific evidence.

Protecting and Enhancing our Environment

49. Over the past 3 years, more housing was built on greenfield land compared to brownfield land across our District²⁵ as we needed greenfield land to meet our housing targets in sustainable locations. Development on greenfield land has enabled the delivery of some

key sites, such as the Monkton Heathfield Garden Community, which provides a significant proportion of housing to meet our targets on the edge of Taunton. If the new Local Plan maximised development on brownfield sites, which could mean higher housing densities, this may **reduce the need for any new allocations on greenfield sites**, although the impact of higher densities on heritage assets and local character will need to be carefully considered.

50. Our existing Local Plan documents promote the mitigation of the climate crisis as a key issue. Whilst our level of carbon dioxide emissions have been reducing slightly overall and on a per capita basis, much of this has been as a result of national decarbonisation of the electricity grid in particular. Efforts to deliver renewable and low carbon technologies and improve rates of walking, cycling and public transport use must be improved. Our Local Plan could be stronger to give us the ability to **require low carbon developments**. We could push the boundaries to demonstrate how serious we are about tackling the climate crisis with **challenging targets for decarbonisation** within new development and ensure we have the infrastructure to support clean modes of transport.
51. The consequences of the climate crisis and global heating include increasing the threat of overheating and water stress, more flooding and stronger, more damaging wind speeds. We are updating our Strategic Flood Risk Assessment to ensure we avoid siting new development in areas of greatest flood risk. High quality design could **maximise opportunities for Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SuDS)** to store surface water using permeable surfaces, grey water recycling and flood storage measures such as balancing ponds. We could ensure that **new developments are built to be resilient to climate change** that is already in motion, particularly the risks of overheating, and work on enabling our existing communities and buildings to be adapted.

52. Rising sea levels and increased storm violence as a result of the climate crisis gives rise to a greater flood risk from the sea posing an increasing threat to new and existing development close to the parts of the coast which are low-lying and/or which are unstable and vulnerable to rapid erosion. We can continue to **focus development away from the areas at most risk of flooding**.
53. The natural beauty of the coast is an essential factor in driving our tourism industry. It is therefore important to ensure that it retains its attractiveness. Some development may be required to enhance the tourism offer so careful planning, siting and mitigation measures could **ensure coastal development can take place without causing unacceptable damage to the coastal environment**.
54. The Quantock Hills and Blackdown Hills Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty have recently adopted Management Plans²⁶ and AONBs are afforded significant protection by the NPPF. However, the Somerset Levels and Moors, which is internationally significant for wildlife, has a dramatic and unique landscape characterised by flat, wet meadows bordered by rhynes and ditches with low hills shaped by human history, farming and natural processes. The **landscape and heritage value of the Somerset Levels and Moors could be better recognised** through the Council's planning policy to reflect its significance.
55. The NPPF expects **net gains in biodiversity from new development** and so our new Local Plan will need to be as strong in this regard. Net gains could be closely linked to the Somerset Pollinator Action Plan, Guidance on Development for Hestercombe House SAC and the Exmoor and Quantocks Oak Woodlands SAC; Somerset Habitat Action Plans²⁷. Somerset County Council and Natural England are working on Great Crested Newts mapping and zoning for use in Plan making and decision taking so we can identify opportunities to improve and widen their habitats. This approach could be extended

to other protected species too. Trees provide habitats and wildlife corridors as well as shade, particularly in our towns, so opportunities could be explored to ensure further **tree planting**, of appropriate species, in new development.

56. Our natural environment should be accessible for everyone to enjoy to provide benefits to our mental health and wellbeing. Improving **access to the natural environment** could be achieved through the site development and the focus of Community Infrastructure Levy, grants and S106 funds to improve footpaths and cycleways and address physical barriers, such as improving access to the River Tone frontage for people with disabilities and access across the M5 and beyond.

Q4 What are your views on how we could address **environmental** issues?

Boosting our Prosperity

Employment and retail

57. For many years we have had high aspirations for attracting new businesses to the area but this has not been as successful as we hoped. The new Local Plan, along with the emerging Prosperity Strategy could try to understand and address this issue. The Local Plan needs to provide the right conditions to attract new businesses to move into our District which may include **ensuring that employment sites are affordable** to potential businesses and being proactive to **encourage refurbishments** as a cost-effective solution in bringing more modern space into the market. We could ensure high quality infrastructure and digital connectivity and to carve out a niche for the **green knowledge industry and research and innovation sectors** to base themselves here.
58. District-wide, we could be bolder in terms of our aspirations to demonstrate that we are a place that wants to **drive up productivity** and is highly supportive of new and existing businesses, particularly the knowledge and industrial sector to compete with neighbouring towns and Districts. We are developing a Prosperity Strategy which will help to deliver the Heart of the South West Local Enterprise Zone (HotSW LEP)'s Productivity Strategy²⁸ that seeks to double the size of our economy over 20 years.
59. The Employment, Retail and Leisure Study²⁹ concluded that we have too much land allocated for employment compared to demand. The NPPF expects us to assess our employment sites and allocation for deliverability so that we focus employment on those that are deliverable and **release poor employment sites for housing** whilst retaining or allocating new ones. This might result in fewer employment sites but those that remain would be of the highest quality, or have potential for modernisation and be most attractive to employers. Often though the most attractive sites to employers are those with good car parking and road access so we will need to **ensure that employment sites have good access to public transport** otherwise this could increase car-borne traffic.
60. **Maintaining a range of site sizes and locations** will provide opportunities for local businesses to grow and stay in the area. Providing **small start-up units** as new build or subdivision of larger buildings will encourage enterprise and entrepreneurship (micro business and small and medium enterprises - SMEs) particularly in the rural and coastal areas.
61. We have a higher proportion of older people here compared to the national average. Fewer young people also means businesses find it more of a challenge to attract the talent and workforce that they demand and may choose not to locate here. A lack of labour over the forecast period is likely to act as a constraint to growth³⁰. The Local Plan could look at ways to **encourage young people to stay or move here**. Improving the local education and skills pathway and career prospects within the knowledge economy, as well as building on the leisure and cultural offers of the area may encourage our highly skilled young people to stay here rather than seeking advancement in their careers elsewhere in the region or country.
62. With the proportion of those aged 17-20 holding a driving licence having fallen by almost 40 per cent in recent years³¹ the need for **excellent public transport links** to access jobs and leisure activities is more critical than ever. Locating **smaller and more affordable housing in our town centres**, improving the food, leisure and entertainment offer in our towns and attractive walking and cycling networks provide more incentive to attract and keep younger people in our area.

63. The existing Hinkley Point nuclear power station lies within the north-eastern part of the District. Hinkley Point B remains an operational power station and the development of Hinkley C is underway. It involves the influx of a substantial additional workforce (with an estimated peak of c.5600 workers). Working jointly with our neighbouring districts, the Local Plan will need to consider **how new workers at Hinkley Point C will be housed and ensure that we provide opportunities to maximise the use of sustainable transport.**
64. With increased online shopping and people choosing to travel to out of town stores, our high streets may need to be less dependent on traditional retail shops in order to thrive. Our policies could be more flexible to **allow vacant retail units to be used in a more diverse way** by creative trades, pop-ups, libraries, exhibitions, markets, cultural events. If our High Streets regularly offer something new they could attract more regular visits. This would need to be progressed in conjunction with town centre management. Encouraging **empty storage areas above vacant shops to be converted to flats or start up offices** and **resisting out of town retail stores and expansion** would add to the vibrancy of our towns and increase local spend.

Q5 What are your views on how we could address **employment and retail** issues?

Housing

65. The NPPF expects us to follow the Government's 'Standard Method' to calculate our Local Housing Need figure which is a minimum (incorporating the average annual housing growth and an affordability ratio). For the former Taunton Deane area this is currently 614 dwellings per year and for former West Somerset this is currently 88 dwellings per year. Over the past 5 years, on average, these figures have been exceeded in both areas.
66. Through the Local Plan process we need to consider **whether we use the Standard Method figure as our housing target or propose a higher requirement figure** in our Local Plan. Past high housing delivery rates, economic growth aspirations and/or a request to accommodate unmet housing need from other nearby Local Planning Authorities are potentially reasons why we might consider a higher housing target. A higher housing requirement may require some further site allocations combined perhaps with an increase in densities particularly in Taunton Town Centre. Using the minimum housing target may potentially not require further allocations beyond reviewing the appropriateness of existing uses. Whether we need additional allocations will be better understood as we progress through the Local Plan process.
67. The NPPF sets out a range of tenures deemed 'affordable housing'. However, a combination of high local house prices and low incomes mean some tenures are not actually affordable in our area or do not meet the needs of many households. We could have a clear **policy requirement only for affordable tenures** that we can evidence need for in order to maximise opportunities for people, especially young people, to access affordable housing.
68. The Authority Monitoring Report's³² for the former Taunton Deane and West Somerset areas show that affordable housing completions

have been falling short of targets. In the former Taunton Deane area over the past five years, the average proportion of affordable housing delivered was 21.3% compared to a 25% target. The former West Somerset area achieved 24.4% compared to a 35% target. If affordable housing is to be a priority, we could ensure we have **stringent site requirements across the District rather than overall targets**. Developers can only argue non-viability in exceptional circumstances as we would make sure we had a robust whole plan viability assessment to reduce incidences of developers arguing down their affordable housing provision on viability grounds.

69. We could consider **increasing the affordable housing requirement on individual sites** now that we may lose some affordable housing due to our inability to take contributions from sites of 10 dwellings or fewer (NPPF) in areas which are not Designated Rural Areas (which are generally speaking our more urban areas).
70. The amount of affordable housing to be sought via Local Plan policies relates closely to the viability of development as well as the amount of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) we ask for from developers. Neither requirement can be too high that it makes developments unviable so if one is raised, the other is likely to need to reduce. **We need to strike the right balance between affordable housing provision and infrastructure funding**.
71. We may also consider whether financial contributions from some sites would help **deliver affordable housing on Council owned land**. We will use the most up to date evidence on the need for affordable housing and viability to inform how much and of what tenures the Local Plan could deliver.
72. Affordable housing must currently meet the needs of those with a local connection to the area who cannot afford to access the open housing market. We may need to **review the how the local**

connection policy should be applied given the physical extent of the District is larger.

73. We are expected to have **regard to the demand for self-build and custom housebuilding plots** for people who want to build their own homes and we maintain a register of those who are interested. We are delivering enough sites to comply with the requirement although we are not actively going above and beyond this requirement. With the right materials and builder a self-build house could be cheaper than a standard house but self-build housing does not need to be affordable housing (as defined in the NPPF) and is exempt from providing a Community Infrastructure Levy.
74. The NPPF requires 10% of housing to be on small sites (<1 hectare) to improve delivery rates. Our delivery rates are high so potentially we might be able to make a case for being exempt on this basis. Nevertheless, **proactively identifying small sites** can help support local building firms and may deliver a wider range of housing products and sites that better respect local character. We can continue to positively promote windfall sites, rural exception sites and for Neighbourhood Plans to proactively identify small sites. The former West Somerset area has a number of small sites identified but not allocated so we could consider allocating these to provide more certainty. We could also consider whether any larger sites could be appropriately subdivided to create smaller sites.
75. In terms of delivering housing in rural areas, we will **look at our approach to settlement boundaries**. Different approaches are used in the former council areas. The West Somerset area does not have settlement boundaries and determines the suitability of housing proposals on a site by site basis³³ based upon the proximity of the contiguous built-up area with a number of further criteria that need to be met (relationship to facilities and pedestrian access; respecting character; traffic generation; and effect on the amenity of the area).

The Taunton Deane area has defined settlement boundaries³⁴ where new housing should be focussed. Sensitive additional development could help support the introduction of local services and facilities in rural communities.

76. We will look at evidence of need for student accommodation and consider whether there is any need to identify suitable sites for student accommodation.

Q6 What are your views on how we could address **housing** issues?

Infrastructure

77. Our towns and some larger villages typically have access to superfast broadband, however, connection outside of these areas is extremely limited. Connecting Devon and Somerset (CDS) has been set up to deliver superfast broadband infrastructure to areas where the market has failed to invest. In addition to this, the Government's policy has shifted in recent years towards supporting rollout of full-fibre (or Fibre to the Premises) connectivity which provides far greater levels of reliability, resilience and speed of internet connections compared to traditional copper wire connections. Enabling such connectivity in Somerset West and Taunton will be essential to attracting high quality employment to the area and driving up productivity. To complement CDS, the Local Plan could support full-fibre in all new homes and businesses by **ensuring developments are required to provide sufficient ducting space for multi-operator full-fibre connectivity**.
78. The Government wants the UK to be a world leader in 5G mobile technology but this is frustrating for our rural areas, some of which have no mobile signal at all, or are only served by a single operator. The Local Plan can continue to support fixed mobile network infrastructure. However, our Local Plan is looking to 2040 and the Government wants the majority of the population covered by a 5G signal by 2025. Our Local Plan could therefore **support the effective use of rooftops and street furniture to accommodate mobile digital infrastructure**, including small cells for 5G so that we are ready for the new technology. This will create significant advantages for local business. In the early stages this is most likely to be cost effective in our towns but we can work with CDS so that the benefits are felt more widely across the District. 5G rollout will rely on full-fibre connectivity and may potentially enable us to develop smarter transport and energy solutions in particular.

79. Infrastructure that makes a new development proposal acceptable in planning terms will continue to be sought using s106 legal agreements. These can include things like junction improvements, public transport contributions and new play space. Infrastructure which is required to serve a wider need is funded, in part, through the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and can include strategic transport improvements, school places, community facilities, flood mitigation etc). CIL is currently in place in the former Taunton Deane area but not West Somerset. We will start to **review the geographical scope of CIL, the amount of the levy and the items which CIL can be spent on** (the Regulation 123 list) to align with the latter stages of the Local Plan production because the issues are closely linked.

80. If we want to mitigate the climate crisis we could provide more **opportunities for people to reduce their need to travel, as well as walk, cycle and use public transport as an alternative to the private car**. Public transport must be convenient in terms of destinations, routes and timetables and frequent enough to meet as many people's needs as possible. It must have benefits over using the car in terms of cost and/or journey time otherwise people won't use it. New or improved routes usually take many years to become self-financing, if at all, so routes need to be 'pump-primed' by s106 funding from developers.

81. There is no up-to-date County-wide Transport Strategy at present so the Local Plan could **take the lead in developing strong policies for public transport provision** to require financial contributions towards bus services; support bus priority measures including smart bus infrastructure; consider the proximity of new development to bus routes; and consider high density development at public transport nodes. We could also consider how to improve strategic bus links through working with the County Council and our neighbouring

authorities, for example to support a bus service from Williton to Bridgwater.

Q7 What are your views on how we could address **infrastructure** issues?

A Better Quality of Life

82. The ability for people to come together through leisure, sport, family and cultural activities builds strong and healthy communities and can reduce the sense of isolation in rural areas. The Local Plan could seek to **strengthen the self-containment of our settlements** through the boundaries allocation of sites to include multi-purpose community uses and to resist their loss.
83. Our population is aging and the Local Plan could also respond in a way to **help older people enjoy a better quality of life** particularly better rural public transport and the self-containment of settlements. Further measures could be more strongly required through the Local Plan. This could include high expectations for the design of new housing regarding adaptability and wheelchair standards; design the public realm to be safe, accessible and include seating and public toilets; bus stops with seating and handrails; locating housing close to community facilities; develop housing of a size and type to encourage downsizing to housing that is cheaper to heat and maintain.
84. We want to create balanced communities. Primarily this means retaining our younger people and encouraging other younger people to move to our area. To this end we could **create places attractive for younger people**. Leisure, entertainment and cultural offers are key to this as well as suitably affordable, sized and located housing/apartments. The Local Plan could look to boost economic prospects through encouraging improvements in access to education and skills development and aspiring towards inward investment from high quality employers; ensure its housing mix and tenures are affordable to young households; and that new houses are served by the best digital connectivity they can be.
85. We also want to encourage **young people to stay in the area if they start a family**. The Local Plan could ensure homes have sufficient internal space for quiet homework areas and sufficient play space and natural light; play facilities located in the centre of neighbourhoods with good natural surveillance; multi-purpose venues suitable for toddler and parent groups; a public realm that encourages use by all ages rather than being purely 'adult' spaces; improve access to recreation, leisure, open space especially by public transport; providing safe walking and cycling routes. Providing support for childcare facilities, schools and healthcare in locations accessible to employment helps households, and particularly women, be able to get back into work whilst managing childcare logistics.
86. Through good design the Local Plan could also try to **reduce inequalities in the built environment experienced by people with physical disabilities and mental health issues**. It could ensure the public realm is designed so that the physical environment is accessible and free from obstructions (particularly important considering the likely push for on-street electric charging points); parks and playgrounds are accessible by level walkways; public spaces are overlooked, with direct and clear routes, well designed transport interchanges, and good lighting to help people with physical disabilities and mental health issues feel more confident at navigating the urban environment. Such design would also help provide an environment where women feel safer, particularly at night. To create a sense of place and local identity, policies could be developed to **avoid the over-engineering of streets** in new developments so that we don't see out-of-a-catalogue streets.
87. The Local Plan could **continue to regenerate Taunton town centre** and build on what has been achieved through the Area Action Plan. The Local Plan should reflect on why some sites in the Plan have not come forward and adapt its policies to improve the prospects of

development taking place. We could **review the uses on the site allocations** to determine if alternative uses or mix of uses are more appropriate and more deliverable to avoid sites sitting empty for many years. This could mean introducing **more housing on town centre sites and perhaps student accommodation if there is an identified need** given that we have an over-supply of employment land. There are a number of development sites in the town centre which place great emphasis on the need to deliver high quality urban design to respect local character, the heritage, biodiversity and open spaces in the town. We are going to produce a Design Guide during 2019 for the town centre and wider District to provide direction for developers.

88. Our environment goes a long way to determining the quality of our health and wellbeing. Local Plans are encouraged by the NPPF to do more in terms of **supporting healthy lifestyles**. In reality, this approach isn't new as for decades Local Plans have sought to encourage walking and cycling, provide sport and recreational facilities, play parks and open spaces, enable accessible primary healthcare among other measures that are inherent in good Plan-making. However, we could try to bring health and well-being to the forefront of our Local Plan policies. We could also **identify areas of the district where there are inequalities in health and actively try to deliver improvements in those areas**. The Council will be producing a Health and Wellbeing Action Plan and the Local Plan will be developed alongside this.

Q8 What are your views on how we could create a **better quality of life** for local people?

What Happens Next?

89. This Issues document is part of Stage 1. All the comments received before the consultation closes will be analysed and a summary report produced and published on our website. The responses will be carefully considered and used to help prepare the Options stage of the Local Plan (also part of Stage 1).

Stage 1	Evidence gathering (Reg 18)	This includes a number of sub-stages including the consultation on this issues document, consultation on options, sustainability appraisal of options and evidence base studies produced
Stage 2	Draft Plan (Reg 19)	Consultation on draft policies, potential development locations and supporting information, based on the previous stage and evidence gathering
Stage 3	Publication version of the Plan	Consultation on the revised plan, changed in light of the previous stage and further evidence gathering. Plan and comments go to the Planning Inspector
Stage 4	Planning Inspector's hearings	An independent Planning Inspector examines the plan, evidence and comments made. The Inspector holds hearing sessions to discuss the 'soundness' of the plan
Stage 5	Plan is adopted	The plan is adopted and is used to inform local planning policy and decisions on planning applications

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