

North Somerset Council

REPORT TO THE STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND REGENERATION POLICY AND SCRUTINY PANEL

DATE OF MEETING: 10 MARCH 2021

SUBJECT OF REPORT: NORTH SOMERSET LOCAL PLAN

TOWN OR PARISH: ALL

OFFICER/MEMBER PRESENTING: MICHAEL REEP, PLANNING POLICY MANAGER

KEY: NO

REASON:

RECOMMENDATIONS

To consider the issues arising from and feedback received on the Challenges and Choices stages of the North Somerset Local Plan and make recommendations to Executive Committee in respect of the approach to be taken to the selection of the preferred spatial strategy and key issues identified in the report.

1. SUMMARY OF REPORT

1.1 The Council consulted on the initial stages of the Local Plan in 2020. Consultation on Challenges took place 22 July to 2 September and Choices 2 November to 14 December 2020.

1.2 The next stage of the plan making process is to consider the preferred spatial strategy which provide the framework for the assessment of the broad locations to meet the growth requirements (housing and employment). This will reflect the local plan's vision and strategic priorities, informed by the evidence and the response to consultation.

1.3 This report sets out some of the main issues identified which will need to be considered by Executive Committee in April, and Panel members are asked for their views.

2. POLICY

2.1 The Local Plan will provide the land use framework for the delivery of the key outcomes of the Corporate Plan and the Council's Economic Plan.

3. DETAILS

3.1 The Local Plan will provide a positive vision for the future of North Somerset, a framework for addressing housing needs and other priorities and a mechanism through which local communities can help shape their surroundings. The heart of the planning system is the delivery of sustainable development which comprises interdependent economic, social and environmental objectives. The local plan provides the local expression of what sustainable development means for North Somerset. It must be positively prepared (to address objectively assessed needs), justified (an appropriate strategy based on reasonable evidence), effective (deliverable over the plan period) and consistent with national policy. It is subject to several stages of consultation and tested through independent examination.

3.2 Government guidance states that 'plans should take a proactive approach to mitigating and adapting to climate change, taking into account the long-term implications for flood risk, coastal change, water supply, biodiversity and landscapes, and the risk of overheating from rising temperatures' (NPPF paragraph 149). The Council has declared a climate emergency and a nature emergency. The local plan needs to respond to this and demonstrate how this has helped to shape our objectives and proposals.

3.3 Consultation on the critical issues facing North Somerset over the plan period (2023-2038) took place in Summer 2020 through the Challenges for the future document and including the proposed vision and strategic priorities. This was followed in Autumn 2020 by the Choices for the future document which confirmed our priorities and set out four broad spatial development alternatives for discussion. Links to the Choices and Challenges consultation documents and the consultation statements which set out the details of the response received are set out in the Background Papers at the end of the report.

3.4 The Local Plan vision was consulted upon in Challenges and was broadly supported.

By 2038 there will be a transformation in the way we live which reflects a more responsible attitude to climate change and the use of resources. New homes, buildings and communities will be highly sustainable, accessible and attractive places with higher quality standards. There will be more diversity in terms of the form and type of new development to increase variety and choice to better meet the needs of all, create jobs and to tackle inequality. Regeneration will transform and breathe new life into existing towns and valued areas will be protected. People's well-being, a strong sense of community, opportunity and fairness will be at the heart of all development in North Somerset.

3.5 In Choices we fed back on the response received to Challenges and set out how the local plan would address the identified key issues:

- Importance of climate change: *We will ensure that the local plan reflects climate change principles.*
- Locate new houses near jobs and services: *Prioritising growth at sustainable places.*
- Don't build in the flood plain: *Avoid areas at highest risk of flooding.*
- Prioritise brownfield land: *Supports regeneration and likely to be close to facilities.*
- Encourage active travel: *Make walking and cycling the preferred and most attractive option.*

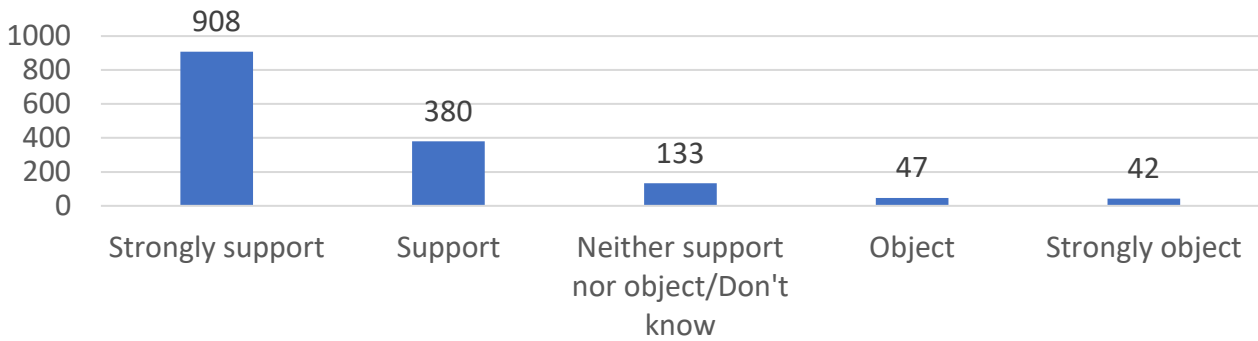
- More genuine affordable housing: *Encourage a variety of tenures and types.*
- Better design: *Excellent design becomes the norm.*
- Green Belt: *Depending on the agreed approach, parts may need to be reassessed.*

3.6 Government guidance requires the local plan to identify the priorities for the development and use of land. We consulted on draft priorities in Challenges and these were amended in Choices. These are important in that they will directly influence the development of the spatial strategy which will identify the broad distribution of growth. The Local Plan priorities are as follows:

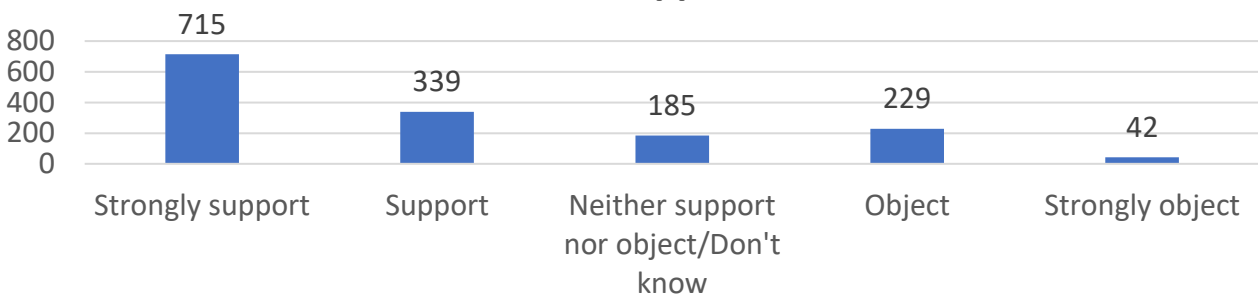
- To promote sustainable development and address the climate emergency.
- To deliver the zero carbon ambition by maximising the opportunities for low carbon development and the use of renewable energy.
- To develop new and existing communities in a way which enhances health and wellbeing, reduces inequalities and is child and family friendly.
- To increase the number and range of job opportunities across the district, particularly at the towns to give people the opportunity to work near to where they live.
- To prioritise the location of new development close to places with a wide range of services, facilities and job opportunities.
- To address the decline in the town centres of Weston-super-Mare, Clevedon, Nailsea and Portishead through supporting regeneration and place-making initiatives which revitalise these places as the focus for retailing, community uses, housing and jobs.
- To reduce car use, encourage walking and cycling, and high quality and effective public transport.
- To deliver a diverse range of housing in a variety of tenures, sizes and forms, particularly genuine affordable housing, to meet future needs of North Somerset residents at locations where they are most needed.
- To deliver essential new strategic transport infrastructure to support new development and enable more sustainable travel options.
- To deliver residential densities through good design, particularly at town centres, transport hubs and on brownfield sites.
- To provide essential infrastructure in step with development, both transport infrastructure and community infrastructure such as schools, healthcare facilities and community centres.
- To prioritise the importance and delivery of green spaces when considering new development, support priority habitats and species and safeguard areas at risk of flooding.

3.7 The Choices consultation focused on alternative approaches to the broad distribution of growth (housing and employment). This included a structured questionnaire which helped to highlight whether respondents (individuals and organisations) supported or objected and their reasons. There was clear support for an approach which maximises the use of brownfield land in the towns (60% strongly support, 25% support) and that new housing should avoid locations which are at risk from flooding (47% strongly support, 22% support).

Question 1: Do you support an approach which maximises the use of brownfield land in the towns?



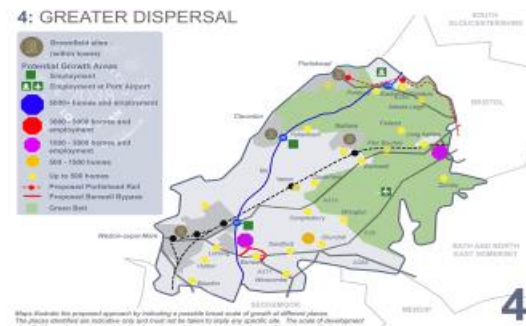
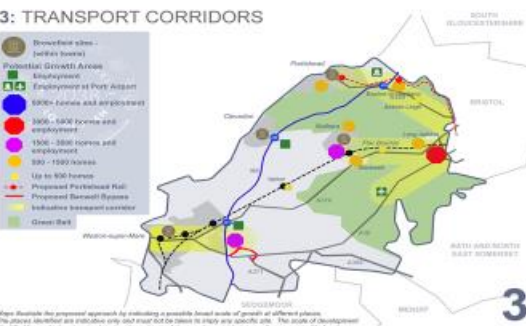
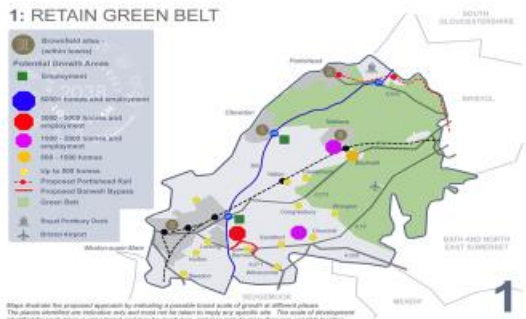
Question 2: New housing development should avoid locations which are at risk from flooding. Do you support this approach?



3.8 Choices consultation presented four alternative approaches for identifying how the new growth could be accommodated. While these illustrated the principal alternatives, the consultation document emphasised that there will be other options and that the preferred strategy may be a hybrid combining elements from different alternatives. Each of the approaches sought to accommodate the growth required (housing and employment) but through the identification of broad locations, not specific sites. The approaches avoided the use of areas at risk of flooding for residential in accordance with the identified strategic priorities.

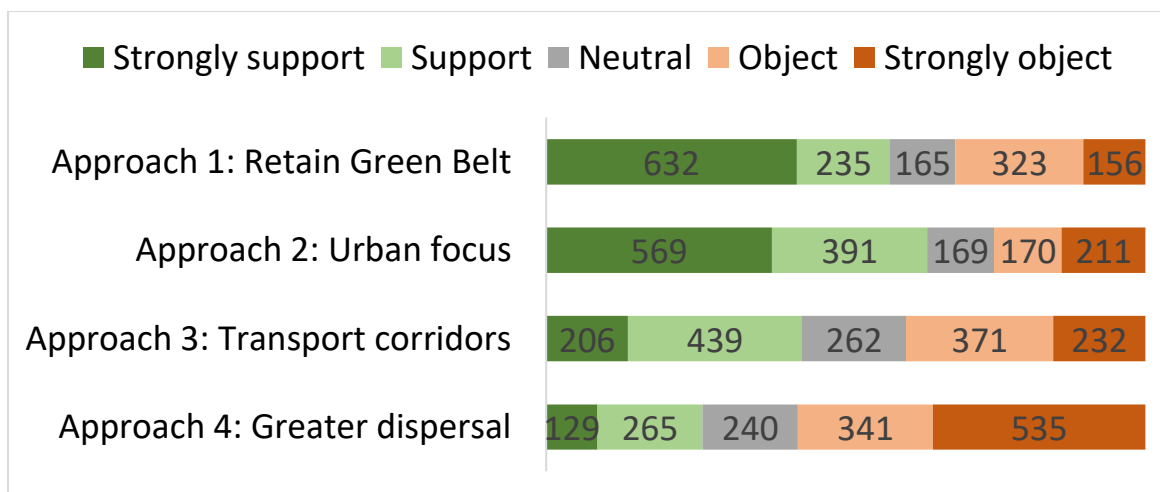
1. Retain Green Belt: This avoided the use of Green Belt.
2. Urban Focus: This maximised the amount of growth close to the four towns as well as locations well related to the Bristol urban area. It results in a relatively small number of large strategic sites.
3. Transport Corridors: This focused growth on existing or potentially enhanced public transport corridors into Bristol and Weston.
4. Greater Dispersal: This identified a large number of smaller development locations.

These were illustrated by the following diagrams:



3.9 The Sustainability Appraisal of the four approaches (see background documents) concluded that Urban Focus performs best against the sustainability objectives and Greater Dispersal the worst. An approach which, all other things being equal, seeks to locate development closer to a wide range of services, facilities and jobs and public transport opportunities tends to score better in relation to a range of sustainability objectives.

3.10 The response to consultation of the four approaches is summarised in the following diagram. It is important to emphasise that this exercise was not a referendum; the purpose was to help us understand the advantages and disadvantages, how well they reflected our vision and priorities and therefore how they might inform the preferred spatial strategy. Overall, taking 'strongly support' and 'support' together, Urban Focus was just ahead, although Retain Green Belt was very close behind and scored better in terms of 'strongly support'. Transport Corridors was roughly 50/50 in terms of overall support/objection. Greater Dispersal was clearly the least well supported.



3.11 There is a clear alignment between our Local Plan vision and priorities, the climate and ecological emergency objectives, the technical studies, the overall response to engagement and government guidance on delivering sustainable development. This can be summarised in terms the following key principles:

- Maximise brownfield and redevelopment opportunities at the towns.
- Prioritise locations close to the greatest range of services, facilities and job opportunities and public transport opportunities.
- Avoid sensitive areas, including land at risk of flooding.

3.12 The next stage is to identify the preferred spatial strategy. This is likely to be a hybrid of the four approaches presented as part of the Choices consultation but based on the principles set out above. A clear spatial strategy is important as it will provide the framework for the scale and distribution of the growth required. This will enable the broad locations to be identified which are best placed to deliver the growth in accordance with the strategy, and provide the context for the preparation of the Consultation Draft Local Plan containing the detailed policies and allocations for consultation at the end of 2021.

3.13 At this point in the plan making process the assessment of the evidence and the response to consultation has highlighted a number of key issues which will need to be taken into account as part of the development of the preferred spatial strategy. These are summarised below.

Housing challenge and delivery

One of the key challenges we will face is over the potential delivery of the overall housing requirement within the plan period and how much can be delivered at large strategic sites.

Issues to consider:

- Large sites can have lengthy lead in times and may require complex and expensive infrastructure which needs to be delivered in step with development.
- The amount of growth on large sites which can be delivered is likely to be challenged and there will be pressure to identify a greater variety of types and sizes of site (a more dispersed approach) to provide short term supply and avoid market absorption issues.
- The government's housing requirement at 1,365 dwellings pa is significantly higher than the current Core Strategy requirement of 1,049 dwellings pa and significantly in excess of the current completion rate which averages 808 dwellings pa. This is likely to increase calls to release a much wider variety of locations, regardless of how well they fit with the spatial strategy and our priorities.

Minimising travel by car

Issues to consider:

- With a move to electric vehicles and more working from home, should we allow more development in villages?
- While electric vehicles are preferable to conventional vehicles in terms of their carbon contribution, they use scarce resources in their construction, and still cause congestion, accidents and produce particulates.
- It is important to prioritise walking and cycling on all new developments for physical and mental health reasons (such as planning for 10/15 minute neighbourhoods).

- The majority of workers cannot work from home. While village locations are likely to provide access to local facilities, it is important to locate growth where as many trips as possible can be made by alternative modes, including access to effective public transport.

Employment provision

Issues to consider:

- How should we plan for jobs post-pandemic – more opportunities to work from home with less commuting, different ways of working?
- We need to ensure jobs are provided at accessible locations for workers, suppliers and customers.

Creating sustainable communities and delivering high quality design.

Issues to consider:

- What are people's aspirations post-pandemic? How do we deliver greener, more sustainable lifestyles?
- It is important to ensure that all new development of whatever scale or wherever it is located meets our objectives for high quality design. This is an aspiration which can be applied to strategic locations at the towns as well as in rural locations.

How much growth is appropriate in the rural areas?

Issues to consider:

- There will be the need for some development at villages but this must be proportionate. Growth should perhaps be restricted to addressing local needs or other specific opportunities?
- More dispersed development is less sustainable and infrastructure provision is less effective.
- The rural areas must not be seen as the contingency for growth that cannot be delivered elsewhere in more sustainable locations.

Use of land at risk of flooding.

Issues to consider:

- Government advice is that plans must take into account the current and future impacts of climate change and direct development away from areas at the highest risk of flooding.
- It is possible to develop on areas of flood risk subject to the sequential and exception tests set out in government guidance and this has taken place in North Somerset.
- Flood mitigation is likely to be expensive and climate change is predicted to increase the risks in the future.
- On flood risk areas within the towns where there are wider sustainability benefits in terms of maximising the use of brownfield and other underused land in locations which are often protected by sea defences.

Use of Green Belt.

Issues to consider:

- The government attaches great importance to Green Belts and once established, they should only be altered in exceptional circumstances.
- We must demonstrate that we have examined fully all other reasonable alternatives before identifying Green Belt locations. This includes maximising the use of brownfield and underused land, optimising densities in towns and other locations well served by public transport and after liaison with neighbouring authorities.
- If exceptional circumstances exist to consider Green Belt locations as part of the spatial strategy, then these should perhaps be limited in number to minimise the impact on the Green Belt and focused on the most sustainable locations well related to the urban areas and public transport opportunities.

The Panel is asked to consider these and any other issues in the context of the development of the Council's preferred spatial strategy.

4. CONSULTATION

4.1 Consultation and engagement will be undertaken throughout the plan-making process in accordance with the Council's Statement of Community Involvement.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Local Plan will be progressed using existing budgets.

6. LEGAL POWERS AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1 The North Somerset Local Plan is a statutory development plan. Local plans are prepared under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012.

7. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The new local plan play an important role in defining and delivering the Councils' response to the climate emergency. It will set out the approach to climate change and environmental issues in terms of, for example, the location and form of development, renewable energy, minimising car use, encouraging green infrastructure and biodiversity, avoiding sensitive areas such as areas at flood risk and minimising waste.

8. RISK MANAGEMENT

8.1 The absence of an up-to-date development plan incurs risks related to the uncertainty of future investment decisions and speculative proposals potentially leading to less sustainable development solutions.

9. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 The local plan will be subject to an equalities impact assessment.

10. CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The new planning framework has significant implications for a wide range of Council services in terms of, for example, the future location of population, jobs and infrastructure.

11. OPTIONS CONSIDERED

11.1 None - SPEDR has an important role to play in advising on policy approaches and the scrutiny of the emerging development plan.

AUTHOR

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

Challenges for the future consultation document.

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2020-07/Local%20Plan%202038%20-%20Challenges%20for%20the%20Future.pdf>

Challenges consultation statement.

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/Local%20Plan%202038%20Consultation%20Statement%20October%202020.pdf>

Choices for the future consultation document.

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/North%20Somerset%20Local%20Plan%202038%20challenges%20and%20choices%20part%20two%20-%20Choices%20for%20the%20future.pdf>

Choices consultation statement.

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-02/Choices%20Consultation%20Statement.pdf>

Choices sustainability appraisal interim report.

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/sustainability%20appraisal%20-%20interim%20report.pdf>

Choices alternative approaches methodology paper.

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/alternative%20approaches%20methodology%20paper.pdf>

Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment interim report

<https://www.n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/strategic%20housing%20land%20availability%20%E2%80%93%20interim%20report.pdf>

