

Question 12 - Preference for Location for Future Job Provision

It is acknowledged in the Issues and Options report that there are barriers to business growth across much of East Devon. Therefore, greater provision should be made in the new local plan to support economic development right across the district.

There is a significant imbalance between supply of certain forms of employment land and demand in East Devon – a problem that has been highlighted time and time again. Whilst provision has been made for the delivery of office and larger warehousing space in the West End, it is clear that there is a shortage of space available for small and medium sized businesses elsewhere in the district.

The West End will still be an important location for large- scale employment provision, however, we would argue that placing too much reliance on this area is a risky approach. West End sites are aimed predominantly at the medium to large scale employers with accommodation requirements in excess of 5,000 sq ft and much of the provision is in the form of ‘sheds’, which have a large footprint but low employment densities. Furthermore, the West End is geographically remote from much of the district. Therefore, the employment supply in the West End fails to meet the needs of many new and growing local micro and SME businesses. As the Council’s own economic development team has identified in its response to recent planning applications, these micro enterprises account for 90% of the businesses registered in East Devon, rising to 99% if SMEs are included. It is, therefore, vital that proper provision be made for them in the right location i.e. close to their markets and transport networks.

Employment growth should be dispersed and higher levels of business development should be supported in other areas closer to Exeter, such as along the A3052 corridor. This is an area which already benefits from good infrastructure and access to the strategic road network and where there is already a considerable amount of employment and other development. Employment development in this location has the potential to meet employment needs in East Devon and the wider Exeter catchment area and would align with key objectives of national planning policy to support prosperous rural economies. To quote paragraph 83 of the NPPF:

“Planning policies and decisions should enable: a) the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business in rural areas, both through conversion of existing buildings and well-designed new buildings.”

It is noted in the current local plan that the Council sees future office developments and jobs in this class as being key to employment delivery. The continued provision of smaller, flexible serviced office

accommodation is a known requirement for the district's towns and its rural economies. Existing rural business parks are operating successfully and remain consistently full, suggesting a severe undersupply and a significant demand in the rural areas. The result is local and rural business growth being curtailed and businesses having to relocate and out-commute from the area because suitable premises or land cannot be found within East Devon. This problem needs to be addressed.

A greater supply of commercial land must be provided across the district to allow for choice in the local market, ensuring that businesses have a choice of possible properties to meet their current and future needs. This would reduce out-commuting and retain more jobs for the district.

Question 14 - Additional Economic Policy Objectives

The economic policy areas to be addressed in the new local plan seem appropriate but it is crucial that the new strategic and non-strategic policies enable the significant imbalance between the demand for and supply of space for small and medium sized businesses to be corrected. The critical need for smaller, flexible office and employment space for small and medium sized businesses has been well-rehearsed in recent planning decisions and reports and the supply is reported to be incredibly constrained to the point of market failure.

Therefore, the new local plan policies must:

- Support the provision of new/additional employment floorspace for small and medium sized enterprises across the district, to complement the large land allocations and development in the West End, which attract a very different form of employment.
- Promote rural economic growth by allocating additional employment sites and supporting expansions of existing employment sites that are operating successfully and have reached, or are close to reaching, full capacity. Development opportunities are more limited in the rural areas and the success of existing employment operations and the potential for their future growth must not be curtailed by overly restrictive development management policies.