



CHARTERED TOWN PLANNERS

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EAST DEVON LOCAL PLAN 2020-2040

PREFERRED OPTIONS REG.18 CONSULTATION DRAFT PLAN – AUTUMN 2022

REPRESENTATIONS ON BEHALF OF GB HOUSE AND SON

Introduction

Bell Cornwell acts as planning consultant for GB House and Son, the long standing owner of large areas of agricultural land in East Devon. Our client's interests include Venmore Farm in Woodbury and Houndbeare Farm near Rockbeare. GB House and Son is also the owner of Woodbury Business Park and the more recently established Houndbeare Business Park, approved as a rural diversification scheme in 2021. Our client undertakes commercial and renewable energy developments and is promoting sites for housing and, therefore, has significant interest in the future local plan for the district. Against this background, the following comments are made on the draft policies within the East Devon Local Plan Preferred Options. These follow on from the representations made to earlier drafts of the plan, notably the Issues and Options version, and the Call for Sites, in 2021.

The Vision for East Devon

The draft local plan sets out a proposed vision for East Devon. This seeks to provide better homes and communities for all, promote a greener district, which address climate change and supports the natural environment, and encourage a more resilient local economy. GB House and Son supports this vision.

03 The Spatial Strategy of the Plan

1. Strategic Policy – Spatial Strategy

The overall strategy is to focus most development within the West End of the district. The settlement hierarchy then identifies one principal settlement (Exmouth), where significant growth is proposed. Below this are main centres, which are towns that are also able to accommodate significant growth, followed by local centres, where development will be supported.

A dispersed spatial strategy that increases the number of locations where some development can be accommodated is supported. This should ensure that local needs are met more adequately.

It is logical for the West End to play an important role, given the area's proximity to Exeter, but the settlement hierarchy is correct to emphasise the potential other settlements, such as Woodbury, to accommodate growth district-wide.

The identification of Woodbury as a Local Centre is supported. The village has a good range of facilities and is less environmentally constrained than many other villages in the district. The scale and form of growth can be carefully controlled through local development management policies so that it complements the character of the area and helps meet local needs. Collectively, villages could make a meaningful contribution to the district's overall housing land supply and growth of this type would also have the advantage of diversifying supply, meeting local needs and supporting rural facilities.

There is also potential for some of the smaller villages and hamlets across the district that would be classed as 'open countryside' to take some limited, small-scale growth, especially in those areas that fall outside of sensitive landscapes, for example, areas outside of the AONB. This is an opportunity that should not be overlooked. Limited residential development in such areas would have social benefits i.e local rural facilities would be supported, both within the smaller villages and hamlets and within larger villages nearby (as is highlighted in paragraph 79 of the NPPF). Ultimately, rural housing is essential to ensure viable use of local facilities.

Equally for employment development, sufficient provision must be made in the new local plan to support economic development right across the district so that growth is not stifled or lost to locations outside of East Devon. It is important to ensure that the new local plan can deliver sufficient supply to allow for choice and flexibility in the local market. Again, it is logical for the West End to continue to make an important contribution to large-scale employment provision but there needs to be more flexibility in the new local plan to allow other employment locations to come forward and ensure that all employment needs are catered for. As has been highlighted in representations to earlier versions of the draft local plan, the West End sites are aimed predominantly at medium to large-scale employers serving national and regional markets and are geographically remote from much of the district. It is vital that proper provision be made for small and medium sized businesses in the right locations i.e. close to their markets and transport networks and that this provision is not stifled by overly restrictive planning policies. Woodbury Business Park is operating successfully and remains consistently full, highlighting a severe undersupply and a significant demand in the area.

A dispersed strategy aligns with key objectives of national planning policy to support prosperous rural economies i.e. paragraphs 84 and 85 of the NPPF, which state:

“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;

b) the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses;

c) sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments which respect the character of the countryside; and

d) the retention and development of accessible local services and community facilities, such as local shops, meeting places, sports venues, open space, cultural buildings, public houses and places of worship.”

“Planning policies and decisions should recognise that sites to meet local business and community needs in rural areas may have to be found adjacent to or beyond existing settlements, and in locations that are not well served by public transport. In these circumstances it will be important to ensure that development is sensitive to its surroundings, does not have an unacceptable impact on local roads and exploits any opportunities to make a location more sustainable (for example by improving the scope for access on foot, by cycling or by public transport). The use of previously developed land, and sites that are physically well-related to existing settlements, should be encouraged where suitable opportunities exist.”

3. Strategic Policy – Levels of future housing development

The new local plan should plan for at least the minimum housing requirement proposed (946 homes per year) in order to introduce greater flexibility into the district's housing supply and ensure a properly robust supply of housing. It is crucial that the words 'at least' remain in the policy.

Paragraph 3 of the draft policy states that provision will be made for a supply headroom of approximately 10% to provide housing supply flexibility in the district in the plan period and this is supported. However, it is noted in the supporting text (paragraph 3.17) that the potential housing sites being considered in this draft local plan only provide about 8% headroom. This surely suggests that additional sites need to be considered for housing development, otherwise the new local plan will be at risk of not providing sufficient supply flexibility.

Increasing the overall supply of housing will help to increase the amount of affordable housing that is provided for the district. The draft plan requires an affordable housing requirement of 4,070 dwellings but the current evidence indicates realistic prospects of delivering just 3,551 dwellings in the plan period. This is a shortfall of 519 dwellings and, of course, there is the possibility that some of the planned for 3,551 affordable homes will not come forward. Rather than relying on qualifying sites to be able to deliver a higher percentage of affordable housing, a safer approach would be to allocate additional sites in the local plan.

The provision for at least 10% of housing supply over the plan period to be met on small and medium sized sites (which the NPPF defines as sites no larger than one hectare) is supported. With small-scale sites, housing is more likely to be provided in locations where it is really needed and to be delivered quickly. Smaller sites are also more likely to achieve wider objectives relating to housing need and would support the vitality of rural settlements.

Paragraph 8 of the draft policy will set out the housing provision requirements for designated areas in East Devon. It is not possible to comment on the approach at this stage as the data on housing provision requirement is not yet available – the draft policy states this information will be completed following consultation on the methodology for identifying the scale of housing provision requirement in Designated Neighbourhood Areas. The right to comment is reserved for when this data is publicly available.

A key element of the draft Local plan's strategic approach is to deliver a new settlement on land to the east of Exeter, around the A3052 corridor. Three different options are presented. The final choice of option, presuming that the delivery of a new settlement is carried forward into the final version of the local plan, could have significant implications on the overall housing strategy, both in terms of numbers and locations. Progressing the local plan without a decision having been made regarding the new settlement is, therefore, premature.

4. Strategic Policy – Employment Provision and Distribution Strategy

The draft policy states that provision will be made for a net increase of sufficient new employment floorspace to meet need and ensure that a choice of appropriate land is available in sufficient quantity, and of the right quality, to drive the economic growth of, and support prosperity in, East Devon. More clarity is needed on precisely what is meant by ‘a net increase’ and ‘sufficient new employment floorspace.’

It is clear that there is a continuing shortage of sites available for small and medium sized businesses across the district, outside of the West End. These businesses play an important role in the local rural economy and it is vital that proper provision be made for them in the right locations, for example, close to existing operations and main road networks.

The scale of new development/level of need for the district has not yet been decided upon – the draft policy states that this will be informed by the ongoing Economic Development Needs Assessment (EDNA), which will be ‘available in time’. The EDNA will also inform the Council’s site selection and site capacity estimates. This is a fundamental part of the local plan strategy and it is premature to advance the draft local plan in advance of the EDNA being published and properly considered. Such important aspects of the local plan must be informed/supported by robust evidence. As it stands, there are fundamental uncertainties.

In terms of the location of development, the draft policy states that existing employment areas that will continue to be the primary locations for industrial, warehousing, offices, distribution development and other B Class Uses are identified on the Policies Map. It is noted, following discussions with the Council’s Planning Policy Manager on 5th January 2023, that not all existing employment sites have been shown on the Policies Map. The policy wording needs to make it clear that this policy relates to all existing and allocated employment sites, as we understand is the intention, and not just those shown on the Policies Map.

Whilst it is logical for existing employment areas to continue to be the primary locations for employment uses, the strategic policy must make sufficient provision for windfall employment development to come forward as opportunities present themselves and cannot be overly prescriptive.

Our client owns Woodbury Business Park, a very successful, established employment site, and the demand for space far outstrips supply. Representations were made to the Council’s ‘Call for Sites’ in March 2021 (reference **go13l1k**), where it was highlighted that this employment site could be expanded to join up with the ‘Salt Pit’ employment site to the west (within the same ownership), to help address the shortfall in this type of provision in a location with very good accessibility to the local and strategic road network.

It is noted from discussions with the Council’s Planning Policy Manager that the employment sites that were submitted as part of the 2021 Call for Sites consultation have not yet been assessed and that this work is to follow in the coming months. To aid this assessment, copies of the following documents from the 2021 submission are included with these representations:

- Call for Sites form from March 2021;
- Site Plan, ref. 8251-06A;
- Access sketch, ref. P_01 P1;
- Highways technical note, dates March 2021;
- Transport Statement, dated November 2017

In conclusion, there is insufficient evidence to inform the employment strategy at this time, with the EDNA not having been completed. Ultimately, a sufficient supply of all types of employment land needs to be made available across the district and it is logical for there to be a focus on future-proofing established employment locations.

7. Strategic Policy – Development beyond Settlement Boundaries

Whilst it is important to protect the landscape, amenity and environmental qualities of the East Devon countryside, there must be sufficient flexibility in the new local plan to allow windfall development to come forward and be judged on its own site specific merits to ensure that the needs of the rural communities can be met.

06 Strategy for development at Principal Centres, Main Centres, Local Centres and Service Villages

25. Strategic Policy – Development at Local Centres

The inclusion of sites Wood_10 – land at Gilbrook and Wood_16 – land south of Broadway for residential-led development is supported as they represent logical approaches to development and growth to the south of Woodbury.

Our client is the owner of site Wood_12. Whilst it has been rejected as part of the site selection process, officers and members of the Council are urged to reconsider Wood_12 as an option for a mixed use allocation. This site, which is in single ownership, abuts Wood_10 on its northern boundary and Wood_16 on its eastern boundary and allocating all three sites would enable a more comprehensive, strategic approach to be taken, which would deliver more for the village (both in terms of housing and other services/infrastructure).

The Council's assessment of site Wood_12 as part of its site selection process concluded that the site is in a sensitive landscape in a prominent location on rising land and that the scale of development proposed (a figure of 141 homes was cited in the assessment) is inconsistent with the spatial strategy when combined with other more preferable sites in Woodbury. The response to these conclusions is that Wood_12 would not necessarily need to be included/developed in its entirety. Development could be focussed on the northern/lower part of the site i.e. the part of the site abutting other site allocations and not all of the site would need to accommodate built development. Furthermore, any future planning application/s would be supported by robust landscape and visual impact analysis. There are increasing obligations on developers to deliver SANGS, BNG, open space etc and there is the space available on Wood_12 to provide more than just housing. Obligations of this type can often be difficult to accommodate on development sites, resulting in less joined-up financial contributions in place of on-site provision. Including part or all of Wood_12 as a mixed use allocation site, in addition to Wood_10 and Wood_16, would create logical opportunities to come up with a comprehensive, perhaps phased, development site for south Woodbury, which could result in a number of benefits for the village. These include: improved connectivity/linkages between Broadway to the north east and the main road running from Woodbury to the Exmouth Road to the south west, which could alleviate pressure at the cross roads between this main road, Globe Hill and The Arch; green infrastructure; more usable public open space and other community facilities that are needed locally.

The landowner has had initial discussions with members of Woodbury Parish Council, who have been supportive of including Wood_12 as a mixed use allocation due to what this could deliver for the village in terms of improved infrastructure and additional local facilities, for example, a doctor's surgery has been suggested.

Our client is also the sole owner of Wood_33. Wood_33 should be reconsidered as a small/medium sized housing site (such sites will need to form 10% of the district's overall supply). This site was discounted for not being adjacent to the settlement but has a number of merits that way in favour of its inclusion:

- A large portion of the site is previously developed land, that is underutilised and could be put to much more effective use;
- Any visual impact of development would be reduced by the fact that there are existing, unsightly buildings on the site, which would be replaced;
- The site is close to a range of local facilities and services and adjoins and faces existing residential properties (i.e. this is not a remote, isolated location in the countryside);
- A residential development would include the conversion of rural buildings, which would preserve and enhance undesignated heritage assets and secure their long term future.

Allocating these additional sites in Woodbury would help to fill the shortfall in housing supply headroom and help to deliver more affordable housing for the district.

09 Supporting Jobs and the Economy and Vibrant Town Centres

52. Employment development in the countryside

The provision for the intensification of existing employment businesses in the countryside is supported.

However, draft policy 52 explicitly states that:

“For avoidance of doubt this policy applies to specific companies or businesses and their operational premises and is not applicable to business parks, industrial estates or similar where the business in question is the operation of that park or site.”

If that wording remains in the final version of the policy, then what opportunities will be provided in the new local plan for the expansion of existing business parks / industrial estates / employment sites, which is crucial for the prosperity of the rural economy? The wording of the policy must reflect the supporting text (paragraph 9.22), which states that:

“It is important for East Devon to develop its employment base and where established sites are successful, an intensification of employment uses or extension of an existing employment site can be considered if this supports additional employment accessible to local communities.”

Development opportunities in the rural areas are more limited and the success of very well established sites and the potential for them to expand to meet demand needs to be supported with the inclusion of explicit local plan policies.

Our client owns Woodbury Business Park, a very successful, established employment site and the demand for space far outstrips supply. Representations were made to the ‘Call for Sites’ in March 2021 (reference **go1311k**), where it was highlighted that this employment site could be expanded to join up with the ‘Salt Pit’ employment site to the west (within the same ownership), to help address the shortfall in this type of provision in a location with very good accessibility to the local and strategic road network.

It is noted from discussions with the Council’s Planning Policy Manager that submitted that the employment sites that were submitted as part of the 2021 Call for Sites consultation have not yet been assessed and that this work is to follow in the coming months. To aid in the assessment, copies of the following documents from the 2021 Call for Sites submission are included with these representations:

- Call for Sites form from March 2021;
- Site Plan, ref. 8251-06A;

- Access sketch, ref. P_01 P1;
- Highways technical note, dates March 2021;
- Transport Statement, dated November 2017.

Our client supports the re-use of existing rural buildings, but not this part of draft policy 52 as worded currently as it is too restrictive. Opportunities to re-use existing rural buildings to deliver much needed employment space, and other complementary uses, will exist across all tiers of the settlement hierarchy, not just tier 1 and 2 settlements, and such opportunities must not be curtailed by an overly prescriptive policy.

53. Farm Diversification

The inclusion of a rural diversification policy is supported strongly. It is becoming increasingly necessary for farmers to diversify in order to retain a viable business. Current Local Plan Policy E4 has proved successful in bringing about complementary new uses with economic benefits for rural areas, for example, with the delivery of Houndbeare Business Park last year, and it is the correct approach to keep such a policy.

As drafted, draft policy 53 is more restrictive than its predecessor by expressly supporting employment uses, rather than allowing *'proposals to diversify and expand upon the range of traditional agricultural related economic activities undertaken in rural areas...'* A more restrictive approach is likely to prevent other complementary uses that would bring about social and economic benefits, but which would fall outside of traditional employment uses classes, from coming forward, which could prevent additional and much needed income streams. Paragraph 1 of draft policy 53 does not need to be so restrictive in terms of uses – the criteria within paragraph 3 of the policy will ensure the acceptability of proposals.