

Watchet Town Council
Local Plan consultation response

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Deadline date for response Monday 16 March 2020. Consultation launched January 2020. Conclusion, inadequate time to consider options posed. There is a risk of discrimination against digitally excluded residents since not all the documents in the online consultation were available at the Watchet consultation road show and the Issues and Options document was only available to purchase at a £5 charge. There is scope for confusion due to the duplication of questions contained in the questionnaire and the Issues and Options document.

1.2 Watchet Town Council understand and accept the need for more affordable and social housing in Watchet but view the number of planning consents approved in outline so far with dismay.

1.3 The question as to whether the policy of settlement limits as used in the former TDBC local plan or the former West Somerset Council policy of considering development within 50 metres of the contiguous building line policy on a criteria based policy is the best for Watchet and Williton is deserving of further informed debate.

1.4 There is no doubt that policies should be in place which will prevent Watchet and Williton from becoming one continuous settlement.

1.5 The absence of a master plan for Watchet means that development proposals are considered on an ad hoc basis with little regard for the cumulative effect of the proposals on local services and infrastructure. The same can be said for Williton.

1.6 There is little provision on the table for the provision of jobs in Watchet to replace the loss of jobs when the mill closed and the reliance on seasonal lower paid jobs in the tourism economy.

2 HOUSING SCHEMES IN THE PLANNING SYSTEM

2.1 There are several large planning applications in the pipeline in Watchet at outline or application stage. These are:

250 Liddymore Road	(3/37/17/020)	Greenfield: outline granted
139 Normandy Avenue	(3/37/17/019)	Greenfield: outline granted
400 + 220 care home, Mill site	(3/37/19/021)	Brownfield: application stage

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136 Cleeve Hill (3/37/18/015) Greenfield: application deferred
936 total

2.2 Pending application is the Parsonage Farm site where the West Somerset Council Local Plan (WSLP) Policy WA2 makes a strategic allocation for up to 290 dwellings. (Greenfield)

This brings the total to 1215 dwellings or 1435 units if the care home places in the mill site are counted in.

2.3 There is no overall master plan for Watchet which sets out what services and facilities are needed should the entire number in the system be built nor is there any statement as to the balance between open market, affordable and social housing which is desirable.

2.4 There is provision in the WSLP for Section 106 agreements to be made with developers to secure affordable housing. An example can be found in the agreement for the Doniford Road site (3/37/15/035). Here, the application was for 73 houses including 25 affordable units. This is the 35% affordable proportion as set out in the WSLP.

2.5 This agreement also sets out provision for infrastructure improvement. There was a sum of £24,615 for pre school improvements and £122,570 for primary school provision for children from the development. These sums were to be paid to Somerset County Council.

2.6 Watchet Town Council need to be confident that this mechanism can deliver the infrastructure improvements perceived as being necessary to accommodate the 1435 units in the planning process. It would be an aid to confidence building if there was transparency as to how the funds were spent or reserved to be spent.

2.7 The Town Council believe that because of the nature of the geology along the coast in Watchet and the inherent risk of coastal erosion it is important that applications submitted contain robust geological and ground stability reports as a matter of course.

2.8 The Council also consider it is important to resource the periodic revision of the approved plan should there be a major change in circumstances which were considered during the formulation of the plan. Such a major change would be the closure of the paper mill in Watchet and the site becoming available for development.

2.9 The Council believe there is a need to consider restricting the number of properties which are sold as second homes or used for holiday lets. Such properties reduce the number of properties available for first time buyers and put upward

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pressure on house prices. This needs to be a balanced approach as there is a need for holiday letting to support the tourist economy. The Council believe this matter needs research during the plan preparation in order to arrive at a considered policy.

3 ENHANCEMENT OF SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE IN WATCHET

3.1 There is a perception that services available in the town and the infrastructure of the town cannot support the proposed volume of new dwellings without enhancement.

3.2 Currently there are four clusters of retailing, services and facilities. The town centre provides the largest cluster including library, shops including convenience store, community use buildings, visitor centre, Town Council office, museums, car parks, pubs, food bank, surgery.

3.3 The second largest cluster is on Liddymore Road and includes shops including two convenience stores. There are two other locations: the Community Centre on the Memorial Ground and the Bowling Club located off Liddymore Road.

3.4 The further from the town centre housing is situated, the greater the distance to walk to services and the more likelihood that people who can do so will use a car to travel to facilities. Car use also puts pressure on the limited car park space available at the three other locations and contributes to pollution and congestion. Those without a car are disadvantaged.

3.5 Car use will increase as more new residents decide to drive to larger supermarkets which will increase pollution and congestion. Again, non car owners are disadvantaged and have to rely on relatively higher priced goods in convenience stores or internet shopping which also adds to pollution and congestion. Such persons are more likely to rely on benefits and at times, the food bank.

3.6 The waiting time for doctors' and other local health appointments is often sited. Also the lack of surgery appointments in Watchet necessitating appointments in Williton with the associated difficulty of travel to those appointments.

3.7 Whilst an increase in resident numbers would enable the surgery to advertise for increased numbers of health professionals, there is anecdotal evidence that such posts are hard to fill in the West Somerset area. (temporary closure of Minehead Hospital and moves to close beds in Williton hospital have occurred in this century)

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3.8 Comments are often made that there is no space at Knights Templar School. These comments are not well founded since SCC deem that there is capacity at the school since two classroom spaces currently used for other purposes could be brought back into use as classroom bases.

3.9 Comments are often made that there will be increased pressure on current sewerage and water supply systems brought by new houses. Such provision is the responsibility of Wessex Water but such provision will require land which the developer led approach to housing supply does not address.

3.10 The local plan could do this by a master planning process rather than relying on the ad hoc Section 106 approach to individual applications.

4 INDUSTRY AND EMPLOYMENT IN WATCHET

4.1 With the closure of the paper mill, the largest single employer in Watchet is probably Knights Templar School. There is much reliance on employment outside the town requiring commuting and a public transport system which fails to provide a reliable comprehensive service. Otherwise, there is considerable employment generated by the tourist offer in the town. Much of this employment is seasonal and towards the lower end of the pay and skill level.

4.2 The closure of the paper mill leaves a brown field site currently underdeveloped. The submitted application includes an area of employment land use. There are developments in train at present by Onion Collective and Biohm to bring an innovative industry to the site which the Council supports.

4.3 The Local Plan should allocate land for employment sites to reduce the need for residents to commute to work.

5 SPECIFIC ISSUES POSED IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE

5.1 (Question 1) The Council supports the objective to achieve a carbon neutrality by 2030.

5.2 (Question 2) The Council believe that sites should be identified for renewable energy development. This to avoid again the developer led approach which fails to take into account environmental impacts which should be part of a master planning approach.

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5.3 (Question 3) Current employment sites should be retained and further sites identified so as to encourage employment creation. There is a need in West Somerset for growth points to encourage employment consolidation.

5.4 (Question 4) Town centres need to be protected from unfair competition from internet based retailers and bid chain stores becoming too dominant. Policies around business rate discretion should be flexed to the maximum permissible to encourage independent retailers to set up and to be retained in place.

5.5 (Question 5) Comments in previous sections relating to the siting of new homes are relevant. Taunton is best placed to deliver the greater part of new homes required as it is the largest service centre in the area and the greatest potential to grow due to its better transport links. Watchet needs considerable investment in transport links in order to support a larger population and there is no sign that SCC or nation government see such development as a priority.

5.6 (Question 6) Whether Watchet and Williton should be considered as “associated settlements” is at the core of the section 1.3 statement.

5.7 The topic paper “Settlement boundaries” published with the consultation document sets out pros and cons of the settlement boundary approach.

5.8 Currently, the TDBC local plan uses green wedges to prevent settlements from growing beyond a defined limit and it is claimed enables the countryside to be brought closer into the town. The current WSLP policy uses a criteria led approach to consider applications within 50 metres of the contiguous built up area. This has led to edge applications being considered and approved in outline as detailed above in 2.1. Once built out, the contiguous built up area expands bringing new land into consideration. Defined settlement limits with green wedges on the face of it provides greater protection from unregulated expansion and thus achieve the Council’s goal set out in section 1.4 above.

5.9 The Council would welcome a seminar from SWT officers to more fully engage with this debate.

5.10 (Question 7) The evidence is that the Watchet area is ahead of target for new homes, at least approved in outline, so should be protected from further applications seeking to build on the proposed expansion of the contiguous built up area. More homes should be encouraged at larger centres.

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5.11 (Question 8) Of the three options, again the master planning approach would be to allocate sites for gypsies and travellers rather than deal with applications on an ad hoc basis.

5.12 (Question 9) This asks for Section 106 contribution priorities to be ranked in order of importance. The Council would rank as follows:

- 1 Designing for Climate Emergency first
- 2 Schools, sustainable transport and community facilities
- 3 Affordable housing
- 4 Accessible, adaptable wheelchair accessible homes

5.13 (Question 10) This relates again to the settlement boundary question. It poses the possibility of removing them from some areas which currently have them let alone introducing them to areas in west Somerset which have not had them. See 5.10 above.

6 SPECIFIC QUESTIONS POSED IN THE CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

6.1 Question 1a The Council broadly support the 9 objectives. Between objective 1 relating to the 2030 carbon neutral target of SWT (which the Council supports) and the housing supply aspiration in object 9, there should be an objective to ensure that all new homes should be built to the pasivhaus standards.

6.2 Question 1b Renewable energy policy. See 5.2 above.

6.3 Question 1c The Council support the additional policy approaches as set out in the document 1c/1 to 1c/7.

6.4 Question 2a The tiers of settlement identified fail to recognise the importance of the coastal settlements being considered together because Minehead / Alcombe is placed in tier 3 Coastal town(Major Rural Centre) whilst Watchet is placed in tier 4 Rural Centres together with Bishop's Lydeard, Williton and Wiveliscombe. The Council believe that Watchet, whilst being of a similar size to the other settlements in tier 4 has more in common with Minehead / Alcombe due to its coastal location and dependence on jobs in the tourist industry.

6.5 To identify a coastal category and to place only one settlement in it seems logical. Either coastal location is a different characteristic or it isn't. There are three Coastal Communities Teams in the district in Porlock, Minehead and Watchet and it seems sensible to consider those settlements as a separate Coastal settlement category.

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- 6.6 Question 2b See responses to question 6 above in sections 5.6 to 5.9.
- 6.7 Question 2c This considers the distribution of housing across the area. There are six options suggested for consideration. One proposes that Watchet and Williton should take more houses due to their proximity to employment at Hinkley and closeness to Bridgwater and Taunton whilst Minehead is deemed to be more remote.
- 6.8 The Council cannot accept that this should be a reason for more houses than those currently in the planning system being allowed - rather that the policies should seek to encourage more sustainable settlements and discourage reliance on long distance commuting to employment.
- 6.9 The Council supports more houses in sustainable transport locations such as those with rail links (Taunton and Wellington) and motorway links (M5 corridor).
- 6.10 Question 2d The Council support the policy approaches set out in the document, 2b/1 to 2b/4.
- 6.11 Question 3a The Council believes that SWT should aim for the government target for new homes of 995 dwellings on average over the next 20 years rather than a higher target.
- 6.12 Question 3b See 5.11 above.
- 6.13 Question 3c Yes, a percentage of new homes should be required to be accessible, adaptable and wheelchair accessible. Why not 100% in the interests of sustainability.
- 6.14 Question 3d Sites should be considered for self build homes on all applications. In rural areas, self build homes should be affordable.
- 6.15 Question 3e The Council support the policy approaches set out in the document 3e1 to 3e/7. In particular, adherence to government internal space standards or better should be mandatory across all applications. That a policy be brought forward to address the concerns referred to in 2.9 above - second homes and holiday letting.
- 6.16 Question 4a There is currently a deficiency of higher value jobs in the area and policy should encourage such jobs in areas where there is a reliance on lower paid jobs such as in tourism industry dependent settlements such in coastal locations. There is a need to increase job opportunities overall so the young people do not feel they have to leave the area to earn a living.
- 6.17 Question 4b See 5.3 above.
- 6.18 Question 4c The Council support the policy approaches set out in the document, 4c/1 to 4c/9. In particular, the Council would support policies to

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encourage a circular economy to encourage settlements to become more self sufficient and sustainable.

6.19 Question 5a See 5.12 above.

6.20 Question 5b The Council support the policy approaches set out in the document, 5b/1 to 5b/4. The Council would like to understand better the approach to developer contributions via a S106 or CIL approach.

6.21 Question 6a To reduce the need for car use, provide more local employment, improve public transport, support community car schemes such as the Watchet Drives EV scheme.

6.22 Question 6b The Council support the policy approaches set out in the document, 6b/1 to 6b/5.

6.23 Question 7a Improvement of local biodiversity could be achieved through the green wedge approach. Also by requiring planning applications to demonstrate how they have provided green corridors through their development. Also by requiring all applications to dedicate a certain percentage of land for tree planting.

6.24 Question 7b The Council support the policy approaches set out in the document, 7b/1 to 7b/12.

6.25 Question 8a See earlier responses and discussion relating to settlement boundaries above.

6.26 Question 8b The Council support the policy approaches set out in the document, 8b/1 to 8b/8.

6.27 Question 9a The Council support the policy approaches set out in the document, 9b/1 to 9b/7. The Council welcome the emphasis on high quality design across developments and look forward to commenting on the proposed SPD in due course.

6.28 Questions 10a & 10b, 11a refer to Taunton and Wellington specific policies and the Council does not wish to comment at the present time.

6.29 Question 12a This addresses policies relating to the coastal strip. The Council support the policy approaches set out in the document, 12b/1 to 12b/3. The Council would comment that there is a need to create a separate policy which recognises the

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potential contribution that a fully functional marina at Watchet could make to the local economy. The Council would welcome input into such a policy.

6.30 The Council would further comment that there is need for SWT to include a policy which recognises the need to work with the three Coastal Communities Teams to market the coastal strip as a tourist destination to secure and enhance tourism related employment and tourist destination provision.

7 CONCLUSION - COMMITMENT TO ENGAGE

7.1 The Town Council commits to engage with the Local Plan process as it continues and would welcome more direct consultation with officers to better understand the options and the process. This is to ensure that the interests of Watchet citizens are protected and taken into account as the town continues to develop and grow.

Watchet is a town with considerable community spirit and desire to increase agency and self reliance and needs to be nurtured by the policies in the emerging new district wide local plan.

