

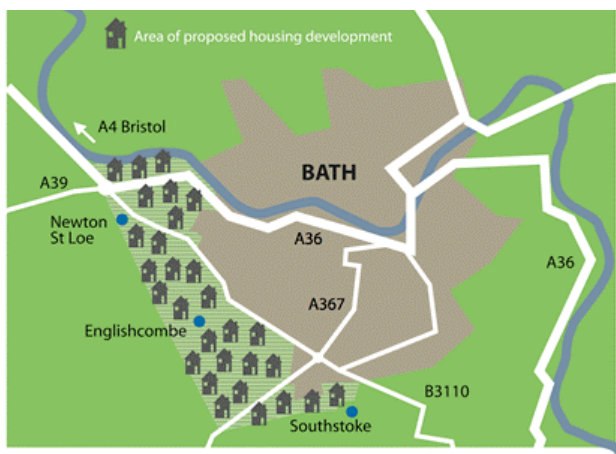
NSL CONCERNED VILLAGERS ACTION GROUP

SURVEY OF VILLAGERS IN NEWTON ST LOE (NSL), BATH & NE SOMERSET

IN RESPONSE TO THE SW REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY (RSS)

Context

Up to 21,500 new homes are planned for B&NES. Of these, 1,000 to 1,500 are proposed as an urban extension to Bath itself, potentially threatening to absorb **Newton St Loe (NSL)** and Englishcombe. A further 6000 new homes are proposed to be built around Whitchurch and between Bristol and Keynsham.



The numbers of new houses have been proposed in the Draft **Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS)** and B&NES Council's Core Strategy in response to wider Government plans for house building.

The RSS is the broader planning blueprint for all development across the South West for the next 20 years, and includes establishing where thousands of new homes in the region will be built.

Survey of NSL

In September 2008, the NSL Parish Council held a meeting to inform the villagers about the RSS. In particular, the plans may affect villagers because the search area for the new build includes green sites adjacent to the village. (see map)

During the meeting a number of questions were raised and a great deal of concern was voiced by villagers about the proposed plans and how they might impact on NSL.

It was clear to some of the villagers that broader consensus from the village may be needed to a) better understand what all villagers really feel about the plans and b) to assess the need for direct action by the community to oppose them.

A few days later, a group of villagers met as *NSL Concerned Villagers Action Group* and agreed the first step: to survey the village for local opinion about the RSS.

A questionnaire was developed and distributed to households/farms in NSL, also copied to the Parish Council and the Duchy of Cornwall offices. Questionnaires were collected over the following two weeks and analysed on a confidential basis.

No questionnaires were delivered to Bath Spa University, although this falls within the Parish, because of the difficulties of clearly profiling the respondents and organising delivery and collection within the original RSS response time limit.

FINDINGS

Out of 60 questionnaires delivered, 51% (31) were returned. The responses are summarised in a data sheet (Annex 1) and analysis of the findings and comments is provided in the following section of this report:

1) Awareness of the plans/participation in debate

All of the respondents were aware of the RSS and that NSL was included in the search area for the development of new housing

Over two thirds of the respondents, (68%), received their information about the RSS plans from the NSL Parish Council. Almost the same proportion (71%) said they had participated in parish council meetings on the subject. These findings reflect good turn out at the parish council meeting in September when information on the RSS was provided to the community.

Media and word of mouth also played a role in helping villagers understand the RSS plans for two thirds of respondents (61 % jointly). Just under a quarter of respondents also sourced information through their local council: BANES

Over half of the respondents understood the number of houses planned for development on green sites outside Bath to be between 1000-1500 homes (58%)

Information about the plans received by villagers was considered 'satisfactory' for 45% of the respondents; but almost the same number (48%) felt that it was 'insufficient or 'poor'. This may reflect the fact that only one parish council meeting was convened to specifically inform villagers about the subject

Almost a quarter of respondents said they would like more information about the proposed plans (23%) and a few people requested visits to their home to provide information (due to travel/health constraints). Just under three quarters (74%) said they would like to participate in further debate and action in the village about this subject.

Some sentiments were expressed that the RSS process had not been sufficiently transparent and that processes and findings needed to be made more public. In particular around the methods used to obtain the official numbers of houses proposed.

2) View of Villagers towards the proposed plans

Advantages

- Only 3% of the respondents felt the new housing plans would be beneficial in terms of bringing new houses to the area. However, a further 16% thought the new development might provide more 'affordable' housing for young families.
- In terms of added benefits, 13% thought that new housing development might improve local transport systems for NSL, highlighting a concern identified by a quarter of NSL respondents. However there has been no available information to support ideas that new build will bring new government investment in infrastructure or services.

Disadvantages

- Despite the sentiments to support new housing – especially affordable housing – the majority of respondents felt the development would not be beneficial. (97%)
- The overwhelming problem about the development was the loss of green belt (90%) and loss of wildlife habitat (97%) and respondents repeatedly called for brown field sites and empty properties to be used before any encroachment into green areas. Most villagers want to see that the natural environment around NSL protected as part of the area's heritage and for food production.

Villagers identified the following negative impacts from the proposed development:

Environment:

Almost all (97%) of respondents thought the development would have a negative result in losing green belt and the wildlife habitat surrounding NSL.

The same majority also believed this would result in increased commuter traffic, with almost all (97%) mentioning resultant noise and light pollution. The current dangers of the local main road were also highlighted together with existing congestion issues in the area.

Another area of great concern was the loss of agricultural land for food production (84%). A number of comments were made to suggest that, given the global problems of food security, this was an aspect that should be considered seriously at this time.

Urbanisation

A high number of respondents were concerned that the development would lead to increased urbanisation of the area with reduced security and increased crime levels (84%) with over two thirds perceiving industrial development to be a negative impact on the local area.

Local Services and Jobs

Almost three quarters of the respondents (74%) felt that there were insufficient jobs to support families in a new development and that the proposed plan would put stress on existing local services. Some also mentioned that brown field sites offer far better existing infrastructure and services than the green NSL area.

3) Role of the Duchy of Cornwall

Almost three quarters of the respondents (74%) were aware that the Duchy is a possible stakeholder in the proposed development of green sites around NSL. Almost 20% of respondents were unaware of their potential role and just one person did not respond to the question

The majority of people who expressed their reaction/feelings on this subject were of the opinion that the Duchy's role is to *protect* green field sites and farming around NSL.

They expected the Duchy to fight the proposed plans and to act green by 'preserving the rural way' of life and maintaining wildlife habitats and the environment for future generations.

Some felt the Duchy should be actively opposing the proposed development on green field sites and believed that this would better reflect HRH's environmental commitments – a few went so far as to say the Duchy should 'lobby the government' against the proposed build on green field sites, and should 'call for a review' of the whole process.

It was also proposed that the Duchy could bring its expertise to finding and developing alternative sites.

A few villagers felt that the Duchy could consider building some 'affordable' housing within existing boundaries of NSL, this option being preferable to filling in green belt and losing the natural environment; however the caveat was consistently that 'after brown field sites' were fully exhausted and only with limited numbers ('a few would be ok'). Another caveat was that good farmland should not be sold off.

There appears to be some dissonance between how the villagers perceive the Duchy - what they believe their commitments to the environment and farming to be, and the Duchy's current agenda for building and development. Some villagers felt the Duchy needed to be more transparent about their interests in development.

A number of villagers commented that the Duchy should listen to the views of the villagers and their needs, and 'represent them fairly', and advised that efforts should be focused on the existing village.

Some respondents noted that the village was 'special' and that was recognised too by HRH. The proposed development in green fields around NSL would spoil this unique village and its setting which, once lost, could never be reclaimed.

The overall message was clear: the Duchy should oppose the plans to build around NSL and should be advocating against development of green sites – especially in this valley.

4. Other

One issue highlighted by villagers was the impending development of *new student housing* and re-housing plans at Bath University, which could release many properties in Bath and free them up for families and other residents.

FORWARD

Almost three quarters of respondents felt they would like more debate and action to address the issues arising from the proposed development and its potential impacts on NSL.

A good majority (87%) of respondents were ready to sign a petition to lobby the government to reconsider and review its proposed plans- including the areas of search for the new housing development.

Signatures were collected over a few evenings over two weeks. Three houses were unoccupied during the petition and some villagers were away or hard to contact.

*The petition was finally **signed by 65 residents from 43 homes/farms (representing approx 75% of village residences)** within NSL, and will be delivered to the RSS offices on Friday 24th October 2008.*

Recommendations

- ❑ protect green field sites, wildlife habitat and rural way of life
- ❑ build on brown-field sites
- ❑ develop existing empty properties
- ❑ protect farmland for food production
- ❑ review housing needs (numbers) especially in light of many houses freed up by new student accommodation proposed for Bath University
- ❑ Duchy to champion a green agenda to protect the environment/green field sites

Action

- ❑ improve awareness and access to information about the RSS in the village:
- ❑ make more background information available (e.g. printed)
- ❑ set up another meeting/debate in NSL re the RSS
- ❑ raise a petition amongst villagers and send to RSS /the government to demand they review the proposed plans
- ❑ share the NSL survey report in the community and with other local action groups
- ❑ share the NSL survey report with local decision makers and to the MPs concerned
- ❑ provide Duchy of Cornwall with a copy of this report
- ❑ encourage the Duchy to engage with the community regarding their concerns and views about the proposed plans

NSL CONCERNED VILLAGERS ACTION GROUP is an informal group of villagers, open to all residents in NSL, which aims to gather and represent the views of concerned villagers in NSL about the RSS. The parish council has been kept informed of all its activities to date.

Meetings have been undertaken in the presence of a member of the NSL Parish Council

Contact with the group can now be made via:
PO BOX 4432, BA1 0JZ

24th October 2008