

8 COMMUNITY SERVICES AND FACILITIES

Exmoor National Park Management Plan Vision for Community Facilities

Thriving towns and villages that are able to provide a reasonable and affordable range of services and facilities so residents are not disadvantaged as a result of living in a remote rural area.

Exmoor National Park Management Plan and Local Plan Objectives for Community Facilities

- To support the provision and retention of community facilities and services that are reasonably accessible and affordable to Exmoor's residents
- To support the development of local initiatives.
- To improve accessibility to jobs, services and facilities for local communities.

Exmoor National Park Management Plan and Local Plan Objective for Employment and Economic Regeneration

- To improve links between National Park purposes and the social and economic well-being of local communities by encouraging visitors to the National Park to use local services and facilities and buy locally produced goods.

Introduction

8.1 Providing for the social and economic needs of the residents of Exmoor is a fundamental part of the National Park Authority's role. Whilst it is still not a statutory purpose, the maintenance of the economic and social well-being of the Exmoor community is vital if the two statutory purposes of landscape conservation and public enjoyment are to be achieved.

8.2 It is Government policy that development plans and planning applications should take account of strengthening rural communities by encouraging new employment, facilitating an adequate supply of housing, and underpinning services and community facilities.¹²⁶ The key, therefore, to ensuring that the needs of Exmoor's communities are properly catered for is the adoption of a sympathetic planning framework that promotes suitable employment opportunities and affordable housing but also supports the protection and provision of community services and facilities such as schools, shops, village halls, health services, library and information services, public houses, banks, public transport, play and sports facilities. Adequate provision and easy access to these services is of vital importance to the quality of life in remote rural communities.

8.3 Market conditions will dictate the level of many of these services, and areas like Exmoor, which have a low and dispersed population, will inevitably have difficulty in supporting the full range of facilities which exist in less remote, more populated areas, particularly in times of economic difficulty. Although nearly half of Exmoor's population is concentrated in the larger centres of Lynton/Lynmouth, Porlock and Dulverton, even these settlements have experienced declines in services, particularly shops, and this pattern has been exacerbated by additional factors such as high business rates, changes in population and shopping patterns.

8.4 The 'Planning for Real' consultations demonstrated the importance people attached to, and their reliance on, the remaining local services. Their retention is essential to the well-being of local communities, particularly for people who are unable to drive or do not have access to private transport. The Plan should therefore seek to protect and improve these remaining services in order to strengthen Exmoor's rural communities and to reduce the need to travel.

8.5 Although the National Park Authority is not responsible for providing this range of needed community services and facilities there is much that it can do, primarily through the planning system where land use issues are involved, for example by supporting proposals for new facilities and resisting changes that may damage existing ones.

8.6 Additionally, the Rural Development Programme provides a vehicle for joint action with other agencies (particularly the Countryside Agency) which can provide advice, financial support and partnership schemes such as the National Park Authority's network of 'Village Information Points' which aims to increase the viability of village shops by promoting them as important sources of information for both visitors and residents. The viability of many community facilities can be improved in this way (e.g. public transport) and the dual use of such services will be encouraged by the National Park Authority. Similarly, a coordinated approach which encourages joint use of buildings or vehicles can often reduce costs and help provide a better standard and range of services than would otherwise be possible.

8.7 The Local Plan policies of this chapter aim to achieve the Exmoor National Park Management Plan and Local Plan objectives where they are directly related to development issues.

Local Plan Policies

Protecting and Supporting Services and Facilities

8.8 Although the major public services such as education and health have traditionally been provided by public bodies, other facilities such as public transport, recreation and playgroups have often been provided by the communities themselves, through self-help and voluntary initiatives. Many Parish Councils have been able to organise facilities such as new sports fields, children's playgrounds, village halls, village car parks and public toilets, that have attracted support and financial assistance from Local Authorities and other bodies.

8.9 Areas identified on the Settlement Inset Maps for community related development during the life of the Local Plan will be safeguarded for this purpose. Such sites are the subject of definite proposals, either for village halls, playgrounds or extensions to school sites as requested by the Education Authority.

Providing for Community Services and Facilities

8.10 Government guidance states that local planning authorities can facilitate provision and help retain existing services by assessing the nature and extent of rural needs and promoting mixed and multi-purpose uses.¹²⁷ A co-ordinated approach which encourages joint use of buildings can often reduce costs and help provide a better standard and range of services than would otherwise be possible. In some Exmoor communities, very often a single building, usually a hotel or public house but sometimes a petrol filling station, provides additional functions such as the sale of convenience goods and a limited postal service. It may be the case on Exmoor that in the remoter settlements this will be the way such facilities continue to be provided. Initiatives outlined in 'The Rural White Paper' encourage the sharing of facilities to retain and increase viability of a greater range of services in rural areas. The National Park Authority supports the principle of the joint use of public buildings.

8.11 During the last 20 years declining school rolls and cost factors have led to the closure of many rural schools. Although a population up-turn in the late eighties helped to slow down this loss the threat of closure for the smaller and remoter schools on Exmoor is still a very real issue and Winsford first school was closed in 1996.

¹²⁷ para. 3.23, op. cit

8.12 Somerset Education Authority has also indicated that in order to meet statutory requirements, the first schools at Wheddon Cross (Cutcombe School) and Dunster require additional land for playing field use. There are also problems with the existing access and insufficient parking space at Cutcombe School. Specific areas of land have been identified for these requirements and the sites are safeguarded in this Local Plan. Community services and facilities which are known will be required in the life of this Plan are identified on the Settlement Inset Maps.

Providing for Community Services and Facilities

POLICY CSF1

Proposals to provide local community services and facilities are listed in Chapter 13 and shown in the Settlement Inset Maps. The allocated sites will be safeguarded from any form of permanent development other than for these purposes. Other proposals for community related development will also be permitted where compatible with National Park purposes.

Protecting Community Services and Facilities

8.13 The loss of community services and facilities such as shops and post offices in Exmoor's settlements is an issue of particular concern for local communities emphasised by responses at 'Planning for Real' events.

8.14 Regional Planning Guidance (RPG10)¹²⁸ states that Local Authorities should support the retention of local retail, healthcare and leisure facilities so as to minimise the need to travel, and to foster the integrated delivery of services at the local level. National Government guidance also encourages the retention of rural services to ensure that rural communities are not disadvantaged. People who live in rural areas should have access to a reasonable range of services.¹²⁹ The Government's Rural White Paper¹³⁰ emphasised the importance of retaining village services and proposed a number of measures to assist in their viability. The Business Rate Relief scheme has now been extended to cover public houses and garages where they are the sole such businesses in a rural settlement.

8.15 Although car ownership has increased there is still a significant proportion of households with no car (17% in Exmoor National Park)¹³¹, and accessibility to services is a concern in a remote rural area such as Exmoor where many people are less able to travel to larger settlements to shop and to access other services. The financial viability of community services is very often marginal and small changes in circumstances can result in the loss of the facility.

8.16 In some of the more popular settlements for visitors, such as Dunster and Lynmouth, existing retail outlets cater more for the tourist trade than for local residents. This has created a source of continuing inconvenience and dissatisfaction to residents and contributes to traffic problems experienced in such villages. Controls over existing retail uses are limited but there may be valid reasons for restricting the spread of retail development, for example, traffic congestion, parking problems and adverse effects on the historic character of settlements. A specific core retail area is shown on the Settlement Inset Map for Dunster and Policy CSF4(DUN) included in Chapter 13 to confine further retail development to the central area to prevent conflict with the residential areas of the village. In addition,

¹²⁸ Tran,7 Regional Planning Guidance for the South West, (RPG10) 2001 Government Office for the South West

¹²⁹ para. 3.23, PPG7 (revised): The Countryside - Environmental Quality & Economic and Social Development, 1997, DoE

¹³⁰ Our Countryside: the Future, A Fair Deal for Rural England, CM 4909, 2000, DETR, MAFF

¹³¹ Census of Population, 1991, Office of National Statistics

support for vital services in the smaller settlements will be exercised through the National Park Authority's management and planning functions.

8.17 The Plan seeks to protect community services and facilities. Policies differentiate between commercial and non-commercial community services and facilities because they cannot be subject to the same viability test.

Commercial Community Services and Facilities

8.18 Policy CSF2 seeks to protect commercial community services and facilities including shops, post offices, banks, pubs, petrol filling stations, pharmacies and private medical establishments which fall within the categories of A1, A2, A3, and D1 of the Use Classes Order 1987. Historically, the National Park has lost and continues to lose services such as shops. Even in the bigger settlements where there may be a number of other shops, the National Park Authority seeks their retention as they provide benefits to the community including employment which are lost if they are given a change of use to residential, for example. Once a change of use is permitted they are very unlikely to become shops once again. Closure of a facility cannot be prevented since this matter is not controlled by planning legislation. However, the National Park Authority can seek to control change of use and, to this end, Policy CSF2 sets out criteria and a test of viability to enable the National Park Authority to assess a number of factors when determining a proposal for a change of use which will result in the loss of a facility. Where a change of use for such a facility is proposed applicants should be aware that the community may wish to consider taking over the business to be run as a community led-enterprise as at Wootton Courtenay Villagers' Stores. Such initiatives and alternative approaches can enable a facility to remain open. The viability test set out in Policy CSF2 requires marketing for a minimum period of 12 months. This time may have the added benefit of allowing communities time to develop community led proposals.

8.19 The viability tests set out below are adapted from the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) Public House Viability Test. In considering applications for the change of use of a site or building used for a commercial community service/facility under Policy CSF2, the National Park Authority will assess whether or not it considers they can be made viable with regard to the following checklist:-

- The viability of the business through any business plan;
- The location of the facility (in terms of whether it lies within a Local Rural Centre, Village or in the open countryside);
- The catchment area of the facility;
- The population of the Parish(es) where the facility is located or which it serves;
- Whether there are any other facilities offering a similar range of goods in the same or adjoining parish;
- Whether there is new development planned in the parish which could potentially increase patronage;
- Whether the facility is in a location well visited by tourists and visitors;
- Whether the facility is included in any marketing literature or tourist guides;
- Whether, in principle, the site can accommodate building extensions;
- Whether the facility is well maintained;
- The accessibility of the facility: the availability and frequency of the public or community transport services in the area; whether there is sufficient car parking and the classification of the road the facility lies on.

8.20 In relation to Clause (b) of Policy CSF2 the marketing steps and evidence that the National Park Authority would require include the following:-

- The applicant/owner has advertised the premises on site and in local newspapers, estate/property agents and, where appropriate, the District Council's sites and premises register; through the South West of England Regional Development Agency and otherwise as requested by the National Park Authority.
- If the applicant/owner is considered to be a willing seller and has failed to provide a willing buyer/occupier in the first three months of marketing they have re-advertised the premises in the aforementioned publications at three-month intervals.
- The applicant/owner has provided the National Park Authority with advertisement details, including sales particulars with a guide price to reflect the market value of the site/building(s).
- The National Park Authority has been provided with written evidence of all enquiries received and the reasons why potential buyers/occupiers found the site/buildings unsuitable.

Commercial Community Services and Facilities

POLICY CSF2

Proposals for the change of use of land or buildings from commercial community services or facilities will not be permitted unless:

- (i) A suitable replacement service or facility is available within convenient distance; or***
- (ii) The use of the site/building for commercial community service/facility purposes cannot be continued or be made viable in the longer term.***

In respect of (i), planning conditions or obligations will be used to ensure that the alternative provision is secured at an appropriate time in relation to the redevelopment of the site/building.

In respect of (ii), applicants will have to provide evidence to justify their application and demonstrate that:-

- (a) All opportunities of grant funding and financial support to help retain the commercial community service or facility on the site or premises have been fully explored; and***
- (b) Reasonable attempts have been made at marketing the premises for a similar commercial community service or facility for a minimum 12 month period.***

Non-Commercial Community Services and Facilities

8.21 It was evident from responses at the 'Planning for Real' events that many people wanted a whole range of community services/facilities protected which included the retention of non-commercial, community services and facilities, such as village halls, schools and play areas in their villages and towns. Policy CSF3 therefore seeks the protection of these services and facilities.

8.22 Policy CSF3 relates to non-commercial community services and facilities. The National Park Authority will apply this policy in respect of change of use applications where the existing use includes the following: doctors' surgeries; police or fire stations; schools; sports facilities; childrens' play areas; dentists; village halls; churches and chapels. Where a facility is proposed for a change of use, the National Park Authority will seek the re-use to be of benefit to the local community.

Policy CSF3

Proposals for the change of use of land or buildings used for non-commercial community services or facilities will not be permitted where this would adversely affect the social or economic well-being of the local community unless:

- (i) A suitable replacement service or facility is to be made available within convenient distance; or*
- (ii) It can be demonstrated that there is a surplus of similar services or facilities serving the same area;*
or
- (iii) It can be demonstrated that there is not a need for the service or facility in the longer term.*

In respect of (i) planning conditions or obligations will be used to ensure that the alternative provision is secured at an appropriate time in relation to the redevelopment of the site/building.

In respect of (ii) and (iii) applicants will have to provide evidence to justify their application and demonstrate that all opportunities of grant funding and financial support to help retain the non-commercial community service or facility have been fully explored.

Shops Outside Settlements

8.23 Farm shops selling local produce can also provide for the needs of the local population where a village shop may not be viable. However, it is important for the National Park Authority to be able to control retail development in the open countryside, particularly as proposals for such development are now more likely to occur as a result of agricultural diversification.

POLICY CSF4

Proposals for new shopping facilities outside the recognised settlements will only be permitted where they comprise:

- i) sale of crafts and goods made on site;*
- ii) shops which are ancillary to farms and visitor attractions, camping and caravan sites.*

Provision of New Health Facilities

8.24 The health needs of the National Park community are relatively well provided for considering the dispersed nature of the population. The last decade has seen an increase in the number of GPs in rural practices, although practices have tended to become larger and consequently more centralised. However, the three Local Rural Centres have either health centres or joint practices and 46% of parishes have a GP or visiting surgery. Lynton also has a community resource centre providing a 24 hour minor injuries unit and a six bed unit in co-operation with social services.

8.25 There are currently proposals for a new Doctor's Surgery at Porlock for which planning permission has been granted. The Dulverton Surgery is presently inadequate in terms of its size and has accessibility problems. The practice is actively looking for a new central site within the Town for new premises. The health centre in Lynton is also inadequate and as a result the primary care team is actively engaged in seeking new accommodation. Changes in health provision and future needs of the population may well result in additional proposals which will have land use implications. Many local communities have expressed concern over the inadequacy of emergency ambulance cover, and although there is one station in the Park at Lynton, the Dulverton area has to rely on cover from Tiverton, Taunton or Minehead which are at least 25 minutes away. An ambulance stationed at Dulverton would be able to service the southern part of the National Park and would be particularly beneficial for incidents in the remoter parts of the moor. Proposals for such a service will be supported and the National Park Authority will co-operate in the location of suitable sites and premises.

8.26 During the 1980s and 1990s, national Government policy was to move away from care in large institutions to provide health care within the community. This resulted in a need for additional day care facilities and small community homes to meet the needs of those people with specialist care requirements. Such a home has been provided in Dulverton, and although there may be problems in finding suitable premises, such provision is essential for improving quality of life and is part of Somerset County Council's strategy for the rehabilitation of long term residential patients.

Provision of New Health Facilities

POLICY CSF5

Proposals for new health and social care facilities to meet local requirements will be permitted provided satisfactory provision for access and parking can be made.

8.27 The combination of attractive environment, availability of suitable premises and a high proportion of elderly residents has resulted in a relatively high demand for residential nursing and retirement homes within the National Park. Although the pressure on existing health and social services is greatly increased by such developments, planning considerations are limited to amenity and environmental impacts.

8.28 Generally, proposals for retirement homes have involved the change of use of existing buildings, the main issue of concern being additional traffic generation and provision of car parking spaces. However, proposals in Lynton and Lynmouth in particular, have often involved the loss of existing hotel accommodation which has led to concern over the effect on the tourism industry, the main economic base of these resorts.

8.29 When considering proposals under Policy CSF6, the need for local housing covered in Chapter Four of the plan should be considered. Where a local need exists, the National Park Authority will expect proposals to meet these needs as a priority. Other proposals should not jeopardise opportunities to re-use buildings for local needs housing to benefit the community.

Residential Institutions

POLICY CSF6

In considering development proposals for residential institutions the Authority will have regard to the effect on the character and appearance of the locality, residential amenity, local housing needs and the adequacy of access and parking arrangements. The Authority will also take account, where relevant, of any adverse effect on the interests of tourism caused by the loss of visitor accommodation.