

South Hams & West Devon village sustainability assessment framework – summary of consultation responses

During this consultation 53 responses were received. These ranged in scale and scope, from one or two lines to numerous pages. Some focussed only on a single service or facility within a specified settlement, others delved deep into the very essence of what defines a rural community

Village networks

A number of responses wanted to know how housing numbers could be addressed if more than one settlement was identified within a neighbourhood plan area, and particularly if one of the settlements would not be considered sustainable in its own right.

The purpose of the village sustainability assessment is to inform the JLP development strategy – where the most sustainable settlements will be expected to deliver a proportionate amount of new homes.

Whilst the sustainability appraisal will provide an objective assessment of each settlement, it will not in itself identify definitive housing figures. The assessment scores will result in an indicative housing figure for settlement, subject to local circumstances being applied. For instance, if a settlement has been identified as being sustainable, with a good level of services and facilities, it is reasonable to expect a moderate amount of new housing. However, if that settlement is surrounded by a sensitive landscape, and few if any suitable sites can be found, it may be appropriate to look how the housing requirement could be met elsewhere. If a neighbouring settlement is not considered as sustainable, but is not as visually sensitive, has deliverable sites identified and is connected to the bigger settlement by footpaths and/or public transport, then it may well be appropriate to meet the housing need in the less sustainable settlement. As is often the case in planning matters, it depends on the balance of impacts and benefits unique to the local circumstances.

It is agreed therefore that there can be some flexibility applied in how housing is delivered, providing that the overall housing figure identified can be met, and that there is a clear relationship between the settlements in question.

Rural communities

A number of responses did point out that the presence of a community facility was only one part of understanding how sustainable a community is, the other half coming from committed community groups to put these facilities to best use. We agree with this entirely, and in many instances an

active rural community will make far more of limited resources than in a town where some facilities can be underused.

This assessment provides an objective assessment of services and facilities, and to measure the activity and effectiveness of community groups in each settlement would simply be too subjective and onerous for an exercise of this type. The nature of community groups is that they can often ebb and flow depending on the level and type of interest within a community, making the accuracy of such an assessment variable at best.

Designated landscapes

There were a number of responses that felt that landscape designations should be included within the assessment. It is understood that this will clearly be a consideration when it comes to the delivery of new development, although the impact of each specific site will vary from settlement to settlement. Whilst the AONB designation benefits from having the highest weight of policy protection, this does not mean that all parts of the AONB have the same characteristics or levels of sensitivity.

The nature of this exercise is to provide a starting point for discussion for neighbourhood plan groups, who can then apply local considerations to the assessment score. In some locations there will be a number of available sites that could be phased to deliver higher levels of housing than identified by the assessment, and these places will benefit from the associated levels of investment in community facilities. Other locations may be more constrained, and may be able to evidence that sufficient sites are not available to meet the identified housing growth. There will be opportunities for all NP groups to interpret the settlement assessment and tailor the assessment to their local evidence base.

Quality of broadband signal

Numerous responses suggested that a qualitative assessment of broadband speeds be taken into consideration, rather a simple yes/no assessment.

All broadband information has been taken from the following Ofcom website, which shows the deployment of superfast broadband across Devon & Somerset:

<https://www.connectingdevonandsomerset.co.uk/where-when/>

For an assessment of this scale and scope, it is unrealistic to expect current broadband speeds to be assessed at individual addresses throughout the 70+ villages. The speed of connection is also subject to a number of variables outside the control of the broadband provider, and this will inevitably result in diminished speeds, but should not unduly affect the overall sustainability score of the settlement as a whole.

It was proposed that there be some intermediate grading of the quality of broadband signal, and this will be incorporated into the assessment.

Quality of mobile signal

Numerous responses suggested that a qualitative assessment of mobile signal be taken into consideration, rather a simple yes/no assessment.

For an assessment of this scale and scope, it is unrealistic to expect mobile signals from all suppliers to be assessed at individual addresses throughout the 70+ villages.

The information used has been supplied by Ofcom, rather than the network suppliers themselves, and as such should be considered to be objective and impartial.

<http://maps.ofcom.org.uk/check-coverage/>

Access to a train line

A number of respondents questioned why this facility had been included given that no villages in West Devon benefit from a train station. There are in fact 2 villages that are served by trains on the Tamar Valley line, both Bere Alston and Bere Ferrers. Given the location of these villages on the Bere peninsula, and the variable nature of the road network to Plymouth, the rail link makes a significant contribution to connecting the local population to the services and facilities of Plymouth.

The village sustainability assessment is intended to be used across the rural areas of the Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan area, and as such there are bound to be some facilities that may relate to some areas and not others.

Character of settlement

A number of responses requested that more attention be paid to the character of the settlement, including recognition of historic buildings and the quality of the surrounding landscape. Whilst it is acknowledged that many of our rural settlements benefit from a high quality built environment, the nature of this exercise is not designed to measure all aspects of the settlement, particularly those of a subjective nature.

In planning terms the presence of heritage assets and a historic village do not in themselves impact on the sustainability of a settlement.

Rural services

It was also suggested that we recognise a wider range of services specific to rural areas, such as a vet or a rural showground

The nature of this assessment is to identify our most sustainable settlements, not to produce an exhaustive list of all rural services, and it is right that the assessment continues to focus on services and facilities found within our rural settlements, rather than those that may be required in isolated parts of the countryside.

Distance from main settlements

A number of responses requested that proximity to larger settlements be taken into account.

Given that this assessment is intended to add a layer of understanding to the South Hams and West Devon settlement hierarchy, it is agreed that a criterion that recognises distances between settlements would add an extra layer of understanding to the assessment.

Where there is some variation of opinion is how these distances are used. One school of thought suggests that the further away from Area Centres the less sustainable all settlements get.

Conversely, it could be argued that if a village with a good level of services is distant from an area centre, it should assume greater importance given the reliance on the surrounding network of

villages, and should be the focus of a greater level of growth to ensure that these valuable services can be sustained.

We are proposing to measure the distance, by road, to the nearest settlement that is higher up the settlement hierarchy – so for our rural villages this will either be a Local Centre, Area Centre, or in a few instances the City of Plymouth.

Quality of the road network

A number of responses proposed that the rural road network needed to also be considered, in order to understand how a settlement connects to its surroundings.

We agree that the nature of our dispersed communities does require a greater understanding of the road network to inform the assessment framework. We are suggesting that settlements within 3 mile of the 'A' road network can be considered better connected than settlements at a greater distance.

Access to walking and cycling networks

This divided opinion somewhat, although some responses seemed to be based on a misunderstanding of what constitutes a 'safe' walking and cycling route.

Whilst it is acknowledged that many rural roads can be used for walking and cycling, many cannot be considered 'safe', on the basis that visibility is often severely constrained, and very few rural roads are lit at night.

Suitable walking infrastructure would require access to village services by either footpath and/or pavements that are lit, and/or secure on the basis that they cannot also be used by motor vehicles.

In terms of cycling infrastructure, there are very 'cycle paths' in our rural areas that provide segregated routes for cycling only. However, there are a number of routes promoted as part of the National Cycle Network by Sustrans. Before a route is promoted a degree of audit has taken place to determine if the route can be considered 'safe' for cyclists of a variety of ages, experience and ability.

Consolidating local services

A handful of responses suggested that many rural communities have proactively responded to the loss of some services by combining some functions under the same roof – such as a village pub also operating a shop and/or post office, often on a part-time basis. There was some suggestion that services co-located in the same building should only score once.

This assessment does not require the village shop, post office, café etc to be located in an independent building, but instead is seeking to identify the services that are provided for the benefit of each community. If these services are co-located in the same building they will still be scored individually, recognising the different services that are available.

Sewerage Infrastructure

A number of responses suggested that an assessment of sewerage infrastructure should be undertaken. Whilst this type of infrastructure could determine the extent to which a settlement could expand, most facilities in rural areas can be expanded or upgraded to accommodate the levels of growth associated with rural villages.

Village car parks

Some responses felt that the ability to park within a village was an important facility to be able to access the services and facilities available. We agree with this suggestion, and have included it in the revised assessment framework.

The consultation identified a list of proposed criteria. Specific comments relating to each of these are identified below. This will be followed by details of how the assessment framework is proposed to be amended.

Facility	Comments	Response
Fire Station	There was little expectation that this facility should be located within a rural village. The overwhelming consensus was to remove this criteria.	Remove from the village assessment framework
Police Station	There was little expectation that this facility should be located within a rural village. The overwhelming consensus was to remove this criteria	Remove from the village assessment framework
Ambulance Station	There was little expectation that this facility should be located within a rural village. The overwhelming consensus was to remove this criteria	Remove from the village assessment framework
Dentist	There was little expectation that this facility should be located within a rural village. The overwhelming consensus was to remove this criteria	Remove from the village assessment framework
Health Centre	This was recognised as contributing to the sustainability of a rural settlement, although there was limited expectation that a health centre would be situated in a rural village.	Recognise that this facility was not expected to be available in villages, although some facilities do exist. Retain with a lower weighting.
Primary School	This was recognised by most respondents as making a significant contribution to village sustainability.	Retain within the village assessment framework, and remain as a highest priority.
Village Shop	Most responses agreed that this was an important facility. Some responses suggested that post office and shop be combined	Retain within the village assessment framework, and increase the weighting to reflect highest priority.
Post Office	More than one response proposed that the assessment	Retain within the assessment, and keep at a medium weighting.

	is flexible enough to recognise some part-time rural services.	
Community buildings / Civic space	These were recognised as being important facilities, promoting social cohesion and wellbeing.	
Outdoor / indoor play area, recreation facility	Considered by the majority of respondents to be of importance to rural communities.	Retain within the assessment and keep at a medium weighting.
Commercial bus service	There was some criticism that in some instances a commercial bus service could exist on one day a week only, and that this should be reflected in the scoring.	Retain within the assessment, and reduce to a lower weighting.
Bus service that links to Area Centre before 9am and after 5pm	The quality of bus service was considered to be more important than simply having a commercially operated route. Enabling access to employment on a daily basis being much more useful than a once or twice weekly service.	Retain within the assessment and keep at a medium weighting.
Community transport / ring and ride	This was recognised as playing an important role, particularly for older people who do not have access to a private vehicle, or are no longer able to drive.	Retain within the assessment and keep at a medium weighting.
Local employment centre / large local employer	There was a mixed set of opinions regarding this criterion. On balance a large local employer is likely to offer some benefits to a community and reduce travel, although it is accepted that there is no correlation between having a large employer and where the workforce comes from.	Retain within the assessment and keep at a medium weighting.
Train station	A number of responses incorrectly asserted that there no train stations serving villages in West Devon. This is not the case. Two stations serve villages in West Devon – Bere Alston and Bere Ferrers, and the presence of the train service into Plymouth not only serves as a valuable alternative mode of transport, but also	Retain within the assessment, and keep at a medium weighting

	saves numerous car journeys every day.	
Internet service	There was almost unanimous support for giving this service a much higher weighting.	Retain within the village assessment framework, and increase the weighting to reflect highest priority. Grade the scoring depending on the level of service.
Mobile coverage	There was widespread acknowledgment that mobile reception was very variable across the rural areas, and that service levels were difficult to assess.	Retain within the village assessment framework, and increase keep at a medium weighting. Grade the scoring depending on the level of service.
Petrol Station	Whilst it is acknowledged that very few villages have this facility, access to a petrol station in rural areas does prevent additional journeys into Local/Area Centres.	Retain within the assessment, and retain as a lower weighting.
Chemist	This criterion did not attract a lot of comment, but those who did comment felt that it was beneficial to a village to be able to access a chemist/dispensary as it reduced reliance on larger settlements. It was also acknowledged that there is little expectation of a village having a chemist.	Retain within the assessment, and move to a lower weighting.
Library	The broad consensus was to remove 'library' and replace with 'mobile library', as this was much more relevant to rural areas.	Remove for the assessment framework, and replace with 'mobile library' which should be afforded the lower weighting.
Cash point	Contrasting responses to this criterion, from removing altogether due to the cashless society we now live in, to giving it the highest weighting as it reduces travel to larger settlements and many small rural businesses don't have card machines for small transactions.	Retain within the assessment, and increase to a middle weighting, reflecting the specific reliance on cashpoints in rural areas.
Hotel/B&Bs	Many respondents questioned the contribution made to the sustainability of a village by the presence of a hotel or B&B. Despite the limited	Remove from the settlement assessment.

	contribution these facilities made to the local economy, this opinion is acknowledged, and we agree that including this facility could skew the overall assessment of sustainability.	
Pub/café	The importance of this facility to social wellbeing was felt to be of importance to many respondents, with some proposing to put this in the highest weighting. It is acknowledged that the function of this facility does provide more than the lower weighting, and the role of this facility in supporting social interactions is acknowledged.	Retain within the assessment and increase to the highest weighting.
Community greenspace / orchards / allotments / community woodland	Access to greenspace is often a reason why many people chose to live in rural areas, and retaining these areas for community access promotes health and wellbeing. The qualitative impacts of these facilities prompted many respondents to ask for a higher weighting.	Retain within the assessment, and move to a medium weighting.
Cycle paths / PRow	Most respondents agreed that this provision was important to rural communities. Some suggested that a higher weighting should be afforded, and it is agreed that some grading needs to be afforded between prominent, designated and promoted routes, and local and/or disjointed footpath connections.	Retain within the village assessment framework, and increase keep at a medium weighting. Grade the scoring depending on the level of provision, recognising NCN routes and promoted walking routes as the higher scoring.
Place or Worship	This was recognised as playing an important role in community life, particularly with reference to the range of functions that many churches have adapted to provide.	Retain within the assessment, and keep at the lower weighting.

The following was proposed for inclusion on the list of services and facilities:

Criterion to be added to the assessment framework		
Distance from the A road network	This criterion provides a better understanding of how easy it is for our rural communities to access the highway network, and provides a degree of understanding of how 'B' and minor roads impact on general accessibility	Insert at a medium weighting
Distance from an Area or Local Centre	This criterion provides a better understanding of how a settlement fits within the wider hierarchy, and the distance at which a wider range of facilities can be accessed.	Insert at a medium weighting
Village car park	This facility can often help people to stop and access local services and facilities, particularly when routes through a settlement are of a narrow width and can be prone to blockage.	Insert a low weighting
Pre-school	This facility often reduces the need for additional journeys, and can help build relationships with local schools. It also helps to develop children's understanding and connection with their local settlement.	Insert at a low weighting

Revised assessment framework

Following consideration of the responses that were received following the consultation, a revised assessment framework has been created. The framework reflects the qualitative nature of the responses received, and not necessarily the quantity of responses.

The assessment framework has changed considerably, most notably in the weighting of specific criteria, with the highest weighting now being attached to the services and facilities that our rural communities have said are most important to them. The full list of the revised criteria and weighting is shown below:

High weight (3 points)		
Village shop	Internet	Education facility
Pub	Community Building	

Medium weight (2 points)		
Post Office	Within 5 miles of higher level settlement	Within 3 miles of A road network
Outdoor/indoor/recreation/sport	Cash point	Train station
Ring & Ride/community transport	Local employment area	Public transport access to Area Centre (pre-9am, post 5pm)
Community greenspace (orchard/allotment/woodland)	Public Rights of Way, promoted cycle paths	Mobile coverage
Low weight (1 point)		
Commercial bus service	Petrol station	Chemist
Mobile library	Health centre	Village car park/parking facilities
Pre-school	Place of worship	

It was suggested by a number of consultation responses that a grading within the scoring system would provide an adequate response when a simple 'yes' or 'no' is not arrived at easily. This is accepted and a traffic light scoring system has been used within the assessment framework, which identifies a half score for some facilities where provision is part-time, or not clearly defined enough to provide a definitive yes or no.

A guide to assessment scoring

Some of the criteria that may result in an intermediate score, rather than a definitive yes or no, are as follows:

Internet connection

This was a much debated criterion during the consultation. Some people insisted that only superfast broadband should be scored, others tried to define a bandwidth threshold or download speeds that could be considered acceptable. The definition of 'superfast' is a download speed of over 24Mbps, by the 'Connecting Devon & Somerset' initiative, and it seeks to deliver this standard of service 'to 100% of premises by 2020'. The assessment score has been based on the deployment of superfast broadband. It should be noted that this is measured up to the point of exchange, and many variables depend on the download speeds between the exchange and individual dwellings. In reality many users could experience lower download speeds, even though the ['Where and When'](#) interactive map shows superfast broadband as being available. The assessment may grade an intermediate score of a settlement is not entirely covered in 'green', or for areas if a level of service cannot be fully assessed. Areas consider to be 'Out of Programme' or 'Under Evaluation' will score no points.

Mobile coverage

There are numerous variables within this section, with 4 different network operators, 4 different levels of service standard and 3 different types of service identified by Ofcom. This assessment uses Outdoor Voice Calls only, and an intermediate score will be identified if less than 2 of the networks are considered good, but whilst still ensuring more than 2 networks provide a service better than 'poor'.

Given the proliferation of available communications methods via either broadband or landlines, it was considered that to measure indoor levels of service for mobiles would be superfluous and repetitive.

Village Shop / Post Office

An intermediate score would be given to each of these facilities if they were not available on a full-time basis.

Distance from higher level settlement and 'A' road network.

This has been mapped using rural roads, and where roads and settlements are at the upper end of the threshold, an intermediate score has been assigned. The constraints of rural roads are well understood, but often road capacity is confused with poor driving decisions, that see too many cars trying to squeeze into passing places designed for single vehicles only, compounding the problem of limited passing space. That does not presuppose that all rural road networks are the same, and there are some stretches that have very few passing places, and that experience above average traffic movements.

Local Employment Area / Large Local Employer

This criterion does not place an expectation on the employer to be the place of work for all local residents, but does recognise that a range employment opportunities will come up from time to time that will meet the needs of some of the local community. There is not a direct correlation between this criterion and the local population, but does recognise that some potential benefits exist, and that where local people can work with a local employer there are reductions in work based travel. There is no threshold applied, but a local employment estate or units are recognised as providing employment opportunities, and so are large single employers/businesses.

Community Greenspace

This could include anything from allotments, community orchards and community woodland, where the asset is accessible to the wider public, and where there are benefits gained from food production or access to the natural environment.

Public Rights of Way / Cycle paths

This recognises a network of footpaths that offers alternatives to walking on the rural road network, ideally enhancing access to local services and/or other settlements. Access to nationally promoted routes are also recognised, such as the SW Coast Path. Sustrans promoted cycle routes are also recognised in this category.

Car Park / Parking

As with the criterion above, the facility needs to be available for all members of the public to use. This rules out the use of pub car parks. A number of village hall car parks have been recognised in this category. The facility does not have to be a formal car park, but non-allocated parking spaces in proximity to local services are counted.

What next?

The assessment framework is only as good as the information that is contained within it. It would be helpful if neighbourhood plan groups and parish councils look at the initial assessment scores that have been provided, and confirm that they agree with the assessment. If not, it would be useful if a revised assessment score could be provided, along with an explanation of how and why you feel the score should be revised.

This is particularly pertinent to the newly added criteria of village car park and pre-school, but also to any of the other criterion that may have changed in recent times. Desktop analysis has been used to inform the initial study, and this may vary in accuracy across the Joint Local Plan area.

It would also be useful if groups could let us know if you think we have omitted any potentially sustainable settlement from the list.

Parish Councils and Neighbourhood Plan groups should review the assessment score and return comments to the JLP Team by the 9th December. Please note that we are not looking to amend the assessment framework any more, but are only focussing on the accurate assessment of settlements.

Any proposed variations may result in a discussion with the respective neighbourhood plan group or parish council before the assessment score is agreed.