Local Character Submission Report

A report on the process used to identify, assess and protect aspects of the local character of the Plan Area when development is planned.

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Why we have produced this summary

This is a summary report covering the work carried out during 2015 and 2016 to assess the local character of the Neighbourhood Plan Area to identify features and assets that the community would like to protect, and the design principles that should influence future development so that it enhances and contributes to the local character rather than detracts.

The results of this work form the evidence base supporting the policies that implement key elements of the Town's Vision and Aims

- "Our heritage will be respected and safeguarded – including the town's attractive historic centre, its beautiful landscape setting and open spaces, as well as the rural character of the rest of the Parish".
- "Development here will have been achieved in a sustainable way that has retained and enhanced the strong sense of community"

Related Aims:

- To safeguard the overall traditional, rural character of the town and its outlying settlements, whilst recognising that there will be opportunities and locations where modern designs can add positively to this character
- To safeguard the enjoyment of views, trees and spaces that are particularly valued by the community and contribute to the character if the area
- To protect and conserve the locally important buildings, walls and other features that contribute to the character or understanding of the history of the town
- To make sure new development is designed to a high standard and positively reinforces local character.

Key general Policies that apply across the Plan Area relating to these aims are:

Policy 5. Open space provision and standards in new developments
Policy 8. Design and character of buildings and their settings
Policy 9. Important views and landscape sensitivity
Policy 10. Important local buildings
Policy 11. Important Open Spaces and Local Green Spaces
Policy 12. Trees in the landscape

Additional policies relating to the character of specific areas within the Plan Area are:

Policy 15. Town centre area character
Policy 21. Bath Road and Old Market Area character
Policy 26. Honeymead and Northfields character
Policy 31. Rixon and eastern fringe character
Policy 34. Southern Fringe character
Policy 37. Rural settlements character: Newton, Glue Hill and Broad Oak
Policy 38. Rural areas countryside character

This work required a significant volunteer project that was run with the help of Matrix Partnership. Matrix built upon its previous significant involvement with the town in 2008 with the Town Design Statement (TDS) and the Station Road brief. The TDS was adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document in 2008.

Using Matrix as Design Consultants

The Town Council engaged Matrix as consultants, to assist the volunteer team to implement a robust approach for identifying features of the town and surrounding area that contribute to its local character and could be protected and enhanced through the Neighbourhood Plan. The need to do this was strongly supported by the community in the launch in March 2014 and subsequent consultation that November, where comments showed that many local residents felt that there is a strong sense of community in the older and more established areas of the town, but this was less so in the newer large-scale estates build in this century.

Matrix November 2014 consultation report "The result of this question [giving examples of styles of housing developments, and asking local residents to write down what they liked and disliked and why] gives an interesting insight on the public view on the character of new development. …. Even more revealing is the fact that the type of development that typifies so much recent development in Sturminster Newton receives the lowest score, notably what might be termed the standard volume house builder type. Essential features may be traditional, but the lack of individuality and variety, repetitive layout types, poor design and use of often limited open space and minimal acknowledgement of local themes suggest issues that may lie behind this result."

The first step in determining appropriate guidance for inclusion in the plan, was to review the published information to identify existing designations / character areas and features and decide the relevant focus of assessment criteria that may be relevant to formulating possible policy guidance / considerations on local character. From this work they concluded that there was a lot of relevant material providing important baseline material (see **Appendix 1**). However, what they also advised was that some areas would benefit from the support of further baseline information, such as open spaces, buildings, views, trees and local character, and a broader-brush appraisal of the character of the rural areas.

Adding detail to the character elements

The next step was to establish agreed criteria and method for undertaking a desk and site-based assessment to confirm what makes the different character areas locally distinctive and important, and oversee the assessment of local character and mapping of key features.

Four categories were identified that Matrix advised work could be undertaken by volunteers that would encapsulate the local character of the area: Views, Trees, Important Buildings and Open Spaces. In addition to this, Matrix also undertook a general character assessment of the rural area, to provide a comparable (but lighter touch) version of the TDS for the rural area.

Matrix considered the possible criteria for evaluating the importance of these features, and set out checklists for the volunteers and guidance leaflets to help them conduct the field work. The data was collected and entered into maps and spreadsheets for analysis. The volunteer teams then reviewed the data, moderated the scores and addressed anomalies in the information recorded. Photographs were taken to evidence the feature or asset.

The results of this work were exhibited in the November 2015 consultation event on large-scale A1 maps with the detailed data printed and displayed next to the maps. Comments were collated regarding the trees, buildings, open spaces and views in questionnaires. The results were then used to update the data – some items were added, some removed and others corrected (this detailed data can be made available for inspection if required). The consultation event had 287 visitors and 205 questionnaires.

Following this, the final step was to review the criteria for making the above decisions, in order to provide the basis for future reviews or re-assessment. This was also seen as potentially informative for the development of possible site design policies / standard requirements.

Views – Policy 9

The landscape is defined by the views one gets as one moves around the Plan Area and from the wider area looking towards the parish.   Volunteers were asked to explore the footpath network, nearby viewpoints and the town to capture key views on checklist forms. Data gathered included:

- Views from key routes and viewpoints marked on a map with direction.
- Photographs from each viewpoint
- Description of the characteristics of the view
- People were asked to rank the views from 1 to 5 (five being the highest overall quality) and to give a brief explanation as appropriate. They took into account both positive and negative aspects to give an overall rank. In the assessment they were asked to consider; distinctive features, background, foreground and composition.
- They were also asked to consider the effect of existing industrial/agricultural and renewable energy development in the landscape.

The results were collated and assessed and the scores moderated. They were then entered to our GIS system to enable the views to be considered together. It was clear from the analysis that the volunteers had not had the resources to cover all the routes, and as such some key views were potentially missing. As such, rather than attempt to ensure that all views had been identified, a more generic approach has been taken to highlight those recreational paths from which views are important, to help inform any landscape visual impact assessments. Particularly notable views are also described in the Neighbourhood Plan in each spatial chapter under "Important green spaces and views".

Buildings – Policy 10

The town has a Mill and Museum Society. One of its members has written a book on the town and its history and has studied the history of the old buildings as part of this work. In addition, a team of volunteers toured the Plan Area to identify buildings that are not currently Listed, yet have some architectural or aesthetic value. These buildings were captured on Checklist sheets provided by Matrix and the building ranked. Information collected included:
- Their historic role in the town – a building's importance may arise from its link with the history of the town rather than its aesthetic value
- The quality of the architecture and detailing of the building and how it contributes to the character of the surrounding area. Ranking was by three criteria:
  - aesthetic value of the building itself, independent of its setting
  - aesthetic value of the overall setting - surroundings and neighbouring buildings

o aesthetic value of the building within its setting. This allowed for recognition of the quality of a group of dwellings that, together, form a coherent and attractive whole. This can be due to their common detailing, materials, architecture or layout.

The buildings and groups of buildings graded as important were included in the November 2015 consultation for residents to comment. These were then included in the Neighbourhood Plan in each spatial section and a policy (10) included setting out how these buildings should be treated. The building owners were individually contacted to inform them of the intention to identify their properties as of local importance in the Neighbourhood Plan.

The Open Spaces and Local Green Spaces – Policy 11

The town has an active Open Spaces volunteer group that works with the Rangers from DCC and the Town Council to ensure key open spaces are well maintained and enhanced (e.g. the Butts Pond meadow). Matrix set out a checklist and guidance that allowed the volunteers to identify, describe and rate for importance in the Town and neighbouring settlements, taking into account the guidance on local green space designation in the NPPF. The volunteers were asked to consider:

o Landscape quality and extent to which they made a positive contribution to the character of an area
o Recreational value
o Wildlife value
o Historic significance
o Importance in a significant view

All previously designated important open / wooded areas were assessed, and other areas highlighted for consideration included the Sites of Nature Conservation Interest designation (SNCIs), open spaces mentioned in the 2006 open space audit, TPO woodland areas where these clearly related to a built up area.

The volunteers took photos of the sites and included descriptions to support the ratings. The open and green spaces graded as important (and less important) were included in the November 2015 consultation for residents to comment. Those agreed as important were then included in the Neighbourhood Plan in each spatial section and a policy (11). The landowners were individually contacted to inform them of the intention to designate their land in the Neighbourhood Plan.

In addition to the list of important open spaces and local green spaces in policy 11, the policy sets out how these should be treated and how other spaces might be assessed to be of similar importance.

Trees – Policy 12

Matrix commented on the general wooded nature of the landscape and the important role its trees play in defining the landscape. They also commented on the importance of trees as a key feature (this could be simply due to their scale and/or location, because they are an unusual species or have a historic association, or because of the impact they provide as part of a group that has collective value)..And also their important in providing a screening function – reducing the visual impact of uncharacteristic or intrusive development or providing a backdrop on the

skyline behind development and thereby softening its appearance in the landscapeThis helped the volunteers to identify tree groupings that fulfilled these functions.

The town has an active Tree Group that sits within the Town's Open Spaces group. It comprised a retired Tree Specialist and other volunteers.   Significant data already existed that identified key trees in the Town and neighbouring settlements, but this was out of date and needed to be refreshed and improved. It also did not consider the overall effect of the tree cover in the town and its surrounding landscape, including the softening and mitigating role of trees (highlighted by Matrix) as backdrops and foreground cover for development.

The Tree Group carried out a visual survey of most the areas of the Parish using a checklist and recorded descriptions of additional key trees and groups of trees. They then graded the trees with a numeric score between 1 and 3.

- 3 - The tree or group of trees has a significant positive role in the landscape of the town's urban street scene (e.g. softens a harsh street landscape) or the countryside (e.g. softens a view of the town, from the town or is crucial in the greater landscape of the local area). The tree is a significant specimen and its loss would be considered a significant loss by the community.   It merits protection should there be any proposed plan to remove it or develop the area.
- 2 - The tree or group of trees is important in the general landscape of the town or countryside and any plan to remove it or develop the location should offer protection or acceptable alternative options for replacement to achieve the same or better overall effect on the landscape in a reasonable time.
- 1 - the tree or group of trees is, of itself, not important, but it has a key role in the location that improves/ softens the landscape of the location (e.g. immature trees planted in a new estate). Its removal or development of the location should include plans for replacement or alternative tree planting to achieve the same or better effect (e.g. new planting) at the location.
- No Grade – the tree or group of trees/ hedgerow is not considered to play a critical role in the landscape, but contributes to the overall wooded character.
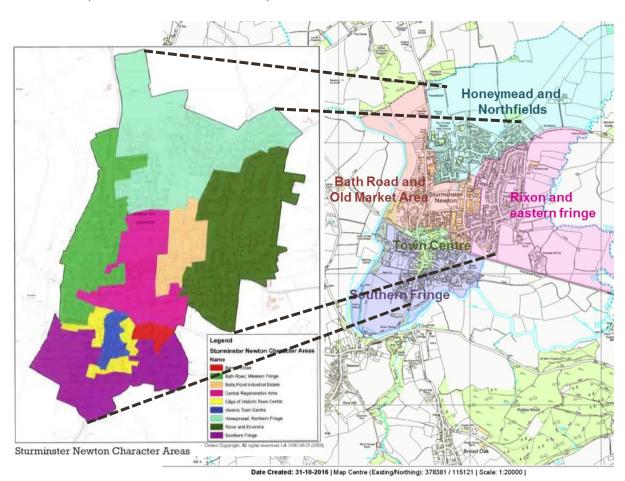
The data was captured in the GIS system along with the location of the tree or group of trees. The gradings were reviewed and moderated after the November 2015 consultation. The data was then reviewed to identify Tree Coverage Areas where trees make a significant positive difference. These are listed in the Neighbourhood Plan with a map in section 5 showing their outline and location. There is a tree policy (12) that then applies to these areas. The Neighbourhood Plan team plan to work with NDDC to include the trees graded 2 and 3 in TPOs.

Character areas

The TDS is very helpful in identifying, in general terms, the different parts of Sturminster Newton town and their distinctive character. It had identified 8 distinct character and landscape areas with two sub-areas. As the TDS character study only covers the town, and not the surrounding parish, a landscape character assessment of the rest of the rural areas was carried out by Matrix. A summary of this character study was consulted on in November 2015.

Several internal discussions were held on how best to incorporate the character descriptions into the neighbourhood plan, so that they would be used to inform future decisions on achieving appropriate design that would reinforce each area's unique character. As further

consideration was given to how policies might be applied and how local people perceive the different character areas (as on the ground the transition between two areas is not always clear cut) – the decision was taken to modify and amalgamate areas to reduce possible repetition and to focus on the positive attributes that the plan would seek to reinforce.

Sturminster Newton Character Areas

Date Created: 31-10-2016 | Map Centre (Easting/Northing): 378381 / 115121 | Scale: 1:20000 |

NP character area	TDS character area
Town Centre – focusing on the specific needs of the retail economy and preservation of the old historic town centre	Most of the Historic Town Centre (blue) and southern part of Central Regeneration Area (fuchsia) around the Exchange
Southern Fringe - leafy with attractive setting near the Stour and older, historic buildings, limited scope for further development	Southernmost section of Historic Town Centre (blue), Edge of Historic Town Centre (yellow) Barnes Close (red) and Southern Fringe (purple)
Bath Road and Old Market Area – more organic / individual character, limited scope for infill, large green field site (former layerage fields for the market) and in the future possible changes to the Butts Pond Industrial Estate	Bath Road, Western Fringe (light green) with slight boundary modification, northern part of the Central Regeneration Area (fuchsia) and Butts Pond Industrial Area (peach)
Honeymead and Northfields - significant new estate-style development over recent years and the high school and leisure centre hub for the town	Honeymead, Northern Fringe (mint green) with slight boundary modification
Rixon and Eastern Fringe - mainly pre and post	Rixon and Environs (dark green)

war development and possible expansion up to near the Trailway	

The town character areas were simplified into 5 zones, as described in the above map and table, and character policies for each drafted, based on the Matrix descriptions (as reproduced in Appendix 2), covering

> Layout
> Scale and form
> Built styles and features
> Materials
> Fronts and boundaries
> Landscaping

Within the Bath Road and Old Market Area, the character policy distinguishes between the two main sub areas (and does not detail Butts Pond, as this area lacks "positive features"). Having similarly sub-divided the rural character area, it became clear on drafting that many of the overlying attributes were common, and therefore a general approach was used, highlighting variations where appropriate.

General Design principles and guidance

Given the feedback from the public about the importance of design, some of the team visited Poundbury and received a presentation and tour from the Director from the Duchy of Cornwall responsible for the estate. Specific information and learnings gathered from this visit included:

- The importance of integrating affordable housing into market housing so that they are indistinguishable
- The problems encountered in the estate from deteriorating rendered facings. Many examples were demonstrated that had discoloured and were damaged by pollution.
- The absence of green space – residents mentioned that they had to travel some distance to access green space for their children to play since they had been located to the outskirts.
- The layout – no straight lines and no differentiation between car and pedestrian surface levels – this may have merit where traffic use is light and will be considered when designs come forward but has not been included in the policies.
- The concealment of utility meters and bins to avoid clutter
- The use of trees to soften street scenes.

These points, together with group discussion on what issues tend to get overlooked in planning decisions, led to the drafting of detailed design principles that we tested in the November 2015 public consultation. These principles were overwhelmingly supported by the public in their questionnaire responses. In parallel with this consultation, we consulted on these principles with NDDC's Planning Team Leader Steve Clarke who had provided previous informal guidance based on his local knowledge of the town. His comments were then combined with the results of the consultation to arrive at the content for Policy 8 on "Design and character of buildings and their settings". His suggestions, received in January 2016, included:

- Clarifying and including improved linkages to the Trailway in the town centre
- Clarification on the requirements for Open Spaces for a given number of dwellings
- The need to consider TPOs for trees or groups of trees that need protection and are outside the Conservation Area if the intent to protect is to be viable
- Simplification and removal of duplication

- Use of materials – conflict between requirement for durability and avoidance of modern materials such as plastics

These principles and considerations formed the basis for Policy 8 on the design and character of buildings and their settings.

The Town Centre review also flagged up the need to consider more specific guidance for the Town Centre. A Guide To Shop Front Design policy was produced by the District Council in 2014 and is referenced in the Local Plan. Although useful, it is not specific to Sturminster Newton as it covers the various towns across North Dorset. The neighbourhood plan team worked with NDDC's Conservation Officer to tour the town centre and identify good examples of shop frontage and poor/ unsatisfactory shop frontages. Content was written by the team based on a suggested format from the NDDC Officer and reviewed by him prior to incorporation into the Neighbourhood Plan. It draws out the key guidelines relevant to Sturminster Newton and contains example shop fronts from the town's historic centre.

Character Appraisal

An Introduction
WHY IS CHARACTER IMPORTANT?

We all aspire to live in a place where we feel proud to live. There are many things that make the places we live in special, these may include a strong sense of community (as with Sturminster Newton) or useful facilitates and services. Another of these important features that makes for a great place to live is a high quality environment, that may include a fine historic setting, beautiful trees, attractive streets, well designed houses, countryside views etc. All these elements can be described as being features of character and are therefore an essential ingredient of a desirable living environment.

Previous public consultation for the Neighbourhood Plan has shown that people value community above all else, but there were several other features that were considered to be very important, all of which could be related to character. Therefore, the Neighbourhood Plan will seek to find ways of enhancing and protecting those features that people value. However, not all aspects of character are positive in this respect and so the Neighbourhood Plan will also seek to encourage ways in which character in the town and parish can be improved and enhanced, thus enriching the lives of its residents and adding to the attraction of the area.

This character study seeks to build an evidence base upon which policies and proposals, in which character is an issue, can be justifiably made.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS CONSULTATIONS & STUDIES

In order to best tailor future polices and proposals of Neighbourhood Plan it is critical that an objective baseline is used to ensure that policies are based on fact and evidence, not unsubstantiated opinions or conjecture. A review of documents relating to the character of the parish has been carried out. The following are brief summaries of the findings and comments on these earlier documents.

The Sturminster Newton Town Design Statement, 2008

The Town Design Statement (TDS) remains largely relevant to the town today and still stands as a Supplementary Planning Document. The TDS divides the town of Sturminster Newton into several character areas, excluding the wider parish. These character areas were used in the TDS to inform the Design Guidelines included in the document. Although some changes have taken place in the town since these character areas were defined, they are still relevant and can be used to inform decision making.

Although the Design Guidance notes are still appropriate, they are not always followed by developers as was originally intended. The Neighbourhood Plan has an opportunity to reinforce these Design Guidelines, and apply them as policy so that future developments are obliged to comply with them.

North Dorset District Council Local Character Areas Assessment, 2008

This large scale character assessment gives a helpful insight to the wider character of the district. The parish of Sturminster Newton falls into four separate character areas, as defined here. These are: South Blackmore Rolling Vales, Upper Stour Valley, North Dorset Limestone Ridges, and Blackmore Vale. There are features that are common throughout these different character areas, which gives a sense of consistency, although there are other features distinctive to each character area.

The District Council Local Character Area Assessment gives a broad overview of the parish landscape characteristics, but it gives little detail that might guide specific Neighbourhood Plan policies.

Dorset Historic Towns Project, Sturminster Newton, Historic Urban Characterisation, 2011

A survey of the history of the town was undertaken with the objectives: to achieve a better understanding of how the historical dimension has influenced the modern townscape; to identify what historical features and structures survive within the modern town; and to better
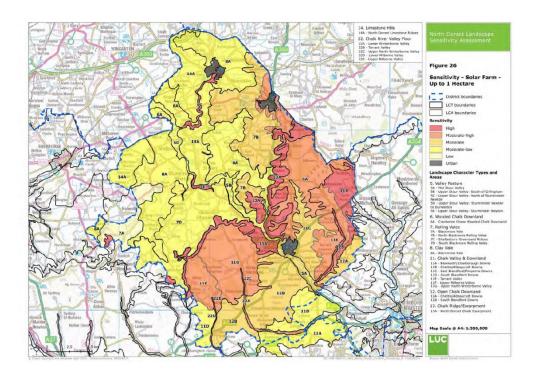
comprehend the contribution made by this historic dimension to the present character of the town.

The survey found that the town originated as an early Saxon royal manor and minster church, but little more is known until the 15th century when Town Bridge was built and St Mary's Church rebuilt, probably on the site of the original minster. A fire destroyed much of the northern part of the town centre in 1729.

The medieval town centre plan has changed very little, with the focus on Market Cross. There were later suburban developments on the southern and western fringes but the majority of development was to the north, generated by the arrival of the railway and the boom of the cattle market. The historic buildings that remain generally date from the 18th and 19th centuries. Medieval structures that remain include 15th century Market Cross, St Mary's Church, Town Bridge and the ruins of the14th century Sturminster Castle.

The historic buildings make an important contribution to the character of Sturminster Newton. Surprisingly little modern infill has taken place behind the historic frontages, town centre development has been small scale, with larger development north of the railway line.

The medieval town plan is still largely complete. The surviving market reflects the importance of the town's rural commerce. The historic character of Sturminster Newton is influenced by its distinctive setting, and the surrounding landscape is fundamental to the town's character.

Landscape Sensitivity to Wind & Solar Energy Development in North Dorset District, 2014

A study of the North Dorset landscape was carried out to assess its sensitivity to wind and solar energy developments. The assessment used the character areas, as set out by North Dorset District Council, to divide the district and assess each area by using an established criteria to determine a sensitivity rating (Low, Moderate-low, Moderate, Moderate-high and High).

The assessment of the areas comprising Sturminster Newton parish can be summarised as follows:

South Blackmore Rolling Vales- landscape of irregular field patterns, hedgerows, small woodlands all create human scale, sensitive to development. Sensitivity to Wind developments are Moderate high to High. Sensitivity to large Solar developments are High, especially when sites can be viewed from elevated positions. Smaller solar developments on screened sites would have a lower sensitivity.

Upper Stour Valley- A small area of strong historic and recreational character. Highly sensitive to any wind or solar development.

North Dorset Limestone Ridges- A rural area of undulating terrain and plateaus. Generally Moderate to High sensitivity due to intimate and tranquil character of the area. Wind and solar developments would be more sensitive on sloping ground, especially towards the Stour valley.

Blackmore Vale- An area of homogenous rural character with a very human scale. The area makes valued setting for the chalk escarpments. Sensitivity to wind development is Moderate to High, especially where there are long views. Sensitivity to solar development is Moderate-low to High.

Generally, due to the scale of landform, pattern, quality and character of the landscape, Sturminster Newton parish is of moderate high sensitivity to wind and solar development, with no areas having been assessed as low sensitivity.

Neighbourhood Plan Autumn 2014 Consultation Results

This consultation event was well attended and the results have been helpful in guiding the Neighbourhood Plan. The key findings relating to character are as follows:

• Both the future role and the identity of Sturminster Newton are considered very important to the future of the town that needs to remain the heart of the rural community

• The Exchange site should be used as a focus for community services.

• Views and open green space in the town are highly valued by its residents and should be protected.

• The high quality landscapes surrounding Sturminster Newton should be protected and the transition between town and country must be sensitively handled.

• New residential developments should consist of a mix of house types, built to a high quality and be of distinctive yet sensitive design.