

### Introduction

- 6.01** Town Centres are the traditional focus for shopping. They are generally accessible by both public and private means of transport. The range of services and facilities in Town Centres is diverse and, in addition to shops, includes leisure facilities, financial and professional services, and various community services.
- 6.02** The traditional retailing role of the Town Centre has come under threat from Out-of-Town retail developments. Recent government guidance has recognised the importance of Town Centres and now emphasises the need to protect Town Centre vitality and viability.

### Key Objective

To retain and promote a range and mix of retail facilities within our Towns and Villages to meet the needs of the community and which will preserve and enhance the character and vitality of those centres.

### Shopping in Sedgemoor

- 6.03** Bridgwater is the third largest Town in Somerset and administration and shopping is primarily centred there. There has been a substantial increase in “Edge of Centre” retail floorspace as a result of the development of the Bridgwater Retail Park and the Safeway Supermarket. In contrast there has been little significant increase in Town Centre floorspace since Angel Place opened in 1986. In recent years there has been a decline in the vitality and viability of the Town Centre. The retail vacancy rate stood at almost 15% in October 2003 compared with a National average of about 11%.
- 6.04** The Towns of Burnham-on-Sea and Highbridge are the other main shopping centres in the District. Burnham-on-Sea has a relatively modern supermarket located in the Town Centre. There is also a Local Centre at Rosewood Farm. The Town Centre itself has benefited from a traffic management and enhancement scheme that has improved the pedestrian environment. Highbridge currently suffers from a high level of vacant shops and the impact of through traffic.
- 6.05** Elsewhere in the District, the Rural Centres of Cheddar, Nether Stowey, North Petherton and Wedmore provide a focus for local retailing and

services. Cheddar is a significantly larger centre than the other three with a good range of local shops, including a medium size supermarket that serves the surrounding area, and a variety of commercial businesses. It is therefore identified as a Town Centre where the sequential test for the location of new facilities should be applied.

- 6.06** There are also a number of smaller shops located in many of the larger Villages, as well as farm shops and other retail outlets such as petrol filling stations scattered throughout the rural area. Although farm shops principally exist to sell locally produced foodstuffs, there is a trend for them to sell goods which have been brought in from elsewhere.

### Town Centre Regeneration

- 6.07** The District Council has identified the regeneration of Bridgwater Town Centre as one of its key objectives. Consultants were commissioned to undertake extensive surveys and consultations, which have been used to inform and influence the Town Centre Strategy. The focus of this strategy is to develop the Town’s potential, improve quality and maximise the benefits of its historic character. The purpose of the strategy is:
- to establish the current status of the Town Centre;
  - to outline the key objectives for the regeneration of the Town Centre;
  - to encourage the development of a shared vision for the Town Centre;
  - to define Town Centre projects which will create a new sustainable role for the Town Centre and which can be delivered; and
  - to be used to attract investment and encourage funding for Town Centre regeneration purposes.
- 6.08** A Transport Study has also been completed for Bridgwater. This will be an important influence on measures to improve accessibility (also refer to Transport and Movement, Chapter 7).
- 6.09** There are also a number of possible environmental improvement schemes being investigated for Burnham-on-Sea and Highbridge. Specific enhancement schemes will be considered on their merits as and when they come forward.

# Shopping and Town Centres

## Chapter 6

### Town Centres

**6.10** Government guidance states that Town and District Centres should be the preferred locations for retailing and other uses which attract a large number of trips. Concentrating such developments in these locations not only helps to maintain their vitality and viability, it also offers the most sustainable location in terms of reducing the need to travel and dependency on the private car.

### Location of Shopping Development

**6.11** The Local Plan identifies Town Centre areas where it is expected that new shopping proposals will be accommodated. For the purposes of controlling new retail development, Cheddar Village is also identified as a Town Centre where the sequential test for locating new development will be applied.

**6.12** The Town Centre of Bridgwater is a large area that includes commercial, leisure, and residential uses, as well as shopping. The preferred location for new shopping developments will therefore be within the Main Shopping Areas where the majority of retail activity takes place. The Local Plan defines the Main Shopping Areas based upon High Street, Fore Street, St Mary Street, Eastover and St. John Street.

**6.13** Should it not be possible to find a suitable site in Bridgwater within the Main Shopping Areas, a Town Centre site will be the next preferred location for new retail development.

**6.14** The Town Centres of Burnham-on-Sea, Highbridge and Cheddar are significantly smaller and more compact than Bridgwater. It is not considered necessary to identify separate Main Shopping Areas within them, the defined Town Centre area as a whole being the first preferred location for new developments.

**6.15** Where it is not possible to find suitable sites within these areas, preference will be given to Edge-of-Town Centre sites. These are sites that are usually within 200 to 300 metres easy walking distance of the defined Main Shopping Areas in Bridgwater or of a similar distance from the defined Town Centres of Burnham-on-Sea, Highbridge and Cheddar. This distance will vary depending upon the size of the Town Centre and the attractiveness of routes to the Centre.

**6.16** Where proposals are at an appropriate scale, the next preference will be sites in Local Centres. These are small groupings of shops and limited other services serving an immediate neighbourhood. They are therefore only appropriate for small-scale additional development. The Local Plan identifies the following Local Centres (as defined on the Proposals Map):

#### **Bridgwater**

North Street  
Taunton Road  
Westonzoyland Road  
Bower Manor  
Wills Road  
Parkway  
Rhode Lane

#### **Burnham-on-Sea**

Rosewood Farm

**6.17** Only if no suitable sites are available in any of these locations, will "Out-of-Centre" sites be considered. In assessing proposals for retail development on sites outside of the preferred locations, the District Council will consider whether the scheme meets a need that could not otherwise be met.

#### **POLICY SH1**

**Proposals for new retail development will be permitted firstly within Town Centres, then on Edge-of-Centre locations, followed by Local Centres, provided that:**

- a) there is an identified need for Edge-of-Centre development;**
- b) the proposal is of a scale appropriate to the Town Centre or Local Centre;**
- c) the proposal would help maintain and enhance the viability and vitality of the centre; and**
- d) the proposal would not damage the viability of other nearby Town Centres.**

**In Bridgwater, first preference will be for sites within the defined Main Shopping Areas.**

#### **POLICY SH2**

**Outside the preferred locations, retail proposals will not be acceptable unless it can be demonstrated that no other sites are available in accordance with SH1. Where this is the**

case, proposals will only be permitted where it can be demonstrated that:

- a) **there is an identified need for the development;**
- b) **the development will not adversely affect the vitality and viability of nearby Town Centres or the rural economy including village shops; and**
- c) **the development is accessible by a range of means of transport in addition to the car.**

### Major Shopping Proposals

- 6.18** Major retail developments may have a significant impact on neighbouring centres. Government guidance suggests that applications for retail developments over 2,500 sq m gross should be supported by evidence on the application of the sequential test, possible economic impacts, accessibility by a choice of means of transport and any environmental impacts.
- 6.19** Impact assessments may in some instances, be necessary for smaller developments. This is likely to depend upon the size of the proposal in relation to the centre or adjoining centres.

#### **POLICY SH3**

**Major shopping proposals of over 2500 sq.m on sites outside of Town Centres, or likely to have a significant impact on neighbouring centres, should be accompanied by a Retail Impact Assessment. This should demonstrate:**

- a) **the need for the development;**
- b) **the application of the sequential approach;**
- c) **the likely economic impact of the development on neighbouring centres;**
- d) **the development's accessibility by a choice of means of transport, and its effect on overall travel patterns and car use; and**
- e) **any significant environmental impacts it may have.**

### Retail Warehousing

- 6.20** Retail warehousing is generally located in Edge-of-Town Centre or Out-of-Town Centre locations. Retail warehousing originally concentrated on bulky non-food goods but increasingly there is pressure to allow more general comparison goods to be sold. These developments almost exclusively favour the car-borne shopper and provide easy access with an abundance of free car parking. Occupiers prefer large flat sites facing or adjoining main roads.
- 6.21** Any new proposals should be located within the Town Centre, or on an Edge-of-Centre site if possible to encourage linked trips. Should a suitable site not be available, an appropriate Out-of-Centre site may be acceptable. Any sites would need to be accessible by means of transport other than the private car. In order to protect existing Town Centres, planning conditions or legal agreements may be used for Out-of-Centre developments. These may restrict the subdivision of units, and/or limit the range or types of goods sold.
- 6.22** Proposals will therefore need to be assessed against Policies SH1, SH2 and SH3.

### Change of Use in Town Centres

- 6.23** As well as shopping, Town Centres are host to a wide variety of activities. These include leisure activities such as restaurants, pubs, clubs and cinemas, businesses such as banks, estate agents and other office uses, housing, education, and other community facilities. Many of these activities assist in extending the use of the Town Centre both throughout the day and during the evening. This diversity of uses and accessibility to people living and working in the area is important to sustaining their vitality and viability.
- 6.24** The Local Plan will therefore promote a flexible approach to other Town Centre uses and encourage a diversification of uses. However, it is important that a balance of uses is maintained. In particular, it is important that in those streets that already have a concentration of retail uses, there should be some control over the non-retail uses being introduced on ground floor frontages to maintain interest to shoppers. The Local Plan therefore identifies Main Retail Frontages in Bridgwater where the change of use at ground floor level to a non-retail use will be strictly controlled.

# Shopping and Town Centres

## Chapter 6

### Bridgwater Town Centre

**6.25** The Main Retail Frontages are located in the central part of the Main Shopping Areas where there is greatest concentration of existing shops. The frontages are generally also in areas where considerable investment has been made in improving the shopping environment, either through pedestrianisation, provision of rear servicing (also refer to Proposal TM9), or redevelopment. Whilst it is accepted that an element of uses in Class A2 (Financial and Professional Services) and Class A3 (Food and Drink) may be appropriate, concentrations which detract from the shopping function should be avoided. The use of upper floors for other purposes, including housing, will be encouraged.

**6.26** Elsewhere within the Main Shopping Areas and defined Town Centre, there will be greater encouragement for other Town Centre uses that support the shopping function of the Town as a whole. It is still important that over concentration of non-retail uses is avoided. This applies particularly to residential development that can result in long frontages with only minimal pedestrian flows within the shopping street.

#### **POLICY SH4**

**Within the Main Retail Frontages in Bridgwater, defined on the Proposals Map, proposals for changes of use to non-retail uses on the ground floor will be resisted. Exceptions may be made for uses falling within Classes A2 (Financial and Professional Services) and A3 (Food and Drink) of the Use Class Order if all the following circumstances apply:**

- a) **the proposal does not form a prominent part of the shopping frontage or an important link between the frontages of retail uses;**
- b) **the proposal does not form a continuous frontage with one or more existing non-retail uses(s); and**
- c) **the proposal does not cause demonstrable harm to the vitality and viability of the Town Centre as a whole.**

#### **POLICY SH5**

**Within the Main Shopping Areas defined on the Proposals Map but outside Main Retail Frontages in Bridgwater, proposals for the**

**following non-retail uses will be permitted, provided that they do not result in a concentration of single uses, where the cumulative impact results in a loss of retail units damaging to the vitality and viability of the Town Centre:**

- a) **offices providing Financial and Professional Services (Class A2 of the use Classes Order);**
- b) **premises for the sale of Food and Drink (Class A3); and**
- c) **Assembly and Leisure (Class D2).**

### Town Centres

**6.27** Within the Town Centre of Bridgwater, but outside of the Main Shopping Areas, and in the Town Centres of Burnham-on-Sea, Highbridge, and Cheddar, a more flexible approach to non-retail uses will be supported. Such locations may be appropriate for leisure uses, financial and professional services, food and drink uses, community services and residential uses.

**6.28** Although such uses may contribute to the diversification of the Town Centre, concentrations of single uses can cause local problems. The loss of retail premises may also adversely affect Town Centre vitality and viability. Proposals will therefore be assessed not only on their positive contribution to Town Centre diversification, but also on their cumulative impact to Town Centre vitality and viability.

#### **POLICY SH6**

**Within Town Centres defined on the Proposals Map but outside of Main Shopping Areas, proposals for the following non-retail uses will be permitted, provided that they do not result in a concentration of single uses where the cumulative impact results in a loss of retail units damaging to the vitality and viability of the Town Centre:**

- a) **offices providing Financial and Professional Services (Class A2 of the Uses Classes Order);**
- b) **premises for the sale of Food and Drink (Class A3);**
- c) **Assembly and Leisure (Class D2);**

- d) **Non-Residential Institutions (Class D1); and**
- e) **Residential (Class C1 and C3).**

### Land safeguarded for Retail Development

**6.29** Following community planning and regeneration initiatives for Highbridge an opportunity for future retail expansion or rationalisation has been identified in the proximity of the existing KwikSave supermarket. It is therefore appropriate to safeguard this area in order that the potential for such use is not lost. The safeguarded area comprises surplus vacant railway land north of Market Street and west of the railway.

**PROPOSAL SH18**  
**Land north of Market Street, Highbridge is safeguarded for retail use.**

### Location of Non-Shopping Key Town Centre Uses

- 6.30** Town Centres are the preferred location for other uses in addition to shopping that attract large numbers of people. Such uses will sustain and enhance the centres' vitality and viability. In addition, locating major travel generators in the Town Centre where there is the widest choice of means of transport, is a significant way to reduce the dependence on the private car and to achieve wider sustainable development goals.
- 6.31** Key Town Centre uses might include public and private offices, entertainment and leisure facilities such as cinemas and night clubs, hospitals and other community facilities. The first preferred location for such uses should be a Town Centre site (apart from Main Retail Frontages) that has good accessibility. The second preferred location would be an Edge-of-Town Centre site, which is well related to transport facilities such as public transport.
- 6.32** In exceptional circumstances where there is a clearly defined need, Out-of-Centre development may be permitted where it can be demonstrated that no suitable sites are available in the preferred locations. In these circumstances, the development must be accessible by a choice of means of transport.

**POLICY SH7**  
**The preferred location for non-retail uses that attract large numbers of people will firstly be**

**Town Centre sites, followed by Edge-of-Centre sites, provided that they are:**

- a) **accessible by a choice of means of travel;**
- b) **of a scale appropriate to the size and function of the Town; and**
- c) **would assist in sustaining the vitality and viability of the Town Centre as a whole.**

**POLICY SH8**  
**Elsewhere, proposals for non-retail uses which attract large numbers of people will not be permitted unless it can be demonstrated that there is a defined need, which cannot be accommodated in the preferred locations. Where this is the case, preference will be given to proposals that involve the conversion of suitable existing buildings or the extension and improvement of an established facility. All proposals should be accessible by a choice of means of transport, and should not seriously adversely affect the vitality or viability of any neighbouring Town Centre.**

### Shops and Services Outside Town Centres

- 6.33** Local shops and services are important in meeting day to day needs, particularly in rural areas. They also assist in reducing the need to travel and can act as important community focuses.
- 6.34** In Towns, such facilities are provided outside of the Town Centre in Local Centres and individual shops and offices. In the rural areas, there are shops, post offices and public houses in many of the villages.
- 6.35** Increasingly, these facilities are coming under threat. The loss of such facilities can be particularly damaging to local communities where there are few or no other alternatives. An objective of the Plan is therefore, to both maintain existing provision and to promote additional services.
- 6.36** The Local Plan Proposal Map identifies existing Local Centres as well as Rural Centres and Villages. For the purposes of interpreting policies, Local Centres are defined as small groups of shops or a single store, usually comprising newsagents, general grocery store, a sub-post office, and a chemist, serving local needs.

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### Resisting the Loss of Local Shops and Other Services

**6.37** The Local Plan seeks to resist the loss of shops and other local services in Local Centres, Rural Centres and Villages. Easy access to a range of local services is an important way to reduce people's dependency on the car. In rural areas, alternatives to the car such as public transport are often limited. It should also not be forgotten that a significant number of people, either in Towns, or rural areas, do not always have access to a private car and therefore rely more heavily on local services.

**6.38** It is accepted that in many cases it is not possible to prevent the loss of local shops due to other factors such as economic viability and competition. However, the change of use of a local shop to a different use should only be considered where it can be demonstrated that the existing use is no longer viable and that attempts have been made to market the business as a going concern.

#### **POLICY SH11**

**Proposals that would result in the loss of shops or other local services in Local Centres, Rural Centres, and Villages, will not be permitted where this results in a significant or total loss of such services to the local community. Exceptions may be made where it can be demonstrated that the existing use is no longer viable.**

### Provision of New Local Shops and Services

**6.39** In Towns, Rural Centres, and Villages, encouragement will be given to the provision of small-scale local shops and services. In Towns and other identified Centres floorspace should not normally exceed 500 sq m gross. In the remaining Rural Centres and Villages the floorspace should not normally exceed 200 sq m gross.

**6.40** Where new development is proposed, the Local Plan seeks to ensure that local facilities are already available and accessible by means other than the car, or will be provided as part of the development.

#### **POLICY SH12**

**Proposals for small-scale local shops and services in Towns, Rural Centres and Villages, will be permitted provided:**

- a) they are of a scale to serve only the local area; and**
- b) they are accessible by a choice of means of transport.**

### Cheddar Gorge Commercial Area

**6.41** Within Cheddar Gorge there is a concentration of shops, restaurants, teashops, and other commercial activities. These are associated with the tourism function of the area rather than the more general retail needs of Cheddar Village. Many of the businesses are seasonal and specialist in nature. The Local Plan Proposals Map therefore defines Commercial Areas within Cheddar Gorge. Most of these areas are within the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

**6.42** These areas are not considered to be appropriate for general retailing, as they are peripheral to the Centre of Cheddar. A Town Centre or Edge-of-Centre location will be the preferred location for such uses (Policy SH1).

**6.43** There are considerable concerns and difficulties relating to traffic congestion and parking in Cheddar Gorge (Chapters 7 and 11). Any new development in the Commercial Areas is likely to increase these traffic problems as well as impacting upon the environmental quality of the area. New proposals for shopping and food and drink will therefore be strictly controlled and restricted to sites within the identified Commercial Areas.

**6.44** There may be opportunities to improve and enhance existing facilities in these areas. This will generally be encouraged although any proposals would still need to be carefully controlled. Individual proposals for new shopping and food and drink facilities, or improvements to existing facilities will therefore be considered against Policies TC13 and RLT14 as well as other policies in the Local Plan and the Cheddar Gorge Design Guide.

#### **POLICY SH13**

**Within the Cheddar Gorge Commercial Area as defined on the Proposals Map, proposals for New Shops (Class A1) and Food and Drink Premises (Class A3), or the enhancement of these facilities will only be permitted if:**

- a) they are of a scale to serve only the local area;**

- b) **they would not result in additional traffic congestion or parking problems;**
- c) **they do not cause demonstrable harm to the vitality and viability of Cheddar Centre as a whole; and**
- d) **there would be no significant adverse environmental impact.**

### Farm Shops

**6.45** Planning permission for farm shops is not usually needed for farms selling their own produce. Permission is required for the sale of food or goods produced elsewhere or if it has been processed. There is increasing pressure for farmers to look for ways to diversify their activities, farm shops are one such option. (A policy for farm diversification is set out in the Employment and Economic Development Chapter - Policy E8).

**6.46** In many cases, the provision of farm shops can provide an alternative form of local shopping as well as supporting the rural economy. However, they might also have an adverse impact on the viability of existing village shops. There are also issues related to their accessibility and visual impact on the countryside.

#### **POLICY SH14**

**Proposals for new or extended farm shops will only be permitted if:**

- a) **there would be no significant adverse impact on the viability of existing shops in adjoining Towns, Rural Centres and Villages;**
- b) **the local road network can safely handle the extra traffic the proposal will generate;**
- c) **safe access is available or can be achieved; and**
- d) **any proposed buildings would not have an adverse visual impact on the locality.**

**Conditions or a legal agreement may be imposed to limit the range or source of goods to be sold.**

### Petrol Filling Stations

**6.47** Shops within petrol filling stations can also have an important role in providing local shopping and other services, particularly in rural areas. However, they might also have an adverse impact on the viability of village shops and are often not accessible without the use of a private car.

**6.48** Shops within petrol filling stations will therefore be controlled and the amount of retail floor-space should normally not exceed 200 sq m gross.

#### **POLICY SH15**

**Proposals for shops ancillary to petrol filling stations in rural areas (ie. outside defined settlement boundaries) will be permitted, unless they would harm the viability of existing shopping available in nearby Local Centres, Rural Centres, or Villages.**

### Garden Centres

**6.49** Garden centres do not necessarily need to be located in open countryside and are not considered as an agricultural use. They are principally a retail outlet and produce similar impacts to other forms of retail warehousing.

**6.50** The Plan seeks to locate garden centres in appropriate locations where their physical impact does not cause harm and where the traffic generated by the use can be absorbed by the road network. They will also need to be accessible by a choice of means of transport. The best location for garden centres will therefore usually be within or adjacent to Towns or Rural Centres. Planning permission will be subject to conditions restricting general retail sales and limiting the type of goods sold to those associated with horticulture or gardening.

#### **POLICY SH16**

**Proposals for garden centres will be permitted where they are located on land within or adjacent to Towns or Rural Centres provided:**

- a) **they are accessible by a choice of means of transport; and**
- b) **there will be no adverse impact on the environment.**

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**Permission will be subject to conditions limiting the type of goods sold to those associated with horticulture or gardening. Any additional services will be restricted to ensure they are ancillary to the main use.**

### Markets and Car Boot Sales

**6.51** In recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of markets and car boot sales, which in turn have become more commercial and regular. These can cause problems of increased traffic, noise and general disturbance. The planning process can control regularly occurring markets but many infrequent events are allowed as permitted development. Not all sites are suitable for markets or car boot sales. The implications of large commercial markets for Town Centres also need to be considered.

#### **POLICY SH17**

**Proposals for new markets and car boot sales will be considered against their impact on the vitality and viability of nearby Town Centres. Proposals must minimise unnecessary disturbance to nearby residents and ensure highway safety.**