**Policy 27 – Retention of Community Facilities**

National Policy 10.118

The planning system can play an important role in facilitating social interaction and creating healthy, inclusive communities. National policy states that to deliver the social, recreational and cultural facilities and services that local communities need, planning policies should plan positively for the provision of community facilities347. Policy 14 – Social infrastructure aims to deliver this strategic objective for the District.

10.119 National policy also states that planning policies should guard against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services, particularly where this would reduce the community’s ability to meet its day-to-day needs. Policies should also seek to ensure that established shops, facilities and services are able to develop and modernise in a way that is sustainable and should be retained for the benefit of the community.

10.120 In rural areas, national policy348 requires local plans to promote the retention and development of local services and community facilities in villages, such as local shops, meeting places, sports venues, cultural buildings, public houses and places of worship.

**The District Council’s Approach**

 10.121 Access to services is a key issue in North Dorset and the Council wishes to ensure that community facilities are retained, where possible. Policy 27 sets out the circumstances when the Council may permit the loss of a community facility. It draws the distinction between those facilities that are run as private commercial businesses and others. For private commercial facilities, the key consideration is whether the business is viable or could be made viable. For other facilities, the main issues are whether there is a need for the current use and, if not, whether the facility could be put to an alternative community use, bearing in mind funding issues.

**Permitted Development Rights**

 10.122 Recent changes to legislation would allow the temporary change of use (up to 2 years) of up to 150 square metres of floorspace of some community facilities (provided they are not located in a listed building) to certain commercial uses under permitted development rights349

 347 Paragraph 70, National Planning Policy Framework, DCLG (March 2012). 348 Paragraph 28, National Planning Policy Framework, DCLG (March 2012).

At expiry of the two-year term, the site would revert to its previous lawful use.

10.123 Such temporary changes of use under permitted development rights cannot be controlled by the policies in this Local Plan but the success (or otherwise) of the enterprise and any impacts associated with the temporary change of use may be material considerations in the event that a land owner or developer subsequently submits a planning application to seek a permanent change of use.

**Community Right to Bid**

10.124 A local community facility may be listed in the Council’s register of assets of community value, under the Community Right to Bid. When a listed asset comes to be sold, a moratorium on the sale (of up to six months) may be invoked, providing local community groups with a chance to raise finance and to make a bid to buy the asset on the open market.

10.125 In the event that a land owner or developer submits a planning application putting forward proposals that would result in the loss of a community facility, the Council will have regard to the listing of any such facility as an asset of community value and any initiative by the community to acquire the asset under the Community Right to Bid when considering the application.

**Commercial Community Facilities**

 10.126 The loss of commercial community facilities, such as neighbourhood shops in towns or village shops and public houses, reduces customer choice and can also necessitate people travelling further afield to meet their needs. This is a particular problem in rural areas, where village shops, post offices and public houses are central to village life, but Policy 27 applies to all community facilities.

10.127 Where viability is an issue, the Council would hope that owners of commercial community facilities would have explored all options available to them to ensure the continued success of their business. Where facilities need to extend to improve their viability, the Council will respond positively to applications for development to ensure local needs continue to be met.

10.128 If facilities need to diversify to maintain their presence on the high street or in the local village then again the Council would consider favourably applications for new uses in addition to the existing use. Depending on the scale of diversification sought, owners may be able to include a change of use in part of their premises through permitted development rights. Although this may only be temporary (for a two year period) it may be a useful tool to ‘test the water’ or appetite of local residents for such a use.

10.129 To encourage diversification of rural services to ensure that they stay at the heart of local communities, more information and support can be provided by the Pub is The Hub350, a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to offering advice and support to licensees, rural public houses and community services. An example of a successful diversification of a commercial community facility in North Dorset is the White Horse public house in Stourpaine, Blandford. When a nearby local shop was forced to close, a new store was built inside the pub. This new part of the business has been enthusiastically received by the local community and has helped the local landlord not only boost an existing community resource but saved another from being lost altogether.

10.130 The Council does not seek the retention of unviable commercial community facilities but wishes to prevent the loss of those that are viable or could be made viable. Opportunities within the permitted development rights allow temporary changes to other uses but, where a permanent change to another use or redevelopment is proposed, the Council will need to be convinced that the facility is not viable. Developers will be expected to show evidence of attempts to dispose of the property as a business. The Council will expect developers to provide evidence:

* of widespread advertising of the property as a business within North Dorset and neighbouring districts or counties for a minimum of 12 months;  of the terms of disposal or the type of lease being offered;
* of the prices at which the disposal or lease of the business was being offered, which should reflect market values for such a business;
* of all offers received by the applicant or the estate agent marketing the business; and
* that no reasonable offer for the sale or lease of the business has been rejected.

349 The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (as amended by Statutory Instrument SI 2013 No. 1101.

**Other Community Facilities**

10.131 Within the towns and villages, in addition to commercial community facilities (shops and public houses) there are those facilities that the Council considers are non-commercial community facilities (meeting rooms, village halls, sports clubs, places of worship, etc) that are of great value to local communities. These facilities require careful financial management but are not commercial concerns, and the Council will seek their retention to ensure such facilities are maintained in our towns and villages.

10.132 As with commercial community facilities, where facilities need to extend to ensure their continued use then the Council will respond positively to applications for development. Where facilities need to diversify, whether through permitted development initially or by application for change of use for part of the premises, again the Council will consider applications favourably.

10.133 However, there will be occasions when a facility may become unused or underused and Policy 27 outlines the Council's preferred approach to complete re-use or redevelopment. Where a change to another use or redevelopment is proposed, the Council will need to be convinced that the site or premises is no longer suitable or needed for the current or an alternative community use or that its continued community use cannot realistically be funded.

10.134 If it is considered that a facility is no longer needed for its current use then developers will be expected to demonstrate that the potential to use the site or building for other community uses had been investigated. Funding issues may relate both to the running of the facility itself and to its maintenance. In such cases, the Council will expect evidence to be provided of the running and/or capital costs and of the efforts made to secure adequate capital or revenue funding. 10.135 For the re-use or redevelopment of both commercial and non-commercial community facilities, the Council will take into account the importance or value of the facility to the local community and the area it serves as well as the viability of commercial establishments. Those facilities listed as an asset of community value will be given greater weight in the decision-making process.

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| **POLICY 27: RETENTION OF COMMUNITY FACILITIES** To ensure community facilities (both commercial and non-commercial) are retained the Council will: 1. respond positively to applications where facilities need to be extended to improve their viability or to ensure their continued use; and
2. look favourably on diversification to support the continuation of the existing use (i.e. change of use of part of the site to support the original use).

Development (including the change of use of an existing premises) which involves the loss of a commercial community facility (including a local shop or a public house) will only be permitted if it can be demonstrated that the use is no longer commercially viable or cannot be made commercially viable. Development (including the change of use of an existing premises) which results in the loss of a local community facility which is not run as a private business will only be permitted if it can be demonstrated that it is no longer practical or desirable to use the facility for its existing use or another use likely to benefit the local community. For all applications for development, the Council will take into account the importance of the facility to the local community and the area it serves as well as the viability of commercial establishments but greater weight will be given to the retention of those facilities listed as an asset of community value |