

Housing & Major Projects Scrutiny Panel

May 2013

Midsomer Norton, Radstock and Westfield Update

Introduction

The Southern part of the District has a range of distinctive characteristics, identities, communities and history. It makes a strong contribution to the overall character of Bath and North East Somerset. The area was transformed during the industrial revolution to exploit its mineral resources. Life in the area was dominated by coal mining, leading to a proud heritage of energy production. The strength of community and identity borne out of this heritage remains, as do the towns and villages which developed.

Midsomer Norton became an important coal-mining town in the nineteenth century and continues to cater for key services, employment, shopping and leisure facilities to the wider communities. Its historic core runs along the River Somer which remains an attractive feature in the High Street. It is located approximately 10 miles south west of Bath and 16 miles south east of Bristol in the Mendip Hills. The neighbouring towns present competition to Midsomer Norton as a market town destination.

The town is the principal market town for the Somer Valley, serving a number of rural settlements. The town centre provides a range of retail outlets, a library, and leisure facilities. Reinforcing the town as the service destination for the rural hinterland is a key priority.

Radstock is located on the northern edge of the Mendip Hills in the Wellow Brook Valley. The town has been settled since the Iron Age and is one of the best preserved former coal-mining towns in England. This forms the basis of its Conservation Area status. The Great Western Railway, and the Somerset and Dorset Railway established stations and marshalling yards in the town. Radstock was at the heart of the Somerset Coalfield and became a central point for railway development.

Strong and thriving town centres are crucial to retaining and attracting employers to the Somer Valley area. The town centres have suffered from a lack of investment. Job and GVA increases are an important indicator of success. Midsomer Norton and Radstock should play complementary roles. The focus for Midsomer Norton town centre is to strengthen the retail offer, encouraging more support for local shops and services.

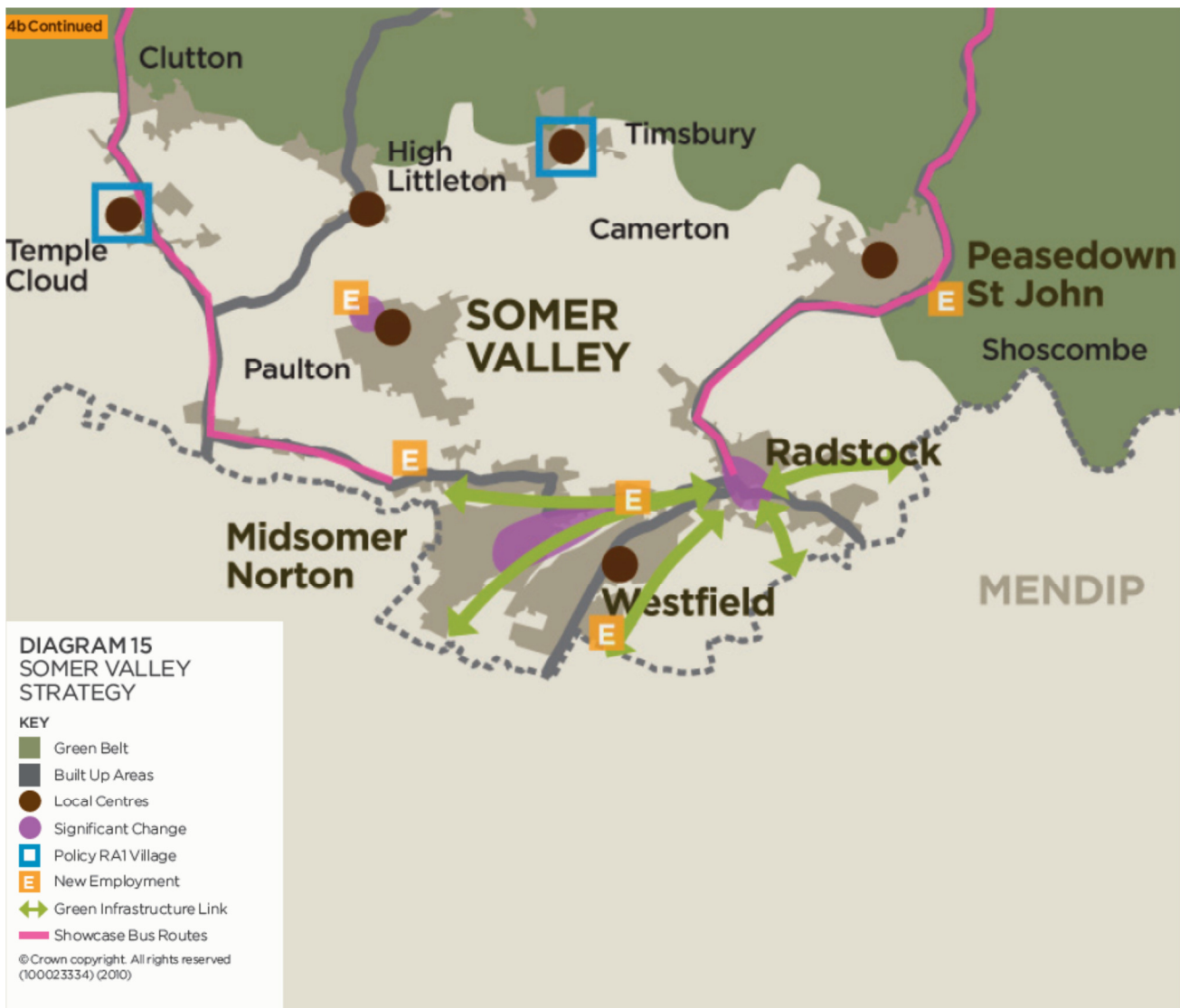


Figure 1: Somer Valley (Draft Core Strategy – note Policy RA1 Village designations have been removed in the recent consultation).

Policy Context

The draft Core Strategy sets out the Council’s vision for the wider Somer Valley Area, and for Midsomer Norton and Radstock Town Centres. This incorporates evidence from the Economic Regeneration Delivery Plan (ERDP). For the Somer Valley Area the ambition is to:

“create a thriving and vibrant area with a sense of wellbeing, its own identity and promoted as a whole, with Midsomer Norton and Radstock as the focus. Facilities in Midsomer Norton and Radstock will be available and accessible for the communities in the surrounding villages.”

The southern part of the District will become more self-reliant, facilitated by economic-led revitalisation alongside local energy generation, building on its industrial expertise and improving skill levels. Transport connections to other centres, as well as connections between settlements within the Somer Valley area will continue to be improved.

Midsomer Norton and Radstock Town Centres should provide key employment opportunities, services and leisure provision to the communities. Midsomer Norton Town Centre will continue to be the principal centre with improved public realm and enhanced townscape and a Town Park.

Policy SV2 of the draft Core Strategy envisages Midsomer Norton as a key link within the network of settlements. This helps to make the area more self-reliant. It identifies the key priorities as:

- Unlocking redevelopment sites in the town centre to avoid the need for out of centre retail development, particularly in respect of vacant/ underused buildings such as the former Palladium cinema and former brewery.
- Enhancing the public realm.
- Enhancement of leisure provision including the Town Park.
- Focus on the southern end of the High Street as the retail core.

Principles for future development include the following:

- Strengthen the shopping offer in the southern end of the High Street. Provide better pedestrian connections from the main car parks to the core retail area, creating a stronger frontage to South Road.
- Enable more intensive use of the South Road car park providing the opportunity to accommodate a modern food store. Any development here should retain public car parking for the town centre.
- Conserve the town centre's heritage and unique townscape character.
- Enhance the positive feature of the River Somer.
- Reduce the amount of traffic using the retail core of the High Street and improve the environment for pedestrians.
- Improve routes and major entrances into the centre. Improve access to green infrastructure including the proposed Town Park. Improve linkage to Sustainable Transport Routes. Improve the range of leisure and visitor attractions as part of the total town centre offer.

Policy SV3 provides the strategic policy framework for Radstock Town Centre. This seizes on key regeneration opportunities to:

- Bring into use the under-used and vacant sites within the town centre.
- Enhance the public realm.

The principles for future development in Radstock include:

- Protect and enhance heritage assets: The built form should retain its historical and architectural value and development should attempt to integrate these features and carefully consider materials appropriate to the locality and building style.
- Ensure that linkages to green spaces and sustainable transport routes are prioritised.
- Protect and enhance areas of visual significance and views to open landscape, in light of their close relationship with the history of the town.

Annexes 1 and 2 illustrate the Core Strategy spatial strategy for the Town Centres.

Economic Regeneration Delivery Plan

The ERDP aims to counter the local economy vulnerability to global change and move towards a modern local economy, with proactive promotion of the area. The town centres are a focus for employment - Midsomer Norton's supports nearly 800 jobs, almost half of which are in retail. Overall the Midsomer Norton and Radstock area rely heavily on manufacturing jobs, which account for a quarter of the local employment and twice as high as the district average. Over half of the residents in the area travel to work elsewhere.

The ERDP identifies some key measures required to achieve the ambition. Midsomer Norton town centre needs to:

- Strengthen the shopping heart – provide larger shops in the core area of the High Street to attract national retailers, in particular an anchor food store.
- Create a mixed use centre – create the opportunity for redeveloping outdated units to provide a mix of new shops, office and housing.
- Improve local attractions – planting and public realm improvements to strengthen the arrival points in the shopping, park and leisure areas.
- Surrounding the town centre, we need to maximise the potential of nearby development sites to complement and support the High Street.

Challenges and Opportunities

A number of challenges are identified as key risks to achieving the ambitions for the Somer Valley area generally. The local economy is vulnerable, and dependent on a narrow range of industries and a few large employers. There is a perceived difficulty in attracting economic investment in the area.

Conversely, the area has a good number of opportunities and strengths to inspire and influence new development, and achieve the ambitions. There is a high quality natural environment within and surrounding the towns. The critical mass of a combined Somer Valley area offers potential and there are active local communities and existing community networks.

The identified challenges and opportunities that relate to the Town Centres are set out below:

Midsomer Norton

Challenges:

- Increasingly strong competition from nearby market towns in surrounding districts.
- Lack of medium and large sized shopping units.
- The dominance of parking in the street scene, poor pedestrian links, busy roads and a lack of public space.
- Lack of evening economy to contribute to sense of vibrancy and community.
- Perceived fear of crime in some parts of the town centre.

Opportunities:

- Distinctive and appealing townscape with historic buildings, the River Somer flowing through the High Street and the conservation area.
- Distinctive views from the town to green skylines.
- Enhanced leisure facilities on the edge of the centre including a skate board park.
- Accessible parking.
- Improvement of the existing cycle network and use of the sustainable transport links.
- Strong community support that will benefit implementation.

Radstock

Challenges:

- The highway network and meeting of a number of busy roads. This compromises the pedestrian environment and creation of a strong sense of place in the Centre.

Opportunities:

- Rich heritage: The most significant element is the Radstock Conservation Area and its well preserved mining past. The conservation area is relatively extensive. Particular assets include; the museum, historic buildings such as the Brunel Shed and other former railway routes. Victoria Hall, the key municipal

- Potential flood risk.
 - Limited development opportunity sites to achieve overall ambitions for the town.
- building reflects the height of Radstock's industrial past and continues in community use to this day.
- An outstanding natural environment within and around the town, boasting prominent hills and valleys, woodlands, rivers and streams, and important biodiversity.
 - Strong network of established community groups.
 - Diverse range of services and a varied retail offer.
 - A strong, high quality education sector across the age ranges including Norton Radstock College.

Recent Projects

Recently completed projects in **Midsomer Norton** include the delivery of the Somer Valley Adventure Play Park and Skate Park. The project was part of the successful Play Pathfinder scheme.

Improvements to Midsomer Norton Primary School have been carried out in the last year. This has provided replacement of temporary buildings and a new entrance to the school, new hall, classrooms and nursery, and administrative suite.

Work to improve the facilities and services available at the Hollies was undertaken during 2011-12. This has resulted in improved access, additional meeting rooms and enhanced community space.

Recent projects in **Radstock** include design, construction and development of new education facilities at Writhlington School. The school was completed in 2011. During construction the existing school buildings remained operational.

In **Westfield** an application for a 93,000 sq ft Sainsbury's store was refused in March. The scheme, which would be built on the site of CFH Total Document Management's premises, would have a detrimental impact on nearby Midsomer Norton and Radstock town centres.

Planned and Future Projects

In **Midsomer Norton**, work is progressing on bringing forward a regeneration strategy in line with the draft Core Strategy and the ERDP. Particular attention is being given to the opportunity of South Road car park. It is a key site that is central to the wider regeneration of the town. The strategy will need to be wider than the town centre, and will flow from the work undertaken for the ERDP.

Through the ERDP, seven packages of investment were identified. These are the key sites and projects for Midsomer Norton. They draw on the existing spatial and economic strategies for Bath and North East Somerset. South Road, The Hollies and the High Street Core are shown in the plan below. An update is provided on each in the following sections. A brief update on Town Park, Welton Bibby & Baron site in Midsomer Norton, and the Alcan site in Westfield is also provided.

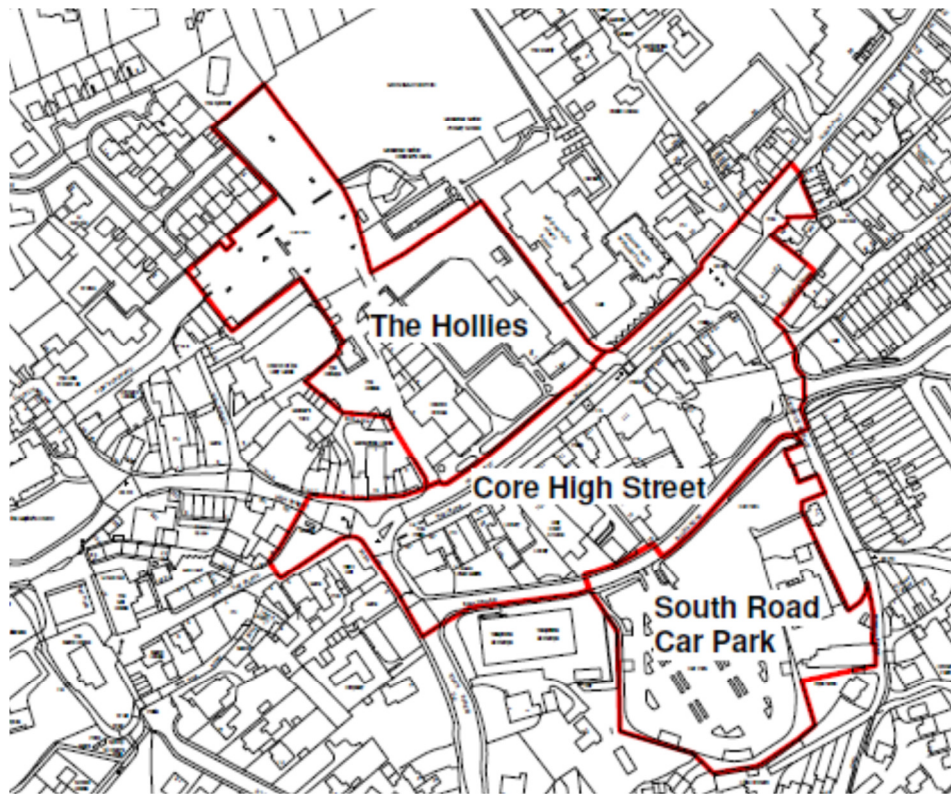


Figure 2: Plan of development sites in Midsomer Norton (Town Centre)

South Road

A food retail unit of around 45,000 sq ft gross would be feasible to site on South Road Car Park with undercroft parking. The site is designated for food retail within both the draft Core Strategy and Midsomer Norton's ERDP.

Site investigation works are currently being undertaken. The findings contained within the report, with estimated costs of remediation, will be shared with agents and prospective purchasers. This report will be capable of being novated to the successful party and their contractors. The concept design produced by a specialist food retail architect shows plans, artists impressions together with a scale and massing exercise which will be taken forward for pre-application advice by appointed planning consultants. The information will be shared with the marketing agent, to share with any interested parties to demonstrate what is preferred in terms of size and design on South Road.

The marketing of the site is through a design commercial tender and will dispose of a long leasehold interest. B&NES will retain the freehold to manage the restriction of 10% non-food (comparative goods) and other restrictions such as no pharmacy or optician.

Close liaison with the Town Council and the Chamber of Commerce resulted in alternative parking solutions for the town's retailers and business people to utilise during the temporary closure. This helped to free up the balance of car parking spaces for customers and visitors to the town.

The Mayor and the Chamber have been intrinsic in identifying spaces, allocation of permits and managing parking during this time.

Regular update meetings with the Town Council and the Chamber of Commerce will continue to be led by Property Services. These parties all understand that this will be a useful exercise in managing parking during the food retail store's development period, which may be up to 20 months in total.

The Hollies

Further discussions with the owners of the site are on-going. The expectations for this site come from the ERDP and from the draft Core Strategy. Retail expansion, to assist the town centre may be pursued pending the outcome of recent proposals for an out-of-town retail store. This will be progressed through the formal pre-application process.

The owners of The Hollies supermarket wish to expand their store to encourage the existing retailer, Sainsbury, to remain rather than pursue a planning appeal for a store at Westfield. They have appointed Mountford Piggott architects to increase the existing 28,000 sq. ft gross store to one closer to 40,000 sq. ft gross. The agent, Hartnell Taylor Cook, have confirmed their support for a supermarket on South Road. They are concerned that the ERDP reference to housing development at The Hollies could hinder their proposals for expansion.

Evidence of retail need indicates that two supermarkets (at Hollies and South Road) would take up the demand for food sales and also contribute to increased footfall within the core High Street area. The resultant aim is to act as a catalyst to regenerate the area around the Palladium / Brewery through private sector investment.

High Street Core

Regeneration of the Retail Core, either as a whole or in phases, will enhance retail offer. It is possible to provide larger retail units for which there is an identified need. The historic features of the Palladium and the Brewery would be retained and the scheme could provide a business hub.

In 2012 Midsomer Norton Town Council commissioned a retail core feasibility study to explore proposals and examine the types of retailers who may locate within the Town Centre. This demonstrates the options for connectivity between the supermarket on the South Road car park, and the High Street. It examined land ownership, the scope for development, and the extent of land assembly required. It concludes that redevelopment could provide a significant link which could be achieved through a range of alternative routes.

The study also identifies national operators seeking wider representation in similar towns to Midsomer Norton, and provides their space requirements. Operators such as Costa, Greggs, Poundland and QS could all be interested if their space requirements could be accommodated.

A fundamental need for the town centre is the attractive link between the new supermarket and the High Street. Therefore, in order to progress the regeneration here, it is vital that steps are taken to bring the South Road site to market as soon as possible. This will act as a catalyst and will enhance the value and attraction of the Retail Core.

Sources of funds to assist the projects are being investigated including commercial investment, Section 106 funds and the Revolving Infrastructure Fund (RIF).

There are also a series of projects which would increase the vibrancy of the town centre. These need to be addressed in addition to those above, including the additional priorities identified by the Midsomer Norton Economic Development Partnership, such as redesign of the Hollies Gardens, and the inclusion of market space.

Town Park, Welton Bibby & Baron and Alcan

The **Town Park** has been included in the draft Core Strategy (see Figure 2). It is likely to progress as part of a future planning application, and will be subject to pre-application advice. Its status within the Core Strategy will support delivery through this process.

Terrace Hill has signed up to a conditional purchase of the whole **Welton Bibby Baron** site. They are currently consulting locally to gauge views on their proposals. This would be likely to include redevelopment for a supermarket and housing, the details are as yet unknown. It is likely that the scheme will progress through to a formal pre-application stage during 2013. For retail purposes, the site is considered edge-of-centre. Town centre sites such as South Road and the Hollies will be preferred. It will be necessary to integrate any development here with the wider vision for the town.

The former **Alcan** factory in Westfield is providing residential-led mixed use development, including community facilities. The scheme includes re-provision of employment uses and a town centre link.

Economic Development

Midsomer Norton Town Council have an established Economic Development Partnership. The focus of the group is supporting job creation and the wider economic development of the town. Membership comprises representatives from MSN Town Council, B&NES Council, businesses and traders, and local developers.

The Radstock & Westfield Economic Development Forum oversees and manages the delivery of an economic development action plan of interventions, aimed at increasing economic and social/ community growth in Radstock and Westfield. The forum is made up of local and B&NES Councillors, business representatives, Radstock Town Team, Writhlington School and Norton Radstock College.

Indicative Development Programme

The following table provides an indicative development programme highlighting the development sites described above.

Project	2013	2014	2015	2016-2020
South Road Car Park				OPEN 2016
The Hollies				
High Street Core				
Alcan				
Town Park				
Radstock – Railway Land				
Assumptions				
Viability & land ownership				
Planning (pre-planning & application)				
Build/ implement				

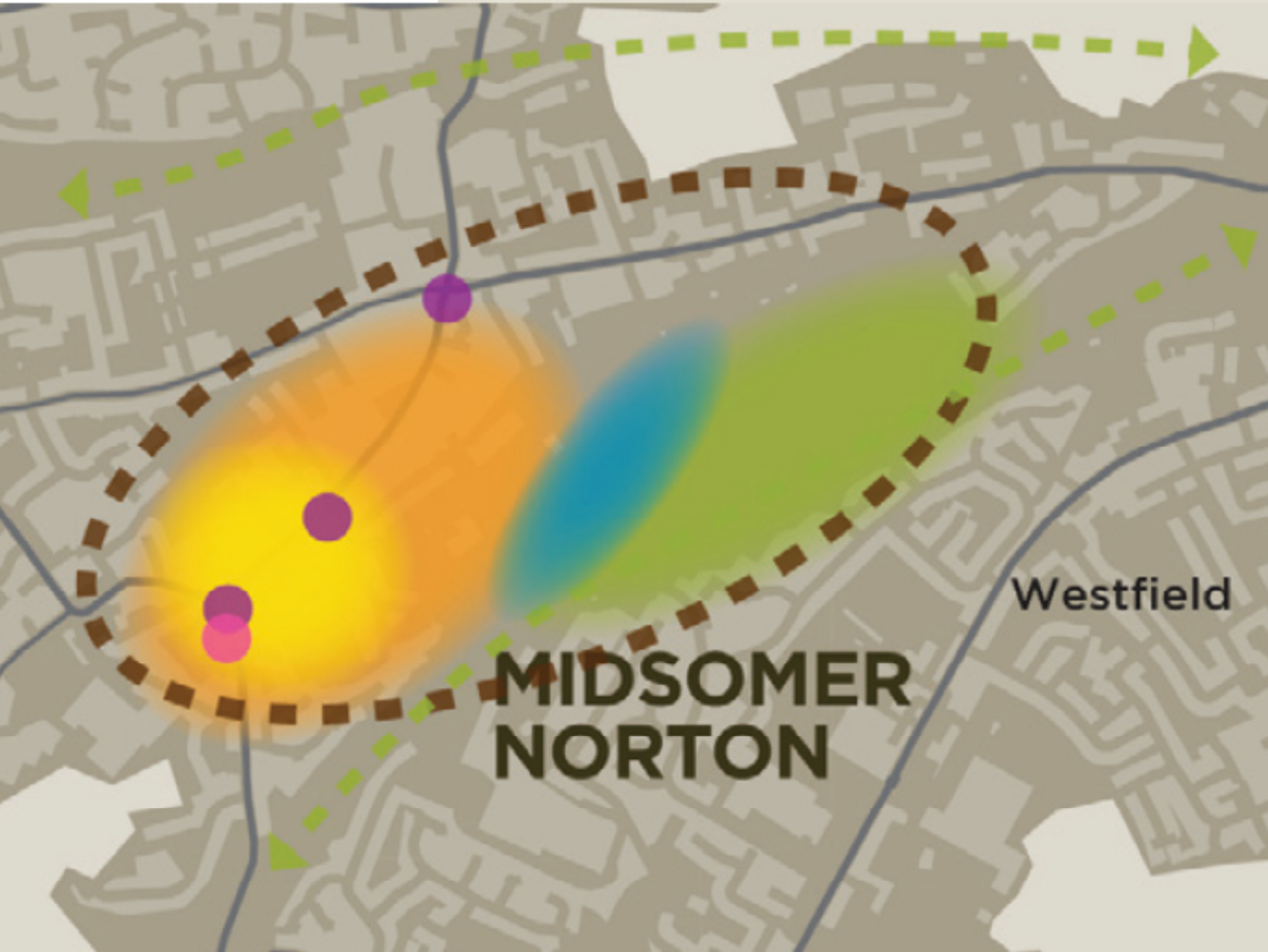
**Annex 1:
Midsomer Norton Town centre (Source: Core Strategy)**

**▼ DIAGRAM 16
MIDSOMER NORTON
TOWN CENTRE**

KEY

- The Policy Area
- Town Centre
- High Street Core
- Gateway Improvement
- Leisure & Community Area
- Town Park
- Key Community Landmarks
- ↔ Sustainable Transport/ Green Infrastructure Corridors

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Annex 2: Radstock Town Centre (Source: Core Strategy)

DIAGRAM 17 ►
RADSTOCK CENTRE

KEY

- The Policy Area
- Potential Areas for Change
- Key Community Landmarks
- Radstock Railway Land (Local Plan Allocation)
- ↔ Sustainable Transport/ Green Infrastructure

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