

Dear Charlotte

Thank you for your email attaching a letter from Williton Parish Council's Environment and Planning Committee raising concerns regarding the ongoing loss of commercial properties within the Parish. You note that, over the years, you have witnessed a significant reduction in the number of businesses operating in the area, which has had a considerable impact on both the local economy and the character of the community.

You mention the PC is concerned about a recent planning application for a change of use from commercial property to residential flats. Unfortunately, you have not provided any details (address/application number), but I do note that WPC have recently objected to an application for prior approval relating to premises at 5 Long Street (CMA/39/25/001), so it could well be this you are referring to? If so, your request that the application be put to the Planning Committee is noted and, if officers were minded to recommend that prior approval is given, it would be referred to the Committee Chairman for consideration of your request. I should mention that, as it stands, there is a firm objection to the proposals on flood risk grounds from the Environment Agency.

Turning to the issues you raise more generally, I am afraid it is unsurprising that across Somerset we are seeing more and more premises being converted from commercial uses, in particular offices. Nationally, you will appreciate there has been a shift in workplace practices in recent years, with more people working at home or on a hybrid basis. This change is most directly as a result of culture changes from the COVID pandemic, and new legislation providing employees with more flexibility over where and when they work. As a result, there is less demand for office floorspace, so organisations have reviewed their stock. This process is ongoing nationally and is not just an issue for Somerset. The loss of commercial premises has been further impacted by the relaxation of planning rules that now allow for conversion of such buildings to residential without the need for a full planning application. Such proposals are generally subject to a process of prior approval, under which the council's ability to object to the loss of commercial uses is significantly reduced. In addition, the new planning use class E allows for much more flexibility between commercial uses and whilst this can allow for a wider range of uses coming forward without the need to first obtain permission from the council, it does mean that we are no longer able to protect retail uses in the way we could in the past.

To help inform the development of policies for the Somerset Local Plan 2045, we have produced an [Economic Development Needs Assessment](#) (EDNA) which touches on these issues. We are also currently undertaking an Employment Land Review which will consider the potential supply of employment land in Somerset and balance this against the identified need in the EDNA for employment land over the next 20 years. The Employment Land Review will assess individual existing employment sites and potential new sites for their suitability for employment use on matters such as site layout and design, location and accessibility, local amenities and public transport, character of the area and neighbouring uses, age and suitability of stock. Some existing employment sites may be recommended as unsuitable for employment use and therefore could be considered for other uses. We are expected by the National Planning Policy Framework to review whether underutilised brownfield land could be freed up for housing. You will be aware that the Government's housing target for Somerset has increased significantly (by approximately 41%). The draft Local Plan will need to consider all these matters and propose sites for allocation. Your concern about the loss of employment property in Williton is useful to understand and we will consider this too. We will also review data on the amount of commercial floorspace that has been lost to other uses.

I hope you find this information useful.

Kind regards

Zac Ellwood

Interim Area Manager – Development Management (North & West)