

---

# WEST DORSET, WEYMOUTH & PORTLAND LOCAL PLAN

## EXPLORATORY MEETING, 22 JANUARY 2014

### COUNCILS' OPENING STATEMENT

---

My name is Dr. David Evans. I am a Chartered Town Planner with over 30 years experience and hold the post of Environment Director for both West Dorset District Council and Weymouth and Portland Borough Councils who are working in a shared services partnership. I would like to summarise the background to the plan and the overall position of the two Councils before my colleagues Hilary Jordan, Spatial and Community Policy Manager for the Partnership, Dr Keith Woodhead, our advisor on housing need and former Head of Planning at the South West Regional Assembly, and our Barrister Sasha White QC deal in more detail with the issues that you have identified in your letter to us.

We have carefully considered the six points you have raised in your letter of 10<sup>th</sup> December. Having reflected on these and taken expert advice, we are both surprised and disappointed that you have decided it necessary to hold an exploratory meeting as we believe these matters can all be properly resolved through the examination process.

Preparing a plan within the current legal and policy framework and in the context of Government's strong Localism agenda is no easy task. The Secretary of State Mr Pickles has made it very clear to local authorities that development is a matter for local decision and he has abolished Regional Spatial Strategies. Yet the replacement Duty to Cooperate and NPPF policy does not work well. Planning is not a technocratic exercise – it is both an art and a science - set firmly in a political context. A degree of pragmatism is therefore essential if local plans are to be put in place across the Country.

But despite these difficulties members and officers have put considerable resources and effort into plan preparation as they see real value in the plan led system and are committed to delivering the growth needed in the area.

From the very beginning we set out to fully take on board the duty to co-operate. We recognised that the biggest issue we would face concerned the future expansion of Weymouth. This is the largest town in Dorset but is tightly constrained within its administrative boundary. The main areas for expansion lie in the adjoining administrative area of West Dorset. Historically the two authorities have been at loggerheads over development issues and this is well documented in previous local plan inquiry reports. The pioneering shared services partnership between the two Councils which commenced in 2011 provided the ideal opportunity for both Councils to take the bold step of preparing a joint plan that crosses the administrative boundary and tackles the most contentious issue of how and where to

meet the needs for homes and jobs. Members of both Councils responded well to this challenge although piloting the joint plan through two sovereign councils has been a challenging task. But we have achieved this and have even allocated a major development site which lies astride the administrative boundary at Littlemoor. What better example could there be of two local authorities taking the Duty to Cooperate so seriously as to prepare a Joint Plan covering the whole of a Housing Market Area?

We have worked closely with our other neighbouring authorities too. We recognised that the future expansion of Yeovil in adjoining South Somerset was the second most important cross boundary issue. There is a long history of close cooperation between the two Councils on cross boundary issues including our participation in the development and evaluation of options for the expansion of the Yeovil. And similarly we have worked with the other neighbouring authorities.

On the matter of the objective assessment of housing need, we have sought to use the most up to date and relevant information. The draft National Planning Policy Guidance referred specifically to the 2011 based Interim Household Housing numbers which are the basis now used in the Local Plan and we have assessed likely trends post 2021. These figures have been rigorously tested in the work of Dr Woodhead and published in the Review of Future Housing Requirements dated April 2013.

We have also given consideration to the need for affordable housing in the area. The DCLG methodology is completely different from that used for identifying general market demand and the results cannot be compared. As you will see from our response to you, the option of allowing land for development of sufficient total housing to supply the required amount of affordable housing is neither feasible or deliverable - it would require nearly 5,000 dwellings to be constructed per annum!

No other authority in the area has met or been required to meet this level of development. Development to go towards meeting these needs is almost entirely dependent on the market and on the very limited government grant that is available. The plan has to be driven by the realities of the market if it is to be deliverable, as has been accepted in all the surrounding areas that have had plans adopted or progressed through local plan examinations.

We are also disappointed that you appear to regard the council's decisions to respond to the results of public consultation by changing some of the allocations as a flaw in our plan making process. As you will hear this morning we have put considerable effort into engagement with the local community through a whole series of meetings before we started drafting the plan and subsequently at each stage in plan preparation.

There is little point in consultation if we fail to consider the comments raised and then where appropriate make changes to the plan. In my view plan preparation should be an iterative process and I would expect members to make changes to reflect the views of the local community. But I do not accept that the changes that the Councils have made following pre submission consultation have fundamentally changed the strategy of the plan set out in policy SUS 2.

You have raised some other issues in your letter but we believe that these can properly be dealt with through the examination process.

Finally I have reflected on the matters you have raised and asked myself this simple question – what more should we have done? Even with the benefit of hindsight, I have concluded that we have done everything that we should. We have recognised that the major cross boundary issue concerned the expansion of Weymouth into West Dorset and the two Councils have taken the bold decision to prepare a joint plan which covers the whole of the Housing Market Area. And we have worked closely with our adjoining Councils on other cross boundary issues. We have met the requirement in NPPF to meet the objectively determined housing needs for the whole Housing Market Area and have allocated land for housing development in excess of 15 years across that area. We have fully involved the local community in plan preparation and members have responded to the comments received. In short we have met the necessary legal and policy requirements.

The biggest danger that the area now faces is from a delay in plan adoption leading not only to a delay in the delivery of the growth that we propose, but opening the possibility of “planning by appeal”. There are bound to be parties whose land is not allocated in the plan in whose interest it is to derail the local plan process. We therefore urge you to recognise the benefits that progressing our plan through examination to adoption will have and the very serious implications of any other course of action. We therefore ask you to please confirm as soon as possible that you consider that the necessary legal requirements to commence the examination have been met.

David Evans  
20<sup>th</sup> January 2014