

Dear Mr Hogger,

North Dorset Local Plan Examination: Additional Mid Hearing Written Material

Thank you for inviting the Blandford + Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group to comment on the above material prepared by the District Council to answer your queries following the recent hearing sessions on the Local Plan Part 1 (NDLP1).

In general, the Steering Group is greatly disappointed that the District Council has not responded to the matters it raised on the Blandford strategy in the NDLP1 at the hearing, and which it anticipated you would want covered, given the debate that was had. These matters were of considerable importance to our local communities and we would have expected the District Council to have at least made some statement within the relevant explanatory notes (notably docs MHD006 and/or MHD011).

To make matters worse, in addressing the need to extend the plan period to 2031, which we support in principle, the District Council has chosen to significantly increase the size of the least sustainable site on the edge of Blandford St Mary to 450 homes. Once again, this is seen only as a 'minor modification' requiring no re-assessment in the SA/SEA of the reasonable alternatives, which is especially concerning in the light of the doubt thrown on the deliverability of the other two sites on the edge of the village. Such a proposal cannot in our view be seen as such and raises major concerns on how the social infrastructure needed by the town will be provided.

A housing scheme of 450 homes in this location will neither be able to afford to make provision for a new primary school and GP surgery and nor would those facilities be able to serve the town even if they were viable. The District Council has conspicuously avoided making such demands of the scheme in its Policy 16. That quantum of development, although more than sufficient to create capacity problems for existing facilities, would not normally be sufficient to pay for those types of facilities and the land budget cannot accommodate the 2Ha – 3Ha required for those purposes without extending further into the countryside to the south. In any event, there is already a primary school in the village (which cannot be extended) and there is no sense in providing another school south of the town when the real demand is to serve pupils living in the northern half of the town. Similarly, the existing GP surgeries are in the town centre, which is reasonably accessible for the town population, but their expansion will not be easy. And the main demand for such services lies in its northern and eastern areas.

The Schedule of Changes Arising from the Hearing Sessions (MHD018) acknowledges this issue in its ref 7/14/14, which refers to the need for a "careful assessment of the need for, and location of, new facilities in the town". In addition, ref 8/16/9, states "potential growth in Blandford will require additional medical provision which can either be provided through expansion of the existing medical centre or by the development of a new surgery ... if necessary, land can be allocated through the ... neighbourhood planning process".

In the view of the Steering Group, that 'careful assessment' has been done and the local community has demonstrated through the recent household survey that it is persuaded of the advantages of using land to the north or east of the town to make provision for a new primary school as part of a sustainable urban extension. Further, the development of a new GP surgery to serve the town is the most sensible and realisable option and the same urban extension will be able to deliver that too. The Steering Group has already discussed these matters with the landowners, the county council and the local surgeries and is confident its Neighbourhood Plan will be able to make deliverable proposals in due course.

In doing so, the Steering Group will be mindful of the proposed change (ref 8/16/8 in the Schedule) to para 8.13 of the supporting text to Policy 16, which appears to enable the Neighbourhood Plan to make provision for "additional greenfield sites beyond the by-pass". No other reference is made to this by the District Council in its explanatory notes but we are assuming it enables our Neighbourhood Plan to allocate a series of sites to the north and east of the town for sustainable development and we therefore approve of this change. We will now do so in partnership with the landowners, being mindful of the District Council's expressed reservations about the landscape sensitivity of this area (repeated in its note ref MHD011 but offering no new insights on the matter) and how important it will be to require effective mitigation measures.

In summary, although some of the proposed 'minor modifications' to policies 6, 14 and 16 are welcomed, they are not sufficient for the Steering Group to withdraw its objections. We will therefore make further representations during the public consultation period on the proposed modifications and we expect the District Council to justify their soundness through a review of the Sustainability Appraisal.

This letter was discussed and approved by the full Steering Group at its meeting on 14 May 2015 and it is authorised to be submitted on behalf of Blandford Forum Town Council, Blandford St Mary Parish Council and Bryanston Parish Council.

Yours sincerely,

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