

EXAMINATION OF THE NORTH DORSET LOCAL PLAN 2011-2026, PART 1

Statement by Pegasus Planning Group on behalf of Lightwood Strategic Ltd: Participant ID: 3055
Duty to Co-operate, Legal Requirements and the Council's Broad Strategy Issue 1

1. This statement follows representations on the Pre-Submission Draft of the Local Plan by Pegasus Planning Group on behalf of Lightwood Strategic Ltd (ID: 3055; Representations 4077, 4081, 4082 and 4084) and similar representations submitted by Lightwood Strategic Ltd (ID: 3059; Representations 4154 to 4163) which also included as an Appendix details of suggested site allocations at Barrow Hill and Thornhill Road, Stalbridge. It is also to be read in conjunction with our pre-hearing statement on Issue 4.
2. We have no detailed comments to make on the Duty to Co-operate, in answer to the Inspector's Questions 1.1 and 1.2. However, it will be important to know what the Council has to say about relationships between settlements in the north of the District and neighbouring areas of Somerset and Wiltshire; especially as the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) has focused on relationships within the Bournemouth and Poole Housing Market Area, covering the six local authorities of Bournemouth, Christchurch, East Dorset, North Dorset, Poole and Purbeck.
3. The Background Paper on Meeting Housing Needs of November 2013 (MHN001) states (in paragraph 4.10) that *'the northern part of the District, including the towns of Gillingham, Shaftesbury, Sturminster Newton and Stalbridge, look towards Yeovil and Salisbury and lie within the 'North West Dorset' functional HMA. The southern part of the District, including Blandford lies within the 'Bournemouth & Poole periphery' functional HMA.'* Paragraph 2.12 of the Local Plan Part 1 also comments that *'The recent SHMA Update recognises that the northern part of the District has only a limited functional relationship with the South East Dorset Conurbation'*.
4. Evidence submitted in support of the Partial Review of the Purbeck Local Plan, Part I, includes interim findings for Purbeck¹ from the on-going work by GL Hearn to prepare a new Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) for what is now called the *Eastern Dorset Housing Market Area* (the same six local authorities). In the Council's response to the Inspector's Question 3 to the Council, this update of the SHMA is not mentioned. Presumably this work will be influenced by the 2012-based CLG household projections which are due to be published in February 2015. Relationships with adjoining housing market areas in Somerset and Wiltshire may also be

¹ GL Hearn, January 2015, *'Eastern Dorset Strategic Housing Market Assessment: Interim Findings for Purbeck District'*

important for settlements in the north of the District. It would be helpful to know how these relationships will be considered in the updated SHMA.

5. In answer to Questions 1.4 to 1.10, it is our view that the strategic site selection process has been unduly restrictive in relation to some of the larger settlements, and in particular Stalbridge which shares an allocation of 230 dwellings for 15 years with some 50 smaller settlements. Stalbridge is a sustainable settlement with a wide range of facilities and is much larger than other settlements that are proposed to be included in policies for the open countryside, without a settlement boundary.
6. We are not aware of clear evidence in support of this approach from the sustainability appraisal and strategic site selection process undertaken for the Local Plan. In particular, the exclusion of Stalbridge from the group of larger settlements is not consistent with NPPF paragraphs 17 and 55 as it does not take account of the role and character of Stalbridge, support a thriving rural community, promote sustainable development in rural areas, or enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities.
7. Strategic development opportunities in Stalbridge appear to have been excluded from consideration at an early stage, The Background Paper on Market Towns Selection of November 2013 (MTC001) explains the approach to strategic site selection in the following terms in paragraphs 3.11 to 3.13:

'3.11 The Council continues to believe that the District's main towns (i.e. Blandford, Gillingham, Shaftesbury and Sturminster Newton) should continue to expand, and that their expansion is a strategic issue, which requires some detail in policy. However, the approach to development elsewhere is seen as a less strategic issue and the Council now suggests a more flexible approach to development in the rest of the District within a 'light touch' strategic policy framework.

3.12 The Local Plan Part 1 broadly maintains the levels of development at the four main towns, having had regard to updated and new evidence base studies, further work on sustainability, especially in relation to sites at Blandford and Gillingham, and the responses to consultation on the draft Core Strategy.

3.13 The reduction in the level of development proposed for Stalbridge and the villages in the Council's strategic policies, not only gives these communities the

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opportunity to plan for their own needs, it also means that the Local Plan Part 1 now proposes that the vast majority of growth should take place at the four main towns.'

8. The Council's response to the Inspector's Question 4 (INS010 a/b/c) highlights the range of local facilities in Stalbridge (Table 2), the presence of employment opportunities in Stalbridge (Table 4) and the availability of public transport services. There is a railway station at Templecombe (3.4 miles from the centre of Stalbridge) which is not mentioned in the Council's response, as well as at Gillingham which is mentioned.
9. The Council's approach will impose an unwarranted restriction on the growth of sustainable rural settlements generally. In the case of Stalbridge it is particularly restrictive because of the size and other characteristics of the town. This approach will impact on the affordability of housing generally as well as on the supply of 'affordable housing' by Section 106 contributions from the development of market housing.
10. It is for the Council to explain and justify its approach. The documentation does not explain why the decision was taken to include Stalbridge with smaller settlements. The approach of the Pre-Submission Local Plan followed the Consultation on Key Issues of 29th October to 21st December 2012, which included options to include Stalbridge either with the District's larger villages or with all of the District's villages, but not with the four main towns. The settlement strategy in the Draft Core Strategy consultation of March 2010 had been based on Policy C of the Regional Strategy.
11. The Inspector's Question 1.6 points out that paragraph 1.8 of the Sustainability Appraisal (SUD003a) refers to '*five market towns which act as hubs serving their rural hinterland*'. The town of Stalbridge is generally mentioned separately from other rural settlements. Objective 4 of the Local Plan refers to '*focusing on meeting local (rather than strategic) needs in Stalbridge and the District's villages.*' This linking of Stalbridge with smaller villages is anomalous. It fails to take account of the characteristics of the town and the opportunities for sustainable development.
12. In response to Questions 1.7 and 1.8, we believe that the allocation of 230 dwellings outside the 4 main towns will be unduly restrictive; that it will fail to meet strategic and local housing needs or to maintain rural services; and that the downgrading of

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Stalbridge is not justified by the evidence of the Plan or information in the Council's response to the Inspectors Question 4 to the Council (INS010 a/b/c).

13. Policy 6 should be modified to add Stalbridge to the list of larger settlements with a specific housing allocation for 240 homes as there are significant opportunities for sustainable residential development, as identified in the submission by Lightwood Strategic Ltd (ID: 3059; Representations 4154 to 4163).

14. In answer to Questions 1.9 to 1.11, the supply of housing in all but the four main towns will rely on Neighbourhood Plans or local communities 'opting-in' to define a settlement boundary in Part 2 of the Local Plan. This approach means that the provision of housing to meet local needs is not resolved in Part 1 of the Local Plan and remains highly uncertain. In the case of Stalbridge there is also an opportunity for the town to contribute to strategic housing needs by amending the existing settlement boundary to reflect development opportunities consistent with the size and role of the settlement, as well as accommodating continuing infill within the town and any other opportunities identified by neighbourhood planning.

15. Part 1 of the North Dorset Local Plan does not provide sufficient strategic guidance for neighbourhood planning. NPPF (paragraph 184) states:

'The ambition of the neighbourhood should be aligned with the strategic needs and priorities of the wider local area. Neighbourhood plans must be in general conformity with the strategic policies of the Local Plan. To facilitate this, local planning authorities should set out clearly their strategic policies for the area and ensure that an up-to-date Local Plan is in place as quickly as possible. Neighbourhood plans should reflect these policies and neighbourhoods should plan positively to support them.'

16. In answer to Question 1.12, we maintain the view expressed in our representations (ID: 3055; Representations 4077, 4081, 4082 and 4084) that the plan does not comply with paragraph 157 of the NPPF which states that '*Local Plans should... (inter alia) be drawn up over an appropriate time scale, preferably a 15-year time horizon, should take account of longer term requirements and be kept up to date*'. The end date of 2026 will result in a time horizon of only about 10 years at adoption, if the Plan is adopted in later in 2015/16. It will also be more than 12 years since the previous local plan was adopted. As the SHMA looked ahead to 2013, it is difficult to understand why the Local Plan does not have a similar timescale.

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17. Question 1.14 is addressed primarily to the Council although we concur that more than 400 pages seems an excessive length, even by the standards of current local plans. In part this is because of the recitation of national policy, which may become out of date, repetition of the aims of the plan and the inclusion of more factual information and explanation than may be absolutely necessary. However, this additional explanation may be useful for local residents and other users of the plan. Perhaps research with focus groups of potential users of the plan would assist the Council to consider editorial changes as minor modifications that do not alter the meaning of policies.

18. We explained in our representations why we believe that the Local Plan Part 1 is unsound and suggested some changes that would help to make it sound. As we maintain those views, they are summarised below for the Inspector's convenience and in response to the Guidance Notes for these Hearings.

19. Our representations do not challenge the legal compliance of the plan, but do challenge its soundness, on the following grounds:

- The plan has not been positively prepared as it fails to meet objectively assessed needs for housing in the District overall or in specific settlements including Stalbridge;
- The plan is not adequately justified because of shortcomings in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment and in the settlement strategy;
- The effectiveness of the Plan is undermined by its relatively short timescale (to 2026) which means that it will not have a 15-year time horizon at adoption); its settlement strategy, which places significant settlements such as Stalbridge within the countryside where various restrictive development management policies apply, with no settlement boundaries; and its reliance on neighbourhood plans and local communities to 'sign up' to provide new housing development through Part 2 of the Local Plan (a site allocations document);
- The plan does not comply with national policy (the NPPF) because of these shortcomings. In particular, it fails to comply with the following paragraphs of the NPPF:

14: seeking opportunities to meet the objectively assessed development needs of the area with sufficient flexibility to adapt to rapid change;

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17: supporting thriving rural communities;

47: boosting significantly the supply of housing and ensuring that the Local Plan meets the full objectively assessed needs for market and affordable housing in the housing market area, consistent with other policies;

55: promoting sustainable development in rural areas, with housing located to enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities;

151: consistency of Local Plans with the objective of contributing to sustainable development and other policies of the Framework;

153: relying on additional development plan documents only where clearly justified;

157: drawing up plans for an appropriate timescale, preferably a 15-year time horizon, and taking account of longer term requirements; and

158/9: having an adequate, up-to-date and relevant evidence base, including a Strategic Housing Market Assessment that assesses the full housing needs of the area.

20. To make the plan sound, the following modifications are proposed:

- Modifications to Policy 2 to include Stalbridge as a fifth 'main town' and one of the District's service centres; to delete Stalbridge from references that include it with the District's villages and countryside in policy terms; and to include a commitment to define a revised settlement boundary in Part 2 of the Local Plan.
- Modifications to Policy 6 to include Stalbridge with an allocation for about 240 homes.
- Modifications to Policy 20 to exclude Stalbridge from the countryside and to include reference to a defined settlement boundary for Stalbridge.
- A new policy and inset diagram for Stalbridge; similar in form to Policies 16 to 19 including policy commitments to define a revised settlement boundary in Part 2 of the Local Plan and to review the Conservation Area boundary (under Section 69(2) of the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990).
- The new policy should state (inter alia) that:

'Stalbridge will continue to function as an important service centre, in conjunction with other settlements in the north west of the District through:

- a. development and redevelopment within the existing built-up area;*
- b. greenfield extensions to the south and west of the town as defined in Part 2 of the Local Plan; and*
- c. other opportunities identified by neighbourhood planning*

About 240 new homes will be provided at Stalbridge during the period 2011-2026. Housing needs will be met through... (the above locations).

Employment needs will be met at the Station Road employment area and the Gibbs Marsh Trading Estate.

The vitality and viability of Stalbridge as a local shopping centre will be maintained and promoted. Additional retail and service uses (A1, A2 and A3) will be permitted and changes of use of existing retail and service uses will not be permitted unless there is evidence that the existing uses are no longer viable.'

- Consequential modifications to Policies 2, 6, 9, 20 and other text in the Plan to add references to Stalbridge as a settlement with a defined boundary and to delete references that associate Stalbridge in policy terms with the District's villages and countryside.
- Overall housing requirements should be re-assessed with the aim of improving access to housing and affordability.
- The plan period should be extended to 2031.

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