



17th October 2011

Mr. O Lewis
Forward Planning Manager
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RE: NEATH PORT TALBOT LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (2011-2026): PREFERRED STRATEGY REGULATION 15 CONSULTATION, WELSH GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Dear Owain,

Thank you for consulting the Welsh Government regarding the Neath Port Talbot Local Development Plan pre-deposit documents. We are pleased to see progress being made in furthering a development plan for the area.

It is for the statutory consultation bodies and their equivalents to contribute to Sustainability Appraisal (SA) including Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and Habitats Regulation Assessment exercises and your expert group to help you assess if they are fit for purpose.

As always, we would urge you to seek your own legal advice to ensure that you have met all the procedural requirements, including screening for SEA, because responsibility for these matters rests with your Council.

In respect of the other pre-deposit documents we would refer firstly to the new approach to examining LDPs and the way we address this stage of pre-deposit documents involving the preferred strategy, options and other background material from a policy perspective. Please note that there will be a need to obtain and consider advice and representations from other relevant Government Divisions regarding candidate site proposals or aspects of detailed site assessment.

In the past our comments at UDP pre-deposit draft stage would have been in the form of specific objections to policy omission, relevance or wording which, if not addressed at deposit or pre-inquiry changes, would be considered by the Inspector in arriving at the recommendations in the Inspector's Report.

Under the new system, the responsibility rests with the local planning authority to ensure that a submitted LDP is sound in procedural terms and enshrines the principles of early community engagement, transparency, consistency, coherence and compatibility to neighbouring authorities. If these principles have not been addressed adequately at the earliest stages of preparation, then the deposit LDP may be considered unsound and unfit for examination.

Without prejudice to the Minister's discretion to intervene later in the process and to the independent examination, the Welsh Government is committed to helping local planning authorities minimise the risk of submitting unsound documents by making appropriate comments at the earliest stages of document preparation, and particularly at the Regulation 15 pre-deposit consultation stage.

To do this, the Welsh Government looks for clear evidence that the ten tests of soundness (as set out in 'LDP Wales' and the 'LDP Manual', and explained further in guidance issued by the Planning Inspectorate) are being addressed.

Having considered all the submitted documents provided by Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council under Regulation 15, we acknowledge the amount of work undertaken by the authority to reach this stage.

To ensure your authority secures a sound plan in due course, we have provided a strategic assessment of the Preferred Strategy document (as supported by the other documentation you have provided). We have indicated where evidence of soundness is not immediately clear. The annex to this letter sets out the detailed comments of the Welsh Government on the Preferred Strategy document; some comments relate to more than one test of soundness and we have provided cross-references where most appropriate.

There still remain some substantive matters as outlined below, which need to be addressed well before you produce a deposit plan. We suggest that to support your on-going self-assessment regarding soundness, you improve or provide:

- The LDP would be better informed by a strengthened identification of **key issues**, and by the **vision** and **objectives** being more spatially distinct, focussed on the plan period, and better related to the area's unique local characteristics and key issues.
- Consideration of the **spatial implications** e.g. the strategic distribution of growth within the urban and valleys areas as proposed in the preferred strategy. The strategy included in the deposit plan would benefit from being more locationally specific signalling the anticipated role and function of places across the County Borough.
- **Strategic policies** in the deposit plan must provide greater detail and clarity, being well aligned to the objectives and chosen strategy with supporting justification to indicate **delivery mechanisms** and **timescales for implementation**.
- The Welsh Government's national and sub-national household projections for Wales form a starting point for assessing housing requirements. Deviation from these figures should be suitably justified and based on robust and up to date evidence. **We have concerns regarding the low level of housing provision** in the preferred strategy,

appearing to plan for a declining population, below zero net-migration, opposite to the generous oversupply of employment land..

- The **housing** figure needs to be adequately evidenced and justified, both in terms of the overall figure, and in relation to the deliverability of affordable housing.
- A key component of the evidence base to support housing growth is the authority's **Local Housing Market Assessment (LHMA)** which is due to be reviewed. This evidence may require refinement of growth levels in the Deposit Plan. This work should also inform the Gypsy and Traveller need for the Deposit Plan.
- Provide a clear link between **housing and employment land** requirements for the area, particularly strategic employment locations and the Valleys.
- **Employment land** requirements (numerically and spatially) need to be clarified, including the over generous employment land supply.
- **How key national policy** issues (such as affordable housing, flooding, climate change, infrastructure availability, resource safeguarding, environmental/landscape issues, waste, etc), have influenced development of the Preferred Strategy at a strategic level.
- Give consideration to the impacts of **climate change** and the adaptation responses with regard to; floodplain/coastal risks/water management, biodiversity, green/open spaces and the historic environment to the spatial distribution and design of new developments.
- The delivery of **infrastructure** to support development should be integral to the plan and articulated accordingly. This should have regard to, in broad terms, the scale, location, timing and funding of infrastructure to demonstrate sufficient certainty of delivery over the plan period.
- How the strategy will address uncertainty and yet achieve the identified objectives. The deposit plan will need to be **flexible** enough to respond to circumstances such as emerging regional work (WSP, RTP, etc.) and evolving national/regional population/housing numbers and to include **contingency** approaches if the private sector are unable to deliver or the planned infrastructure required cannot be funded.
- The **monitoring framework** needs to be developed further.

Providing data exists and work has been undertaken where apparent gaps in the evidence base have been identified, we believe that much of this advice can be accommodated by refining and including emerging background material, for the deposit plan and its supporting documentation. This should not delay deposit plan preparation and should improve the prospects of the plan being deemed sound.

You should document your response to our comments in your Consultation Report.

To assist your authority in taking forward the LDP, we recommend that we meet your officers to discuss our response. If you have any queries in relation to the response, please contact me (on 029 2082 3732).

Yours sincerely

Mark Newey
Head of Plans Branch
Planning Division
Welsh Government

Annex