

West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland Local Plan EiP

Position statement made by Smiths Gore on behalf of the Salisbury Diocese Board of Finance.

Matter 3: Spatial Strategy

3.2 Is the overall distribution of housing and employment appropriate to the needs of the two areas?

- The Salisbury Diocese considers that the proposed overall distribution of housing needs to be more positive and be more flexible to the housing needs of the area over the plan period, in accordance with national planning policy and guidance.
- The submission plan describes that the reason for the proposed single housing land requirements across the whole plan area is to allow development to be focused at the largest town of Weymouth. Although this may be reasonable in terms of the greatest proportion of development this fails to recognise the importance of proportionate development also being directed to other settlements within the Local Plan area.
- Paragraph 1 of the National Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) section on Rural Housing (Reference ID: 50-001-20140306) explains that it is important to recognise the particular issues facing rural areas in terms of housing supply and affordability, and the role of housing in supporting the broader sustainability of villages and smaller settlements. A thriving rural community in a living, working countryside depends, in part, on retaining local services and community facilities such as schools, local shops, cultural venues, public houses and places of worship. Rural housing is essential to ensure viable use of these local facilities.
- Furthermore paragraph 1 goes onto explain that all settlements can play a role in delivering sustainable development in rural areas – and so blanket policies restricting housing development in some settlements and preventing other settlements from expanding should be avoided unless their use can be supported by robust evidence. This position has also been supported by Planning Minister Nick Boles at a conference at the Planning Inspectorate on 12 March 2014. Mr Boles stated that such an approach to housing strategies in rural areas would not be accepted and Inspectors examining Local Plans should not consider the approach to accord with national policy as it is unsustainable for those communities.
- As such it is clear that a greater onus in the overall strategy should be placed upon ensuring that a proportionate amount of this increase in the rate of housing development is directed to all settlements, rather than simply the largest town or towns. In particular the needs of smaller rural settlements should be properly assessed and addressed to ensure that these settlements retain the important role they play in the lives of the rural community of West Dorset. Without this clear indication within the Plan that it will support the rural housing needs of communities outside of the largest towns the Plan cannot be described as being consistent with national policy and must therefore be found **unsound**.

3.4 Is there sufficient flexibility in the Plan to respond to changing circumstances?

- The Salisbury Diocese is concerned that the upper limit to the housing target figures within the Strategic Approach and Policy SUS 1. will not allow the necessary degree of flexibility in the Plan to ensure that it can respond to changing circumstances. In order for a Plan to be found sound it must be consistent with national policy. Paragraph 21 of the Framework makes it clear that Local Plan policies should be flexible enough to accommodate needs not anticipated in the plan and to allow a rapid response to changes in economic circumstances. By setting a maximum target figure the Plan will not ensure flexibility should the housing needs of the area change throughout the course of the Plan. It is recommended that a target figure be set with the phrase '**in the region of**' replaced with '**at least**' preceding it, to ensure that the housing needs of the area will be met as they stand but also to ensure there is adequate flexibility within the policy.
- The same concern can be translated to the specific figures identified for the separate West Dorset & Weymouth areas from 2021 – 2031. Again, by setting a range of figures with a maximum target figure the Plan will not ensure flexibility should the housing needs of the area change throughout the course of the Plan. It is therefore recommended that the higher target figure be set with the phrase 'at least' preceding it, rather than the range figures, to ensure that the housing needs of the area will be met as they are currently understood but also to ensure there is adequate flexibility within the policy. Obviously if a subsequent review of the Plan identifies a far greater need for housing development in the 2021 – 2031 period the restrictive nature of the upper figure of the range would not allow the housing needs for the area to be met.