

14/3/2016

West Somerset Local Plan to 2032 Opening Statement

Good afternoon and on behalf of West Somerset Council welcome to the examination of the West Somerset Local Plan to 2032. The Council has prepared a short scene setting statement to introduce the examination of our Local Plan, a copy of the statement will be uploaded to the Examination webpage in due course.

West Somerset's local planning area is distinct from the West Somerset District boundary insofar as it excludes the area designated within Exmoor National Park which is subject to a separate emerging Local Plan being prepared by The National Park Authority.

The Planning Area has a population of around 27,000 people with approximately 18,000 living within the main settlements of Minehead/Alcombe, Watchet and Williton. The area is characterised by an ageing population where across the West Somerset Council area more than 15% are aged 75 and over according to the 2014 Somerset Mid-Year Population Estimates.

Two-thirds of the geographic area of West Somerset District lies within the National Park. Beyond the Park's boundaries and within the LPA area is located part of the nationally protected Quantock Hills AONB while other parts of West Somerset are protected European Wildlife Sites and/or are subject to flood risk.

Across the Planning Area agricultural, Retail, Residential Social Care plus tourism and related activities are the principal sources of employment. Economic activity is largely concentrated in the Coastal Strip. Nuclear power generation is of course a very significant source of employment with approximately 600 persons currently employed at Hinkley Point. Over the construction period of the Hinkley C reactor about 25,000 additional temporary jobs are expected to be created over a ten-year period peaking at 5,600.

Gross weekly pay according to NOMIS Earnings by Residence 2015 is £512.70 per week. This is below the UK figure at £529.60 but above the South West average. West Somerset has a high level of self-employment at over 25% which is significantly higher than that for the region and nationally. Recent studies have indicated that average earnings amongst the self-employed are 14% lower than those employed by businesses.

Housing affordability is a key issue given the nature of local employment and high quality natural environment. The ratio of lower quartile house price to lower quartile earnings is 9.2 – 1 (the highest in Somerset and significantly higher than the national average of 6.5 – 1).

West Somerset is the smallest Council in England and has faced considerable challenges as such in delivering key services. In 2014, the Council entered into a formal partnership arrangement with Taunton Deane Borough Council to provide services.

It is against this backdrop and within this context that the West Somerset Local Plan to 2032 has been prepared.

The Plan's preparation began in 2009 with consultation on an Issues Document, this was followed in 2010 with Options Consultation. Clearly it has taken longer than anticipated to progress this Plan to examination. There are a variety of reasons for this including challenging resource pressures, a changing national picture and planning context.

Notwithstanding the above, the Council has submitted a Plan for examination which it considers is positively prepared. It plans for a rate of development well in excess of the long-term historic average and which seeks to maximise the delivery of affordable housing. In

addition it has adopted a more flexible approach to development by removing settlement boundaries and introducing a more permissive, criteria-based policy.

The Council has attempted to respond to many of the Inspector's initial concerns with the Plan as submitted. It has put forward a number of potential soundness changes to ensure the effectiveness of policies and consistency with The Framework.

Finally and in respect of sites, the Council recognises the importance of providing certainty of supply. Consequently in December 2015 it endorsed six further sites for potential allocation within the Plan to 2032. These sites will help to ensure, that despite the very high historic rate of windfall development, the Plan accounts for a more substantial element of the Plan requirement for 2,900 new homes.

Beyond the Local Plan to 2032's adoption the Council can commit to a targeted future review to ensure the Plan provides full planning policy coverage and a singular document in-line with National Policy and Guidance. This review could also address any new and changing requirements arising from the Housing and Planning Bill or other new or amended national planning policy.