

## Local Plan introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement.

My name is Ruth Fletcher and I am the Cabinet Member for Planning and Infrastructure at Horsham District Council.

Whether you are here in person, will be attending later sessions or listening remotely, I would like to welcome you all to wonderful Horsham District.

I would like to thank the Inspector for your interest in the plan and your very considerable work in independently assessing its content.

Horsham is a growing and thriving District and has had an excellent record of plan-led housing delivery under the current Horsham District Planning Framework. The preparation of this Local Plan has therefore been a key corporate priority with input from teams across the whole council.

We received a high number and high quality of responses to our consultations. However, getting agreement for a new plan has been a great challenge. To some extent this is always expected: it is difficult to balance the need for more housing, especially the genuinely affordable housing needed by our younger generation and lower paid workers while maintaining those aspects of the character of our District that make it such a desirable place to live. And by the way, only last week, Horsham made a list of the top 20 'happiest places to live'.

However, getting local consent for new development is especially challenging for us given the history, for reasons outside the council's control, of infrastructure: schools, health care and transport not keeping up with the rising population. This challenge has been compounded by our caused high housing targets and by having to develop the plan through five iterations of the National Planning Policy Framework.

The tensions caused have been very real for our council; they resulted in the previous administration being unable to get agreement even among its own group members to bring forward a new plan. Not just one but 4 leaders of the council lost their jobs and there was a dramatic change in political control of the council.

The consequence of that is that our Local Plan has been delayed.

This delay became far more serious for us when Natural England's position statement in September 2021 led to Water Neutrality. This is something new and unique to our area.

It suddenly meant that we were legally prevented from permitting most new development. This has had major consequences for the Council, for our residents and for our local construction industry. We have been left with an out of date plan and operating under the tilted balance.

As a result, we have seen growing numbers of speculative applications where the key factor in getting permission has not been compliance with the plan policies, but the availability of water solutions.

So we have seen allocated sites sitting idle for lack of water at the same time that we have had to grant permission for unwanted, unallocated and less sustainable sites outside the built-up boundaries. Our officers have had to divert huge amounts of time and effort into defending appeals against harmful speculative applications when they would otherwise have been helping pass new applications and positively preparing our new plan. Local communities have been understandably angry and frustrated to see new sites that they had excluded from their hard-won neighbourhood plans being granted permission.

As this number of unbuilt permissions for speculative sites rises, so does the risk that these sites will 'cannibalise' delivery of allocated sites.

So, with this background, the new administration is determined to get HDC back to plan-led development and out of the tilted balance as soon as possible. When we took office, this was our top priority.

We took the Regulation 18 plan as a starting point and continued work on the evidence base. We set up further consultations with parishes and local groups to learn more about their priorities and to minimise adverse impacts for our communities. In line with our Council priorities, we also strengthened key policies including those on climate change, protecting the environment, higher eco building standards, early delivery of supporting infrastructure, and moving up a gear on active travel.

The plan we now have allocates land which can come forward without further harm to the internationally protected habitats of the Arun Valley. This means that housing numbers are significantly lower than the starting point of the standard method with our high affordability multiplier and 'duty to cooperate'. We believe that what we have now is an ambitious but realistic compromise that will deliver new homes for our residents while protecting the wider rural character of our District.

I cannot overstate the extent to which getting this far has been difficult for our officers and difficult personally for councillors, especially those with large housing allocations in their own wards. But even with the lower housing numbers there has been a political price, one which we have paid at recent byelections.

However, we are proud to have succeeded in getting a decisive majority including some significant cross-party support at Full Council on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2023.

I want to give especial thanks to the Council Officers throughout the organisation who have worked so hard to bring this plan to fruition and especially to the officers in Strategic Planning and our Director. I also want to thank my predecessor Cllr John Milne, now John Milne MP, who as Cabinet Member, steered the plan through the critical Regulation 19 stage. Finally, I want to thank the many, many parish councillors and residents who have contributed throughout this plan process.

I am proud to be able to present this new Horsham District Local Plan to you.

I have no doubt officers will assist you in responding to your questions over the course of the examination process.

Thank you