

**West Suffolk Submission Draft Local Plan**

**January 2024**

**Guidance notes and frequently asked questions**

This information will help you make comments on the final 'submission' version of the West Suffolk Local Plan. The submission plan is the council's final draft of the document.

**The consultation on the submission local plan will take place from 30 January to 12 March 2024.**

The consultation asks specific questions required by the planning inspectorate (the body which checks that we prepare local plans correctly). These questions are:

- Is the plan legally compliant?
- Is the plan sound?

At this final consultation stage you can only submit comments on the plan in relation to its **legal compliance or soundness**. These guidance notes explain these questions and terms and provide information that will help you submit your response.

**Is the submission local plan version legally compliant and does it meet the requirements of duty to cooperate?**

West Suffolk Council believe the local plan documents comply with the law. To be legally compliant the documents must be:

**1. Prepared in accordance with the local development scheme (LDS)**

The West Suffolk Local Plan documents are in our programme of work for the preparation of planning policy documents, or 'local development scheme' (LDS), and the key stages have been followed. The plan must be in the current LDS to have been published for consultation. The most recent LDS can be viewed here. [https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/planning/Planning\\_Policies/upload/Local-Development-Scheme-web-June-2023.pdf](https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/planning/Planning_Policies/upload/Local-Development-Scheme-web-June-2023.pdf)

**2. Prepared in compliance with the statement of community involvement (SCI)**

The statement of community involvement (SCI) sets out how the council will involve the community in preparing and revising planning documents and in considering planning applications. The process of engaging with the community in preparing the local plan documents should comply with West Suffolk Councils' SCI.

The West Suffolk Local Plan documents should comply with the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012. On publication, we must publish the documents as set out in the regulations, and make them available at our principal offices and on our website.

### **3. Subject to a sustainability appraisal**

Sustainability appraisal is a tool for appraising policies to ensure they reflect social, environmental and economic factors. When we publish a local plan we are required to provide a sustainability appraisal report.

### **4. Subject to engagement with neighbouring authorities and other bodies under the duty to co-operate**

The duty to cooperate places a legal duty on local planning authorities to engage constructively and work with neighbouring authorities and other prescribed public sector bodies to address cross boundary, strategic planning matters as part of preparing their local plan. The local planning authority has undertaken extensive and ongoing engagement with neighbouring authorities and certain other bodies over strategic matters during the preparation of the plan. Evidence of this can be seen in the West Suffolk Duty to Cooperate Statement which is available to view on the evidence pages of the of the consultation system at <https://westsuffolk.inconsult.uk/>

### **Is the local plan submission version sound?**

To be 'sound' a local plan should be:

- Positively prepared
- justified
- effective
- consistent with national policy.

These terms are explained in paragraph 35 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2023) and are repeated below along with our interpretation.

#### **1. Positively prepared**

The plan should provide a strategy which, as a minimum, seeks to meet the area's objectively assessed needs; and is informed by agreements with other authorities, so that unmet need from neighbouring areas is accommodated where it is practical to do so and is consistent with achieving sustainable development.

#### **Our interpretation of this is:**

- Does the overall strategy in the plan meet the infrastructure and development needs of the area?
- Has the plan considered the requirements of other districts; for example, for housing and employment, and taken account of these where appropriate?

#### **2. Justified**

The plan should be the most appropriate strategy, taking into account the reasonable alternatives, and based on proportionate evidence.

### **Our interpretation of this is:**

- Are the choices made in the plan backed up by facts?
- Are any alternatives to the plan realistic and have they been assessed in a sustainability appraisal?

### **3. Effective**

The plan should be deliverable over the plan period and based on effective joint working on cross-boundary strategic matters that have been dealt with rather than deferred, as evidenced by the statement of common ground.

### **Our interpretation of this is:**

- Is there evidence of joint working during plan preparation in the published statement of common ground?
- Are there any regulatory or national barriers to delivery of cross boundary strategic issues?
- Is the strategy in the plan compatible with neighbouring authorities' strategies?

### **4. Consistent with national policy**

The plan should enable the delivery of sustainable development in accordance with the policies in the National Planning Policy Framework and other statements of national planning policy, where relevant.

### **Our interpretation of this is:**

- National policy (including the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)) must be followed in the production of a local plan;
- The development plan document should have regard to these policies and where a departure is made, local evidence is needed to justify why.

## **Q. What is a local plan?**

A local plan provides a vision for the growth and development of an area and policies which set out the way that the council aims to meet the housing, employment, social and community needs of an area while at the same time protecting and enhancing the natural, built and historic environment.

It is produced by the local planning authority (West Suffolk Council) in consultation with the local community and other bodies. It will identify land for housing, jobs, local services and supporting infrastructure to meet future needs.

It is an important document for the district and has a major influence on how it will change and develop in the future. It is also the document which contains the local policies against which all planning applications are assessed.

## **Q. Does West Suffolk already have a plan?**

Yes. The existing local plan documents include:

- Former Forest Heath area Core Strategy (2010).
- Former Forest Heath area Single Issue Review (SIR) (2019).
- Former Forest Heath area Site Allocations Local Plan (2019).
- Former St Edmundsbury area Core Strategy (2010).
- Former St Edmundsbury area 'Vision' Site Allocation documents (2014).
- Joint Development Management Policies Document (2015).

Much has changed since some of the two former authorities' local plans were prepared and adopted. Government guidance was substantially revised in July 2018, and February 2019 and again in 2023. Neighbouring authorities in Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex and Cambridgeshire have published plans for growth that may impact shared infrastructure and have effects on the local economy.

Preparing the new West Suffolk Local Plan will include reviewing, updating or deleting existing planning policies and adding new policies where appropriate to make sure they are as up to date as possible and meet the districts future needs.

Hargrave, Great Barton and Newmarket have made neighbourhood plans which are part of the district's development plan and several others are under preparation.

## **Q. Why does West Suffolk need a local plan?**

It is a statutory requirement that local authorities produce a local plan for their area and keep it up to date.

West Suffolk Council was formed from the former Forest Heath area and the former St Edmundsbury area and came into being on 1 April 2019. The new council needs to start afresh and plan positively for the new, larger area.

Government guidance requires local plans to be reviewed every five years to establish if a new plan is necessary, so our timeline starts with the creation of

the new council in 2019. The West Suffolk Local Plan will provide strategic and local policies that will help and guide the delivery of sustainable development to 2040.

### **Q. What happens if the old plans are not updated?**

There is a risk that central government could intervene and prepare a local plan for the council, which would be likely to limit local involvement and decision making, and incur extra expense.

If an old local plan is out of date or new plan is not prepared in a timely manner there is a danger existing policies such as those relating to housing will not be applicable when considering planning applications. This increases the risk of unplanned, speculative development.

### **Q. What is a strategic housing and economic land availability assessment?**

The strategic housing and economic land availability assessment (SHELAA) identifies and assesses the development potential of possible sites for future housing and economic development. These are all the sites put forward by landowners, agents, developers and businesses.

Some sites are described as 'deferred' - this means that there is something that currently prevents the site being developed, for example it is in the area designated for special protection.

Some of the sites assessed as being 'included' are identified as allocations in the submission local plan while others are not. It is important to note that just because a site is identified as 'included' in the SHELAA doesn't mean that it will necessarily be allocated in the local plan.

### **Q. Why do we need more homes?**

The population of West Suffolk is steadily growing, and the council must plan for growth based on the best available information. Between now and 2040 we will need more homes for a number of needs including:

- People who live here and want to stay here - including people getting older who may want smaller or specialist housing.
- The children of today who will want to live and work in the area.
- Single people - more people are living on their own, either through choice or change of circumstances.
- People moving here, including for work or to set up businesses.

In the absence of a local plan that identifies and allocates land for housing, unplanned sites are more likely to come forward through speculative planning applications. Without a supply of land identified in a local plan, it would be difficult to refuse applications, even if people may think they are on inappropriate sites.

## **Q. How did the council decide how many homes we need?**

The minimum number of homes needed is calculated using the standard method which is set out in national planning guidance. The standard method uses a formula to identify the minimum number of homes expected to be planned for, unless exceptional circumstances justify an alternative approach. The local housing need addresses projected household growth and historic under-supply. In establishing the number of homes to be planned for, it should also take into account any unmet needs which cannot be met by neighbouring authorities. The housing need figure generated using the standard method may change as the inputs are variable.

## **Q. Is 'no development' an option?**

No. The Government is clear that housing growth is fundamental to revitalising the economy and meeting housing needs, and one of the main aims of the National Planning Policy Framework is to 'significantly boost the supply of housing'.

## **Q. How was the option for sharing the growth around the towns and villages in West Suffolk decided?**

During the issues and options consultation (2020), we consulted on four different options for housing growth distribution in West Suffolk. The consultation responses were reviewed as well as the evidence on available sites and constraints. As a result, a preferred option was developed and consulted on (2022) to focus development in the towns, key service centres (KSC), local service centres (LSC) and type A villages. Having considered the responses to the preferred options consultation, this strategy remains appropriate and is carried forward in the submission local plan.

## **Q. What does strategic and local policies, and site allocations mean?**

**Strategic policies** are those that address West Suffolk's priorities for the development and use of land in the district, are essential to delivering the overarching strategy of the plan and which are often relevant to cross boundary issues. The strategic policies have the prefix SP. Neighbourhood plans should accord with these policies in their preparation.

**Local policies** are locally specific policies that will be used in day-to-day planning decisions (providing more detail on the strategic policies, and providing criteria that proposals are required to comply with). The non-strategic local policies have the prefix LP.

**Strategic site allocation policies** are the large sites of at least 500 homes, large employment or mixed-use allocations located in the towns of Bury St Edmunds, Mildenhall, Newmarket and Haverhill and some key service centres. These are listed before the local site allocations in the relevant section.

**Non-strategic site allocation policies** are small to medium size sites in towns, key service centres, local service centres and type A villages ranging in

size from 10 to 15 homes in the type A villages to 375 homes and a primary school in a key service centre.

**Q. How will existing infrastructure and services cope and what new infrastructure and services will be provided to support the growth?**

It is recognised that services such as schools and doctors are stretched in some locations and that infrastructure could be improved in some areas. We are working closely with colleagues in the district and county council responsible for parks, schools, and roads, etc as well as with external parties, such as the utility providers and the National Health Service to try to ensure that infrastructure needs are adequately planned for.

A draft infrastructure delivery plan is published alongside this submission draft of the local plan which sets out what infrastructure is needed to enable the delivery of the spatial strategy, including proposed levels and locations of development, to ensure proposals are in place, or will be put in place, to deliver that infrastructure.

Where appropriate, new developments are required to contribute to the delivery of appropriate infrastructure, whether directly or through financial contributions. This means the council can ensure adequate and appropriate infrastructure is in place to accommodate growth.

**Q. What will happen to planning applications that are submitted before these documents are finalised?**

Planning applications will be considered using the adopted former Forest Heath (FHDC) and St Edmundsbury (SEBC) Core Strategies, the Joint Development Management Policies document, the FHDC Single Issue Review and Site Allocations Local Plan and the SEBC Vision 2031 Local Plans, and national planning policies in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

**Q. What is a sustainability appraisal, and what does it do?**

A sustainability appraisal is a required document, which sits alongside the local plan and seeks to ensure that all areas of the proposed plan are assessed against a range of social, economic and environmental objectives. This work is being undertaken independently and will impact on each stage of the plan's preparation. Carefully considering these three objectives will enable us to deliver sustainable planning policies.

The sustainability appraisal is also open to consultation at the same time as the submission consultation of the local plan and can be viewed on the consultation system at <https://westsuffolk.inconsult.uk/>

**Q. What is a habitats regulations assessment, and what does it do?**

A habitats regulations assessment (HRA) is an assessment undertaken to consider and appraise the likely impact of a plan or project upon internationally designated sites of nature conservation importance.



The habitats regulations assessment is also open to consultation at the same time as the submission consultation of the local plan and can be viewed on the consultation system at <https://westsuffolk.inconsult.uk/>

**Q. Is there a glossary to help me understand the terms used in the document?**

Yes, a glossary has been produced as standalone document to accompany the local plan and can be viewed on the consultation system at <https://westsuffolk.inconsult.uk/>

**Q. How can I register on the online planning policy consultation system?**

You will need to be registered on the system in order to submit your representations to us online. We would strongly advise you to use this method of commenting. It is the most efficient and effective way to send us your comments.

<https://westsuffolk.inconsult.uk/system/register>

To help you when registering please note the following:

- Areas of interest (AOI) – please choose the topics you wish to be consulted on. You can amend this at any time by logging on to your account. If you do not select AOI you will not be directly notified of any forthcoming consultations and will need to check the system to see if any are due to start.
- You must agree to the council's terms and conditions and privacy policy to enable registration.
- Once you have registered you will receive an activation link in the registered email (check the junk box if it is not received in a few minutes).
- As soon as your account has been activated you will be able to make your comments on any active public consultation directly into the system.

**Q. How can I make a comment?**

All of the consultation information is available to view in the virtual exhibition at <https://westsuffolk.exhibition.app/>.

The best way to comment on the local plan is online via the council's online consultation system at <https://westsuffolk.inconsult.uk/> If you have difficulty commenting online, or you need information in a different format, please let us know and we will be happy to help.

You can email us [planning.policy@westsuffolk.gov.uk](mailto:planning.policy@westsuffolk.gov.uk) and if you have any questions on any aspect of this consultation, please contact a member of the strategic planning team on 01284 757368.

If possible, we would encourage you to send us your views online via our consultation system as it is the most effective and efficient way to comment. If you are unable to comment online, you will need to complete a standard response form which sets out the legal and soundness questions relevant to this

consultation. A copy of this form and guidance notes can be downloaded from the website at <https://westsuffolk.inconsult.uk/WSLPdraftsubmission>. If you are unable to access it online, please use the contact details above and a form will be posted to you.

Written responses can be posted to: Planning Strategy, West Suffolk Council, West Suffolk House, Western Way, Bury St Edmunds, IP33 3YU.

### **Q. Will my comments be made public?**

We are legally required to make the comments we receive about the local plan available for all to see, including your name. No other personal information will be published (please ensure any documents you upload to the system do not contain any personal information as this will not be redacted before publication). This meets the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulations 2018. We cannot accept any comments marked private or confidential.

All comments will be available to view as soon as reasonably possible after the close of the consultation period.

### **Q. How long is the consultation?**

The consultation runs for six weeks from 30 January (9am) 2024 and closes on 12 March 2024 at 5pm.

### **Q. What happens next?**

Following this consultation, comments are submitted to the planning inspectorate. A public examination will take place at a later date. Please ensure you are registered on the consultation system to receive updates on the progress.

Further information and updates about the West Suffolk Local Plan will be published on the home page of the council's online consultation system at <https://westsuffolk.inconsult.uk>.

### **Q. How can I get involved and how can I find out more?**

If you have any questions

- email us at [planning.policy@westsuffolk.gov.uk](mailto:planning.policy@westsuffolk.gov.uk)
- call 01284 757368
- Visit the <https://westsuffolk.exhibition.app/>.
- Submit feedback at <https://westsuffolk.inconsult.uk/WSLPdraftsubmission>.
- Attend our in-person consultation events - details of dates, times and locations are available on the <https://westsuffolk.inconsult.uk/WSLPdraftsubmission>.