

Development Local Plan Examination: Hearing Statement

Our Ref: 2012-067-EIP/M2

Date: 22 March 2021

From: NJL Consulting (Consultee ID – 1232396) on behalf of Lavington Participation Corp. and Duncraig Investment Corp.

Matter 2: Plan Strategy – key Issues, vision and objectives

Key Issue: Is the overall strategy coherent and based on a clear and robust preparation process? Is the strategy realistic and appropriate in the light of relevant alternatives and is it based on robust and credible evidence?

Question 2a) Is the LDP's overall strategy consistent with those of neighbouring authorities? What are the main cross boundary issues and how have these been addressed?

- 1.1 The main cross boundary issues with neighbouring authorities are considered to be in- and out-migration for both jobs and new homes, delivering on the economic growth agenda, boosting housing delivery and affordable housing provision balanced against the Green Belt boundary with West Cheshire.
- 1.2 Some background studies have been prepared jointly with Wrexham Borough Council; however, we consider that further background evidence-based justification is required to demonstrate that the overall strategy is consistent with those of neighbouring authorities, especially where net in and out migration may have an impact upon household formation and forecasted economic growth.
- 1.3 Flintshire is one of five local authorities and other bodies in North Wales, to have joined the North Wales Economic Ambition Board (NWEAB). Set in the context of the North Wales Growth Vision, there is an ambitious target for this region to achieve 2.8% annual economic growth and supporting the creation of over 120,000 new jobs by 2035. The recent pledge by the Welsh and UK Government of £240 million investment as part of the North Wales Growth Deal, highlights the targeted growth for the area within which Flintshire is located.
- 1.4 There is not only a need to look at neighbouring authorities within Wales, such as Wrexham, but cross-border to England – given the importance of aligning growth ambitions with the Northern Powerhouse. The Wrexham-Deeside-Chester Hub, identified as a key triangle growth area within the Wales Spatial Plan, exemplifies this approach to cross-border cooperation and supporting Flintshire's sub-regional economic role. The establishment of the Mersey-Dee Alliance (MDA), where Flintshire is also a key partner, promotes economic, social and environmental interests across the West Cheshire, Wirral and North East Wales area. The MDA growth region represents a single economic sub-region with a population of close to 1 million with the potential to:
 - Double its economy to £44bn GVA;
 - Increase its population beyond 1.1 million people;

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- Create a minimum of 50,000 jobs; and
 - Build up to 25,000 homes.
- 1.5 Flint is the third largest town in Flintshire and is strategically located within the MDA along Chester Road – an important cross-border transport corridor. The Mersey Dee Area Growth Prospectus sets out the growth ambitions for the area by identifying Flint within a network of coastal settlements which play a key role as ‘industrial powerhouses’¹ to the MDA.
- 1.6 It is therefore evident that Flintshire plays an important sub-regional economic role, operating through an increasingly fluid cross-border relationship with neighbouring authorities.
- 1.7 This is reinforced through commuter travel patterns. As confirmed within the Local Housing Market Assessment Addendum (2020) *‘the analysis indicates a strong connection with the neighbouring areas of Wrexham and Cheshire West and Chester’*² taking into account working commuter pattern and each authority’s own distinct housing markets. The LHMAA confirms that just 61% of the Borough’s population live and work in Flintshire. This is well below the 70% threshold for assessing an authority as a self-contained housing market. Indeed, the Council accept that this shows only a *‘moderate degree of self-containment’*³.
- 1.8 Notwithstanding this, the LHMAA concludes the Borough as broadly being a self-contained housing market for the purposes of local plan making. This would appear an incorrect assumption given the marginal evidence which is also based upon out-of-date 2011 census data⁴. We strongly recommend that stronger evidence is provided on this key cross-border issue to ensure that economic forecasts and household formation in the Borough is planned for appropriately.
- 1.9 It remains incumbent upon the LPA in the first instance to ensure that appropriate levels of growth are planned for the Welsh side of the national border and are commensurate with meeting development needs in Flintshire. The concerns raised through the Wrexham LDP Examination over the level of housing provision set within Wrexham is however a relevant cross-border matter for Flintshire to consider should Wrexham be unable to address this additional housing requirement.

¹ Mersey Dee Area Growth Prospectus (2017) Page 4

² Local Housing Market Assessment – Addendum (2020) Para. 3.42

³ Local Housing Market Assessment – Addendum (2020) Para. 3.42

⁴ Local Housing Market Assessment Addendum (2020) Table 3.9

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Question 2b) How have the key issues been selected? Are they all addressed directly and adequately by the vision and strategic objectives? What is the relationship between the Key Issues and Drivers (para. 3.30) and the challenges that must be planned for (para. 3.35)?

- 1.10 During the early stages of local plan preparations, the key issues and drivers are derived from the Strategic Options Consultation (2016) and Preferred Strategy Consultation (2017). These remain largely unchanged to the Deposit LDP.
- 1.11 LPC fully support Strategic Objective 9 that seeks to '*Support development that positions Flintshire as an economically competitive place and an economic driver for the sub-region*'. This is reflective of Flint's role within the North Wales Growth Deal and MDA and as one of the most sustainable growth settlements in the Borough (Tier 1 – Main Service Centre).
- 1.12 Understanding the integral link between employment and residential growth is fundamental to the LDP and at present this is absent from the LDP vision, albeit reference is made to this within Strategic Objective 11 which is supported.
- 1.13 The objectives of locating growth to sustainable locations and settlements is fully supported in Strategic Objective 12, while also ensuring that housing needs are properly met as sought from Strategic Objective 11.
- 1.14 However, it is imperative that the proposed housing allocations follow the strategic objectives of the plan. It is considered the proposed allocations and strategic policies do not align as sustainable settlements such as Flint are identified for comparatively limited growth than smaller less sustainable Tier 2 and 3 settlements

Question 2c) Is the vision appropriate and sufficiently detailed?

- 1.15 LPC supports reference to Flintshire's '*unique position as a regional gateway*' however it is imperative that housing delivery is explicitly referred to within the vision in supporting economic growth. The vision does not fully address housing figures and distribution which should be referred to from the outset. It is therefore suggested that the LDP vision refers to the '*unique position as a regional gateway and area for housing and economic investment whilst protecting its strong historic and cultural identity*'.
- 1.16 As it stands the vision does not provide certainty to developers by confirming that housing delivery is a key target for the County Council.

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Question 2d) What are the implications, both positive and negative, of Flintshire's gateway location on a national border? How are these accounted for in the LDP?

- 1.17 Flintshire benefits from its unique and strategic location to fulfil its role as a sub-regional economic hub. The implications are that it is ideally located to accommodate a significant scale of economic growth, as forecasted by the LDP with scope for 8,000 to 10,000 new jobs being planned for. It is imperative that the housing strategy is aligned to this strategic objective.
- 1.18 As observed by the West Cheshire NE Wales Sub Regional Spatial Strategy (2006), this work recognised the lack of relevance of the national border given how authorities such as Flintshire operate sub-regionally. While the study was of its time, the same conclusions can be drawn today. This precipitates a more strategic cross-border relationship which continues to be reinforced by the Mersey-Dee Alliance (MDA).
- 1.19 The result is a far more inter-connected spatial relationship between English authorities such as Cheshire West and Chester, particularly in terms of migration trends and commuter patterns. Differences in affordability between cross-border housing markets inherently plays a role in informing such trends, with many choosing to reside within Flintshire and settlements such as Flint in order to commute into Chester.
- 1.20 The Flintshire and Wrexham Employment Land Review (ELR) (2015) confirms that of all authorities in North Wales, Flintshire had the highest number of out-commuters (29,300) in 2012 representing 41% of the total across the region⁵. Table 18 of the ELR confirms that as much as 19.8% of out-commuters travelled to Cheshire West and Chester, more than any other neighbouring authority.
- 1.21 While it is dependent upon local authorities to ensure that their own individual needs are met, this cross-border relationship inevitably means that growth within Chester will play some part in Flintshire's housing needs.
- 1.22 This requires very careful consideration so that the Plan targets its actual requirement. The conclusion within the LHMAA that Flintshire operates as a self-contained housing market cannot be an accurate representation of this strategic, cross-border relationship. Indeed, the threshold evidence within this report confirms as such with just 61% of people choosing to live and work within Flintshire⁶. Based on more current 2019 data from ONS Annual Population Survey⁷, only 39,100 residents live and work within

⁵ Flintshire and Wrexham Employment Land Review (2015) Table 17

⁶ Local Housing Market Assessment (2019) Para. 3.37

⁷ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Business-Economy-and-Labour-Market/People-and-Work/Employment/Commuting/commutingpatterns-by-welshlocalauthority-measure>

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Flintshire (50.6%). This is significantly below the identified 70% threshold for establishing self-containment in housing markets.

- 1.23 LPC therefore raise doubts over the extent to which the LDP has properly accounted for the growth of neighbouring authorities within its own housing requirement for Flintshire (also see response to Matter 6c).

Question 2e) Does the LDP address the physical and mental health of the population?

- 1.24 LPC have no comments to make in relation to this question.

Question 2f) What is the purpose of the strategic policies? Are they useful and useable in development control terms?

- 1.25 Strategic policies are fundamental to the LDP process and are primarily concerned with articulating a vision of how the area should develop during the Plan period. They identify provision for major land uses, the broad siting of development both site-specific and borough-wide and make clear where policies of restraint will be applied. It is therefore critical that strategic policies are deliverable and capable of achieving clear outcomes for the Plan.
- 1.26 Strategic policies also need to avoid being overly prescriptive on development control, particularly in relation to settlement boundaries. Choosing to not provide policy flexibility and room for manoeuvre within the LDP in order to accommodate to changing circumstances (e.g. stalled delivery rates on strategic sites and other housing allocations), risks undermining the delivery of the plan itself. This is an acute issue for Flintshire given the Council's track record of failing to meet its housing requirement in over the UDP period.
- 1.27 This is further exemplified within the LDP where it states that additional flexibility allowance (14.4% to 18.1%) has now been built into the Plan. LPC critique the approach that has been taken and extent to which this offers genuine flexibility given the continued over reliance upon the Northern Gateway within this additional allowance (see response to Matter 3a).
- 1.28 In addressing this issue, it would be logical to provide flexibility to the Plan in policy terms through setting out an appropriate trigger and flex within settlement boundaries, to enable opportunities for other deliverable sites in sustainable locations to come forward. In their current form Policies PC1, HN4 and HN4-D are too prescriptive should housing delivery stall across the Borough, particularly for standard open market housing schemes.

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1.29 This is considered in more detail in our response to Matter 20.

Question 2g) What is the policy position on Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land?

1.30 The policy does not include reference to the protection of best and most versatile agricultural land as this is set out as national policy in PPW10⁸ which states that such land *'should only be developed if there is an overriding need for the development, and either previously development land or land in lower agricultural grades is unavailable... which outweighs the agricultural considerations'*.

1.31 There is therefore no need for the LDP to set out a specific policy on this matter as it is clearly addressed within PPW.

Question 2h) Are the Proposals and Inset Maps accurate and user friendly?

1.32 LPC have no significant comments in relation to this question but would recommend that on adoption the Proposals Map is provided in digital/ interactive format for ease of reference.

Question 2i) In the light of the time which will remain if the LDP is adopted in 2021/2, is the plan period (2015-2030) appropriate?

1.33 LPC have concerns regarding the proposed plan period. With a base date of 2015 and the earliest date of adoption towards the end of 2021, the LDP will already be 6 years into a 15-year plan period. As a result, the LDP in its current form will only cover a 9-year period.

1.34 The LDP is now six years into a condensed plan period with the challenge of delivering an increased housing requirement of 7,950 units. In delivering on this requirement, LPC express significant concern over the site selection process which has rolled forward two strategic allocations from the UDP.

1.35 The UDP set out a broadly similar housing requirement of 7,400 homes over a 15-year plan period from 2000 – 2015, equating to an annual average of 493 new dwellings per year. The Council accepted that this represented an achievable target given that this annual requirement fell *'16% below Flintshire's average housing completion rate for the five-year period up to the start date of the Plan'*⁹.

⁸ Planning Policy Wales (2018) Paras. 3.54 and 3.55

⁹ Flintshire UDP (2011) Para. 11.18

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- 1.36 With the UDP being adopted as late as 2011 and only 4 years left on the plan period, it was significant that the Council continued to allocate the strategic site at Northern Gateway for 650 homes – equating to circa 10% of the overall requirement. This was despite the Inspector acknowledging at the time that *'there is no doubt that delivery of the scheme within the plan period will be tight'*¹⁰. Indeed, it was not until 4 years after the plan period ended in 2019 that any form of development came forward on the site (see response to Matters 3b and 3c).
- 1.37 The outcome of the UDP was a resounding failure to meet the housing requirement and a significant backlog of 2,012 homes.
- 1.38 This context demonstrates the crucial point that the Council's past failure to meet their housing requirement is not a debate over the Council's track record of housing delivery or the housing requirement being too high, but whether the right choices were made in terms of site selection to meet that requirement.
- 1.39 In choosing to pursue a site of the scale and complexity of Northern Gateway as a strategic allocation, despite there only being four years remaining over the plan period, the Council had placed themselves in a constrained position. The UDP was evidently over-reliant on this strategic site with not enough alternative sites being identified for delivery.
- 1.40 The Deposit LDP is likewise well into the proposed Plan Period and continues to be over-reliant upon strategic allocations that have been rolled forward from previous plans.
- 1.41 LPC therefore raise concerns on history repeating itself and the deliverability of the LDP. It is critical that the Plan is robust, stable and flexible enough to accommodate to changing circumstances over the Plan Period. Continuing to rely upon two strategic sites which have failed to deliver under previous development plans, does not provide flexibility it is instead restrictive.
- 1.42 It would therefore make sense to roll forward the plan period as a genuine 15-year plan, while ensuring that the requirement over the interim 6-years is addressed positively and at the earliest opportunity within the plan so that needs can be met. It is important the plan does not take a retrograde step by deferring this backlog to later in the Plan Period and instead addresses the housing requirement early. LPC therefore propose that alternative, smaller sustainable sites come forward to deliver the housing requirement over the Plan Period.
- 1.43 This is fully aligned to emerging Policy STR2 which directs growth to Tier 1 Settlements such as Flint, where residential development is encouraged alongside economic

¹⁰ Inspector's Report on the Flintshire UDP (2011) Para. 11.158.12

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growth. As Flintshire and many other authorities look to establish a course for economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now more important than ever that the right choices are made in terms of site selection so that the LDP can deliver on this key objective.

Question 2j) What will be the status of Place Plans, when prepared, and how will they relate to the LDP?

1.44 LPC have no comments in relation to this question.