



A VISION FOR THE BLANDFORD PLUS NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN AREA IN 2031

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN VISION

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of this report is to summarise the outcome of the Vision Workshop of February 2015 in relation to the preparation of the Blandford Plus Neighbourhood Plan. Its outcomes are being tested by a number of the community engagement activities through February-March 2015, the results of which will be reported to the North Dorset Local Plan 2011-2026: Part 1 (NDLP1) Examination Hearing on 18 March 2015.

1.2 The report has been prepared by RCOH Ltd on behalf of the Blandford Plus Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, which itself has been authorised to represent the views of Blandford Forum Town Council, Blandford St Mary Parish Council and Bryanston Parish Council. It is submitted as an appendix to the Examination Statement made by the Steering Group.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Blandford Forum Town Council has long sought to address social and other infrastructure weaknesses in the northern half of the town. The addition of 1,110 new homes in the fifteen year period of the plan is already placing new pressures on the availability of primary school places and General Practice facilities in the area with many of the 500 homes of that number already consented now built on the northern and eastern edges of the town. The proposed growth strategy plans for no further growth in the town from 2015 to 2026, which will leave it 'caught between two stools' of having insufficient development to finance the much needed infrastructure.

2.2 Indeed, the decision to plan only to 2026 and not for at least another five years is likely to mean a speedy review of the NDLP1 soon after its adoption to plan for new homes beyond 2026. NDDC has presented no evidence to indicate that its chosen spatial strategy will be suited to growing Blandford St Mary even further to the west and south.

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2.3 Blandford St Mary and Bryanston parish councils have consistently objected to the plans to grow Blandford St Mary village (as well as to the former proposal at Crown Meadows) as unsustainable. Although having grown over the last decade and containing the Brewery site, the village has remained a distinct settlement to its neighbouring town over the River Stour. The river floodplain, the A354 bypass and the rising land west into the Dorset AONB all serve to constrain its further growth into a higher order settlement. The village has never regarded itself as part of a single town with Blandford Forum and it does not function as such.

2.4 Both Parish Councils believe that the cumulative impact of 800 new homes around the village in the coming years cannot be accommodated without causing serious traffic congestion and harm to the AONB and its setting and to the nearby Bryanston SSSI. Bryanston Parish Council also objects to the strategy that may lead to further development creep into the AONB, with the significant negative landscape, biodiversity, traffic and heritage impacts that will result.

3. VISIONING

3.1 The Steering Group held a Visioning Workshop on 5 February 2015 to assemble and analyse the planning policy context and community engagement data collated to that point. The session forms a key stage in scoping the policies of the Neighbourhood Plan with the knowledge that it must meet the 'basic conditions' to pass its own examination and must then win the support of the local community at referendum if it is to be 'made'.

3.2 The workshop concluded that the preferred vision for the Blandford Plus area in 2030 should be:

"Blandford Forum has grown to become a more successful and sustainable town providing a wider range of homes, jobs, shops and facilities to meet all the needs of the local community. Blandford St. Mary and Bryanston have remained at their current size as small but viable communities. The tourism potential of the area has been realised, which has led to new local employment opportunities.

Change in the local landscape has been managed to sustain its special character and the ways in which it helps define the character of the town and villages. The special historic and architectural character of the Blandford Forum, Blandford St. Mary and Bryanston Conservation Areas and the Listed Buildings that help define each place has been sustained and enhanced. The local communities are able and are encouraged to walk, cycle and use public transport for their trips within and beyond the area."

3.3 This vision is distinctive to this Neighbourhood Plan in describing how the area should appear and function in fifteen years time. It reflects the outcomes of key spatial policy choices to be made in 2015 and how change will be made for the good of the local communities of the area.

3.4 Crucially, this vision does not accord with that of the NDLP1, at least in respect of the spatial implications of growth. It is, however, consistent with the overall NDLP1 vision of sustaining the role of Blandford Forum as an important town in the district, even if the NDLP1 may have under-estimated the scope of growth necessary to 2030 to enable this objective to be achieved.

4. THE SPATIAL STRATEGY

4.1 The vision comprises a clear spatial strategy that focuses growth on building Blandford Forum into a more successful town, rather than growing the much smaller village of Blandford St. Mary to the south. In doing so, it recognises that the town must continue to grow beyond 2026 if it is to secure crucial improvements to local public transport, schools and other community facilities and to create new, higher value-added job opportunities for the local workforce.

4.2 The vision believes the only sustainable way of growing the town for the longer term but also to deliver early crucial infrastructure investment is to use available and suitable land on the northern and north-eastern edges of the town. That land adjoins the A350 bypass and A354 Salisbury Road and extends to a total of almost 40 Ha across two sites.

4.3 The northern land (N) forms 13 Ha immediately north of the A350 bypass and extends to the Sunrise Business Park to the west, to the Town Council boundary to the north and to the Town Council allotments to the east. The site lies within the Cranbourne Chase AONB but can be contained within the landscape. The land was allocated for sports pitches by Policy BL6 of the 2003 Local Plan but this proposal has since been abandoned.

4.4 The north-eastern land (NE) forms 28 Ha immediately to the east of the A350 bypass to the south of Letton Park and north of Pimperne Brook and Black Lane. The land falls within the setting of the Cranbourne Chase AONB but does not lie within it. It can be safely accessed from both the bypass and by the A354 Salisbury Road and there are opportunities to bridge over the bypass to connect the site with Preetz Way.

4.5 Both the N and NE sites are in the same single land ownership and the landowner has promoted their availability to NDDC for a wide range of uses since the early stages of the Local Plan. They have now been made available for the following potential mix of uses:

- Up to approximately 1,000 new homes (800 on NE and 200 on N) to contribute to the current plan period and to 2030+
- 2 Ha of new employment land to extend Sunrise Business Park
- two new green bridges connecting the N site to the housing and retail development south of the bypass (Gurkha Road) and the NE site to Preetz Way and Larksmead Playing Field
- A new primary school serving the new development and the northern half of the town
- New shuttle bus services connecting the N and NE sites with the town centre, Blandford School and Blandford Heights Industrial Estate

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- A new GP Surgery serving the new development and the northern half of the town
- A replacement Household Recycling Centre for the town
- An extension to the Town Council allotments
- New sports pitches as part of a significant new area of parkland including a 'green ring' from Preetz Way through the NE site to the N site and to Sunrise Business Park and Shaftesbury Road with connections to Pimperne Brook/Black Lane

4.6 The main reasons for the vision supporting the alternative spatial strategy of land north and north east of Blandford Forum are:

- It has the capacity to deliver sufficient new homes and new employment land for growth in the period to and beyond 2026 and to finance the delivery of crucial social and grey infrastructure
- It will deliver essential upgrades to public transport, primary school, recreation, health and recycling services and facilities to address existing capacity problems in the northern half of the town
- It can be stitched into the fabric of the main town by breaching the bypass with existing and new foot and cycle bridges and by creating a 'green lane' along Black Lane avoiding the bypass
- Its impact on the Cranbourne Chase AONB and its setting is arguably less than that of the land on the edge of Blandford St. Mary and can in any event be satisfactorily mitigated through a comprehensive landscape strategy
- It can achieve safe and efficient access to the highway network and will reduce the need to travel by car, given its closer proximity to the majority of the town's existing employment sites, its ability to provide a new primary school serving the north of the town and its delivery of new bus services to connect the northern half of the town with the town centre and Blandford School
- Neither spatial option will deliver homes close enough to the town centre to encourage many walking trips, so the emphasis must be on securing public transport services improvements that require the footfall that only the existing and new residential areas in the northern half of the town, including the Sunrise and Heights industrial areas, can deliver

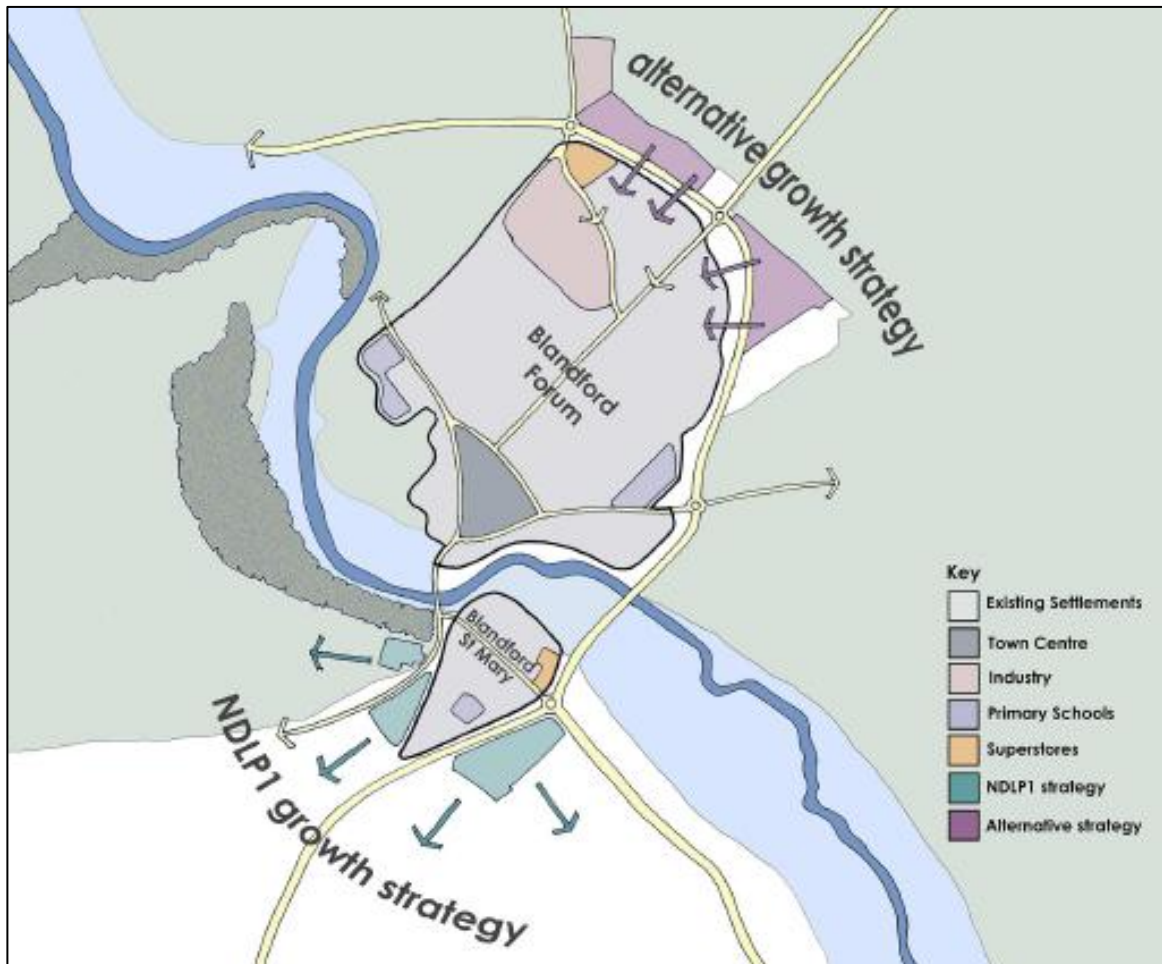
4.7 These important benefits are in stark contrast to the proposed spatial strategy focused on Blandford St Mary village. That collection of sites can only deliver housing and no other land uses or social infrastructure, as they are too remote from the vast majority of town residents. The largest site cannot be connected to the village in any meaningful way for pedestrians and cyclists and will have no local facilities, resulting in an isolated housing estate with a poor quality of life. And none of the sites is capable of leading to further growth beyond 2026 given their landscape capacity and increasing remoteness from the town.

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4.8 They cannot therefore contribute to a meaningful vision of the Blandford Plus area other than in providing new homes in the short term. They too have their landscape impacts on the Dorset AONB and their cumulative impact with the redevelopment of the Brewery may have serious consequences for traffic management within the village.

4.9 The concept plan below shows both the proposed NDLP1 and the alternative growth strategies. In effect, although on the edge of the town and beyond the bypass, the northern strategy looks inwards to the town. Its mix of land uses and infrastructure benefits for the town will tie it into the town and make it feel it belongs. The perceived severance of the bypass will over time become less as it is constantly breached by walkers and cyclists to and from home, work and school.

4.10 Conversely, the proposed strategy can only look outwards as it tries to assimilate mono-housing uses around the sensitive landscape edges of a village that already feels and appears complete in its setting.



5. THE WAY FORWARD

5.1 The Steering Group has now embarked on a series of community engagement activities across the town and parishes in order to receive what it expects to be a significant endorsement for its alternative strategy. These activities include a leaflet to all households, an online survey and a public meeting in each community.

5.2 Thereafter, the Steering Group will complete its analysis of the evidence to support those policies in its neighbourhood plan that do not rely on the outcome of the NDLP1 examination.

5.3 A decision will be made on how to respond to that outcome once it is known. If the Inspector supports the case made by the Steering Group then it will work with NDDC, the landowner and other relevant bodies to formulate appropriate site allocation policies in its neighbourhood plan. These policies will establish the key development strategy and management principles to inform the likely masterplanning work to support future planning applications.

5.4 Should the Inspector support the proposed NDLP1 spatial strategy then the Steering Group will consider if it will be possible for the neighbourhood plan to contain similar policies for the other sites. It may prefer to stay silent on these matters and allow NDDC to manage their delivery through planning applications, so that it may focus on positive planning policies elsewhere in the area.