

BLAENAU GWENT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN EXAMINATION

Request for information: INSP 001

Inspector: Vincent Maher MA (Cantab) MCD MSc MBA MRTPI

This is the first of a series of requests for information as I prepare for the examination in public which is likely to take place at the end of June 2012.

Progress so far

I have read the submission version of the Local Development Plan (LDP) and checked it against the track change version of the plan that incorporates focussed changes (FCs). I have reviewed objections and statements of support for the plan including alternative sites identified. I am now reviewing the evidence base that supports the plan. At this early stage of the examination, I would be grateful if the Council could prepare **short** responses to questions relating to housing, employment and transport policy. The Council is directed to identify relevant references in its Council's examination library to support its answers (e.g., SD77 for the Employment Sites and Premises Study).

Housing

1. Does the FC figure of 3,500 new houses identified in Objective 3 of the plan refer to additional new homes built or net new houses (that is, new houses built minus houses demolished)?
2. Would it be more correct to interpret this figure as 3,500 new "dwellings" or "homes"? Will a proportion of the new homes proposed be flats, especially given the demographic profile of the county borough, relatively low levels of car ownership and a commitment in Policy SP4 to built a mix of dwelling types? If the Council agree that the term "houses" is incorrect, does it follow that this term should be changed elsewhere in the LDP?
3. How has the figure of 3,500 houses been reached? Some submitters question the Council's sums. Paragraph 5.5 of the FC version of the LDP is unclear. I would welcome a more detailed explanation of the FCs to paragraph 6.30 of the LDP and the figure of 3,932 dwellings that appears in this revision. The Council is asked to present its calculations in a table showing where housing is anticipated in five year phases in the different parts of the county borough.
4. What evidence underpins the justification for a figure of 3,500 new houses when considered against the Welsh Government population and household projections (SD71 to SD76) and the recent rate of new housing completions in the county borough?
5. Why is the Council seeking to promote the figure of new housing set out in the LDP, given the levels of vacant stock (refer SD68)? What would be the implications of increasing the supply of housing on other initiatives which seek to reduce the number of vacant houses? Does

the Council have any firm, costed proposals to reduce the number of vacant houses over the lifetime of the plan other than those set out in SD68? If so, what are they?

6. How does the Council's approach to the planning of new housing perform when tested against soundness tests CE1, CE2, CE3 and CE4? Is the Council's policy and allocations for new housing realistic and soundly based?

Employment land

1. What is meant in Objective 9 of the LDP by the phrase "By 2021, 50 hectares of employment land and a range of premises have been delivered"? I do not understand what "delivered" means. What evidence or reports did it rely upon to arrive at this figure?
2. The Delivery and Implementation section of the LDP identifies some public sector grant for the delivery of MU1, the largest allocation of employment land to be "delivered". To what extent is the delivery of this project dependent on public sector grant? Is the necessary public sector funding package in place to secure private sector investment?
3. What are the implications of pursuing an employment land allocation of this scale when there is already a significant amount of empty stock? Does the Council acknowledge that vacant stock elsewhere will not be developed for employment or other uses during the lifetime of the plan?
4. Is the Council's policy and allocations for employment land use realistic and soundly based?

Transport

1. Policy T2 identifies the need to safeguard land for the extension of the railway from Ebbw Vale Parkway to Ebbw Vale town, a rail link to Abertillery and a new station at Cwm. The supporting text to this policy refers to a doubling of the frequency of rail services. How confident is the Council that these projects will be delivered during the lifetime of the LDP? Have any of these projects secured funding? If so, when are they scheduled to start and be completed?
2. How critical are the road projects identified in Policy T5 to securing new private sector investment? Has funding been secured to implement them? When will they be implemented?
3. Has the Council commissioned any research to assess the economic impact of the transport investment the Council seeks to achieve? How will these projects demonstrably improve the offer of the county borough for inward investment and consequent housing investment relative to neighbouring local authority areas?

Vincent Maher

INSPECTOR