

BY EMAIL

Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
Secretary of State
Ministry of Housing, Communities and
Local Government
4th Floor, Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London
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29 January 2018

Our Ref: PD/BT

Dear Secretary of State

LOCAL PLAN INTERVENTION

I write in response to your letter headed 'Local Plan Intervention' dated 16 November 2017, with regard to progress on plan preparation in Wirral.

The Development Plan in Wirral currently comprises:

- the remaining policies in the Unitary Development Plan for Wirral, adopted in February 2000, which were reviewed and saved by the Secretary of State in September 2007 and continue to be supported by Planning Inspectors at appeal after being found consistent with the existing National Planning Policy Framework;
- the Joint Waste Local Plan for Merseyside and Halton, adopted by the six partner authorities of Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens, Sefton and Wirral in July 2013;
- the Neighbourhood Development Plans for Devonshire Park, made in December 2015 and for Hoylake, made in December 2016.

Until May 2013, the Secretary of State's Regional Planning Guidance and Regional Spatial Strategies had provided housing and employment numbers and detailed targets and policies for the Borough, which previous Governments did not want to see duplicated by local policies.

Since December 2012, the Council has also had a Proposed Submission Draft Core Strategy Local Plan in place as a material consideration.

A further three Neighbourhood Development Plans are currently in preparation: for Leasowe; Birkenhead and Tranmere; and Birkenhead North; and discussions likely to lead to applications from a further two local communities are ongoing.

Approximately 46 percent of Wirral is currently designated as Green Belt, to promote urban regeneration and prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another.

Up to April 2017, development under the Unitary Development Plan, successive Regional Planning Guidance and Regional Spatial Strategies and the Proposed Submission Draft Core Strategy has led to the completion of 20,741 new dwellings and over 650,000 square metres of new and converted employment development.

These regeneration-based strategies have also led to an increase in the local population by 2.4 percent between 2001 and 2011, reversing for the first time the consistent decline in population since 1971, increasing the dwelling stock by 8,836 dwellings since 2001.

Further progress on housing-led regeneration has been hindered by the premature withdrawal of national funding from the Housing Market Renewal Initiative and the Mersey Heartlands Growth Point, which the Council has now sought to address through the formation of a Growth Company, to promote regeneration by using Council assets in partnership with a private sector investor, who will be announced in early 2018.

Planning permission is currently in place for 16,098 new homes, including 2,577 on existing urban and previously developed sites and up to 13,521 dwellings at a large regeneration site at the heart of the urban area, at Wirral Waters, which was granted outline planning permission in May 2012 but on which no new housing development has yet taken place.

The Council's existing Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA), rolled forward to April 2017, shows the potential for a further 4,531 dwellings, subject to viability, of which only 825 would currently be deliverable within 5 years.

Despite the impact of the recession, which saw the level of development in the Borough drop from 820 dwellings during 2007/08 to only 268 in 2011/12, the more recent recovery has led to 1,315 new dwellings on sites under construction in April 2017, compared to only 475 in April 2016.

The Council has, therefore, continued to enable development within the Borough in line with the adopted UDP, the Proposed Submission Draft Core Strategy and national policy, even though the Core Strategy has not been progressed to full adoption because of the issues that I will outline in further detail below.

Throughout this period, the Council has also joined in establishing a Combined Authority, in April 2014 (with a Metro Mayor, from May 2017) with the objective of securing a Single Spatial Plan for the City Region by 2020. A Statement of Co-operation was agreed in October 2016 and a re-assessment of strategic, cross-boundary numbers for housing and employment for each district was published for consultation in October 2017.

The Combined Authority has also recently agreed to act as an early pilot for the new Statements of Common Ground for the City Region.

Your letter was considered by the Council's Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 7 December 2017, for which Local Plan progress will now be a standing item, requiring quarterly reporting.

A further meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 31 January 2018 will review the progress recorded in successive Local Development Schemes and monitoring reports published in December each year.

This review shows that the principal delays arose from the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies, the need to complete additional public consultation and the need to complete robust district level housing evidence, in the context of the problems and delays associated with national household projections since the publication of the 2011 Census (paragraph 3.36 of the attached Overview and Scrutiny Report refers).

The Council's existing Local Development Scheme was last amended in July 2015 because of the need to complete this housing evidence, which could not be finalised until May 2016.

Following further consultation in August and September 2016, the Council's Cabinet resolved, in February 2017, to undertake a wide-ranging review of development options, based on a revised timetable agreed with the Council's Leadership in June 2017, which will include:

- a revised methodology for assessing the suitability of potential housing sites (the SHLAA), which was published for consultation in July 2017;
- an initial review of the Green Belt, for which a proposed methodology was published for consultation in October 2017;
- a draft Strategic Housing and Employment Land Market Assessment for the City Region, which was published for consultation in October 2017;
- a Playing Pitch Strategy Update, which was published in November 2017;
- the Brownfield Land Register, which was published in December 2017, following consultation in October 2017;
- an update to the Council's Employment Land and Premises Study, which will be published in early 2018;
- an updated viability assessment, to be completed in early 2018; and
- a new SHLAA, to apply the revised methodology, from April 2018.

The Local Development Scheme has now been reviewed, in line with this programme, alongside the publication of the Council's statutory monitoring report in December 2017. A copy of the amended Local Development Scheme, approved on 21 December 2017, is attached for your further information.

The current timetable, which is expected to be formally adopted by Council in March 2018, allows for the results of the development options review to be reported to Cabinet in July 2018; with consultation on sites for allocation in September 2018; and approval of an initial draft Plan for final stakeholder consultation and statutory appraisals in December 2018. The final Draft Plan will then be presented for approval in July 2019, for publication under regulation 19 in September 2019, with submission to examination, following the review of representations, in early 2020. A more detailed work programme is also provided as an attachment to this letter.

The Leadership is committed to delivering this timetable, which we believe could not be soundly or legally concluded over any shorter period of time, given the statutory processes involved.

We have also committed to strengthening the Forward Planning Team, with the addition of one FTE posts.

I therefore trust that the content of this letter will allay any fears you may have about the Council's support for the growth and development of its area and its commitment

to progress future plan preparation, subject to any further review of national policy early in 2018.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Phil Davies." The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

Councillor Phil Davies,
Leader of Wirral Council