

Vale Scrutiny Committee

Report of Head of Planning

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Local Plan 2031: Part 1 Review and Lessons Learned

Recommendation:

To note the following lessons learned from the preparation of Local Plan 2031: Part 1 to inform future VOWH Local Plan preparation:

- a) As established during Stage 2 of the Examination, the team must continue to have clearly defined roles and responsibilities for key workstreams.
- b) In preparation for future Examination hearings, team members giving evidence should always undertake rehearsals to ensure they are adequately prepared for the Local Plan 2031 Part 2 Examination and Hearing Sessions.
- c) A structured approach to project management, resource planning and governance ensuring timely progression of the Local Plan 2031 Part 2 must remain in place at all times.
- d) An iterative approach to plan preparation engaging with management team, Cabinet Member and stakeholders on an ongoing basis through regular meetings should be maintained.
- e) A proactive approach to working with site promoters assisted with the preparation of Statements of Common Ground with all site promoters ahead of the Local Plan Examination.
- f) Key staff should be retained as far as possible, supported by experienced consultants and agency staff where they can genuinely add value.
- g) Experienced QC support should be retained.

Purpose of Report

1. To brief Scrutiny Committee on lessons learned from the preparation of Local Plan 2031: Part 1.

Strategic Objectives

2. Timely adoption of LPP1 supports the delivery of the Council's strategic objectives by supporting the delivery of housing (including affordable housing); economic growth and infrastructure.

Background

3. The Vale of White Horse District Council submitted its updated Local Plan 2031: Part 1 (LPP1) to the Secretary of State in March 2015. A Final Report is expected from the Planning Inspector in November 2016. The Inspector's Interim Findings, published in June 2016 stated:

"I am pleased, at this stage, to be able to conclude that, subject to modification, I am likely to be able to find that the plan is sound".

4. It is important that both good practice and potential areas for improvement, learned during preparation of LPP1 are recognised and are used to inform preparation of future plans. This paper reviews the process of preparing LPP1 and summarises the lessons learned. The review of the local plan process commences with the publication of the Preferred Options Consultation in February 2013.
5. UK Government published the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in March 2012. This effectively replaced all national policy at the time and included new requirements for the preparation of Local Plans. Other changes included the deletion of regional planning and the revocation of Regional Strategies. The South East Plan was revoked in March 2013.
6. The changes to national and regional planning introduced during 2012 and 2013 led to significant changes in how Local Plans are prepared. Perhaps the most significant change was the responsibility given to Local Planning Authorities to identify and plan to 'fully meet' their 'Objectively Assessed Need' for housing (OAN). Historically, housing targets for individual council areas had been set in Regional Strategies. For this reason, work commenced during 2013 to prepare an updated Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) for Oxfordshire, to inform plan preparation for all Oxfordshire authorities.

Timetable

7. The Vale of White Horse published its draft Local Plan in February 2013. Assuming LPP1 is adopted in January 2017, it will have taken nearly four years from publishing the draft Local Plan to Adoption, including nearly two years post-submission. By comparison Wiltshire Council and Cherwell District Council, took five plus years from draft Local Plan to Adoption respectively.
8. To achieve our 'accelerated' timetable, a number of decisions were made to help speed up the process, these included:
 - Dividing the Local Plan into two parts - Part 1 focusing on strategic policies and sites; Part 2 focusing on non-strategic sites and development management policies;

- Preparing a draft Preferred Options document for consultation ahead of the updated SHMA being completed;
- Identifying a range of possible housing targets, contingency planning and through the Housing Delivery Update published in February 2014, working up potential site allocations to address the new OAN in parallel to the updated SHMA being published.
- Agency staff were employed at key stages of preparing the plan to ensure that some 2000 consultation responses could be addressed promptly;
- A fast track approach was adopted to formally sign off stages of plan preparation with special Cabinet or Full Council meetings being held where needed.

Figure 1: Timetable for preparing VOWH LPP1 and comparison with two other authorities

Vale of White Horse District Council	
Plan Stage	Date
Draft Plan (Preferred Options)	Feb 2013
Additional Consultation (Housing Delivery Update)	Feb 2014
Pre-Submission	Nov 2014
Submission	Mar 2015
Adoption	Jan 2017
Time: Preferred Options to Adoption 3 years, 11 months - 1 year, 10 months post submission.	

Wiltshire Council	
Plan Stage	Date
Draft Plan (Preferred Options)	Oct 2009
Additional Consultation	Jun 2011
Pre-Submission	Feb 2012
Submission	Jul 2012
Additional Consultation	Sep 2012
Adoption	Jan 2015
Time: Preferred Options to Adoption 5 years, 3 months - 2 years, 3 months post submission.	

Cherwell District Council	
Plan Stage	Date
Draft Plan (Preferred Options)	Feb 2010
Pre-Submission	Aug 2012
Pre-Submission (Refined) March 2013	Mar 2013
Submission	Jan 2014
Adoption	Jul 2015
Time: Preferred Options to Adoption 5 years, 4 months - 1 year, 5 months post submission.	

Plan Preparation

9. This section briefly summarises aspects of plan preparation that were either successful or where scope for improvement has been identified.

Figure 2: Plan Preparation Successes and Scope for Areas of Improvement:

Successes:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A structured approach to project and resource management and governance - fortnightly cycle consisting of Local Plan Board meetings (i.e. reporting to Head of Planning and the Cabinet Member) and similarly, a regular cycle of Cabinet Member Briefings.• Regular updating of the project plan and risks and issues logs• A work-stream approach with lead officers identified for key work areas, confirming clear work areas of responsibility.• An iterative approach was taken to plan preparation, which included engaging with stakeholders on an ongoing basis, such as Oxfordshire County Council officers and infrastructure providers.• This iterative approach also allowed Senior Management Team and Cabinet Member to comment on emerging drafts throughout the process.• A proactive approach towards working with site promoters, and the use of consultants to provide specialist advice on a site-by-site basis. This approach also assisted with the preparation of Statements of Common Ground with all site promoters ahead of the Local Plan Examination.
Areas for Improvement:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The structured approach to project management stopped after plan submission, but would have been beneficial to support management of the Examination process (see below).• Relatively high level of staff turnover was experienced throughout plan preparation, including the loss of key staff. Less experienced staff found it difficult to cope at some points and recruitment back into posts proved difficult.• Some agency staff took time to build up local knowledge and experience or had relatively poor skills.

Examination

10. The Local Plan Examination has included two formal hearing stages held in September 2015 (Stage 1) and February 2016 (Stage 2). This section briefly summarises aspects of managing the Local Plan examination hearings that were either successful or where scope for improvement has been identified.

Figure 3: Examination Successes and Scope for Areas of Improvement:

Successes:
Stage 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• High quality legal support provided to officers.• Successful outcome achieved overall.
Stage 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Structured approach to project management re-introduced along with clearer identification of officer responsibilities - including lead for managing Examination logistics identified.• Appointment of Subject Matter Lead to help coordinate preparation of Examination Statements.• More time set aside to allow officers sufficient time to prepare for Examination.• Training provided along with practice Examination Sessions for all officers.• Clearer and more regular briefings for officers attending Examination to ensure good understanding of Council’s position.• High quality legal support and Examination project management provided to officers by QC.• Successful outcome achieved overall.
Areas for Improvement:
Stage 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improve clarification of officer roles.• The sharing of information not always successful within team, this sometimes led to confusion and a lack of shared understanding.• Management of the Examination logistics was not assigned to any one individual and resulted in a confused approach.
Stage 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Generally successful overall.

Financial Implications

11. Not applicable

Legal Implications

12. Not applicable

Risks

13. Not applicable

Conclusion

14. Many aspects of plan preparation were successful. The plan was prepared to an accelerated timescale within a much changed plan-making environment and had to respond to regional planning being abolished and the NPPF being introduced. The Council responded quickly and positively to a significant increase in the district's housing target with no delay in plan preparation and delivered some important workstreams in parallel to help create and maintain momentum.
15. However, loss of key staff caused problems during plan preparation and continuity was sometimes hindered as a result. Sound project and team management was needed throughout the process and progress and confidence suffered sporadically when project management became relaxed and/or key individuals left the team.