

Cabinet

28 July 2026

Dorset Council Local Plan

For Decision

Cabinet Member:

Cllr S Bartlett, Planning and Planning Enforcement

Local Councillor(s): All

Senior Leadership Team:

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Statutory Authority: Planning and Compulsory Purchase act 2004

Report status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The national planning context for preparing the Local Plan is undergoing rapid and fundamental change, with significant implications for Dorset's current plan-making approach. The Government is reforming both the planning system and national policy, creating significant risk to continuing under the existing ("legacy") system.
- 1.2 A new plan-making framework is being introduced, requiring Local Plans to be prepared within an ambitious 30-month timeframe set by Government. This system includes structured "Gateway" stages to track and secure progress and introduces Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) to address strategic issues across local authority boundaries. Compared with the legacy system, this approach is more streamlined, proportionate, and reduces the risk of late-stage failure.
- 1.3 The Government's 2024 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) significantly increased Dorset's housing requirement, almost doubling the calculated Local Housing Need, and imposed a December 2026 submission deadline for legacy plans. Recent consultation on potential sites to meet the development needs generated over 9,000 responses, raising issues that need resolution. Further assessments of landscape impact within the National Landscapes are needed alongside further consideration of heritage impact.

- 1.4 As a result, it is no longer possible to produce a sound Local Plan under the legacy system by the Government-imposed deadline of December 2026. This position is reflected nationally, with many other local planning authorities transitioning to the new system. Additional risk arises from the pending 2026 NPPF, as any legacy plan would need to align with both the 2024 and 2026 Frameworks, with policies that are not compliant with the 2026 NPPF becoming redundant immediately upon adoption.
- 1.5 The new system offers key advantages: clearer focus on local priorities and sites, earlier weight for emerging plans in decision-making, and the introduction of Spatial Development Strategies at the regional level which will address much of the strategic matters covered by the duty to cooperate. Alignment with Wessex regional partners, who are already progressing under the new system, is critical to ensure coordinated planning, influence over strategic decisions, and optimal outcomes for Dorset.
- 1.6 Arrangements for moving ahead under the new plan-making system are set out in the report including delegation to the Corporate Director for Planning in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning for various parts of the plan-making process. The process begins with a formal Notice of Intent to Commence Plan making and a minimum four-month scoping phase. Cabinet and Full Council approval will be required for the two key consultation stages and for adoption.
- 1.7 Effective project management and resourcing will be essential to meeting the challenging timetable. To support delivery, it is requested that additional funding of up to £1 million is made available to secure external consultancy support.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 It is recommended that:
- a) A decision is made to progress the Dorset Council Local Plan via the new plan-making system;
 - b) The governance arrangements outlined in the report are agreed delegating the detailed arrangements to Cabinet Member for Planning in consultation with the Corporate Director for Planning;
 - c) The indicative timetable for the production of the local plan in Appendix 1 is agreed with the detail delegated to the Cabinet member for Planning and the Corporate Director for Planning to review and vary this timetable and update and publish when necessary;
 - d) The content and publication of the formal Notice of Intent to Commence Plan Making included in Appendix 2 is agreed;
 - e) The outline of the focused Scoping Consultation and Consultation Strategy in Appendix 3 is noted with the detail to be agreed with the Cabinet Member for Planning;

- f) The spend of up to £1,000,000, initially funded from Local Plan Reserves, to bring in additional support to the project as and when needed is agreed;

3. Reason for the recommendations

- 3.1 To put the necessary arrangements in place to enable the Dorset Council Local Plan to be prepared as quickly and efficiently as possible under the new plan-making system.

4. The Dorset Council Local Plan

- 4.1 The national planning context within which the Local Plan is prepared, is undergoing fundamental and rapid change. The Government is both reforming the plan-making system itself and significantly revising national policy. These changes have direct and substantial implications for how and indeed whether it is appropriate to continue progressing our Local Plan under the existing, or “legacy” plan-making system.
- 4.2 The Government is introducing a new plan-making system, with an expectation that local plans will be prepared within a 30-month timeframe. It also introduces Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) that are produced at a more strategic level, across local authority boundaries. The new local plan-making system incorporates a series of formal Gateways, enabling local planning authorities to “bank” progress at key stages and reduce the risk of failure late in the process. This represents a more structured, streamlined approach compared to the current system.
- 4.3 At the same time, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) published by the Government in 2024 had a significant effect on the evidence base requirements and plan strategy. The NPPF almost doubled Dorset’s calculated Local Housing Need and imposed a strict deadline of December 2026 for submission under the legacy system. In response, the Council ran a round of consultation in mid-2025 on housing opportunity sites to meet this significantly increased requirement.
- 4.4 That consultation generated over 9,000 representations and raised new and complex issues that must be properly addressed for the local plan to be found sound. These include the strengthened legal duty in relation to National Landscapes, which came into force on 23 October 2023 and places greater emphasis on their protection and enhancement. Addressing these matters requires further evidence gathering, analysis and policy development including the testing of potential transport impacts. The testing of transport impacts should be iterative, but the government’s deadline only allows sufficient time for the testing of a single development scenario.

- 4.5 Advice from the Planning Inspectorate has identified additional areas where further work is needed to address specific national policy requirements. This includes the need to agree a position statement with statutory bodies on specific issues such as the implications for the strategic road network. In addition, several of the evidence studies resulting from the consideration of additional sites need to be undertaken sequentially.
- 4.6 Taken together, this further work means it is no longer realistic or deliverable to prepare a sound plan under the legacy system within the Government's prescribed deadline. Many other local planning authorities, including our Wessex partners in BCP, Wiltshire and Somerset Councils are in the same position, moving to continue their plan preparation under the new system.
- 4.7 A new version of the NPPF is expected in 2026. Any local plan prepared under the legacy system would need to demonstrate conformity not only with the 2024 NPPF but also with this emerging 2026 version (when published). Policies that fail to align with the updated framework would risk becoming immediately out of date upon adoption, undermining the value of the plan and the significant resources invested in its preparation.
- 4.8 By contrast, the regulations for the new plan-making system, laid on 25 March 2026 introduce a more proportionate and streamlined process, with a clearer focus on meeting needs and other local issues and a reduced risk of plans failing at examination. They enable the emerging strategy to carry greater weight earlier in the plan preparation process, strengthening our ability to manage development in the interim until the final local plan is adopted.
- 4.9 Importantly, the new system also reshapes how strategic, cross-boundary issues are addressed. The current "Duty to Cooperate," which has been a frequent cause of plan failure, will largely be replaced by Spatial Development Strategies (SDS). This means that the local plan only needs to consider local cross-boundary matters with wider strategic issues such as housing distribution and major infrastructure, being addressed at the broader geographic scale through the SDS.
- 4.10 All Wessex partners are progressing under the new plan-making system. Alignment with our Wessex partners on the new plan-making system is therefore critical. This will enable coordinated plan preparation and consideration of strategically significant growth and infrastructure provision across the wider area. Choosing not to align would significantly diminish our ability to influence these discussions and secure the best outcomes for Dorset.

5. Arrangements for moving ahead on the new plan-making system

- 5.1 The preparation of the Local Plan under the new plan-making system will follow a series of statutory stages, beginning with early scoping and progressing through consultation, gateway assessments, submission, examination and adoption. The Government require Local Planning Authorities to prepare a local plan over a 30-month period after the conclusion of at least a four-month scoping period. There is a need to follow the regulatory requirements of the new plan-making system; however, much of the work that has been undertaken to date can be used to inform the local plan as it passes through each stage.
- 5.2 Stage 1 – Scoping: The process will commence with publication of a ‘Notice of Intent to Commence Plan making’, which provides formal notification of the Council’s intention to prepare a Local Plan. A Local Plan timetable must be published at this stage, setting out key milestones and consultation periods to meet the 30-month requirement. The timetable must be reviewed and updated as necessary and updated following each key stage in the process.
- 5.3 The 30-month timetable represents a significant challenge for all involved. Many factors are outside of Dorset Council’s control such as further changes to National Planning Policy or capacity of the Planning Inspectorate to provide timely input at each Gateway stage and at examination. The new plan-making process is also untried and untested and therefore it is unclear whether it is possible to prepare a local plan within 30-months. It is anticipated that the timetable will require regular updating to reflect this challenge and will be subject to change.
- 5.4 A draft Notice of Intent to Start Plan-making is included in Appendix 2 of this report, and an indicative Local Plan Timetable is included in Appendix 1. It is proposed that responsibility for agreeing and publishing the timetable along with any future updates, is delegated to the Cabinet Member for Planning in consultation with the Corporate Director for Planning.
- 5.5 The scoping stage must run for a period of at least four months from the point of publishing the Notice of Intent to Commence Plan-making. During this period a scoping consultation must be run. This consultation is focused on the specific and general consultees and will seek views on the scope and content of the local plan. Although the target audience is the specific and general consultees, it will be open to all interested parties to input.
- 5.6 It is anticipated that the local plan will include a vision for the future of the area supported by no more than ten measurable outcomes to monitor the delivery of the vision, aims and objectives for the local plan area and a spatial strategy for managing growth. It will also include the level of growth that is expected to take place over the period of the local plan with site allocations and policies to achieve this growth and an approach to deliver the necessary

infrastructure to support the growth. Supporting infrastructure may include, but is not limited to, playing pitches and other sports facilities, schools, local waste management facilities, active travel infrastructure, health facilities, community buildings, and other social and community infrastructure.

- 5.7 In addition to the content and scope of the local plan, the scoping consultation will ask about how to engage with the specific and general consultation groups during the plan preparation. This will help inform the consultation and engagement strategy for the local plan.
- 5.8 A summary of consultation responses will be prepared and published to inform the later stages of plan-making.
- 5.9 Stage 2 – Gateway 1: Following the scoping stage, the Council must publish a Gateway 1 self-assessment statement confirming readiness to proceed with plan preparation. This assessment will consider governance and project management arrangements, the updated local plan timetable, the details of the approach to consultation and engagement, the anticipated content of the plan and the arrangements for undertaking environmental assessments of the plan as it progresses. The publication of the Gateway 1 self-assessment statement is the formal start of the 30-month timeline for the production of the local plan.
- 5.10 Stage 3 – Local Plan Content and Evidence Consultation: Once the Gateway 1 statement has been published, a consultation on the local plan content and evidence is required. This consultation is open to everyone who may have an interest in the local plan to comment on and must run for at least six weeks. The consultation must include as a minimum, a draft vision for the area, measurable outcomes, any aims and objectives of the local plan, the amount and type of development and any local policies needed. It is likely that this content will include more detail than the minimum required including proposed sites for meeting the development needs of the area.
- 5.11 This is a key stage in shaping the Local Plan. A report will be brought to Cabinet for approval of the consultation material prior to publication.
- 5.12 Stage 4 – Gateway 2: After completion of the Content and Evidence Consultation and the publication of the responses received, the Council must seek observations and advice on the work undertaken from an appointed person, most likely a Planning Inspector. This stage provides an early independent review of the progress towards the creation of a sound plan. The advice received will be published and used to inform preparation of the draft plan.
- 5.13 Stage 5 – Consultation on the proposed Local Plan: The proposed draft local plan will be subject to consultation for a minimum period of 8 weeks. The draft local plan will include a vision, outcomes and strategy for the area, a full set of proposed policies and sites to meet the development needs of the area

to achieve the vision, a policies map showing the spatial extents of policies and allocations, and the necessary evidence and supporting material.

- 5.14 This stage represents an important opportunity for all those with an interest in the local plan to comment on the detailed content of the proposals. This draft Local Plan will be presented to Cabinet and Full Council for approval prior commencement of consultation. It would also be intended to seek delegated authority to the Cabinet Member for Planning in consultation with the Corporate Director for Planning to submit the local plan for Gateway 3 assessment and then examination subject to there being no significant issues raised through the consultation that materially change the content of the local plan.
- 5.15 Stage 6 - Gateway 3: Prior to submission for examination, the Council must pass through Gateway 3, where the appointed person (likely to be a Planning Inspector) assesses whether the prescribed requirements have been met. The prescribed requirements include an assessment of the content of the proposed draft local plan, whether the correct process has been followed in the preparation of the local plan, whether the submission documents have been prepared and meet the requirements, and that the necessary arrangements are in place to enable the examination of the local plan.
- 5.16 The results of this assessment will be published. Where the appointed person concludes that the requirements are not met, the Council will need to undertake further work to address the issues raised and repeat Gateway 3.
- 5.17 Stage 7 – Submission, Examination and Adoption: Following a successful Gateway 3 assessment, the Local Plan will be submitted for independent examination. The examination will test whether the local plan is sound. If necessary, the examination may be paused to allow further work to be undertaken. If the Local Plan is found sound at examination, it will be brought to Full Council for formal adoption.
- 5.18 To ensure effective delivery of the Local Plan within the required timeframe, it will be important for appropriate governance arrangements to be put in place alongside the necessary resources.
- 5.19 Detailed governance arrangements will be prepared and agreed with the Cabinet Member for Planning.
- 5.20 It is proposed that authority is delegated to the Corporate Director for Planning in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning to update and publish the local plan timetable, to submit information for each of the Gateway Assessments, and to publish the statutory notices and other relevant documentation such as the outcomes of consultation.
- 5.21 It is proposed that the content of the proposed scoping consultation will be delegated to the Corporate Director for Planning in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning. The Stage 3 – Local Plan Content and

Evidence Consultation material will be brought to Cabinet for approval prior to commencing consultation.

- 5.22 The Stage 5 – Consultation on the proposed Local Plan will be brought to Cabinet and then Full Council for agreement prior to the start of the consultation. Delegated authority will also be sought at the same time to submit the relevant material for Gateway 3 assessment and if successful at Gateway 3, to submit for Examination subject to the consultation and Gateway 3 assessment not raising any issues that materially affect the content of the local plan.
- 5.23 Once the local plan is found sound at examination, it will be brought to Full Council for formal adoption.
- 5.24 Additional resources will be required specifically to assist with processing consultation responses, to assist with some evidence gathering and to support the writing of the Local Plan. An external consultancy has been engaged to provide support under existing delegated arrangements. However, it is anticipated that the overall cost of this support will exceed current approved limits. At the point of drafting this report, spend against the agreed budget as part of this contract are zero but ‘tasks’ are due to start shortly with a value of up to £225,000. Cabinet is therefore requested to approve additional expenditure of up to £1,000,000 to support delivery of the Local Plan as part of this contract.

6. Alternative options considered

- 6.1 A thorough examination of the option of continuing to prepare the local plan under the legacy system has been undertaken. However, due to the significant increase in calculated Local Housing Need, the issues raised through the consultation, the need to gather further evidence to be able to demonstrate a deliverable local plan, and the need to address some policy issues highlighted by the Planning Inspectorate, it is not possible to meet the Government’s hard deadline of December 2026. As such, the only option is to proceed with preparing a local plan under the new plan-making system and to put arrangements in place to proceed at pace.

7. Legal considerations

- 7.1 The arrangements for plan-making under the new plan-making system are set out in the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2026. The process outlined in the report summarises the key stages of plan-making set out in these regulations. It is for Dorset Council to consider which approach to take to preparing the local plan but getting complete coverage of local plans across the whole country as quickly as possible is a government priority.

8. Financial implications

- 8.1 In order to proceed rapidly with the production of the local plan, additional resources are needed. Additional resource is already in place with the ability to spend up to £500,000 however it is possible that this value may be exceeded through the 30-month timetable. For this reason, and to avoid future delay, it is requested that this limit is raised to £1,000,000. This will be in addition to the existing local plan budget and resourcing.

9. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

- 9.1 Producing a local plan has far reaching implications. It provides a framework to guide decisions on planning applications directing development to locations that are the least sensitive and that reduce reliance on car-based travel. It helps to balance growth with the conservation of biodiversity and landscape impact, mitigating any impact.
- 9.2 The local plan will play a role in both mitigation and adaptation of climate change. Directing development to locations where there are alternatives to car travel not only reduces greenhouse gas emissions but also reduces congestion on the roads. It will steer development to locations with lowest risk of flooding and coastal change and build green infrastructure into developments to help with urban cooling.

10. Well-being and health implications

- 10.1 Having a decent and secure home is key to good health and well-being and the local plan will provide a framework for the delivery of housing of all types and employment opportunities to meet needs. Active lifestyles will be enabled through well designed places and the local plan, alongside the emerging Dorset Design Code will set the policy framework for requiring good design.

11. Other implications

- 11.1 Due to the wide-ranging nature of the local plan, its production will contribute towards many Council objectives.
- 11.2 The timetable to adopt the local plan under the new plan-making system would result in a short delay of around six months over that anticipated under the legacy system. However, as the likelihood of preparing a sound plan under the legacy system is minimal, it is considered more appropriate to move on to the new system.

12. Risk implications

- 12.1 The risks associated with trying to meet the Government's deadline of submitting a local plan under the legacy system are considered so significant that it is not possible to proceed on this basis.

12.2 However, the new system is untried, and it is uncertain how long each stage will take. Multiple local planning authorities are moving onto the new plan-making system meaning that there may be resource constraints at statutory consultees and at the Planning Inspectorate which may impact the timetable. By putting in place governance arrangements, delegated authority for parts of the plan-making process and securing additional external resources, the risks are reduced.

12.3 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: High

Residual Risk: Medium

13. Equalities

13.1 This report focuses on the timetable and process for producing a local plan rather than the content of the local plan itself. As such, an Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) is not considered necessary. An EqIA will be produced for the local plan during its production so that the implications of the proposed policy framework can be fully considered

14. Appendices

Appendix 1: Indicative Local Plan Timetable

Appendix 2: Notice of Intention to Commence Plan-making

Appendix 3: Scoping Consultation Outline and Local Plan Engagement Strategy Preparation

15. Background papers

Timetable for the production of the Dorset Council Local Plan under the legacy system: [The Local Development Scheme for Dorset Council March 2025 - Dorset Council](#)

Report sign-off

This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Assurance and Governance (Monitoring Officer), the Director for Resources (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Cabinet Member(s)