

DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL PLAN

Executive Summary

A new Local Plan for the Borough of Woking will be required from 2027. This report sets out a timetable and associated outline of the work programme to produce a new Local Plan for the Borough.

The Local Development Framework (LDF) Woking Group will consider the scope and timeline of the new Local Plan at its meeting on 10 January 2024.

Recommendations

The Executive is requested to:

RESOLVE That

the timeline set out in the report be noted with the caveat that it is subject to minor change as the details for the new system of plan-making are published.

Reasons for Decision

Reason: To set out a timetable and associated outline of the work programme in order to produce a new Local Plan for the Borough of Woking.

The Executive has the authority to determine the recommendation(s) set out above.

Background Papers:	None.
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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Members will already be aware of the resolution of Council at its meeting on 12 October 2023 to commence work on a new local plan for Woking. It was agreed that *Officers bring forward a timetable and associated outline of the work programme to produce a new Local Plan for the Borough of Woking* ([link to 12 October 2023 Council report](#)).
- 1.2 The government carried out a consultation on plan-making reforms in late summer/ autumn this year. Much of what is proposed can be brought into effect through amendments to existing legislation and guidance. A timetable and outline work programme can be prepared to a degree but cannot be finalised until this detail is forthcoming from central government. Therefore, the table in paragraph 3.5 of this report should be considered a 'working document' as it will evolve over time as the detail needed comes forward from central government.
- 1.3 The Government's recent plan-making reforms consultation that finished in October set out a new timeline for preparing a local plan of 30 months from start to finish. Through the consultation, concerns have been raised that this timeline is unachievable. Under the new plan-making system, local planning authorities are required to 'give notice' of the start of their plan making. This formally starts the clock ticking, and the start of the '30 month' timeline. In the absence of the necessary secondary legislation and detail, it is unlikely any local planning authority will be able to 'give notice' until late summer/ early autumn of 2024. There is plenty of work that can be done now to prepare for the formal commencement of the plan that will increase our chances of delivering a new local plan within the 30-month timeframe. This includes a variety of technical studies and the preparation of a communications strategy, for internal use, to ensure robust engagement and governance.

2.0 Work in advance of formal 'give notice'

- 2.1 The principles of plan-making under the new regime remain the same, i.e. that local plans should have a clear vision and a strategy to deliver that vision. This should be based on a robust identification of the development needs of the local authority area and the capacity to deliver those needs. Work is already underway on the preparation of a new corporate strategy and the new local plan will seek to deliver the spatial objectives of that strategy. Some sites were promoted to the Council during 2022 and a 'Call for Sites' will be carried out in 2024. All sites will be assessed for their suitability and this will be reported in due course. In tandem to this, work will be carried out to determine the Local Housing Need (LHN) for the new plan period. The revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was published in late December and includes the detail of how the government will require local planning authorities to calculate housing need. Given this now allows for a less rigid approach, it would be prudent to consider the use of specialist consultants to assess whether or not there are exceptional circumstances for Woking to justify a specific approach in calculating Local Housing Need. Given the usual controversies surrounding housing numbers in a local plan, being in a strong position to justify the Council's approach upfront is sensible.
- 2.2 Specialist consultants will need to be appointed to undertake studies to determine specific development needs for commercial and employment land. A study to determine the characteristics of future housing need is also required. This will look at the size, tenure and type of housing needed including for older people and affordable housing. A Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment Needs study; transport evidence and green infrastructure study, and open space strategy are other significant evidence reports that will need to be prepared.
- 2.3 With regards to Woking town centre, there is already a strong body of evidence that will support the new local plan. This includes all of the background work undertaken to support the town centre master plan and the master plan itself. Work completed on design matters within the town centre area have the added advantage of informing the Borough-wide design code that will also need to be delivered. Evidence to support the new local plan will be prepared in

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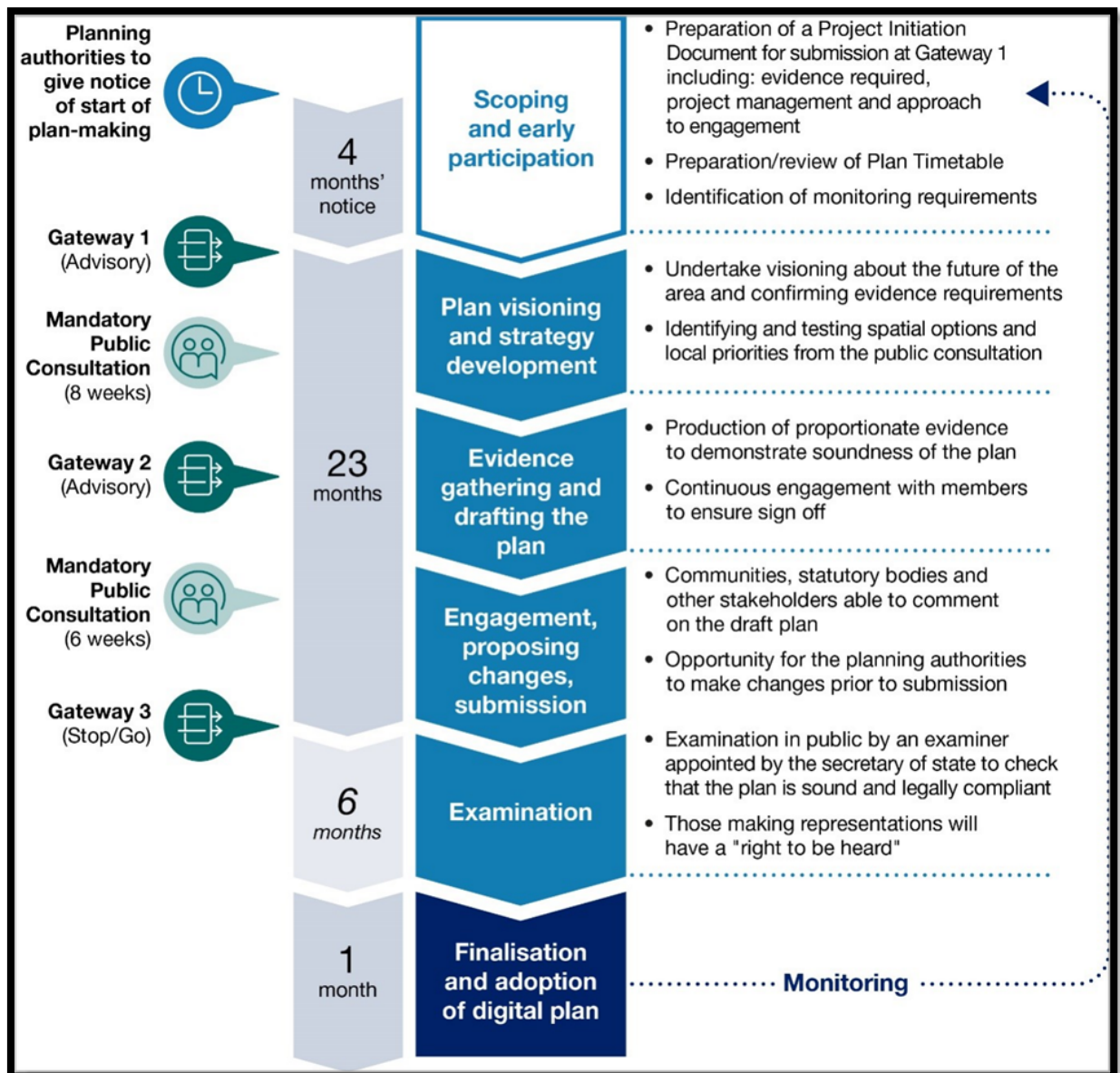
accordance with best practice and will comply with national policy and guidance. Members will need to have an opportunity to review the evidence presented to them. It would be time well spent to consider options for dealing with evidence reporting and publishing within the context of committee cycles and lead in times.

- 2.4 The new plan-making system includes two separate consultation stages with the expectation that the consultation comments will be assessed within a matter of weeks, identifying the main issues raised and how the emerging local plan will address those issues.
- 2.5 The government expects new local plans to be fully digital in the way they are prepared and presented. This may require the use of additional software which will need to be investigated and explored and this will, of course require resources from both planning policy and ICT.
- 2.6 Other early and ongoing work will include preparing a consultation and communications strategy. It is also likely that there will be a plethora of consultations and new regulations and guidance. The planning policy team will need to be aware of these and ensure a strong knowledge and understanding of these proposals. It is likely that there will also need to be training for Members although this might be best delivered from the Planning Advisory Service (part of the LGA). The team will continue to monitor opportunities for training and support as we progress through this process and volunteer for pilot status which is likely to result in support from DLUHC.

3.0 Working timeline for the new local plan

- 3.1 The diagram below is taken from the formal plan-making reforms consultation and illustrates the various stages as proposed in the consultation and forms the basis of the proposed timeline for delivering a new local plan for Woking. This is presented with a small health warning as the details are not finalised and there could be some changes to the process.

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3.2 Although Council has formally resolved to commence preparation of a new local plan, under the new plan making system, the Council will need to formally 'give notice' to the Planning Inspectorate of the Council's intention to start plan making and then to develop a detailed programme that can be fully prepared within the requirements of the new system, provided the information needed is available. This is, in effect the mechanism for starting the clock on plan preparation. As there is a void in terms of the formal guidance needed, it is not possible or practical to formally 'give notice' but proceed with preparing and organising evidence so that when the time comes, the Council will be ready to progress at pace.

3.3 As the front runners are expected to be ready to 'give notice' in the autumn of 2024, the proposal is for Woking to work to the same timescale. However, it is worth pointing out that if Woking are not a front-runner there is a possibility the Council may be asked to wait. Any information related to this will be brought to Members at the earliest opportunity.

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3.4 In broad terms, the timetable is set out in the table below. As details of the new system are forthcoming, the programme will be refined. In the meantime, this should be treated as a 'living document'.

Stage	Notes	Dates
Give notice of start of plan making	This triggers the start of the formal process of plan preparation with the Planning Inspectorate. This stage focusses on the scoping of the local plan content and early participation. The Council will then be required to prepare a Project Initiation Document for submission at Gateway 1. This will include identifying the suite of evidence required, project management and our approach to engagement. A detailed Plan timetable will be prepared along with identifying the monitoring requirements.	October 2024 Complete associated tasks by end of February 2025
Gateway 1 (advisory)	This advisory meeting will provide a 'critical friend' assessment of the PID, timeline and project management and evidence identified but is not binding	Details are not yet available, but this would need to be completed within a short timeframe to keep the plan making on track. Likely to be March 2025
Plan visioning and strategy development	This involves visioning work about the future of the area and confirming the evidence needed. Given the proposed work over the next 18 months or so, this stage is likely to take around 10 weeks as it will involve the pulling together of existing strands and engaging with Members. It will need to be done at this stage to ensure the process is followed. A consultation document will need to be presented to Members as part of this, ready for formal consultation with the community so reporting deadlines need to be included within this stage	10 weeks including a report to members. (April/ May/ June/ July 2025)
Mandatory public consultation (8 weeks)	Consultation on spatial vision and strategy options	September to November 2025
Evidence preparation	The diagram above shows that the evidence base should be prepared within the 23 month period between Gateway 1 meeting and Gateway 2 meeting. In reality, this is not workable because some of the evidence is needed in sequence and there is a risk that there are insufficient resources available within the team to procure all the evidence streams required.	Ongoing but with a main focus on this being done in the run up to the plan policies and proposals being prepared so that it is as up to date as possible and demonstrably informs plan content. February 2025 to January 2027

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Local Plan drafting	Along similar lines as the evidence preparation because once evidence has been completed it is possible to have a discussion about the findings, the impacts for the borough and the policy choices available. This can be done as and when and inform plan content. That said, given the desire to engage with stat consultees, a clear 6 months needed.	November 2025 to May 2026
Gateway 2 (advisory)	This advisory meeting will provide a 'critical friend' assessment of the work done so far and making sure the evidence prepared is adequate to support a sound plan and direction of travel for the policies and proposals.	Details are not yet available but this would need to be completed within a short timeframe to keep the plan making on track. Sometime between November 2025 and May 2026
Mandatory public engagement (6 weeks)	Consultation on the draft plan	June/ July 2026
Getting 'submission ready'	Taking on board any comments/ concerns raised at consultation stages, making any amendments as necessary, especially regarding stat consultee comments.	September/ October/ November 2026
Gateway 3 (Stop/ Go)	Mandatory meeting to determine whether plan will be considered sound	Late October/ November 2026
EXAMINATION	Estimated time of 6 months from submission	Submit in December 2026 and conclude Examination in March/ April 2027
ADOPT PLAN	One month for finalisation and digitisation	June 2027

4.0 Corporate Strategy

- 4.1 Work on a new corporate strategy is underway and the new local plan will deliver the objectives that have a spatial element. Without a new local plan in place, the spatial objectives set out in the corporate strategy will not be delivered.

5.0 Implications

Finance and Risk

- 5.1 The new process includes the requirement for a 'Project Initiation Document' at the start of plan preparation and 'gateway' meetings throughout the process to support local planning authorities to identify and manage risks to ensure greater surety around delivering a sound plan. In addition to this, the Council's corporate risk management processes are engaged as part of the project management process.

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- 5.2 A budget has already been approved to support the delivery the new local plan and will be managed and monitored.

Equalities and Human Resources

- 5.3 The new local plan will be subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment but within the context of this report, no equalities and human resources impacts have been identified.

Legal

- 5.4 The new local plan will be prepared within the statutory and regulatory framework but within the context of this report, no legal impacts have been identified.

6.0 Engagement and Consultation

- 6.1 The proposed timeline is not a matter for engagement or consultation but the new local plan itself will include two separate public consultations stages lasting a minimum of 8 weeks and 6 weeks respectively.

REPORT ENDS