



NORTH DEVON COUNCIL AND TORRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCIL JOINT PLANNING POLICY COMMITTEE (JPPC)

REPORT DATE: 23rd January 2026

TOPIC: Update on preparation of a new Joint Local Plan

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the future preparation of the new joint local plan in the context of the recent announcements and guidance on plan-making reforms and wider changes to the planning system.
- 1.2 The report introduces an initial draft of a Programme Initiation Document (PID) for the preparation of the new joint local plan for northern Devon under the auspices of the People and Place (PaP) project.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 Members of the Joint Planning Policy Committee (JPPC) are recommended to:
 - (1) note the emerging detail of the new plan-making system and associated guidance;
 - (2) enable officers to update and continue to progress activities deemed as necessary within the 'getting ready' phase of plan-making, including the development of a detailed plan making programme; and
 - (3) recognise the initial draft of the People and Place Project Initiation Document (PID) (Appendix 1).

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To support the effective progression and programme management of the preparation a joint local plan for northern Devon.

4 REPORT

- 4.1 As Members are already aware, the Government has committed to the fundamental reform of the plan-making system, with the legislative framework introduced through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 (LURA). The former Government also undertook a technical consultation on plan making reforms in the Summer of 2023, with a view to shaping associated regulations and guidance.
- 4.2 Whilst the overarching primary legislative framework has been in place for some time, there has not, until recently, been any clarity and certainty on the detailed

substance of the new plan-making process, nor the expected content of new local plans.

- 4.3 On 27th November 2025, the Minister of State for Housing and Planning issued a [Written Ministerial Statement \(WMS\) on reforming local plan making](#). The WMS finally set out a range of detail on the new plan-making system. The WMS was accompanied by a substantial bundle of new online guidance, published in draft, that sets out detail on the intended operation of the new plan-making system – with a commitment of more to follow.
- 4.4 This was followed on 16th December 2025 by the issue of a consultation on a revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and other changes to the planning system; the content of which is subject to consideration under a separate item on this agenda.
- 4.5 The WMS set out the Government’s intent to lay the required plan-making regulations before parliament imminently, with an expectation of them coming into force early in 2026. Upon the legislation coming into force, local planning authorities will have the ability to start preparing a new local plan using the new plan-making system. At the time of drafting this report, the regulations are still awaited.
- 4.6 Whilst the guidance is draft, the Government has published it so that local planning authorities can *see the direction of travel*, to let them *see the upcoming changes* and to *help begin [preparing a] new local plan immediately*. The guidance does indicate explicitly that it is provided in draft form and that it maybe subject to change, with the Government expecting to review it and make any necessary revisions and updates as the new system is implemented and the related regulations and policy provisions confirmed.
- 4.7 None-the-less, there is sufficient clarity in the WMS and draft guidance to progress with plan-making on the new joint local plan for northern Devon with confidence; with an expectation that necessary regulations and finalised guidance will be in place at such a time as the two local planning authorities will be in a position to formally carry out any activities that require such elements to be in place.
- 4.8 The draft plan-making guidance is extensive, providing both an overview of the system and processes alongside providing detail on a wide range of plan-making activities – albeit focussed at present on the first steps of preparing a plan. More guidance, including that on particular elements of technical evidence, is trailed to be released over the coming weeks and months, eventually covering the full process of the new plan-making system.
- 4.9 A Briefing Note (Appendix 2), circulated previously, pulls out some of the key provisions from this draft guidance, focusing on the early stages of the plan-making process. It should be noted that this Briefing Note is not a substitute for

reading the guidance as a whole. In the interests of brevity, the content of the briefing note is not replicated in the body of this report.

- 4.10 The new plan-making system comprises of a core 30-month plan-making process, fronted by an initial 'getting ready' period of mandated preparatory work and dovetailed by a post-adoption monitoring and review period. This report focuses on the getting ready phase, as this is most relevant to the current circumstances for the two Councils' work programme, and for which most of the issued draft guidance is directed.
- 4.11 The draft guidance makes it clear that local planning authorities are expected to spend time getting ready before formally starting to prepare a new plan and triggering the 30-month plan preparation period. The Government recommends that local planning authorities should start to get ready as early as possible and provide guidance on what activities should be carried out before triggering the formal 30-month process. To be clear, any time spent 'getting ready' does not count towards the 30-month period, however it must be for a period of at least 4 months.
- 4.12 The guidance identifies that *getting ready* means making progress in these 5 areas:
1. preparing and publishing a local plan timetable;
 2. establishing project management and governance;
 3. consulting and engaging on the plan;
 4. the anticipated content of the plan; and
 5. starting the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).
- 4.13 Before triggering the 30-month plan preparation process, the local planning authority must carry out, as a minimum, a number of specific activities:
- prepare and publish the first version of the local plan timetable in line with the data standards;
 - publish the [notice of intention to commence](#) at least 4 months before seeking to pass through Gateway 1; and
 - run a scoping consultation, inviting early engagement from the public, statutory bodies and other stakeholders, inviting feedback on how to engage with them through the plan-making process and what the plan should contain.
- 4.14 There is also an expectation to make use of this initial period to start a range of other activities before commencing the 30-month plan preparation process to be in



the best position to ensure that it is possible to deliver within the 30-month period, with the following identified to be carried out prior to Gateway 1:

- decide on project management and governance arrangements, including the completion of a Project Initiation Document (PID);
- carry out baselining - establishing an understanding of the current picture and future potential of the area;
- have started to understand the availability of land in the area, including running a call for sites;
- carry out a SWOT analysis of the context of the area;
- start to understand the proposed scope of the plan, main areas and locally specific subject matters it will address, based upon data from the existing plan, information gathering, baselining and early engagement;
- start shaping a draft vision that can be updated throughout the 30-month process, identifying priorities and having regard to baseline evidence, SWOT, early engagement, other local priorities, plans and strategies, national planning policy, sub regional strategies;
- begin identifying measurable outcomes to monitor progress to achieving the vision;
- to have mostly identified and scoped evidence needs, and have a plan for how this is to be delivered;
- start to understand the likely levels of development that are required for the area;
- establish some early considerations for high-level and conceptual spatial options to deliver the identified development needs and on topics that may require specific policies; and
- scope and commence initial work on the SEA, identifying relevant environmental objectives at an international, national and local level, along with baseline information from other relevant plans and programmes including key environmental characteristics likely to be significantly affected, existing environmental issues and key receptors.

4.15 Officers have yet to fully scope the detail of these requirements and expectations and work these up into a fully detailed programme of work, with individual tasks and workstreams. This will be a priority over the coming weeks. However, a number of aspects of the expected work has already commenced, with other



newly identified requirements now tasked to Officers as tasks and projects to progress.

- 4.16 A significant range of work that is now identified in the guidance to be carried out in the 'getting ready' phase is already underway or has been completed, recognising the Councils' commitment to make progress and get a new plan in place. This includes:
- establishing robust and streamlined governance arrangements with a joint committee (JPPC);
 - putting in place project management processes and tools;
 - providing efficient and effective mechanisms for member engagement into plan preparation (Thematic Working Groups);
 - completed a first iteration of site identification and assessment through the HELAA;
 - benchmarking northern Devon's settlements to understand their sustainability and potential;
 - developing effective development monitoring processes and systems
 - advancing less time sensitive technical evidence – coastal change, landscape character; and
 - developed initial consultant briefs for core evidence – housing and economic needs assessment, traveller accommodation assessment, strategic flood risk assessment.
- 4.17 Since the publication of the guidance, building upon monitoring and other work already underway, Officers have been tasked with delivering work on the newly framed 'baselining exercise', identifying existing sources of information and exploring the best platform through which to collate and present the data. Work is also underway to understand what, if any, changes are required to transition the HELAA to align it with the new guidance on site identification and assessment.
- 4.18 It is inevitable that the programme will somewhat evolve over the coming weeks and months as further guidance is issued (particularly on other technical evidence and requirements) and the details of requirements and guidance are finalised and digested; with expectations and best practice around all of this emerging. Nonetheless, Officers recognise the need to progress proactively and swiftly, particularly given the context of Local Government Reorganisation and the ambition and expectation for the two Councils to work together to progress a plan as far as possible; ensuring that northern Devon and its communities are best placed to shape their own future.
- 4.19 Work has started on preparing a revised Project Initiation Document (PID) for the new joint local plan (Appendix 1), to develop and document required project management provisions, practices and processes. Whilst this is clearly essential to ensure the success of the project, it is also now an integral expectation within the

plan-making process and utilised to demonstrate compliance with requirements to pass through the Gateway 1 Self-assessment.

- 4.20 The PID is intended to be a live document that pulls together all the pertinent project management information into one place. It will be maintained throughout the lifetime of the project and is likely to particularly develop and evolve over the 'getting ready' phase of the project; in preparation for the Gateway 1 self-assessment and commencement of the core 30-month programme.
- 4.21 This initial PID focusses on factual and pre-existing arrangements. It will be developed over the coming months to ensure that a robust programme is in place, adequate resources are available and deployed and appropriate governance and oversight is applied.
- 4.22 All timings within the PID are preliminary at this stage as it has not been possible to work up a fully detailed project programme in the time available since the publication of the WMS and draft guidance. Officers will work up a more detailed programme over the coming weeks utilising dedicated project management software to feed into a revised version of the PID which will be reported back to members of JPPC in due course. This will also feed into the preparation of a formal Local Plan Timetable, that is another requirement of the new plan-making system – replacing the previously required Local Development Scheme.
- 4.23 For North Devon and Torridge, the draft guidance identifies that the following backstop timings for starting plan-making would apply:
- [give notice of your intention to commence plan-making](#) by 31 December 2026
 - [publish your Gateway 1 self-assessment](#) by 30 April 2027
- 4.24 The initial estimate is that it may be appropriate to commence the prescribed formal four-month notice period around June 2026, publishing the Gateway 1 Assessment in Winter 2026 and hence formally commencing the formal 30-month programme. Although this is currently a high-level estimate.
- 4.25 The June estimate is on the basis of needing to complete a range or preliminary work so as to ensure that it is possible to carry out a meaningful scoping exercise and consultation that adds value to the process and is not simply a notification exercise, informed through the progression of a range of the 'getting ready' activities set out above – such as baselining, plan-scoping, early vision development and understanding high level spatial and strategy options. This also recognises the value of front-loading engagement, given the demanding timeframes imposed for the main plan-making process.
- 4.26 There are gaps in the information provided in this initial PID – such as with the required evidence, the risk and issues register, etc. and these will be developed over the coming weeks and months as part of this getting ready phase.

- 4.27 Whilst the Government is clear that they wish local planning authorities to be preparing new local plans without delay, they are clear through the draft Guidance that local planning authorities should only commence the formal 30-month preparation period once they are reasonably satisfied that they are in a position to achieve such a timeline; making effective use of the getting ready phase to ensure work is progressed satisfactorily.
- 4.28 It is however recognised that it is important and necessary to progress with pace, particularly in the context of LGR and in order to realise a new local plan for northern Devon, to realise the area's potential and to try and best address the many complex issues that it faces. Therefore the work programme will be developed to be ambitious but achievable.
- 4.29 The draft guidance indicates that the PID should be seen as a live document and maintained over the lifetime of the project, being the go-to project management documentation. It also indicates that it is not necessary publish the PID in full and make it available to the public. Consideration will need to be given as to the extent that future versions of the PID will be published or whether a summary or more limited version should be developed that can be fully issued.

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 With the issue of the WMS and a raft of plan-making guidance, it is possible to now push forward with plan-making activity associated to the new joint local plan for northern Devon. Whilst the regulations are not yet issued, the direction of travel and the emerging requirements are now clear.
- 5.2 Work is continuing on the initial work streams of the new local plan process, as well as looking further ahead to progress work streams which will be key in the preparation of the plan during the next year.
- 5.3 Developing a detailed work programme will be progressed as a priority, alongside accelerating the wide range of work packages and tasks that can be taken forward and are required during the getting ready phase.
- 5.4 These will be reported back to Members over the coming months, alongside any updates on the issuing of new regulations, policy and guidance.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The preparation of a new joint local plan will require the commitment of a significant level of resourcing by the two local planning authorities; both in terms of staffing capacity and direct revenue financing. The work will be primarily completed by the officers within the respective planning policy teams of the two Councils, although there will be calls upon wider services and officers within the Councils where specialist and expert support and advice is required.



- 6.2 The make-up of the two planning policy teams will need to be reviewed to ensure that sufficient and appropriate capacity exists, with any proposals for varying capacity taken through the appropriate Council processes. Similarly, discussions are required to understand the potential scope for drawing on wider Council resources as and when required.
- 6.3 Preparation will also necessitate calling upon the services of external specialists and support services where capacity or expertise is not available within the Councils. Both Councils have annual budget provision to support this aspect of the work, along with earmarked reserves that can be called upon as necessary and appropriate to support the preparation and examination of the plan. It will be necessary to review and establish whether the pre-existing revenue budgets are sufficient to support the pace of the programme required under the new plan-making system, particularly with respect to the procurement of any necessary consultancy services.

7 EQUALITIES ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 The preparation of a new local plan will provide the opportunity to consider the needs of all sectors of northern Devon's communities and that due regard is given as to how they can be best addressed when planning for the future development of the area. The new plan-making system includes prescribed periods of formal consultation and expectations to engage proactively with a wide range of interested parties and stakeholders.
- 7.2 The new plan-making system also requires that local planning authorities identify and publish details on how they will engage with stakeholders as part of plan preparation. The initial PID provides information on the approach to stakeholder engagement and consultation, including details of who will be engaged, how and when. This engagement strategy will continue to be developed throughout the lifetime of the project and particularly through the getting ready phase.

8 ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 The local plan provides the opportunity to consider how the Councils should respond, through planning, to meeting their environmental objectives; including the local declaration of the climate emergency, and to other influences such as the provisions of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan.
- 8.2 Section 39 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (as amended) requires local planning authorities to exercise their functions in relation to plan making with the objective of contributing to the achievement of sustainable development. The preparation of a new Local Plan provides the Council with the opportunity to guide and influence how northern Devon should develop in a sustainable manner and secure positive environmental outcomes.



8.3 The project programme and PID will explore the scope for developing the environmental aspects of the plan over the lifetime of the project, including any requirements for technical evidence.

9 CONSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

9.1 Schedule 2 of the Agreement for a Joint Planning Policy Committee (North Devon Council and Torrige District Council, dated 22nd October 2021); Section 10 of Annexe 1 – Powers and Duties of Committees, Constitution (North Devon Council, May 2023); and Terms of Reference and Functions of the Joint Planning Policy Committee, Constitution (Torrige District Council, October 2023).

10 STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY

10.1 This report contains no confidential information or exempt information under the provisions of Schedule 12A of 1972 Act.

11 BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: (The background papers are available for inspection and kept by the authors of the report):

- Local Development Scheme; North Devon Council and Torrige District Council; March 2022
- National Planning Policy Framework; MHCLG, December 2024
- National Planning Policy Framework: proposed reforms and other changes to the planning system (December 2025)
- Planning Practice Guidance; MHCLG, online resource only
- Planning Reform Working Paper: Reforming Site Thresholds
- Planning Reform Working Paper: Speeding Up Build Out, MHCLG , May 2025

12 STATEMENT OF INTERNAL ADVICE

12.1 The author confirms that advice has been taken from all appropriate Councillors and Officers:

- (i) Cllr Malcolm Prowse, Lead Member for Economic Development and Strategic Planning Policy; Chair of Joint Planning Policy Committee (NDC)
- (ii) Cllr Robert Hicks, Lead Member for the Economy; Vice-chair of Joint Planning Policy Committee (TDC)
- (iii) Sarah- Jane Mackenzie-Shapland, Head of Place, Property and Regeneration (NDC)
- (iv) Helen Smith, Planning Manager (TDC)



13 APPENDICES

13.1 This report is supported by the following appendices:

- (1) Appendix 1 – People and Place Project Initiation Document (PID)
- (2) Appendix 2 - New Plan-Making System Briefing Note (December 2025)