

Covid-19 Assessment - Executive Summary

1.0 BACKGROUND

In recognition of the current Covid-19 pandemic, the Welsh Minister for Housing and Local Government, in a letter (7 July 2020) to Local Planning Authorities stated that:-

“Local planning authorities must reflect on the impact of the pandemic on their areas and consider the consequences for LDPs under review or being implemented. Long held views and policies on matters including transportation, economic development, housing, regeneration, the role of town centres and the importance of green infrastructure have all been brought into focus recently. We must think creatively and differently to promote a sustained recovery which has people and places at its heart.”; and

“LDPs currently undergoing review ... should undertake an assessment of the evidence base, strategy and policies in terms of sensitivity to the consequences of the pandemic. Robust conclusions should be reached on the need for new evidence and any consequential changes to strategy and policy before progressing plan preparation.”

The full Assessment is contained in the ‘Torfaen RLDP Covid-19 Assessment’, agreed by Council on 29th September 2020; and this document provides a non-technical executive summary.

2.0 EVIDENCE BASE ASSESSMENT

Table 1 below contains an assessment of the supporting evidence base that fed into the RLDP Preferred Strategy, to identify any documents that may have been affected by the current pandemic and thus may need reviewing / updating. In summary, the Assessment shows that the majority of this evidence is considered robust / still valid, and does not need to be updated or reviewed at this time; or the impacts of the current pandemic can be assessed in evidence yet to be updated or produced.

Table 1: Torfaen RLDP - Evidence Base Assessment

RLDP: Preferred Strategy Evidence
<p>The Assessment considers that the following evidence is still valid:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Adopted Torfaen LDP Review Report;▪ Report of Pre-Deposit Participation: Torfaen RLDP Preferred Strategy;▪ Integrated Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report;▪ Integrated Sustainability Appraisal of the Torfaen RLDP Preferred Strategy;▪ Habitats Regulations Appraisal Initial Screening Report;▪ Habitats Regulation Assessment of the Torfaen RLDP Preferred Strategy;▪ Updated Candidate Site Register;▪ Draft Candidate Sites Assessment Reports;▪ Torfaen Sustainable Settlement Assessment;▪ Housing Background Paper; and▪ Torfaen’s Active Travel Integrated Network Map. <p>The Assessment considers that the following evidence is still valid, but with more detailed comments being provided:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Torfaen RLDP Revised Delivery Agreement (DA) (March 2020) - The pandemic will necessitate a further revised DA being agreed by the Council / Minister - including an

extension to the existing Timetable due to delays in safely consulting on the Preferred Strategy and alterations to the CIS to take account of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic itself. These alterations could include a longer consultation period with enhanced online participation methods, telephone appointments and socially distanced meetings / exhibitions in appropriate settings, etc.

- Torfaen Employment Land Study (ELS) (March 2020) - The consultant who produced this study has undertaken a review ('Advice Relating to Implications of Covid-19 Impacts' - Sept 2020) to assess the implications of the pandemic. In summary, this has shown:-
 - Covid-19 is still an ongoing situation and therefore much of the actual, near-term impacts have yet to be fully realised and the economic data (which has a lag time) has yet to fully emerge. The impacts over the longer term (such as the planning period for the RLDP) are less certain, most pertinently in relation to the upward curve of the economic recovery from the recession in the medium term following the pandemic.
 - In conclusion, the consultant considered that the ten recommendations of the Torfaen ELS remain appropriate, most critically, the overall forecast for employment land need to 2033 and the recommendation to allocate employment land above baseline needs. The uncertainty in the market at present highlights the need for any planning for employment land to provide flexibility to adapt to change, whether through incorporating a buffer of additional land in the forecast calculations or enabling a range of employment uses to be provided on the allocated sites.
- Regional Employment Study (RES): Larger Than Local Study (March 2020) - The consultant has also undertaken a review of the RES and concluded that its five recommendations remain valid and appropriate.
- Monmouthshire, Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen LDP Demographic Evidence (2019); Torfaen Demographic Evidence Addendum Report (2019); and Torfaen LDP Demographics (2020) - As regards the impact of the pandemic, Edge Analytics who produced this evidence, in the latest 2020 report stated, "Currently, there is insufficient evidence to inform an assessment of the Covid-19 impact upon long term demographic trends. The latest scenario evidence provides a timely and robust suite of outcomes from which Torfaen Council can consider its LDP options, reviewed and scrutinised in the light of social, economic and demographic changes that will result from the post Covid-19 recovery."

Evidence Currently in Preparation

The Assessment considers that the following evidence, which is currently being prepared, will not be affected by the pandemic and is still valid:-

- Draft Torfaen Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (February 2020); and
- 'Gwent' & Torfaen Renewable & Low Carbon Energy Assessments.

It also considers that the early impacts of the pandemic can be taken into account in the update of the Torfaen Local Housing Market Assessment (August 2017) currently being prepared.

Evidence yet to be Prepared

The Assessment considers that the following evidence, which is yet to be prepared, will not be affected by the pandemic:-

- Torfaen Settlement Boundary Review;
- Green Wedge Review;
- Torfaen Green Infrastructure Assessment;
- Strategic Flood Consequence Assessment; and
- Aggregates: 'Gwent' Sub-Regional Statement of Collaboration.

The Assessment considers that the following evidence, which is yet to be prepared, can take the impacts of the pandemic into account:-

- Torfaen RLDP: Plan / Site Level Viability Assessments
- Torfaen Town Centres & Retail Study
- Torfaen Infrastructure Plan
- Torfaen Integrated Planning & Transport Strategy

3.0 TORFAEN RLDP: PREFERRED STRATEGY ASSESSMENT

Issues - The Torfaen RLDP Preferred Strategy contains 40 economic, environmental, social and cultural 'key' issues, challenges and drivers (detailed in Chapter 3). The Assessment has concluded that the greater majority remain valid; with five having been recommended for updating, i.e. those relating 'Commuting to Work', 'Town Centres', 'Traffic Issues', 'Public Transport' and 'Deprivation'. In addition, one new key issue on the 'Economic Impacts of Covid-19 and Enabling the Recovery' has been recommended for inclusion into the approved RLDP Preferred Strategy (March 2020), detailed in Table 2B below:-

Table 2B: Torfaen RLDP Preferred Strategy - New Economic Key Issue

Economic
Impacts of Covid-19 and Enabling the Recovery - Probably due to the pandemic, Torfaen is seeing some unfortunate job losses as companies reduce their workforce, but generally, they thankfully remain in business and in occupation of their premises. In addition, it is too early to fully understand the longer-term impact of the pandemic. But clearly, there is now an increased need for the RLDP to create opportunities for even more new jobs to compensate for these job losses and enable the economic recovery; and thus there is still a need to protect employment land / premises and allocate / enable the development of new employment sites; as well as capitalising on the opportunities of the new Llanfrechfa Grange Hospital, Torfaen's strategic location and the potential of 'new growth industries', such as med-tech, logistics / home delivery, 'green' technologies, the local foundation economy, etc.

Vision - The Torfaen RLDP Preferred Strategy Vision states what the Plan sets out to accomplish by 2033 and reflects the ambitions and intentions of the land use policies within the Replacement Local Development Plan as follows:-

At the eastern edge of the South Wales Valleys, Torfaen will be part of a Networked City Region supporting healthy, thriving communities and a sustainable prosperous economy in an outstanding historical, cultural and natural environment.

To achieve this: By 2033, through collaborative working, the development strategy for the Replacement Torfaen Local Development Plan will deliver sustainable growth that supports the wellbeing of current and future generations whilst responding to the challenges of climate change. It will provide a distinctive, vibrant and prosperous area for people to live work and visit and where people have the skills, knowledge and opportunities to achieve a better quality of life in safe, healthy and thriving communities with accessible green infrastructure and local facilities.

The above Vision, was arrived at through reviewing the current Torfaen LDP Vision; and has taken account of the requirements of national, regional and local strategies; key issues and objectives; the background evidence; and pre-deposit participation with key stakeholders and Torfaen Councillors. It is considered that whilst certain elements of what the Plan is looking to achieve, such as provision of employment, enhancement of green infrastructure assets and maximising sustainable travel options may have been elevated in importance as a result of the pandemic, the overall statement of the RLDP Preferred Strategy Vision remains valid.

Objectives - The Torfaen RLDP Preferred Strategy Objectives contains 17 objectives (detailed in Chapter 4), which the Assessment has shown that they all remain valid and none needs to be changed, or any new ones added. Indeed, the main conclusion is that several objectives have gained in importance because of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as:-

- the need to create local employment / tourism opportunities, retain existing employers and promote flexible town centre uses to mitigate any short term job losses / recession and facilitate the economic recovery;
- the importance of placemaking, community facilities, green infrastructure, addressing climate change, etc. to health and well-being, etc.;
- the need for both market and affordable housing as people seek larger market properties with gardens, etc. and the potential for an increased affordable housing need if short-term job losses are not mitigated; and
- the importance of integrated and efficient transport infrastructure, public transport and broadband networks which encourage active travel and a reduction in private car use to build on changes as a result of the pandemic, such as more home working, increased levels of walking / cycling, etc.

Strategic Policies - The RLDP Preferred Strategy contains 17 Strategic Policies (detailed in Chapter 5); which the Assessment concludes remain valid, and none need to be changed, or any new ones added because of the pandemic - with many gaining in importance.

In detail, it is considered the growth strategy of 50ha of employment land and a 4,800 dwellings (320 dpa) housing target remain valid, as well as their proposed spatial distribution across the three housing market areas within the County Borough. Similarly, the five housing and employment Strategic Sites remain valid (noting that County Hall has recently been permitted and no longer needs to be allocated in the Preferred Strategy).

The remaining Strategic Policies are generally set around promoting development for the better, which are also still considered valid; such as placemaking, green infrastructure, climate change, sustainable transport, etc., and making appropriate allocations for Gypsy & Travellers, aggregates, renewable energy, etc.

Finally, it is also recognised that many of the Preferred Strategy 'Strategic Policies' will be developed further in complimentary Deposit RLDP policies (the next stage of the RLDP preparation process) informed by new evidence (currently being prepared or to be produced shortly) that will take account of the pandemic.