

Local Plan Introduction – Cllr Ruth Fletcher 22 April 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement.

My name is Ruth Fletcher and I am the Cabinet Member for Planning and Infrastructure at Horsham District Council.

Whether you are here in person, will be attending later sessions or listening remotely, I would like to welcome you all to Horsham District.

I would like to thank the Inspector for taking on the continued examination of our plan and for your very considerable work to date.

Horsham District is a genuinely good place to live and work. We live in the beautiful Sussex countryside with thriving towns and villages, each with their own individual history and character.

We are proud of where we live and there is a strong sense of community – you only need to visit our Friday Lates events in the summer to see this in action.

Horsham is a growing and successful District which has had an excellent record of plan-led housing delivery under the current Horsham District Planning Framework, but this is increasingly out of date.

There is a need for more housing, especially for genuinely affordable housing for our younger generations and for local and lower paid workers. However this requirement for new housing must be balanced against the need to protect the character of our District so that we don't lose what we all value so highly.

As you will be well aware, the path to get to this point since preparation of the plan started in 2018 has been long and especially difficult:

- Getting local support and buy-in for new development is always challenging where meeting the national targets means there will be significant greenfield development.

In our case, this has been compounded by the legacy of past developments which have not always brought the supporting infrastructure that was promised. What we hear time and time again from our residents is that we must not have more housing without the schools, healthcare and transport needed for the rise in population.

- A further challenge to the preparation of this plan has been the issue of water neutrality. Natural England's position statement in September 2021 suddenly meant that we were simultaneously required to continue delivering our housing target but legally prevented from permitting most new development for a period of four years. This also led to delays in the preparation and examination of this plan. This has had major consequences for the Council, our residents and for our local construction industry.
- During this whole period, additional work has been needed to accommodate the multiple changes to planning rules that have taken place.

The result is that we have been left with an increasingly out-of-date plan, operating under the tilted balance. We are seeing an increased number of speculative applications for unallocated and less sustainable sites than those in our plan, adversely impacting local infrastructure provision and our countryside and environment.

Local communities have been understandably angry and frustrated at the lack of certainty about future development in their areas, and have real concerns about the impact this will have on their day to day lives.

The council's time and resource that should be used to support positive development has had to be spent managing applications and appeals for sites

in isolated locations that do not deliver the quality, the schools, transport links and the affordable housing that we need.

Developers have suffered from being unable to progress with work on allocated sites and lacking certainty about future sites.

This means that we are determined to get HDC back to plan-led development and out of the tilted balance as soon as possible. When we took office in 2023, this was our top priority, and this remains the case today.

The housing numbers in our initial plan submission reflected the ongoing constraints of water neutrality at that time.

In the work we have done since then, we are addressing the increased housing requirement and reflecting the transition as we gradually recover from the impact of water neutrality.

We welcome this examination to certainty over the Council's housing requirement, and we expect that this will lead to further decisions being made about additional housing allocations. We welcome the opportunity to air the opportunities and challenges that this will bring in an open, fair and constructive manner.

I cannot overstate the extent to which this will continue to be a challenge for local communities facing large allocations in their areas.

However, without meeting this challenge, we would continue under the tilted balance with all the consequences of large scale permissions in less sustainable locations and little certainty that these will even be successful developments that deliver in the time frames needed.

The new development that this plan will bring will help shape our community for generations. It is therefore absolutely imperative that the development which does come forward in the plan is of the highest possible quality, that it is genuinely deliverable and comes with early delivery of infrastructure, that it brings higher levels of affordable housing, that it protects our green spaces and that it respects and enhances the character of our towns and villages.

I would welcome ongoing and constructive dialogue with the development industry and communities to ensure that this becomes a reality.

Getting this far has been difficult for our officers and difficult personally for councillors, especially those with large housing allocations in their own wards. I want to give continued thanks to the Council Officers throughout the organisation who have worked so hard to bring this plan to fruition and especially to the officers in Strategic Planning and our Director.

I want to thank my predecessors in this role, especially John Milne who picked up the local plan from the previous administration and quickly brought it to submission, and who has continued to support our determination to complete the job.

I want to recognise the excellent work that so many parish councillors and clerks have put in to develop Neighbourhood Plans which are so important - also a very challenging task.

And finally, I want to extend my thanks to the many, many residents who have contributed throughout this plan process and will no doubt continue to do so as this examination progresses.

I have no doubt officers will assist you in responding to your questions over the course of the examination process. Thank you