



A briefing information sheet for stakeholders

Contents

Pg 3: Introduction to Opening Doors

Pg 4-5: The local context

Pg 6: The role of councils

Pg 7: Home Ownership Register

Pg 8: Key partners

Pg 9: Identifying sites

Pg 10-11: Housing need and affordable housing

Pg 12: Community Land Trusts

Pg 13-14: Respecting the environment

Pg 15: Further information

Introducing Opening Doors

Opening Doors is a joint initiative of the Dorset Councils Partnership (DCP) – West Dorset District Council, North Dorset District Council and Weymouth & Portland Borough Council.

Our three local authorities have produced a strategy and action plan that aims to enable a significant increase in the pace and volume of high quality homes of differing tenures.

Opening Doors will engage developers, landowners, housing providers, residents and other partners to encourage housing growth needed to meet local demand.

Opening Doors has its own website – www.openingdoorsdorset.co.uk – to highlight activity and provide updates.

There will also be events and regular newsletters to explain the need for more housing and encourage more take-up of special schemes, such as shared ownership, and a new Home Ownership Register.

As well as identifying potential new sites for homes (through the local plan) the Opening Doors programme will actively look to bring new life to stalled sites, which already have planning permission in place for homes, and brownfield sites that have the potential for residential development.

Opening Doors – the local context

The need to ‘accelerate’ the number of houses being developed

Nationally, government has made the building of new homes a priority. But what is the picture locally?

Like many areas, demand for homes is outstripping supply in many parts of West Dorset, North Dorset and Weymouth & Portland.

Some aspiring homeowners and tenants do not earn enough to afford property and private rents in the area.

In many of our towns and villages, the house price to earnings ratio is higher than the national average.

According to the National Housing Federation’s Home Truths 2016/2017 report the average house price in Dorset is £295,202 while the average salary is £24,263 – a ratio of 12 of house prices to incomes. This means the average house price is more than 12 times the average salary. The national average is 7.6.

In West Dorset the average home is £289,026 and the average salary is £24,357 – with a ratio of 11:9. In North Dorset it is £261,532; £24,508; and 10:7. In Weymouth & Portland it is £221,443; £22,682; and 9:8.

Lack of housing supply also has an impact on house prices and market rents, exacerbating the problem. This is set against an increasing and ageing population, with some young people and essential workers having to look elsewhere to live – contributing to a skills gap and acting as a barrier to economic growth.

Under the Western Dorset Economic Growth Strategy, a total of 20,000 additional homes is proposed between 2016 and 2033.

This works out at an average of 1,176 per year over 17 years from 2016 to 2033. Last year (2016-17) a total of 914 homes were built (772 in West Dorset/Weymouth & Portland, and 142 in North Dorset).

An average of 737 homes has been built annually in the DCP area over the past five years but this number needs to be increased.

Setting out targets and identifying land in Local Plans is no longer enough on its own to meet the housing needs of the area. The aim of Opening Doors is to take a more proactive approach to encourage the homes to be built.

Local demand

There is a great demand locally for new housing – especially for affordable housing.

There are currently 902 people on the North Dorset’s Housing Register, 1572 people on West Dorset’s Housing Register and 1539 on Weymouth & Portland’s Housing Register. These are people seeking social housing or shared ownership properties.

There are many more not on official records in the area who are seeking to buy or rent on the open market but struggling to do so.

We are required to plan for all sectors of market demand in our local plans. Current local plan targets are for 775 homes a year in West Dorset and Weymouth and Portland, and 285 in North Dorset.

The Government is consulting on a new standard methodology for housing requirements that would raise these to 780 a year for West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland and 366 a year for North Dorset.

Providing new, decent and more affordable homes will reduce the need for young people to move away, which in turn will help the local economy and the essential infrastructure that serves the public. It will also help attract key workers to the area and halt the brain drain of young professionals.

The role of councils – how we can open doors

As local authorities, we play a central role in housing although it is important to note that we are not housebuilders and no longer hold our own housing stock.

We hold the housing register of people in the area requesting affordable or social housing and provide daily advice to people in housing need.

We also oversee the housing strategy which plots out the long term aims and vision for alleviating housing problems in the area.

As planning authorities we also play a key role in determining the sites and policies that will help meet the national building targets that are set by government.

Although the responsibility for building new homes lies with developers, housing associations, community land trusts and others, we are the main player that can bring everyone together.

We have been awarded Housing Business Ready status by the Housing Finance Institute (HFI). This means that we have the commitment, leadership and expertise to allow greater levels of housebuilding, whatever the changes in government policies and the housing market over the coming years.

We have the ability to apply for certain grants to allow developments to proceed, such as the Housing Infrastructure Fund.

We also have £2m worth of grants to support Community Land Trusts (CLTs).

We are working with private sector developers, housing associations and landowners to gain insights into barriers to development from their perspective, gauge how enthusiastic they are about housebuilding, explore potential sites and encourage their involvement in the programme.

However, it is also within our powers to buy and acquire land, which we can prioritise for housing.

Some local authorities have set up Local Authority Trading Companies to build houses and we are investigating if this would also be a suitable route for Opening Doors.

Home Ownership Register

We already have a clear picture of the local demand for social housing through our housing registers.

What is less tangible is the number of people who would not qualify for social housing but are struggling to buy and rent locally.

One of the key components of our Opening Doors programme is to reach out to those people.

We will do this by launching a new Home Ownership Register. This will be a list of people interested in buying or renting a home, whatever the tenure. It will give us feedback for the wider housing need in the area.

It will also allow people on the register to receive information about potential new-build developments and housing initiatives.

The register will provide useful data on the level of demand that will help to guide planning policy.

It will also be a valuable tool in demonstrating to developers the demand for new housing in our area.

We will be encouraging home seekers to sign the register through our Opening Doors website at www.openingdoorsdorset.co.uk, a dedicated page on Dorset-for-you and at local promotional events such as housing fairs.

Key partners

To open more doors it is essential we work with key partners in the private and public sectors – including developers, house builders and housing associations.

We are making direct contact with developers to engage with them an interest in potential sites.

We will be letting developers know we are 'open for business' and able to talk to them seriously about potential housebuilding.

We will also be developing new and existing relationships with stakeholders, landowners and agents to reach developers and encourage them to consider schemes in our area.

As local landlords for affordable homes, housing associations will also play a key role in working with us. Associations can also bid for Homes and Community Agency (HCA) funds for affordable housing.

We hold regular meetings with them and are seeking to identify sites where affordable housing can be developed or which they can manage as landlords.

We are also looking to work jointly with them on events to engage residents' interest in new homes.

Identifying potential sites

There are sites allocated for housing in our Local Plans and we will very much be looking at these to encourage schemes to come forward.

We are also actively looking at sites that already have planning permission in place for housing but have not yet been developed.

We also have the capacity to apply for match funding from the government to help unlock stalled sites for development.

We are targeting the larger urban areas first and brownfield sites that have the potential for housing.

As part of this we have a Brownfield Site Register to identify plots of land in our area that have the potential for housing development.

We will not only be looking at large sites but also medium, small and even individual sites. Regarding the latter, we will be supporting people who are interested in building their own home through our Self-Build Register. Anyone interested in building their own homes is encouraged to sign up so we can offer support, advice and identify potential plots.

Housing need and affordable housing

We will be actively looking to attract a mixed tenure of housing so all needs are met and to make our area an attractive proposition.

However, a home building programme will also help us to meet our targets on affordable housing.

Affordable housing can be delivered in different ways. This includes development of sites by affordable housing developers, usually housing associations.

Exception site policy allows for the modest development of affordable housing on sites outside of defined development boundaries, where there is a local need.

Also, our local plans set out that developers must contribute a certain number of affordable homes where open market housing is proposed.

Affordable housing is sought at the following levels for developments of over 10 units

- 25% in Portland
- 35% in Weymouth and West Dorset
- 30% Blandford and Shaftesbury
- 25% Gillingham and Sturminster Newton

Our councils have robust policies for the provision of affordable housing within open market housing developments.

However, national policy requires that we take viability into account when negotiating planning applications, and this is reflected in the local policies. This is because if we were to insist on the same affordable housing provision in every case, some sites would not come forward for development at all due to viability.

Our starting point for all negotiations is the local plan policy, and the proportions of affordable housing set out in the local plan policies (which vary across the council areas) have been achieved on many schemes. However in other cases, developers may argue that the scheme will not be viable unless the amount of affordable housing is reduced. This may be because of market values, or particular characteristics of the site that make development more complex and costly, for example where significant new infrastructure is being provided.

Where developers wish to negotiate for a reduced amount of affordable housing, we require them to submit a detailed viability assessment. We then have this work independently assessed, normally by the District Valuation Office service

which is independent of any developer or land interest, and this evidence will be used to guide the final decision.*

Most new affordable housing provision is achieved through negotiation on development sites, but we also work to bring forward affordable housing in other ways. This includes supporting 'rural exceptions' sites, often for 100% affordable housing, and innovative approaches such as Community Land Trusts, which are giving people the power to shape their own communities. There is more about CLTs below.

** Sometimes the evidence shows that it is not possible to provide any affordable housing on the site: on other occasions the development may be viable with a reduced proportion of affordable housing, or with a financial contribution towards the provision of affordable housing on another site, though provision on the site itself is always the preference. National policy also sets out that affordable housing proportions should only be negotiated on the larger development sites (those of more than ten dwellings, though we can negotiate for affordable housing on sites of more than five within designated rural areas such as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which cover a significant proportion of our councils' areas).*

Community Land Trusts

We have £2m worth of grants to support Community Land Trusts (CLTs) to provide affordable housing for local people.

Community Land Trusts are a form of community-led housing, set up and run by ordinary people to develop and manage homes as well as other assets, such as shops and post offices. The majority of properties are for long-term rent although some may be in shared ownership.

CLTs act as long-term stewards of housing, ensuring that it remains genuinely affordable, based on what people actually earn in their area, not just for now but for every future occupier.

There are now over 225 Community Land Trusts in England and Wales, half of which formed in the last two years.

We have 10 active CLTs in West Dorset alone – one of the highest numbers for a single district nationwide.

Opening Doors programme will actively encourage and support new CLTs to form in West Dorset as well as North Dorset and Weymouth & Portland.

Respecting our precious environment

We are very fortunate to live in such a beautiful county. Opening Doors is very mindful of balancing the needs of meeting local housing demand with protecting the local environment.

Our Local Plans already set out how new housing will be balanced against the needs of the environment.

A development strategy focuses on new developments in larger settlements first, and avoiding harmful impacts on environmental designations.

However, we also need to recognise that the housing and economic needs of the area cannot be met without some development in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The need for growth from both a national and local perspective can be considered a justifiable exception for developing in these areas, but this is assessed very carefully as part of the independent examination into local plans.

Opening Doors will be actively looking to identify brownfield and urban sites in the first instance.

When identifying sites in more rural areas, we will look for the most appropriate places that have least impact on the environment.

Opening Doors is about building communities – strong, vibrant, sustainable and balanced communities. These will grow and prosper with the right mix of housing for families, residents and workers placed in the right locations to balance the need for housing with protecting Dorset’s environment.

Our programme is not just about bricks and mortar.

More homes will also potentially support the local economy in a variety of ways, including job creation, an enhanced labour pool, increased trade for local services, retention of key workers, a slowing of the ‘brain drain’, greater spend in the local community and a potentially higher tax take from the workforce.

A good neighbour

We very much appreciate that new developments can be concerning for the nearest neighbours, with issues including house prices, roads, drainage and school provision.

Neighbours will be consulted before cases are weighed up and decisions made.

We will also be explaining to the community at large why new housing is essential if this part of Dorset is to thrive and survive.

And we will work closely with service providers to help them meet the infrastructure needs of new development – including making bids for external funding for infrastructure where necessary. Developers of new homes make payments towards infrastructure provision, to address the impacts of their developments on local communities.

New home building will be of particular value if occupied by people who can stay in the community and contribute to the community.

Further information:

Please visit our website at www.openingdoorsdorset.co.uk for more information.

You can also email info@openingdoorsdorset.co.uk.

Our councillors with responsibility for housing will also be happy to talk to you.

They are:

Cllr Graham Carr-Jones (NDDC leader and housing portfolio holder):
CllrGCarrJones@north-dorset.gov.uk and 01963 364005

Cllr Gill Taylor (WPBC briefholder for housing): GTaylor@weymouth.gov.uk and
01305 779936

Cllr Tim Yarker (WDDC portfolio holder for housing): cllrt.yarker@westdorset-dc.gov.uk and 01305 265942

You can also speak to our housing enabling officers about affordable and commercial housing.

They are:

Clyde Lambert (commercial housing enabler): clambert@dorset.gov.uk

Paul Derrien (housing enabling team leader): pderrien@dorset.gov.uk

