

Local  
Development  
Plan

Issues Paper

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# Looking Beyond 2006 – Key Issues

## INTRODUCTION

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The Blaenau Gwent Local Development Plan is a statutory plan that will set the strategy and policies to guide development and use of land and to safeguard the environment up to 2021. It will be prepared over the next 4 years, in consultation with stakeholders and the general public, in accordance with the Delivery Agreement.

### The Issues Approach

This Issues Paper is the first step in preparing the 'Preferred Strategy' for the Local Development Plan. It is a discussion document intended to promote debate focused on the issues of strategic significance. From an analysis of information on national, regional and local trends and policies, a number of potential issues begin to emerge. These are identified in a way that will inform discussion and decisions on strategic options.

### Your Role

The Issues Paper sets out a range of issues and series of questions considered relevant to the future planning of the Borough.

The feedback from this stage will enable the Council to clearly identify the issues relevant to the Borough and develop possible visions, objectives and options for development.



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## 1. BACKGROUND

### AREA PROFILE

Blaenau Gwent County Borough is situated in South East Wales. It is 20 miles north of Newport and 30 miles north of Cardiff, borders the Brecon Beacons, and is well placed to take advantage of the Heads of the Valleys road network. Most of 70,600 population and 29,585 households (2001 Census) can be found in the towns of Abertillery, Brynmawr, Ebbw Vale Nantyglo and Blaina, and Tredegar.

The Index of Multiple Deprivation (2005) indicated that 26% of the lowest standard output areas (LSOAs) fall within the 10% most deprived in Wales. Nearly 90% of the lowest standard output areas fall within the 50% most deprived in Wales.

There are above average LOSAs for:

- Employment (32%)
- Overall deprivation (26%)
- Health (23%)
- Income (19%)

Below average numbers of LSOAs for:

Environment

No LSOAs for

- Housing
- Geographical Access to Services

More detailed information on the area is provided in the following sections on: housing; employment; town centres; transport; the environment; and Leisure, Recreation and Tourism.

### POLICY CONTEXT

The Blaenau Gwent Local Development Plan must have regard to current national and regional guidance and will be influenced by a number of other national and regional policies and initiatives.

### National Policy

Local planning authorities are required, under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, to undertake their functions with a view to contributing to the achievement of sustainable development.

The 1998 Wales, Assembly Government also has a d

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The Wales Spatial Plan provides a framework for the future spatial development of Wales. Blaenau Gwent, along with neighbouring authorities, has been identified as part of the South East – Capital Network Zone. The vision for the Capital Network is:

*“An innovative skilled area offering a*













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- The total number of households is projected to increase by 20% to 1,478,500.
- The number of Households in South East Wales will increase by 22%.
- In general the average household size is expected to continue to fall from 2.34 persons to 2.09.

### **Affordable Housing**

Local Housing Market Assessments are to provide the evidence base to support policies to deliver affordable housing through the planning system. It is now desirable that new housing development should incorporate a reasonable mix and balance of house types and size to cater for a range of housing needs and contribute to the development of sustainable communities. For affordable housing it is now considered important for the authority to have an appreciation of the demand for different dwelling sizes and types of housing in relation to supply, so that they are well informed



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16% Intermediate. The Housing Market Assessment identifies that in the Affordable sector the need is for 1-bedroom dwellings whilst in the private sector the need is for 1, 2 and 4+ bedrooms.

### **Current Situation:**

- Underlying population decline
- Losses of 200 per annum as a result of natural change

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identify the area as an area of regeneration.

In line with these key strategic documents Blaenau Gwent proposes to halt population loss and turn it around to a population gain for the authority by the end of the plan period.

One option that is to be put forward as a Strategic Option for growth is a housing completion figure of 200 per annum, which is nearly double what has been achieved in the past but isn't as high as the Housing Market Assessment figure of 250 per annum. In accordance with the MIPPS, Blaenau Gwent has, with the other ten constituent local planning authorities and a broad range of stakeholders (including the Home Builders Federation, utility companies and environmental organisations) given extensive consideration to the issue of regional housing apportionment, and have agreed a figure of 200 for Blaenau Gwent.

Other options may be for a higher level of growth such as the 250 figure identified in the Housing Market Assessment or a lower figure such as the continuation of the UDP figure of 118 houses.

### Question 2.1

Do you agree with the assessment of the population situation?

Is it acceptable to use the SE Wales Strategic Planning Group figure as one option for growth? What other options might be put forward?

### Location of Development

The current housing strategy sought to make provision for housing in all major settlements within the County Borough. The intention was that the provision of land for residential development would provide housing

choice and opportunity throughout the Borough, and encourage and facilitate existing residents to remain in their local communities.

Blaenau Gwent is characterised by the concentration of its population in urban settlements (the valley towns of Tredegar, Ebbw Vale, Brynmawr, Nantyglo/Blaina and Abertillery). These urban settlements contain a wide range of services and facilities, and have town centres comprising concentrations of retail and commercial premises. The spatial strategy is aimed at concentrating a high proportion of the new housing demand in these centres where they can assist and sustain the regeneration of these towns and also benefit from their close location to the existing services and facilities.

Blaenau Gwent also has settlements that can be classed as peripheral or town extensions which whilst located within the town environs are sufficiently distant from the centre as to not benefit from easy access to the services provided there. These settlements include areas such as Waundeg, Rassau, Garnlydan, Beaufort, Victoria, Waunlwyd, Roseheyworth and Six Bells. The UDP strategy identified housing opportunities within these settlements where there were appropriate sites, easily accessible by public transport, which had potential to sustain or assist the growth of these communities.

The final category of settlement includes small independent settlements, which are too small to support a diverse range of facilities, and are physically separated from existing centres. Such settlements include the villages of Pochin, Bedwelly Pits, Trefil, Cwm, Llanhilleth, Bryntithel and Swffryd. Growth in these areas is greatly limited to small expansion based on local need.

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### Question 2.2

If a growth option is proposed, how should future growth be distributed throughout the Plan Area? Should it be based on the UDP Settlement Strategy, described above, or are there more sustainable patterns that should be considered?

Are some of the third category settlements too small to enable sustainable development? Some of the settlements listed are only hamlets and more work may be needed to identify how growth should be dealt with in these areas.

### Question 2.3

Are there settlements or areas where future development should be controlled differently?

Another alternative is to concentrate development in and around the main towns where people have best access to jobs, facilities and services, including public transport. Given the new railway line planned for the Ebbw Fawr valley, perhaps most development should be focused in this area. The former Steelworks site, which is in the Ebbw Fawr valley, will be able to accommodate nearly a third of the 3,000 proposed houses if a figure of 200 per annum was taken forward.

### Question 2.4

Are there settlements or areas where future development should be encouraged and, if so, explain why?

Another issue is that some towns may not have sufficient Brownfield capacity to meet local need and may require the release of Greenfield sites.

### Question 2.5

In view of the preference for the development of Brownfield sites before Greenfield sites should the Plan look at identifying all Brownfield sites regardless of their location and the needs of the various communities?

### Creating Mixed and Balanced Communities

One of the main themes of the MIPPS is that the plan should cater for a range and choice of housing to meet local needs and demand. The 'Heads We Win' Strategy aims to provide executive and other high quality and affordable housing to attract professionals and key workers, especially younger buyers and first time buyers. In order to ensure that new development can accommodate a range and choice within a site it may not be appropriate to increase densities by much. It is worth noting that our existing settlement patterns produce some of the highest densities in Wales and to set a high density on all new sites may not enable the Authority to meet these wider needs. Planning Policy Wales encourages higher densities, near public transport nodes or near corridors well served by public transport (or with the potential to be served).

### Question 2.6

Should the Plan look at increasing housing densities generally or should it attempt to cater for a range of densities according to the location of the site in relation to public transport?





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Development Plans are required to include provision of land for schools, further and higher education, places of worship, recreation and other community facilities.

The quality of everyday life is greatly influenced by the nature and extent of local community facilities as local schools, community buildings, and medical services play an important role in the life of an area.

Land is safeguarded in the current adopted Unitary Development Plan for strategic sites such as schools. As part of the Local Development Plan process there is a need to review the allocated sites to ensure that they remain up-to-date with any changing circumstances and development needs.

In addition the preferred option, which is chosen for the population and household projections, is likely to influence the provision of community facilities within Blaenau Gwent. Existing population trends show that Blaenau Gwent has an ageing population. Should this trend continue there could be increased pressure on extra health care facilities for the elderly within the County Borough.

Should the option of attracting a younger migration profile be preferred, it may present an increase in population in the school age ranges. This may result in the need to safeguard additional land in the Local Development Plan for school expansion.

### **Question 2.11**

What should be the approach of the new LDP be in relation to the provision of new facilities?

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Maintaining and improving the economic well being of the Borough is important. A thriving economy will help create a better quality of life. The planning system identifies the quantity and location of land required for employment development, seeking to locate employment development closer to where people live and close to good public transport routes. It also has an important function in balancing economic needs with environmental considerations so that the environment is protected.

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## THE COUNTY BOROUGH PICTURE

Some employment facts and figures for Blaenau Gwent are given below:

- 70% of Blaenau Gwent's working age population is economically active, compared to around 75% in Wales and a GB figure of 78%.
- The employment rate is only 64% compared with 71% for Wales and 74% for GB
- Average residents earnings are only 77% of the GB figure.
- Compared to one in six in Wales, around one in four of the working age population of Blaenau Gwent have no qualifications

## ISSUES

### Land Requirement

A total of 12.9 hectares of employment land was developed between 2000 and 2005. This gives an annual take up of 2.0 hectares, according to a recent study commissioned. If this trend were projected forward, without taking other considerations into account, only 30 hectares of employment land would be required over the Plan period.

The UDP allocated 180 hectares of employment land for development for the period of 1996 to 2011. Between 1996 and 2006, 16 hectares of that allocated employment land has been developed during this period. Taking into account that land is needed for waste facilities and that the County Borough is moving towards population growth, should we be looking to

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Town centres are the ideal locations for a number of different activities, not just shopping. They can provide a central destination for other uses such as leisure, employment and homes.

### **NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT**

#### **National Planning Policy**

National Planning Policy guidance in respect of planning for retail and town centres is contained in the Ministerial Interim Planning Policy Statement (MIPPS) 02/2005 – Planning for Retail and Town Centres.

The new policy advice places emphasis on enhancing the role and mixed-use nature of town, district, local and village centres and focussing new development within them. Out-of-town shopping is discouraged where it could compete with the town centre and affect its vitality and viability.

#### **The Changing Retail Scene**

Change in the retail environment of Britain has been a continuous feature since the mid 1960's, where many town centres have suffered, due to:

- The attractiveness of

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issues can be addressed as one given their close proximity.

### **Improving Accessibility**

Lack of access to a car denies a person anything like the mobility afforded to the car driver. Addressing this huge disparity of social exclusion should be one of the main objectives of this Plan. Also many areas within Blaenau Gwent suffer from the negative impact of the increasing car use, such as car parking problems and high pedestrian accident rates. The Council needs to improve accessibility, encourage greater use of sustainable modes of travel that will lead to a reduction in car use.

### **Improving Connectivity**

Connectivity is a main theme in terms of the Wales Spatial Plan and the need to improve regional and local connectivity and accessibility,

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part. Safe cycle and pedestrian routes could reduce the use of cars for journeys to work, for services and for recreation.

### **Question 5.5**

What actions or policies are needed to create safer neighbourhoods for people to walk and cycle?

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### **NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT**

The Assembly Government's objectives for the conservation and improvement of the built and natural environment as well as biodiversity have to be reflected in the Local Development Plan. This will help ensure the proper protection of designated sites and species and the implementation of international obligations, without imposing unnecessary constraints on development. In the face of heavy pressure for development in 'green areas' it is important to ensure adequate protection is afforded to the natural environment as well as the built environment.

Climate change is high on the political agenda, at the moment, as it affects rainfall patterns and increases the risk of flooding. Due to the topography of Blaenau Gwent there are only very limited areas that are affected by flooding and therefore it is not regarded as a strategic issue but will be dealt with through the allocation of land and a policy in the Plan.

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### Question 6.3

Is the countryside within the Plan afforded too much/too little or sufficient protection from development?

Green wedges have an important function as they prevent the merging of neighbouring settlements, which would otherwise lose their distinctive identities. Special Landscape Areas are designated as such because it affords protection to the high quality visual amenity they provide.

### Question 6.4

Should the existing boundaries of such areas be examined to determine their adequacy?

conservation reasons; SLA's and Green Wedges; areas of archaeological or historic interest; areas in close proximity to housing, recreational or tourist attractions or where there would be an undue impact on the environment. A buffer zone of 500m is considered necessary in relation to an acceptable distance from the defined urban area for mineral workings.

### Question 6.5

Is the UDP approach to identifying Mineral Exclusion Zones acceptable?

### Protection of Mineral Reserves

Minerals Planning Policy Wales advises local authorities to include policies for the maintenance of non-energy minerals which are currently in demand. Landbanks are determined using average production figures over the previous 3 years and dividing the reserves by the annual average production.

The LDP will address the requirements of the emerging Regional Technical Statement (currently being prepared by the South Wales Regional Aggregates Working Party) by ensuring that a landbank for aggregates is maintained. It will also seek to identify potential resource areas for sand and gravel and high quality hard rock resources. Coal resources will also be safeguarded where viability or reserves can be demonstrated.

The UDP currently identifies Mineral Exclusion Zones, that is areas where mineral extraction will not be permitted, as: sites of or areas designated for protection for nature

### Harnessing Renewable Energy Resources

The provision of electricity and heating from renewable sources coupled with energy efficiency and conservation are key elements of the UK energy policy and the Wales Environment Strategy. For Blaenau Gwent the issue is how schemes to harness renewable energy from a range of sources including biomass, anaerobic digestion, wind farms and small hydro schemes can be achieved without impacting on local communities, the landscape and ecological interests. The wider issue of more sustainable use of energy will also need to be considered.

### Question 6.6

How can these renewable energy resources be harnessed without causing undue harm to the environment or the quality of life for local communities?



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There are plans for a 44-bed hotel in Ebbw Vale and a driving range and golf course to be built at Bryn Bach Park, Tredegar.

### **ISSUES**

#### **Protection of Open Space**

The Welsh Assembly Government is concerned about the protection afforded to open space provision.

#### **The need for more land for recreation**

An increase in leisure time available to individuals and an increase in the variety of recreational pursuits could contribute to the health and quality of life of the local community. Planning Policy Wales charges the planning system with ensuring adequate

The We5als