

Gillingham Neighbourhood Plan 2011 – 2026

Visioning Workshop, Riversmeet, Gillingham 22 October 2012

Background

The Workshop, comprising invitees from Parish Councils, voluntary groups and statutory services such as the Police and Wessex Water, was part of a process to establish a shared community vision for Gillingham to 2026 and beyond. The area approved by North Dorset District Council (NDDC) for the Gillingham Neighbourhood Plan (NP) is Gillingham parish. NDDC works alongside the NP Group, which is advised by ATLAS, a consultancy that is part of the Homes & Communities Agency and funded by the DCLG.

The NP process builds upon preparatory work, including public consultation, undertaken previously by the Gillingham Town Plan. It also takes account of the recently completed Town Design Statement. The Visioning Workshop was followed later the same day by a public forum, both events facilitated by ATLAS.

Planning context to the Neighbourhood Plan

The NP is part of a hierarchy consisting of:

- The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) setting out policies for England
- The North Dorset Core Strategy/Local Plan. The initial 2010 draft of the Core Strategy has been revised and is open for public consultation from 29 October to 21 December 2012 – see www.dorsetforyou.com/consultationkeyissues/north.

Key issues being considered in the Core Strategy include reducing the overall level of housing proposed; concentrating the majority of growth in the District's main towns; and providing infrastructure to support growth. Core Policy 16 provides for a substantial southward extension to Gillingham on greenfield land, known as the Strategic Site Allocation (SSA). Gillingham is anticipated to grow overall from a 2010 population of 10,900 to a 2026 population of around 14,000.

Components of a sustainable Gillingham

Previous consultation asked the community for views on a range of issues, and ten components of a sustainable Gillingham were identified. These are summarised in an ATLAS paper entitled '*What the community said in July 2010 . . .*'. Group sessions of the Visioning Workshop were structured around these themes, and directed to:

Stage 1 – establishing key aims for encapsulation in a vision statement for Gillingham 2026

Stage 2 – setting objectives in the NP to achieve these aims between now and 2026.

Key points from the Workshop

1. The need for a **coherent master plan**, especially for the SSA. Development must not be piecemeal and must maintain the original vision for Gillingham. Quality development is sought, with **high design standards** and energy efficiency measures.
2. A sufficient level of **affordable housing** integrated into new development. The existing housing stock should be improved. The needs of older people should be canvassed, and **housing for older people** should be future-proofed.
3. A focus on improving **Gillingham Town Centre**, which lacks identity and could be more aesthetically pleasing. An assessment of town centre premises could be made to establish who owns what and obstructive landlords could be named and shamed. Empty shops might be used for new business start-ups and there could be financial incentives such as rates holidays. The town centre could become more vibrant with cafes and niche shops – from previous experience, the multiples like W H Smith and Boots are not interested. A market could generate activity. Part of the High Street could be pedestrianised. Car parking is important.

A Town Centre Regeneration Group is already working on the Town Meadow (fair) site, aiming to turn it into a park.

4. **Jobs and training** for young people are important as a complete package, along with incentives to encourage business start-ups.
5. **Green infrastructure** must be incorporated into new development, with networks of open spaces and a large open space as a focal point.
6. **Permeability** – connections between the town centre, neighbourhoods and countryside are essential. A network of routes for walking and cycling is needed together with improved legibility of routes through signage.
7. **Access and transport** embraces the need to improve public and business transport, including better advertising of bus services. The A303 is important as a strategic route. There is a problem of north-south communication at peak times Gillingham with its rail station could become a transport hub. There should be a bus shuttle between Mere, Gillingham and Shaftesbury.
8. **Health and well-being** – community needs are to be assessed and passed to the NHS. Although new growth is an opportunity for a new health care facility, it may not be needed if there are better connections to existing facilities.
9. **Sport and culture** – new and improved sports facilities are desirable. A community building could be a second phase of Riversmeet (foundations are already in place on site).
10. **Education** – a Further Education College is needed – it could be attractive to employers and serve not just the young but also the whole population.
11. **Governance** – it is difficult to involve younger people: perhaps social media could be used to canvas their views? Community Champions are needed to promote the vision for Gillingham, along with more NP volunteers, and possibly a Transport Czar to work with operators of services.

Other Workshop concerns

- Developers must 'buy-in' to the vision for Gillingham – the NP Group and NDDC are already talking to prospective developers.
- Provision of social infrastructure must run parallel to development.
- Alternative means of power generation should be investigated.
- A strategic approach is needed in relation to the three towns of Mere, Gillingham and Shaftesbury in terms of what facilities each of them has – each town has a piece of the solution.
- The demarcation between the NP and the NDDC Core Strategy/Local Plan is unclear and there must not be duplication.

Implementation

Once the NP has been prepared, NDDC will organise a referendum to ensure that the community has the final say on whether the NP should come into force. People living in Gillingham parish who are registered to vote in local elections will be entitled to vote in the referendum. If more than 50% of people voting support the NP, it will come into force and become part of the Development Plan. This means that if the local community endorses the NP, it will have legal weight in decision-making.

David Hope
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