

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**PLANNING, TRANSPORT AND DEVELOPMENT OVERVIEW &  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**TUESDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2014**

**REPORT OF THE HEAD OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

**Report prepared by Sue Whiteside and Cheryl Parks**

**1. ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN MAIDSTONE'S LOCAL PLAN –  
REPORT ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY DESIGN  
SOUTH EAST**

1.1 Issue for Consideration

1.1.1 To consider the interim report 'Engaging communities in Maidstone's local plan' attached at Appendix A. The final report, together with an action plan, will be presented to the Committee following the multi-stakeholder event planned for 17 September 2014.

1.2 Recommendation of the Head of Planning and Development

1.2.1 That the Planning, Transport and Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers the report 'Engaging communities in Maidstone's local plan' attached at Appendix A, and notes the recommendations made by Design South East that encourage meaningful engagement with the rural communities of Maidstone.

1.3 Reasons for Recommendation

**Background**

1.3.1 Community engagement is an essential part of the local plan process. The council's Statement of Community Involvement, adopted in 2013, sets out how and when stakeholders and the local community can participate in the preparation of local planning policy documents and planning applications. Community engagement in planning should be appropriate and proportionate to the planning issues, transparent, accessible and well planned.

1.3.2 In February 2014, Cabinet approved the Maidstone Borough Local Plan for public consultation. At this stage in the plan-making process, consultation is carried out under Regulation 18 of the

Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2012, allowing for a reasonably flexible and informal consultation. The consultation ran for over six weeks from 21 March to 7 May 2014, during which time some 35 events were held at various locations across the borough, as highlighted in a previous report to this committee. This included specific events in each of the settlements proposed for housing growth plus three collective events for KALC (7<sup>th</sup> April), for the proposed Rural Service Centres (28<sup>th</sup> April) and for the Larger Villages (24<sup>th</sup> April). Prior to, during and after the period of consultation on the Local Plan a dedicated Principal Planning Officer was available for enquiries and assistance by phone and email, and attended a large number of meetings with parish and neighbourhood representatives on topics relating to growth, infrastructure and neighbourhood planning. On 21<sup>st</sup> May 2013, a 'drop in' day had been held for officers to hear parish council views on the submitted SHLAA sites.

- 1.3.3 The Maidstone Strategic Housing Market Assessment (2014) determined the borough's objectively assessed housing need for the local plan, at around 19,600 dwellings<sup>1</sup> for the period 2011-2031. To deliver new homes in a sustainable manner, and taking account of land capacity and constraints, policy SS1 of the draft local plan set a housing target of 17,100 dwellings to be delivered through a sustainable settlement hierarchy. This target will be reviewed in the context of responses to the consultation plan and the council's second call for potential development sites from landowners, developers and their agents.
- 1.3.4 With a focus on making the best use of brownfield sites and existing infrastructure, the settlement hierarchy for the borough comprises: the expansion of the Maidstone urban area as the most sustainable location; followed by the five rural service centres of Harrietsham, Headcorn, Lenham, Marden and Staplehurst as the secondary focus for development; and finally the five larger villages of Boughton Monchelsea, Coxheath, Eythorne Street (Hollingbourne), Sutton Valence and Yalding, where additional limited development is acceptable.
- 1.3.5 The level of development proposed at these village locations is significantly higher than that proposed in the 2011 Core Strategy and the 2012 Core Strategy Strategic Site Allocations. Consequently, as part of the Regulation 18 consultation process, the council sought to engage more fully with the rural communities most affected by the proposed development.

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<sup>1</sup> Recommended to be reduced to 18,600 dwellings as set out in the Planning, Transport and Development Overview and Scrutiny report of 19 August 2014 and Cabinet report of 10<sup>th</sup> September: The Strategic Housing Market Assessment Update

## **Engaging with rural communities**

- 1.3.6 Design South East, an independent not-for-profit organisation, was commissioned to engage with the ten parish councils during the consultation period of the draft local plan. The organisation provides built environment design support for local authorities, the development sector and communities, and helps to facilitate these forums. Design South East strongly advocates the importance of talking to, and getting to know each local community, to understand their design requirements to help foster trust between residents, local authorities, parish councils and developers.
- 1.3.7 The main aim of the brief was to find out how much understanding there was of the local plan process and to ensure that parish councils felt that their views had been listened to constructively. Design South East facilitated workshops that focused on identifying a consensual vision for the place, the physical characteristics of each area, and developing a clear and constructive expression of the community's expectations for the quality of any new development.
- 1.3.8 Design South East quickly found that, very broadly, the parish councils fell into three groups:
- Those with a good understanding of the local plan process and have produced a draft neighbourhood plan, but need to understand the relationship between local plans and neighbourhood plans, and the policy "hooks" that connect them;
  - Those whose main issues are site based; and
  - Those who have questions relating to infrastructure, communication or the local plan process.
- 1.3.9 This grouping allowed Design South East to tailor the workshops to each specific audience.
- 1.3.10 Workshops were split into two parts. The first dealt with individual parish council concerns about the draft Maidstone Borough Local Plan in order that these could be documented and reported to the council in full. The second part included a village walkabout (dependent on daytime/evening meeting), and focused on the housing site allocations and design and place-making issues that would need to be addressed if the character and integrity of each village were to be maintained. Additionally, each parish council was encouraged to hold a further 'advanced design' workshop to further their understanding of the place-making process.

- 1.3.11 These workshops were held with all designated rural service centre and larger village parish councils, with the exception of Hollingbourne parish council who elected not to take part in the process due to the parish council's unavailability.

**Design South East - Conclusions and recommendations**

- 1.3.12 The full documentation of engagement with each village is set out in Annex 1 of the Design South East report. The main conclusions are set out in the table below, together with recommendations of how they can be achieved and/or overcome.

	<b>DSE Conclusion</b>	<b>DSE Recommendation</b>	<b>Officer Response</b>
<b>1</b>	There is frustration within the parish councils about the lack of communication from the borough council on local plan matters.	It is suggested that this could be overcome with the production and implementation of an inclusive coherent community communications strategy.	<p>Public consultation on the local plan was undertaken in accordance with the council's adopted Statement of Community Involvement. A range of stakeholders were notified of the consultation (by email, letter and public notices) and invited to submit comments on the draft plan. Stakeholders included parish councils, statutory bodies, infrastructure providers, and individuals and organisations who had requested to be notified at all stages of local plan production. Additionally a number of exhibition events were publicised, at which officers were in attendance to answer questions.</p> <p>The council has an overarching Communications Plan; and a specific Local Plan Consultation Plan (approved by Cabinet Member via Overview &amp; Scrutiny Committee) ensured as many different stakeholders and the wider community were engaged in the development of the local plan. Further workshops were developed through Design South East, specifically for the parish councils identified in the local</p>

			<p>plan settlement hierarchy where sustainable development is proposed.</p> <p>It is important to note that the council has engaged in many discussions with parishes in the run up to, and during the consultation, but that these have not often ended with agreement on the need for growth or the proposed locations for it. As noted by DSE, place and village identity are very important to those living outside the urban area and the resultant reservations around allocations in these areas have fuelled the concerns around communication and dialogue. The council is duty bound to adhere to the NPPF and its intention to “boost significantly the supply of housing” by planning for the borough as a whole in the most sustainable location. Reducing the housing numbers allocated at a particular settlement may well mean the need for more dwellings to be accommodated at alternate locations.</p> <p>There is a commitment to engage further with the parish councils as the local plan progresses and, in addition to the September stakeholder event, a series of meetings will be arranged for the autumn.</p>
<b>2</b>	There is confusion within the parish councils regarding how the local plan and neighbourhood plans coalesce. It is acknowledged that the local plan takes a ‘top down’	It is suggested that this could be overcome by developing a strategy that ensures parish councils have an active part in the decision making process.	As far as practicable the local plan aims to: reflect the needs of the borough, its communities and stakeholders; be technically robust and demonstrate at public examination that it is based on sound information and evidence; and achieve broad consensus. A local plan must be in conformity with the National Planning Policy

	<p>site based approach whilst the neighbourhood plans take a 'bottom up' place based approach, however the parish councils feel that the local plan is based on numbers and sites without due consideration of the context of place and setting.</p>		<p>Framework and Guidance, and comply with European and national legislation.</p> <p>A neighbourhood plan must also comply with European and national legislation, take account of the National Planning Policy Framework and Guidance, and be in general conformity with the strategic policies of the local plan. It should not promote less development than that identified in the local development plan for the local area (such as new housing allocations) but can allow greater growth levels.</p> <p>Officers are taking steps to offer better support to parish councils preparing a neighbourhood plan. An officer has been designated as a first point of contact for enquiries. Advice notes on neighbourhood planning are being prepared for the council's web site. A consultant has been appointed to offer advice, and to ensure compliance with neighbourhood plan making regulations and general conformity with national policies and the strategic policies of the adopted local plan. Meetings with each parish council that is in the process of preparing a neighbourhood plan are currently being arranged.</p>
<p><b>3</b></p>	<p>The parish councils are passionate about retaining the rural character of their villages and would like to see clear policies for how this is to be achieved in the</p>	<p>It is suggested that this could be achieved by setting a clear vision for each of the rural service centres and larger villages.</p>	<p>The Parish Charter is currently being refreshed for Maidstone and aims to set a standard for the Borough and Parish Councils to work together, respecting a vision for partnership working and acknowledging the borough's rich and diverse character.</p> <p>The setting of a clear vision for</p>

	long term.		each rural service centre and larger village can be considered as the action plan is developed.
4	The parish councils acknowledge that the sites identified in the local plan so far form a starting point to a more community/ place based approach. In taking this forward, many parish councils have articulate and knowledgeable neighbourhood plan sub-groups and feel that this valuable resource should be harnessed.	It is suggested that knowledge could be shared among parish councils in order to foster a more coherent understanding of the local plan and neighbourhood plan processes.	Neighbourhood Plans provide a community-led framework for guiding the future development, regeneration and conservation of an area.  Support from neighbourhood plan champions would be welcomed and the Borough Council can support and help facilitate this resource in partnership with the parish councils.

### **Feedback from parish councils**

- 1.3.13 At the Planning, Transport and Development Overview and Scrutiny committee meeting on 9 June 2014, the Committee requested that feedback be sought from the rural service centre and larger village parish councils on their experience of working with Design South East.
- 1.3.14 A short questionnaire was emailed to each of the nine parish councils involved, and seven responses were received. A summary of the responses is as follows:
- i. 43% were satisfied with the engagement Design South East had with their parish council compared to 14% who were dissatisfied;
  - ii. 57% felt that the engagement had helped with their understanding of the local plan compared to 43% who felt that it had not;
  - iii. 57% felt that the engagement had helped with the development of their neighbourhood plan compared to 14% who felt that it had not;

- iv. 17% felt that there had been an improvement in dialogue with Maidstone Borough Council following the engagement compared to 83% who felt that there had not;
- v. 83% would be happy to engage further with Design South East compared to 17% that would not;
- vi. 100% said that there is more that Maidstone Borough Council could do to better facilitate conversations with their parish council. Some of these suggestions include listening more, engaging in meaningful dialogue sooner in the process, and engaging more with the parish councils in respect of their neighbourhood plans.

### **Next steps**

- 1.3.15 Given the conclusions and recommendations from Design South East, together with the feedback from the parish councils, it is important to adopt an inclusive approach to communication, consultation and engagement with the parish councils.
- 1.3.16 As a first step, a multi-stakeholder workshop is being held on Wednesday 17 September 2014. The rural service centre and larger village parish councils will have the opportunity to meet face to face with key infrastructure providers in order to discuss and find solutions to issues that the parish councils feel are a barrier to development. Design South East will facilitate the event, and Borough Council officers will be in attendance to respond to any queries that may arise.
- 1.3.17 The event will assist in the preparation of an action plan for future community workshops where parish councils will be invited to discuss the issues facing their villages and the options for any future development as part of their emerging neighbourhood plans.
- 1.3.18 The report 'Engaging communities in Maidstone's local plan', attached at Appendix A, will be amended following the multi-stakeholder workshop on 17 September in order to include the conclusions of the event and the action plan for future work. The recommendations set out in the action plan will be presented to a future meeting of this Committee.
- 1.3.19 Meanwhile, further engagement with the rural service centre and larger village parish councils (and their local ward members) will be undertaken through a series of consultation meetings, to ensure active involvement in the development of the local plan. Concurrently, officers and members of the cabinet will meet with other parish councils, including those groups preparing a neighbourhood plan, together with local ward members, to ensure neighbourhood plans are robust and based on sound evidence prior

to their examination, and that the concerns and issues of all are fully understood, discussed and addressed. The schedule of meetings is still to be finalised at the time of writing but will be made available to members of the committee at the meeting.

### **Conclusion**

- 1.3.20 In conclusion, Maidstone Borough Council will continue to work with parish councils to improve the way in which the council engages and consults its residents and partners on important issues.
- 1.3.21 Through the Maidstone Borough Local Plan and the Parish Charter, the council will discuss how parish councils see their communities growing over the next few years in order to understand what local people feel is important, to identify local problems and opportunities, and to understand how residents want their community to develop. This can be achieved by:
- Strengthening the Borough Council's relationship with parish councils;
  - Helping parish councils (and their communities) to enhance their status;
  - Harnessing and encouraging parish councils to share and provide their expertise and knowledge on local issues, for example, through neighbourhood planning; and
  - Encouraging and supporting partnership working, involvement from other agencies and increased local voluntary action.
- 1.4 Alternative Action and why not Recommended
- 1.4.1 The Committee could choose not to consider the report and its' recommendations but that would result in a missed opportunity to build on the engagement with Parish Councils.
- 1.5 Impact on Corporate Objectives
- 1.5.1 The commissioned work 'Engaging communities in Maidstone's local plan' impacted on all three corporate objectives as set out in the Strategic Plan 2011-15.
- 1.5.2 **For Maidstone to have a growing economy** – all parish councils have had an opportunity to comment on how best to achieve a growing economy in the borough.
- 1.5.3 **For Maidstone to be a decent place to live** – all parish councils have had an opportunity to comment on the policies that will shape how the borough will grow over the period until 2031.

1.5.4 **Corporate and customer excellence** – this objective deals with delivering cost effective services to the right people in the right places at the right time, and also delivering the information in an understandable format. The commissioned work 'Engaging communities in Maidstone's local plan' focused on reaching the nine parish councils in a cost effective manner but ensured that nobody was disadvantaged because of where they live or who they are, and the council ensured that people were listened to.

1.6 Other Implications

1.	Financial	X
2.	Staffing	X
3.	Legal	
4.	Equality Impact Needs Assessment	
5.	Environmental/Sustainable Development	
6.	Community Safety	
7.	Human Rights Act	
8.	Procurement	
9.	Asset Management	

1.6.1 Financial – Costs associated with the commissioning of Design South East to undertake engagement with the parish councils can be accommodated within the local plan budget. Future costs arising from the action plan will be considered alongside proposed recommendations.

1.6.2 Staffing – The impact of the action plan on staff resources arising from recommended actions will be considered at a future meeting of the committee.

1.7 Relevant Documents

1.7.1 Appendices

Appendix A – 'Engaging communities in Maidstone's local plan'

**IS THIS A KEY DECISION REPORT?**

**THIS BOX MUST BE COMPLETED**

Yes

No

If yes, this is a Key Decision because: .....

.....

Wards/Parishes affected: .....

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1.7.2 Background Documents

None