

Planning Portfolio - Report to Scrutiny Committee

1 Planning Applications and Appeals

The District Council's Planning Department is the busiest in Kent, with 2,078 planning applications received in the year to March 2016. The next highest was Canterbury with 1,795 applications, Maidstone with 1,737 applications and Tunbridge Wells with 1,732 applications. Dartford received 784 and Gravesham 856. The District Council also grants the lowest number of planning applications (80%) whereas Ashford grants 97% and Tonbridge and Malling 95%.

The existing Local Plan requires the District Council to build 3,300 homes at 165 per annum. In 2015/16, there were 414 net housing completions, which is the highest in the plan period since 2006 (second highest was 290 units in 2008/09). But where these homes have been built has been a surprise. Swanley has built 45 homes in the last 4 years, Edenbridge 110, Sevenoaks 251 and Dunton Green 355. There were 115 affordable housing units completed in 2015/16 (up from 15 in 2014/15), which is also the highest figure in the last five years (since the adoption of the Core Strategy). This is primarily due to the contribution of the West Kent Cold Store site in Dunton Green. Viability issues remain central to the provision of affordable housing and unfortunately the government has decided to give priority to the encouragement of small builders.

Appeals dismissed is below target at 62.5%. Detailed analysis of those that are allowed has not revealed any particular trends or weaknesses in our existing Planning Policy, however we will continue to review each decision. The short term trend is positive and the total number of appeals is low when compared with the total number of planning decisions.

Case officer turnover has been high in the last 12-18 months. Reasons for leaving are varied, from moving closer to home, leaving for the private sector, or wanting to take on a new challenge after serving here for a number of years. Replacing experienced planning officers is currently very difficult. We have been fortunate to appoint highly capable graduates, but understandably they will take time to develop in their new roles. Notwithstanding, performance has not suffered even though workloads have remained high.

As a follow up to the last meeting, the District Council has decided not to use the News Shopper to publicise planning applications as it is several times more expensive than The Chronicle.

2 Building Control

The Building Control Partnership has been operating for two years and continues to modernise and improve its customer delivery. The Partnership has a team of surveyors, at both Council offices, and through direct marketing, service delivery and strengthening its ties with local agents and builders it secures 70% market share against a competitive private sector. Since April, the Partnership has attended to 25 dangerous structures, made of 4,000 site inspections and delivered the ability for customers to make online applications and payments. Internal performance for processing applications remains consistently high and income is in line with budget.

3 The New Local Plan

The current planning policy priority is the preparation of the new Local Plan for the period 2015-35, including planning for housing, retail, employment, infrastructure, recreation and the environment.

The Local Development Scheme (LDS) provides the timetable for the production of the new Local Plan and was agreed by Cabinet in July 2016. In summary it outlines:

- Early 2017 - evidence base substantially completed
- Mid 2017 - first public consultation on emerging Issues and Options
- Early 2018 - second public consultation on the draft Local Plan
- Late 2018 - submission for examination by Inspector
- 2019 - adoption (likely to be after modifications)

The Planning Advisory Committee and Cabinet will have to agree every stage and Full Council will agree the Local Plan prior to submission.

Housing is the immediate priority. The **Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA)** has been completed and recommends an unconstrained figure of 620 dwellings per year, compared with 165 dwellings under the current plan. This assumes 1% growth in population per year for the next 20 years, but does not take into account the high level of constraints in the District, namely the 93% Green Belt and 61% AONB, which clearly suggests that the final housing target for new homes will be significantly lower. But we can only go where the evidence leads.

The **Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA)** assesses the amount of land in the District that could be available and suitable for housing development. This work will help to establish how much of the identified need can be realistically delivered over the plan period. Since advertising a 'call for sites' in Autumn 2015 over 300 sites across the District have been submitted to the Planning Policy team. Officers have visited all sites submitted between September and December 2015, and details of these were presented to the Planning Advisory Committee in June 2016. Officers are now visiting the additional sites, including brownfield sites, and supply could be maximised through higher densities in appropriate locations. The District Council will prioritise development on brownfield sites submitted, and is examining the preparation of a Brownfield Register. The SHLAA will form part of the evidence base for the new Local Plan and will be completed in time for public consultation on the Local Plan Issues and Options in mid 2017.

The **Economic Needs Study** is a technical study which reviews the current status of the District's economy and identifies future employment opportunities. Turleys were jointly commissioned with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council to undertake the study. The study recommends an objectively assessed need for commercial land up to 2035 of 11.6ha (of which 7.2ha should be suitable for office, 1.1ha for industrial and 3.3ha for warehousing/storage). The study analyses the existing employment land in the District and makes recommendations as to how the Council can support continued economic growth. It is believed that this will not be a material issue.

The **Retail Study** states that the District will require 21,400 sq. m. of additional comparison (non-food) floorspace and 10,400 sq. m. of additional convenience (food) floor space over the new Plan period. However, the amount of floorspace to be planned for will be assessed against all other evidence gathered to ensure the distribution and appropriate scale of development. It is interesting to note that SDC has been advised that internet shopping has plateaued.

The key outstanding report is the **Green Belt Assessment**. Arup were appointed in August to carry out the assessment - they are a multi-disciplinary consultancy, based in London, who specialise in this type of work. They have completed a number of recent Green Belt Assessments including for Runnymede, Buckinghamshire, Hertsmere, Uttlesford, Elmbridge, Hounslow, Dacorum, Cheshire East and Barnsley. The five green belt purposes are:

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;

- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

The purpose of the assessment is to establish any differentiation in terms of how the parcels in the existing Green Belt function and fulfil the purposes of the Green Belt. The results of the Study will be reported to Planning Advisory Committee and then Cabinet on 17 January/ 9 February 2017. Where the Green Belt is working well, land will only be developed in exceptional circumstances, which will not include meeting any housing shortfall.

Landscape Character and Capacity Assessment - Land Use Consultants (LUC) were appointed in August to update the existing landscape character assessment and consider sensitivity of the landscape to change. A stakeholder workshop and site assessments took place in October and findings will be reported to PAC in January 2017.

Open Space, Sport and Leisure Study - Study progressing well - assessment work starting for football and rugby pitches during the playing season.

Strategic Flood Risk Assessment - Study progressing well - work will link to a wider Catchment Study for the Darent and some update work on the Medway (including the Eden) being undertaken by the Environment Agency.

4 Swanley and Hextable Master Vision

The District Council has for some time had a priority of achieving the regeneration of Swanley. This has been formalised within the Core Strategy adopted in 2011. The upturn in the economy, rekindled interest by the key landowner in Swanley town centre (U&I), emerging proposals for the District Council's sites together with the interests of Swanley Town Council and those for the improvement of Swanley Station all add up to form the case that this is now the right time to advance a long-term, 20 year regeneration ambition for the town. Hextable is included because of its close relationship with Swanley, in terms of use of services and facilities, although physically separated by Green Belt which will be maintained.

A consultant team led by Tibbalds was appointed in late 2015 to develop a Master Vision for Swanley and Hextable. An intensive period of both stakeholder and public consultation began in February 2016. In total there were about 1,500

visitors to the events, which sought to understand what people thought about Swanley and what they wanted to improve. Building on these views, a Master Vision has been prepared which focuses on:

- The regeneration of the town centre (with an improved retail and leisure offer, a more centralised train station and re-enlivened recreation ground surrounded by community uses);
- New housing as an enabler to the town centre redevelopment (including Swanley Garden Village, up to 3000 homes to the east of Swanley, served by a station halt and prioritised bus-route); and
- Improved infrastructure, including a health hub and leisure centre, public transport improvements and enhanced walking and cycling routes.

Consultation on the Master Vision launched on 7 September for 8 weeks (until 2 November). Drop-in sessions were held in October in Swanley and Hextable and a survey was sent to all households in the area (and it is also available online). Targeted consultation has been carried out with key stakeholders and hard-to-reach groups, including commuters, school-children and businesses. To date we have received approximately 850 postal survey responses and 200 online responses (already exceeding the 1000 responses target). The results analysed to date have been broadly supportive.

5 CIL

Since we began charging CIL in August 2014, the District Council has collected around £604,000 (up to 30th September 2016). Around £171,000 of this has been paid to town/parish councils, as Cabinet agreed in November 2014 to pay Parish and Town Councils 25% of the CIL income, whether they had a Neighbourhood Plan in place or not. There is approximately £403,000 available for the CIL Spending Board. The remaining share (5%) is for the Council's recovery of admin costs, as laid out in the CIL Regulations.

The following towns and parishes have received CIL contributions, due to qualifying development occurring within their area: Chevening, Dunton Green, Edenbridge, Fawkham, Hartley, Otford, Sevenoaks Town (£373,000), Swanley and West Kingsdown. Other town/parish councils will receive their entitlement to CIL contributions once CIL-liable development has commenced in their area. It is expected that large scale development (e.g. sites in Sevenoaks Town, Swanley and Westerham) will continue to yield large CIL receipts.

The governance of the CIL Spending Board states that the Board will meet once receipts exceed £250,000 following the deductions of parish/town council entitlement and admin costs. As stated above, the amount available to the CIL Spending Board has exceeded the £250,000 threshold. The governance procedures in regard to setting up the CIL Spending Board are currently being reviewed. Subject to the agreement of Cabinet and Member training, it is expected that the first Board will sit in the first quarter of 2017. Please remember that CIL will only match fund or top up infrastructure schemes, primarily funded by KCC etc.

The District Council is keen to generate additional funding for West Kent.

6 Consultations

Recent consultations include Starter Homes, KCC funded Bus Services, Active Travel Strategy and Local Transport Plan 4: Growth without Gridlock. There is also a consultation on the Thameslink timetable for 2018 onwards, which includes a direct service from Maidstone East to Cambridge via Otford and Swanley.

We are currently awaiting a number of national planning policy consultation outcomes including Starter Homes, the NPPF, the CIL review and Neighbourhood Planning. These are widely expected to be part of a Government White Paper. We are also awaiting the development of case law to assist in the preparation of a Gypsies & Travellers policy, as the government's intentions are vague.

7 The Future

As for the future, the preparation of the Local Plan and agreement by the Inspector will be challenging. In the words of Sir Michael Fallon "the constraints presented by our large areas of Green Belt and AONB make it impossible for so many houses to be built".

And finally I can only repeat what I said 9 months ago - recruiting and retaining staff in an expensive area like Sevenoaks is not easy.