

Core Strategy Inspector's Report: Summary of the Findings

Key Findings

- The Core Strategy has been found sound, which means the Council can adopt it.
- Changes made by the Inspector do not alter the thrust of the Council's overall strategy.
- No change to the quantity and distribution of development. New development remains focussed on existing towns.
- No release of Green Belt for development.
- Proposals for development at Fort Halstead, including up to 1,000 dwellings, are rejected.

The Non Technical Summary begins as follows:

"This report concludes that the Sevenoaks District Core Strategy Development Plan Document provides an appropriate basis for the planning of the District over the next 16 years. The Council has sufficient evidence to support the strategy and can show it has a reasonable chance of being delivered."

It adds that a limited number of changes are needed but adds that: *"The changes do not alter the thrust of the Council's overall strategy"*.

The Inspector's findings are outlined by topic below, following the order of the Core Strategy, cross referring to paragraph numbers in the Inspector's Report where relevant.

Scale and Distribution of Development

The Inspector comments that the evidence base demonstrates the Council has thoroughly assessed the District and its relationship to other plans and strategies (para 6). She states that the spatial vision is consistent with the Community Plan (para 8).

Some participants suggested that the housing provision should be increased but the Inspector accepted that the Council's proposed provision of 3,300 dwellings derived from the South East Plan was sound (para 8).

The Inspector considered the broad housing provision to be sound (para 23) She found that sufficient land had been identified to meet the housing provision with a slight surplus (para 26) and that this could be achieved without the release of Green Belt land (para 25).

No changes are made to the overall distribution of development.

Development in the Main Towns and Rural Settlements

In **Sevenoaks** the Inspector supported the definition of the urban area based on the Green Belt boundary and highlighted the value of the Green Belt in separating the urban area from other settlements (para 28). No changes were made to the quantity of development proposed in the urban area.

No changes were made to the quantity of development proposed in **Swanley**. The owners of the town centre proposed expanding the centre onto the adjoining recreation ground but the Inspector did not support this, commenting that there had been no engagement with the wider community or in-depth assessment of viability. The Inspector instead supported an amendment put forward by the Council that maintained the town centre boundary and would require any expansion to be fully justified (para 64). The Inspector supported the Core Strategy proposal for commercial development of the Broom Hill site with detailed amendments (paras 52-54). The Inspector did not support a proposed rail freight interchange at Pedham Place adjoining Swanley (para 83).

In **Edenbridge** the Inspector supported the proposal to re-designate the safeguarded land as reserve land and found no justification to allocate the site for development now (paras 24-25). She made an amendment to the supporting text to support the development of a hotel if a proposal came forward on a suitable site.

Major Developed Sites (including Fort Halstead)

The Inspector rejected a proposal to amend the Core Strategy to provide for a development of up to 1,000 dwellings at Fort Halstead. She found no need for the development, that the site was divorced from existing settlements and rail services and that the sustainability benefits were outweighed by the disbenefits (para 62).

The Inspector endorsed the Council's proposal to work with the owners of the Glaxo Smith Kline site at Leigh to find a future use for the site, following the closure announcement which post-dated the production of the Draft for Submission (para 57)

The Inspector rejected proposals to designate extra major developed sites and commented that the Council's overall approach was sound (para 56).

Rural Settlements and the Countryside

The Inspector made no changes to the policy on development in rural settlements. She did not endorse a representation seeking increased development in the Hartley/New Ash Green area (paras 94-5) and rejected a representation to define a Green Belt boundary around Chiddingstone Causeway (para 96).

Some detailed changes were made to the supporting text of Policy LO8 (Countryside) following discussions with Kent Downs AONB Unit. An amendment to the policy was also agreed to add specific reference to conserving and enhancing local landscape character, but the Inspector rejected a representation that a separate landscape policy was needed (paras 86-93).

Design and Conservation

The substance of Policy SP1 was not changed but the Inspector made detailed amendments to the documents to be referred to in applying the policy and amended the title of the section to add “Conservation”. She also added a reference to producing a Local List during the Core Strategy period.(paras 12-17)

Sustainable Development

The Inspector endorsed Policy SP2 subject to qualifying the application of Code for Sustainable Homes Level 6 from 2016 (para 74). She also added additional performance indicators on transport and supported an additional paragraph setting out the Council’s position on east facing slips, while noting the Highways Agency position that there are no plans to deliver the scheme at present (para 67)

Housing Policies

The Inspector endorsed the affordable housing policies (SP3 and SP4), including the lowering of thresholds for provision on site and requiring a financial contribution on smaller schemes, with one minor change regarding viability issues (paras 39-41).

No change was made to Policy SP5 on housing size and type other than adding an extra performance indicator (para 34).

Changes were needed to the policy on gypsies and travellers (SP6) following the announcements on the South East Plan since no provision could be made for the District through the Partial Review of the Plan which was abandoned. The Inspector accepted the approach advocated by the Council which involves making provision through the Allocations and Development Management DPD which will follow the Core Strategy (paras 42-47).

One change was made to the density policy (SP7) which was discussed during the Hearing Sessions. This adds a reference to the character and location of the area as a factor in deciding whether permission may be refused for developments that fail to make efficient use of land (paras 36-38). The value of this amendment in protecting the distinctive character of areas within Sevenoaks was highlighted. With this amendment she considered the policy to be sound (para 38). The delivery mechanism was amended to add a reference to Character Area Assessments and Conservation Area Appraisals as relevant considerations in applying the policy.

Employment Land

The Inspector has not changed the quantity and distribution of employment land to be retained and has not added any new land. She considered some flexibility was needed with regard to the retention of sites and has made an amendment to allow for sites to be released for other uses if it can be demonstrated that they will not be required during the Core Strategy period (para 51). Otherwise the policy is unchanged.

Infrastructure, Open Space and Biodiversity

The Inspector endorsed Policy SP9 on infrastructure and the Infrastructure Delivery Plan subject to minor amendments.

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Amendments were put forward to add detail to the wording on green infrastructure following discussion with other parties. These were endorsed by the Inspector (paras 78-81). The Inspector added wording to the supporting text that a playing pitch strategy should be prepared in response to a request from Sport England (para 76). Policy SP10 was unchanged.

Some additional detail was also proposed in relation to biodiversity, following discussion with Kent Wildlife Trust (paras 84-5). No change was made to the policy (SP11).

Format of the Report

The report follows a standard approach used by the Inspectorate. The purpose of the Examination is to establish whether the plan is sound, not to consider individual objections and the report does not explicitly comment on each representation.

There is a non technical summary (P2). The main body of the report is concerned with assessing soundness which is based on seven main issues identified by the Inspector. This is followed by a short section confirming the legal requirements have been met.

Changes are set out in four appendices. These are:

- Appendix A. Changes discussed at the Hearings (generally detailed amendments put forward by the Council in response to discussion and at the Inspector's request).
- Appendix B. A schedule of minor amendments submitted by the Council with the Core Strategy and agreed by the Portfolio Holder
- Appendix C. Changes the Inspector considers are needed to make the plan sound. There are just four changes in this section.
- Appendix D. A schedule of amendments in response to the changing status of the South East Plan. These were originally submitted with Portfolio Holder agreement before the Hearings to take account of the revocation of the South East Plan. Some alterations were needed to cover its re-instatement in November.