

ITEM NO. 12

CABINET

29TH JULY 2004

SEVENOAKS DISTRICT COUNTRYSIDE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

ITEM FOR DECISION

RECOMMENDATION

- (a) That, subject to the amendments proposed by Babtie in response to public consultation, the Sevenoaks District Countryside Character Assessment be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance; and*
- (b) that the adoption of the Sevenoaks District Countryside Assessment be as Supplementary Planning Guidance recommended to Council.*

(1) This report provides a summary of the comments received during the public consultation exercise that was carried out pursuant to the adoption of the Assessment as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG). It outlines the Consultants (Babtie) response to the representations and the consequential amendments that will be made.

Background

(2) Members will recall a previous Cabinet Report (18th March 2004) which authorised the public consultation exercise, the use of the document by development control and recommended to full Council that the Countryside Assessment be adopted as S.P.G. once the public consultation exercise had been completed. This exercise has now been completed and a summary of the representations received is given below.

(3) Supporting Comments were received from Ide Hill Parish Council, West Kingsdown Parish Council, Horton Kirby & South Darenth Parish Council, Gravesham Borough Council, Kent Downs JAC, CPRE, The Environment Agency and The London Green Belt Council. There was a lot of support for the document both in terms of its content and its usefulness in the planning process. However while supporting the document as a whole the following comments were made:

- suggestions for minor editorial changes
- the addition of page numbers and better referencing
- corrections to the descriptions of particular areas

(9) Objections were received from:

English Nature - the lack of reference to the importance of wildlife designations in Sevenoaks. The document should highlight SSSI's as examples of sites where there are species appropriate to particular areas.

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The Kent Wildlife Trust – while supporting the document in terms of landscape assessment there are concerns over the bio diversity targets in relation to a number of different landscape types.

Cllr Pett – there are many inaccuracies in the description and analysis of the New Ash Green area.

Cllr Mrs Gee - the format of the document makes it difficult to use. The descriptions are too vague and do not illustrate the distinctive characteristics of the areas, it is of little use to specific sites. Additional text is suggested.

Cllr Bruce - the document is almost incomprehensible to lay Members it is frequently impossible to recognise descriptions and hence to accept the validity of some of the comments made. In relation to Hartley and New Ash Green there are detailed queries over the descriptions.

Ash cum Ridley Parish Council - it is not clear whether the assessment includes residential areas. The assessment of Hartley and New Ash Green is too superficial resulting in an analysis which may be unreliable further the recommendations for action unsatisfactory.

Policy and Environment Comments

(5) The Policy & Environment Team does not have the expertise to judge the merits of the individual changes suggested by objectors. These objections and suggestions have been forwarded to Babbie and their responses are given in full in Appendix A.

On a more general level it is agreed that there is a need for better referencing etc and for an improvement in the quality of the maps.

Conclusions

(6) The report has received support from a range of interested parties, both professional and non-professional. The objections have in the main have focused upon inadequacies of the assessment in relation to one particular area, that is Hartley and New Ash Green, and to the “user Friendliness” of the document as a whole.

Babbie have responded to the comments made, as set out in Appendix A of this report, and they have stated where they consider an amendment is appropriate. The proposed changes address the objections made to the assessment of individual areas and to the re formatting of the document in order to make it easier to use. In one case they are awaiting information regarding Montreal Park from a field surveyor this is purely a matter of fact and a change will be made if deemed appropriate.

The proposed changes are highlighted in Appendix A and it is recommended that Babbie’s expert opinion should be accepted and the amendments supported.

The protection of landscape character is a national objective, which is embedded, in current Planning Policy Guidance that supports the “landscape character assessment” approach. The recently published draft Planning Policy Statement 1, Creating Sustainable Communities,

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states planning should facilitate and promote sustainable patterns of development by “protecting and where possible enhancing the natural and historic environment and the quality and character of the countryside” (para 1.5)

The Kent and Medway Structure Plan (Deposit Draft) and the Sevenoaks District Local Plan contain planning policies which seek to both protect the landscape from harmful development and where possible to enhance it. The implementation of these policies is through the Development Control process. The Countryside Character Assessment will be invaluable in the consideration of planning applications especially where the impact upon the landscape is a deciding issue. Other authorities for example Canterbury and Tunbridge Wells have successfully used Countryside Character Assessments in determining applications and have also been successful when tested on appeal.

It is considered the Countryside Assessment will be an important tool in supporting the policies in the Local Plan and will therefore make an important contribution to fulfilling the Council’s aspirations of the Community Plan for a “Green and Healthy Environment”

Financial Implications

(7) Printing and advertising costs have been incurred due to the consultation exercise but they did not exceed the estimated budget. Babbie's examination of the representations and the consequential amendments to the document, including the formatting, will incur an additional cost of an estimated £4000 this can be met from the existing Local Plans budget

Sources of Information

Sevenoaks District Countryside Character
Assessment
Public responses to consultation
Babbie's responses
Previous Cabinet Reports

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