

# Ashford Borough Council: Local Plan & Planning Policy Task Group

Notes of a Virtual Meeting of the Local Plan & Planning Policy Task Group held on Microsoft Teams on **4<sup>th</sup> February 2021**.

## **Present:**

Cllr. Bartlett (Chairman)

Cllrs. Mrs Bell, Blanford, Clokie, Harman, Ledger, Shorter, Spain, C. Suddards.

## **Also Present:**

Cllrs. Barrett, N. Bell, Burgess, Michael, Mulholland, Pickering, Sparks, Walder.

## **In attendance:**

Interim Spatial Planning Manager; Team Leader (Planmaking & Infrastructure); Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking & Infrastructure); Head of Planning and Development; Principal Solicitor (Strategic Development); Member Services and Ombudsman Liaison Officer.

## **1 Notes of the last meeting**

- 1.1 The Notes of the meeting of the Task Group held on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

## **2 Gypsy and Traveller Local Plan Update**

- 2.1 The Team Leader (Planmaking and Infrastructure) introduced this item. He explained that a presentation would follow, covering a number of specific sites for discussion. Officers had been through these sites with Ward Members, and had received constructive and robust feedback. He emphasised that at this meeting Members were not being asked to agree specific sites to be included or excluded from the plan, but Officers were seeking agreement on which sites should be included in further assessment work. He noted that there was a concentration of sites in certain areas of the Borough, and this was a key consideration which needed to be part of any assessment work. He also mentioned that progressing a public site would be part of the ongoing work.
- 2.2 The Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking and Infrastructure) gave a presentation of potential sites and plan options, which covered:
- Introduction and background
  - Site assessment process
  - Site assessment categories
  - Outcome of site assessments

- List of potential temporary to permanent sites, Regularisations, extensions to meet family needs and site submissions on a site by site basis
- Total potential pitch gains
- Borough distribution of existing and potential sites
- Potential actions/alternative options
- Potential implications for any future Local Plan timetable

2.3 The Chairman opened up the item for discussion and the following comments/points were raised:

- A Member asked about flood zone issues in one specific area, and how a determination would be made in view of the conditions. He also commented that a more transparent scoring system would be useful, and suggested that it may help to view sites in order of scoring, from high to low. The Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking and Infrastructure) replied that it may not be possible to find a way past the flood zone issue and that this would require further consideration. Regarding the scoring of sites, she clarified that the score was not the only issue taken into account in terms of site suitability, and other factors were taken into consideration. Further commentary on sites would be presented back to a future Task Group, along with scores.
- In response to a question, the Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking and Infrastructure) advised that the Gypsy and Traveller Plan (G&T Plan) was currently being progressed separately from the Local Plan, and this approach had been approved at the Examination stage for the Local Plan. One suggestion was to develop the G&T Plan to run to 2030, but there were also options around this timescale, and it could be changed in future, if it was considered necessary.
- A Member noted that there were contentious issues between the settled community and Gypsies and Travelers in some areas of the Borough. He said this was particularly a problem where breaches had taken place over the years, and these had eventually resulted in permission being granted for permanent sites. He urged that the Parish Councils and public should be consulted well in advance regarding the Council's intentions to avoid further conflict. He also queried the apparent need for 30 new pitches and asked how the consultants had arrived at this figure. The Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking and Infrastructure) explained that the methodology used for calculating pitches was consistent with national requirements. This assessment formed part of the evidence base for the future G&T Plan. She went on to explain that the drop in the number of pitches required was due to work undertaken by Officers in previous years as part of the Local Plan process, as well as the fact that new pitches had also been granted permission over time. She said that a full revision of the GTAA would be likely to delay the G&T Plan and outlined potential issues and risks associated with this. The Interim Spatial Planning Manager added that there were a number of variables which could impact on the final plan, and it was essential to produce robust evidence at the Examination stage.

- A Member asked why the apparent increase in demand for pitches was not evident through planning applications, and she questioned whether the increased demand really existed. She also expressed disappointment that a search of Council-owned land was still required as she believed this had been agreed by the Task Group back in 2017. She reiterated other Members' concerns regarding sites which had a history of breaches becoming lawful under the new plan. The Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking and Infrastructure) explained that Officers had undertaken work in 2017 to identify Council-owned land and this had been presented to the Task Group. She recalled that some sites had been removed from the Local Plan by the Inspector. She also advised that the Corporate Property team were undertaking work at present to identify all Council-owned land, and would provide up-to-date details.
- A Member said it was extremely important that the July national caravan count should go ahead this year, as it had not been possible to undertake the annual count in July 2020 or January 2021. He expressed concern about slippage in terms of timescale, and questioned whether the necessary Officer resources were available at present for the work required. The Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking and Infrastructure) said she very much hoped the count could take place in July 2021. She pointed out that it would not be possible to see inside all sites, and Officers would write to occupants to request access and set up meetings on some sites. This would be separate from the national count. She confirmed that Officers liaised closely with the enforcement team in relation to G&T issues. Regarding Officer resources, the Interim Spatial Planning Manager added that there was a window of opportunity at present to progress the G&T Plan. Progression of the Plan was encouraged. The potential implications of dealing with pitch requirements as part of any future Local Plan review were explained.
- A Member drew attention to the concentration of existing sites in the west of the Borough, and warned against the danger of concentration of future sites on the borders of the Borough. It was suggested that future permissions should be restricted in locations where concentrations were already high. Concentrated sites often led to contentious issues between the Gypsy and Traveller community and the settled community, as well as affecting local schools and education provision generally. He considered there were grounds to challenge the assessed need and reduce the number required. He did not believe that the assessed need matched the identified need on the ground. He questioned the drop in pitches required from 50 to 30, and believed that this unexplained change undermined confidence in the planning process. The Interim Spatial Planning Manager replied that national guidance dictated the parameters for identifying/meeting need and also for selecting suitable sites. Adopted policy and national guidance provided the assessment criteria in terms of granting planning permissions. It was important to ensure consistency with national policy in order for the future Plan to be found sound. There was an opportunity at present to produce a G&T Plan, although the specific lifetime

of the plan could be adjusted if necessary. He reassured Members that the delivery of a G&T Plan was a priority.

- A Member said that the potential sites across the Borough had not been discussed with Ward Members in the west of the Borough. He also queried why the mechanism for scoring sites had not been sent to Ward Members. The Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking and Infrastructure) explained that the scoring mechanism was for Officer use at present, but would become publicly available in due course. The matrix had been provided to a previous Task Group meeting. She agreed to circulate a copy of her presentation and the scoring matrix to Members.
- Members discussed the possibility of using aerial surveys on sites where access was difficult. There was some doubt over the legality of data collected in this way, and Officers agreed to discuss with colleagues across the county.
- In response to a question, The Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking and Infrastructure) advised that Officers were liaising with the Housing department to discuss options for management of the Chilmington site.
- A Member supported previous comments that it was important to bring the G&T Plan to a conclusion. Delaying the process could lead to undesirable outcomes through appeals allowed, for example. He said it was vital to ensure that the process was well communicated and publicised. It should be clear why this process was relevant and important to everyone in the Borough. Another Member added that the public and parishes must be part of the journey. He highlighted the impact of many sites on residents of the settled community and said it was important not to treat these residents as a minority or forget the impact of neighbouring G&T sites on them.
- A Member considered there was opportunity to provide a more even distribution of sites across the Borough, but this should not be adjacent to the Chilmington site given the number of existing pitches. Another Member, however, supported the expansion of the Chilmington site, and the purchase of land for establishing other sites elsewhere in the Borough.
- A Member considered that it was important to strengthen the scoring criteria to ensure it lined up with national policy. The scoring mechanism should be completely transparent, to make it more acceptable to the public as a just and fair system. The matrix should also take into account the problem with concentration. Enforcement problems could be given a negative score to ensure that they were factored into the matrix.

- The Chairman summarised the discussion and agreed points as follows:
  - A copy of the presentation to be circulated, together with the summary of how the revised figure of 30 sites had been determined, and the details of scoring and methodology.
  - Timing was crucial: it was undesirable to allow the G&T plan to extend into the future Local Plan review.
  - Extend search to include all Council-owned sites. The Corporate Property team to be asked to investigate the purchase of new sites, but no new public 'call for sites' was necessary at this stage.
  - Public consultation timetable to be circulated to Members.
  - Officers to explore a general policy on concentration.
- The Head of Planning and Development said that the development of the G&T Plan was a high priority for the Planning service in order to ensure the delivery of a plan-led approach to G&T accommodation issues, which had not been in place previously. A deliverable strategy was required, which would present a sound approach to meeting requirements and succeeding at Examination. However, there were difficult discussions and decisions ahead. Officers would present evidence to a future meeting, along with a wider set of solutions, so Members could make informed decisions

**Resolved:**

**That the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group notes the methodology undertaken to date and the contents of this report and agrees, subject to the discussion above:**

- **A list of potential sites that can be assessed further to determine their suitability for allocation in the Gypsy and Traveller Local Plan,**
- **A list of actions following the borough distribution discussion for officers to take forward with a view of presenting alternative/additional site options to a future Task Group which will include an assessment of the planning soundness of the approach,**
- **That the Gypsy and Traveller Regulation 19 consultation is programmed for the Autumn 2021 and this is reflected in a revised Local Development Scheme.**
- **That Officers explore a general policy on concentration.**

## **6 Dates of Next Meetings**

- 6.1 25<sup>th</sup> March, 10am, Microsoft Teams  
5<sup>th</sup> May, 10am, venue to be confirmed  
24<sup>th</sup> June, 10am

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5<sup>th</sup> August, 10am  
9<sup>th</sup> September, 10am  
21<sup>st</sup> October, 10am  
2<sup>nd</sup> December, 10am

Councillor Bartlett  
Chairman – Local Plan & Planning Policy Task Group

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# Ashford Borough Council: Local Plan & Planning Policy Task Group

Notes of a Virtual Meeting of the Local Plan & Planning Policy Task Group held on Microsoft Teams on **25<sup>th</sup> March 2021**.

## **Present:**

Cllr. Bartlett (Chairman)

Cllrs. Mrs Bell, Blanford, Chilton, Clokie, Harman, Ledger, Shorter, C. Suddards.

In accordance with Procedure rule 9.3, Cllr Chilton attended as Substitute Member for Cllr Spain.

## **Apologies:**

Cllr Spain

Development Partnership Manager

## **Also Present:**

Cllrs. Burgess, Forest, Sparks.

## **In attendance:**

Spatial Planning Manager; Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking); Senior Urban Designer; Principal Solicitor (Strategic Development); Member Services and Ombudsman Liaison Officer.

## **1 Declarations of Interest**

- 1.1 Cllr Clokie made a Voluntary Announcement that he was a Member of the Weald of Kent Protection Society.

## **2 Notes of the last meeting**

- 1.1 The Notes of the meeting of the Task Group held on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

## **3 National Planning Policy Framework and National Model Design Guide: consultation proposals**

- 3.1 The Spatial Planning Manager introduced this item. He explained that this was an opportunity to shape the Council's response on the consultation proposals. With regard to the Building Beautiful agenda, he said it was important to understand the meaning of beautiful, as well as how to deliver beautiful development and in what

context. There were already a number of policies in the Local Plan 2030 which guided the provision of high quality design and it was essential to clarify the relationship between the current status and the new aspirations from the Government proposals.

3.2 The Senior Urban Designer gave a presentation which covered:

- Draft revisions to NPPF – Design
- Draft National Model Design Guide – What is a Design Code?
- Implications for Ashford.

3.3 The Chairman opened up the item for discussion and the following points/comments were made:

- A Member said it was important to involve communities from the outset and community engagement should be a key part of the process. This was an opportunity for the Council to build partnerships with local Parish Councils and the local community to deliver Design Codes. She also considered that the role of Design Review panels should be highlighted. She questioned why there was no mention of the 5-year housing land supply, and felt this was an important omission in view of the difficulty for LPAs in controlling delivery numbers. She considered that this point should be mentioned in the Council's response.
- A Member emphasised the importance of ensuring that the Planning Service was fully resourced to deliver Government aspirations.
- A Member asked about Affordable Housing, particularly in areas which were currently excluded from the 10% requirement. He also noted the requirement for tree lining on streets and advised that KCC had funding in place to investigate roadside tree planting. He asked Planning Officers to liaise with the appropriate KCC Officer. The Interim Spatial Planning Manager responded that clarification would be sought from Government on the Affordable Housing issue as the position regarding priority between current policies and Government aspirations was unclear.
- A Member requested a number of minor amendments and tweaks to the existing response, and it was agreed that this would be discussed further outside the meeting.
- Another Member said that she considered this was an urban model and that rural needs were not adequately considered. She suggested that comments to this effect should be included in the Council's response. Another Member thought that concentration on the urban areas only was a positive point as the rural areas would remain largely unaffected.
- A Member said she was disappointed that the Government wanted to hamper the use of Article 4 as this was a useful policy to stop unsuitable development.



## **Resolved**

- i) **That the Local Plan and Policy Task Group notes the contents of the report as a means of framing the Council's response to the two consultations, and agrees that the detailed and final responses to the consultation questions shall be drafted and agreed between the Head of Planning, the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Chair of Task Group, following debate at Task Group.**
- ii) **That the response, once finalised, be shared with the Kent Association of Local Councils for information.**

## **4 Local Development Scheme**

- 4.1 The Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking) introduced this item and drew Members' attention to the key points raised within the report. She explained that it was a legal requirement to keep this document updated.

### **Resolved:**

**That the Local Plan & Planning Policy Task Group approves the contents of the Local Development Scheme and recommends that Cabinet consider the contents for adoption at Full Council.**

## **5 Kent Downs AONB Management Plan**

- 5.1 The Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking) introduced this item and highlighted the key points in the report.
- 5.2 The Chairman opened up the item for discussion and the following points/comments were made:
- The Chairman considered that Ash die-back was a significant issue for the Borough and he was pleased to see this issue included in the Management Plan.
  - In response to a question from a Member, the Deputy Team Leader (Planmaking) confirmed that Officers were working with the High Weald AONB.
  - A Member noted the involvement in the report of a Graduate Planner and was pleased to see young talent being included in this project.

### **Resolved:**

**That the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group approves the Kent Downs AONB Management Plan 2021-26 and recommends it to Cabinet (29th April) for adoption as a material planning consideration at Full Council.**

## 6 London Plan Update

- 6.1 The Spatial Planning Manager introduced this item and drew attention to the key points within the report. This document was provided to the Task Group for information, and to highlight the pressures on housing in London and the potential for nearby authorities to be asked to assist with meeting housing numbers.
- 6.2 The Chairman opened up the item for discussion and the following points/comments were raised;
- In response to a question, the Spatial Planning Manager advised that various factors affected living and working in London and that past trends were not necessarily relevant to the future. However, the London housing situation would impact on nearby authorities and it was important to keep abreast of the situation.

**Resolved:**

**That the report be received and noted.**

## 7 Tracker

- 7.1 The Spatial Planning Manager explained that the Tracker had been introduced for information to advise Members on items to come to the Task Group in due course, subject to resources and workload.

**Resolved:**

**That the Tracker be received and noted.**

## 8 Dates of Next Meetings

- 8.1 5<sup>th</sup> May, 10am, venue to be confirmed  
24<sup>th</sup> June, 10am  
5<sup>th</sup> August, 10am  
9<sup>th</sup> September, 10am  
21<sup>st</sup> October, 10am  
2<sup>nd</sup> December, 10am

Councillor Bartlett  
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