



## Greater Ashford Borough – Environment & Land Mapping Commission

### NOTES of the meeting held on Microsoft Teams on Tuesday 10 May 2022 at 1030

#### **Present**

##### Commission Members

Neil Bell	Chair of Commission & ABC Portfolio Holder Planning & Development
Noel Ovenden	Vice Chair of Commission & Leader of Ashford Independent Party & ABC Chair of Overview & Scrutiny
Peter Dowling	River Stour Internal Drainage Board
Christine Drury	Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE)
Nick Fenton	Kent Housing & Development Group
Jo James	Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce (KICC)
Shona Johnstone	Homes England
Sandra Norval	Southern Water
David Robey	KCC Elected Member & Deputy Portfolio Holder for Economic Development
Jeremy Smith	Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC)

##### Professional Advisers

Jeremy Baker	ABC Principal Solicitor & Deputy Monitoring Officer
Daniel Carter	ABC Spatial Planning Manager [for Simon Cole]
Tom Marchant	KCC Head of Strategic Planning & Policy
Andrew Osborne	ABC Economic Development Manager

#### **Apologies**

Michael Bax	Weald of Kent Protection Society (WKPS)
Chris Reynolds	Kent Downs AONB
Tracey Butler	ABC Director of Place, Space & Leisure

## Notes of the Previous Meeting

The Notes of 12 April were agreed as a true record.

## Chairman's Brief Update

The Chairman reiterated his thanks for the work and dedication of the Commission members, without whom none of this would have been possible. Both he and the Council are very grateful, and he looked forward to hearing about the progress since the last meeting and the proposed next stages.

## Feedback on Consultation

- (i) Update from Nick Fenton on Developers' Group response to the Consultation

Nick had met with his Developers' Group, and had made it clear that the work of the Commission was not to look at specific sites, but at the principles of development across the borough and the types of criteria that might be taken into consideration.

The developers had, however, agreed that the current system (not just in Ashford) is not satisfactory: housing numbers are decided by the government; a lot of work done by and for district/borough councils is not taken heed of in determining what is needed in any given area.

Consequently, some big schemes (Chilmington was cited as an example) are put in place, but the developers considered that there should be a requirement to respond not only to housing (residential) need, but also to commercial.

The developers' group had agreed the necessity of protecting Ashford as a rural community, but there is also a rural need in terms of both housing and jobs.

They felt that smaller developments (9-11 dwellings) should be encouraged in villages, to meet both the rural residential and working requirements.

Since the pandemic, there has been a substantial change in people's working patterns, and the developers are not convinced this will ever revert to people travelling to work on a five-day-a-week basis.

With smaller rural developments, however, infrastructure becomes an issue, although 10 houses could be counted towards a better justification for more infrastructure.

The developers group also believed that there are areas within the borough that are uneconomic, and they stressed the need to ensure that the run-down areas of existing developments are made good.

They also cautioned against the "wrong type of development", and although they recognised the demand to work towards net zero, they were uncertain about some innovations such as heat pumps and solar farms.

They felt it was more important to ensure that technology is keeping up with development, and to find land that could manage the problem of phosphate and nitrate pollution at Stodmarsh.

On the issue of general access to land, they felt this did not necessarily go hand-in-hand with some of the wider aims on enabling greater access to green spaces – partly because of the behaviour of some people who misuse the countryside (e.g. 4x4 off-roaders).

One of the points they made was the potential to use development money to improve highways and byways: in this way both new and existing residents in an area would benefit.

(ii) Update from Jo James on the Kent Chamber's Economic Development Group's response to the Consultation

Jo had met with the Chamber's Economic Development group for a facilitated discussion on the consultation questionnaire. Likewise, she had emphasised the importance of the Group's response remaining objective. The main points that were raised by the group were that:

- Development should take regard of the rural nature of the borough and the individuality of each village
- Ashford should not be stopped from expanding, therefore, but its rural nature must be preserved
- More development should take place on existing brownfield sites
- Some concern on increasing the carbon footprint even further
- Existing nature trails and green spaces should be maximised
- Public rights of way should be upgraded; quality of these routes is important
- There should be new dedicated services linking communities to encourage people out, without necessarily being reliant on the car
- Caution should be taken on assuming solar farms are 'the solution'
- There are sufficient country parks in the borough, but existing facilities in them should be upgraded
- Land *should be* maintained for agricultural/food production, although some rural community uses are changing type (e.g. dairy farming to vineyard cultivation) and the effects of this might need to be considered
- More mixed use developments should be considered and those uses should be integrated (cf Henwood, Evegate and Mersham)
- Some commercial developments should be replaced with more modern, fit-for-purpose expansion
- Ashford needs a bus station in the town centre (Lower Elwick Road)

## Update from Working Group 1 (Christine Drury & David Robey)

WG1 are in the process of collating and analysing the responses from the local councils and community forums on the consultation questionnaire. Some interesting points have arisen (see below). The work with local councils is still continuing, with some having requested discussions with the working group so that they can clarify some points or highlight areas about which they feel strongly.

The members of WG1 had also, however, met a group of students from Ashford College for a facilitated workshop discussion and there had been some interesting results. These will be included in a future report, but one of the issues raised had been that of accommodation for students (and staff). Students at the College felt that they were restricted in not being able to find affordable accommodation in Ashford and suggested that this might be redressed – possibly by utilising empty spaces over shops in the town centre?

With regard to mapping:

- Any decisions made in the future need to take account of existing designations (e.g. AONBs, SSSIs, etc). These should either already be mapped or be readily available
- Public Rights of Way need to be mapped and made visible and this should tie-in with making links between communities and making sure that they are safe *[Tom Marchant – KCC – indicated a Rights of Way improvement plan to the end of the decade. A meeting to be set up between interested parties]*
- Cycleways on roads should be replaced with dedicated routes to link villages/communities. These routes should not be available to motorised vehicles.
- Isochronic maps should be available for bus routes, to show where they are viable.
- Views within the borough should be highlighted (e.g. Spelders Hill to Devil's Punchbowl or Repton Park to The Warren). They are important characteristics and should be acknowledged and retained.
- Green spaces should be identified to ensure that they are not conflicting with potential development/infill areas

## Feedback from Working Group 2

It was suggested that the matrix developed by WG2 should be applied to the WG1 suggestions to enable prioritisation. Mapping is/can be a complex process which will depend on data availability and take time. Making an initial 'snapshot' of the borough might be useful in the first instance and help to establish some principles of mapping.

The boxes in the matrix will need to be annotated to be more specific (i.e. give definitions) and clarify particular sources of data

WG2 had (about two months previously) listed characteristics that they considered would be useful being mapped. This should be revisited.

It was also suggested that Neighbourhood Plans could be used as evidence by the Commission, and this could be piloted as some data sets are very broad

Data not already available would need to be captured. A list should be made of what is already available

Mapping areas where no data is available could also be useful: identifying 'the gaps'.

The example of buffer zones was used as something that could be useful, but would need defining, identifying *what* and *where* they are.

### Next stages

WG1 will annotate the matrix to make sure TMA are able to understand the specifics of what they will be asked to map.

DC & KH will meet to look at what data ABC already has and what should be made available for TMA and to get TMA on board for a 'trial run' at the June Commission meeting, which can then be shaped at that meeting.

It was also agreed that village confines had not been listed and that they should be added to the mapping layers as a matter of priority.

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All Commission Members + Executive Leader of the Council

All Professional Advisors + Chief Executive

Secretariat:	Linda Stringer	ABC Senior Executive Assistant
	Jeff Simms	ABC Senior Communications Officer*
	Danny Sheppard	ABC Member Services Manager*
	Kirsty Hogarth	ABC Head of Secretariat

(\* denotes not in attendance for meeting)