



The countryside charity

Kent

Matter 3 – Spatial Strategy and Distribution of Development (Policy STR1, STR3, STR9 and STR10)

Issue 1 – Spatial Strategy

Q5. The Development Strategy also supports the “...creation of a new garden settlement: Tudeley Village...”. What were the reasons for pursuing a new, standalone settlement, rather than the expansion of existing towns and villages? Is this justified?

Q6. Is the housing requirement justified, having particular regard to areas of Green Belt and AONB across Tunbridge Wells?

Q8. Could housing needs be met in a way that did not require land to be removed from the Green Belt and/or require development in the AONB?

Q9. Do policies relating to the Green Belt, the High Weald AONB and/or flood risk provide a strong reason for restricting the scale, type and distribution of development in Tunbridge Wells?

As set out in our Matter 2 hearing statement, CPRE Kent considers there are good reasons why the Council should not be seeking to meet its housing requirement in full – reflecting the constraints clearly shown on the key diagram, including the fact that 69% of the borough is designated AONB and 22% is green belt. On this basis, it is considered that the creation of a new garden settlement in the green belt is not justified. Furthermore, insufficient consideration been given to increasing densities, as a means of reducing land take.

With regard to the green belt and AONB, as set out in our Matter 2 statement, paragraph 176 of the NPPF requires great weight to be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in AONBs. Paragraph 137 confirms the great weight be attached to the green belt.

Housing growth should be balanced against the need to protect and continue to conserve and enhance what is important to the local community, including the green belt and AONB.

Given that the High Weald AONB stretches across the whole length of the borough, not only should consideration be given to the impact of the development strategy on the AONB, but also the impact on the significant areas of land which lie within its setting.

In balancing the role the AONB and green belt have on the Council’s development strategy, the NPPF at paragraph 3 states “the framework should be read as a whole (including its footnotes and annexes).” If the delivery of housing was the sole objective of the NPPF, then paragraphs 3 and 11(b) would have not been included. For these paragraphs to be meaningful they need to be given due consideration.

CPRE Kent is of the view that the scale of development should be moderated. Need should be the starting point – balanced against the constraints of being a borough with significant green belt and AONB coverage, plus other constraints.

The borough does not have the capacity to meet its full housing requirement without significant harm to the green belt and AONB and its setting. And therefore, its requirement should be reduced.

In this regard, CPRE Kent remains to be convinced that the Council has placed sufficient emphasis on increasing density within the towns and larger villages or on insisting on high density development

The Kent branch of the Campaign to protect Rural England exists to protect the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of the Kent countryside

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on greenfield sites; or in fully exploring opportunities for development outside the green belt and AONB. The result is that far too much AONB and green belt countryside is being allocated for development.

Not only is much weight given to the AONB in the NPPF, but its importance is addressed in the Government's response to the Glover Review, which underlines how the last two years have demonstrated the benefit that people get from having access to nature-rich landscapes; and how AONBs have been such a vital resource. The Government notes that "the huge increase in visitors during the Coronavirus pandemic demonstrated the vital role protected landscapes have in supporting the nation's health and wellbeing."

(See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/landscapes-review-national-parks-and-aonbs-government-response>)

The CPRE report Beauty Still Betrayed (April 2021) <https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/beauty-still-betrayed-the-state-of-our-aonbs-2021/> highlights the threats to our AONBs as a result of unsuitable housing, particularly in the south east, with the High Weald AONB suffering the highest development of all. Evidence demonstrates that building within AONBs is taking place at low density (averaging 16dph) and doesn't provide the affordable homes that rural communities need.

The Right Homes in the Right Places companion Housing Need Consultation Table (published 14 September 2017) states that 75% of borough is covered by green belt, AONB or SSSI – which in turn are listed in footnote 7 of paragraph 11 of the NPPF together with: Local Green Space, irreplaceable habitats; designated heritage assets (and other heritage assets of archaeological interest referred to in footnote 68); and areas at risk of flooding – which provides the caveat for not providing for the full objectively assessed need for housing. The issue of flooding will be relevant also in respect of development proposed at Tudeley and Paddock Wood.

In conclusion, it is considered that the local plan should not seek to meet the full objectively assessed need, as set out in the standard methodology. Policies for the green belt and AONB provide a strong reason for restricting the scale of development in the borough. The provision of a new garden settlement in the green belt is inconsistent with these policies.

Issue 2 – Distribution of Development

Q1. How was the distribution of development established? Has the Council sought to direct housing growth towards settlements based on their scoring in the Settlement Role and Function Study, or by another means?

CPRE commented at the Issues and Options stage that the option of a new standalone settlement “only scores well in the Council’s Sustainability Appraisal on the assumption that it will not affect the AONB or the green belt ...” As it is the only Option which does not specify a location, the Council should treat any public support for Option 5 with great caution, since it represents a vote for “anywhere but here”.

It is clear from the Matter 1 hearings that the Council’s strategy doesn’t follow a clear logic and that the principle of creating a new standalone settlement was predetermined. As we set out in our own hearing statement, page 7 of the non-technical summary of the Sustainability Appraisal states that the inclusion of a new garden settlement and large urban expansion were found to be fundamental to the preferred strategy. The combination of this, and the fact no alternative garden settlements not involving green belt release made it to the second stage of the SA, demonstrates there has not been sufficient consideration of alternative strategies which avoid release of land from the green belt and AONB.

In respect of the principles of the distribution of development, as set out in our Regulation 19 representation, CPRE Kent is of the view that it is not clear whether development across the borough is being sustainably distributed.

It would be helpful to understand the distribution of development in terms of its relationship with the Council’s settlement hierarchy, to ensure that development is being planned in the most sustainable locations across the borough.

Table 4 (distribution of housing allocations) of the Submission Local Plan (CD 3.128) does not clearly set out the balance of housing growth in relation to the most sustainable locations across the borough.

Development numbers are set out as a range of lower/upper yields attributed by parish/settlement. However, there is no reference to how the number of homes allocated relates to settlement role or function, or to the settlement hierarchy.

Confusingly, the Settlement Role and Function Study (October 2021) CD 3.133 provides settlement groupings in tiers A-G, whereas policy ED8 refers to settlements by type: town, rural service and neighbourhood centres and villages. As such, it is difficult to understand the development strategy in terms of the sustainability of the borough’s settlements.

The question remains: is development being directed to the right places, to the most sustainable locations?

Q5. Where new development is proposed in towns and villages, is the scale, type and distribution of housing development proportionate to their character, role and function?

As set out in response to Question 1 above, it is difficult to understand whether new development at towns and villages will be of a scale, type and distribution proportionate to their character, role and function. The reason for this is that it’s not clear what function the borough’s towns and villages hold

in respect of a settlement hierarchy and the role this plays in being a proxy for sustainability. It's not clear whether a definition has been provided of the settlement scores needed for places to fall into each of the A-G groups set out in CD 3.133. Moreover, this settlement hierarchy then appears to have been discounted, for example in the case of the AONB village of Matfield.

As set out in our Regulation 19 representations, in the interests of protecting the green belt and AONB CPRE Kent is of the view that higher densities should be encouraged within the borough's towns and villages. Higher densities in themselves should not be assumed to adversely impact on settlement character. In fact, research undertaken by CPRE and Place Alliance concludes that higher density schemes are shown to be more successful, including in terms of design quality (see below).

It is noted that the Brownfield and Urban Topic Paper (January 2021) CD 3.83 makes reference to use of an indicative density of 45dph (compared to the 30dph in the SHELAA), which is little more than suburban density levels. If the density of brownfield and urban land is being optimised to what amounts to very low levels of development, the question arises about what happens in the case of green field allocations – and the implications for resultant yields and the provision of affordable housing and support to active travel and public transport.

The Strategic Sites Masterplanning and Infrastructure Study report (February 2021) CD 3.66a refers to the opportunity to provide a higher density of development around the settlement centre at Tudeley, with lower density development at the edges to respect rural character. At paragraph 5.63 it is noted that average density would be between 35-38dph for the urban extension at Paddock Wood. These densities are very low and fall below the expectations set out in the National Design Code.

Further research undertaken by CPRE and Place Alliance (A housing design audit for England, 2020) https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Place-Alliance-A-Housing-Design-Audit-for-England_2020.pdf concludes that housing schemes performed more poorly with distance from the urban core and with reduced density. The additional constraints imposed by stronger pre-existing urban context, were considered to encourage a more sensitive design response. Building at low density and on green fields is not being done well in terms of design quality. The most successful schemes (as audited in the study of 142 developments) were those at 56dph – which is almost double the national average of 31dph.

The National Design Code (July 2021) states that density is an essential component of an effective design code. Building at 20-40dph is noted as representing development in outer suburbs; suburban development is pegged at 40-60dph and urban neighbourhoods at 50-120dph.

Q6. What is the justification for distributing new housing development to settlements within the High Weald AONB? How did the AONB designation influence the scale, type and distribution of housing development?

As set out in response to Question 5 above, it is not clear what the justification is for distribution of new housing development in the AONB in respect of (1) the under-explored issue of Maidstone Council taking potential unmet need as discussed at the Matter 1 hearing and (2) the sustainability of the settlements in question with particular reference to a settlement hierarchy.

The NPPF states that much weight must be given to the AONB in the NPPF. In addition, the importance of the AONB is addressed in the Government's response to the Glover Review. This underlines how the last two years have demonstrated the benefit that people get from having

access to nature-rich landscapes; and how AONBs have been such a vital resource. The Government notes that “the huge increase in visitors during the Coronavirus pandemic demonstrated the vital role protected landscapes have in supporting the nation’s health and wellbeing.”

[See Government response to the Glover Review:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/landscapes-review-national-parks-and-aonbs-government-response>]

This makes it vital that if new homes are to be built in the AONB that they are built at higher densities, so affordable homes can be provided that rural communities need, rather than at what the evidence suggests is low density development (averaging 16dph).