

Introduction

- 8.1** Tourism is defined as “all aspects of visitor experience, whether the visitor is on a day trip, a short break or a long holiday, visiting for leisure or business, from this country or overseas.” (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 1997).
- 8.2** The Plan area forms part of the ‘Garden of England’ and much of the countryside falls within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is a popular tourist destination characterised by orchards, hop gardens, oast houses, Wealden villages and famous attractions such as Scotney Castle and Sissinghurst Castle Gardens.
- 8.3** The spa town of Royal Tunbridge Wells has attracted tourists since the seventeenth century and its present character is derived from its historical associations, architectural heritage and countryside setting, extending into the centre of the town by extensive areas of common land.
- 8.4** The historic country town of Cranbrook is another popular tourist destination, providing a base for exploring the surrounding area.
- 8.5** Provision for tourism in the Borough includes accommodation and visitor attractions, offering opportunities for leisure, shopping, eating and access to museums, galleries and theatres. These, combined with a strategic location between London and the south coast and its transport connections, have made the Plan area a valued destination for visitors, with Tunbridge Wells Borough attracting the second largest share of visitors in Kent.
- 8.6** The tourist industry is significant in terms of the investment and employment that it generates. However, because tourism depends on a high quality built and natural environment, this Local Plan strongly emphasises the protection and enhancement of this asset.
- 8.7** Specifically, this Plan aims to retain the existing serviced and non-serviced accommodation in the Borough and in particular enable the provision of appropriate new accommodation.

Aims

1. To improve the attractiveness of the towns, villages and countryside of the Plan area to tourists by assisting the development of high-quality facilities whilst protecting the unique quality of the environment.
2. To facilitate the retention of existing serviced and non-serviced accommodation in the Borough and the provision of new, high-quality tourist accommodation throughout the Plan area to meet future demand.
3. To concentrate major new tourist accommodation in Royal Tunbridge Wells town centre.

Tourism Development

- 8.8** This Local Plan facilitates the development of tourism in the Plan area in a sustainable, managed manner in accordance with Government guidance in PPG21. Within the Borough, tourism depends on a high-quality environment and above all this Local Plan places strong emphasis on protecting and enhancing this asset. The fabric of the towns and villages and the natural beauty of the surrounding countryside are extremely important in this context. In addition, specific policies in the Plan assist the development of tourism; promote the importance of historic town centres for shopping, entertainment and improved leisure facilities; improve transport links and expand recreational facilities.

- 8.9** Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has adopted a positive stance towards tourism and in January 2000 adopted a Tourism Strategy which is consistent with the objectives of this Local Plan.
- 8.10** As well as the attractiveness of the built environment and the countryside, the Plan area boasts a number of attractions. Development of tourist facilities in the countryside can allow for a greater diversity in the rural economy. The promotion of tourist enjoyment of the countryside should be primarily aimed at those activities which draw on the character of the countryside itself, its beauty, culture, history and wildlife, and should be based around an existing resource. Given the general policies of restraint and the likely impact on rural roads and communities, it is not appropriate to encourage tourism in rural areas on a large scale.
- 8.11** The Kent Structure Plan 1996 and the Kent & Medway Structure Plan 2006 contain policies which generally permit minor facilities and attractions where they make an important contribution to diversifying and upgrading tourism attractions in the County in keeping with changing demands. Such developments should be consistent with environment, transport and Green Belt policies.

TOURIST ACCOMMODATION

- 8.12** A key factor in establishing a successful tourist industry is the availability of a range of tourist accommodation. Staying visitors make a significant contribution to the local economy and are an essential part of the prosperous tourism industry within the Plan area, both in terms of the jobs generated and related expenditure. A 2000 survey of the economic impact of tourism in the Borough indicated that the total number of jobs supported by tourism was over 3,300, equating to 7% of total employment in the Plan area (South East England Tourist Board 2000). It is estimated that staying visitors spend approximately 1.39 million nights within the Borough, generating in the region of £44.20 million of direct tourist expenditure into the local economy. Consequently, it is important to provide and retain a range of appropriate accommodation within the Borough.
- 8.13** The range of accommodation available within the Plan area includes hotels and guest houses, bed and breakfast and self-catering accommodation, and caravan and camping sites. For the purposes of this Local Plan, serviced accommodation is taken to include hotels, guest houses, motels, inns and bed and breakfast establishments. Non-serviced accommodation is taken to include self-catering accommodation and youth hostels.
- 8.14** In meeting current and future accommodation needs in both the urban and rural areas, all development proposals will be subject to environmental policies in this Plan and other considerations, such as access, design and landscaping.
- 8.15** The Tunbridge Wells Borough Hotel Needs Assessment (1999) assessed the need for hotel accommodation in the Plan area up to 2011. The study assumed a low growth forecast (2%) of demand for accommodation. It identified a shortfall in supply over the Plan period and this is addressed in the following sections.
- 8.16** The provision of additional self-catering accommodation within the Plan area should be facilitated in order that a comprehensive range of accommodation can be provided. Where approval is granted for self-catering accommodation, the Local Planning Authority will consider the need to attach a condition to the permission which either limits the use to holiday accommodation only, or limits occupation to a certain season, as advised in Circular 11/95 and Annex C of PPG21.

Provision of Tourist Accommodation

SERVICED ACCOMMODATION

- 8.17** The urban area of Royal Tunbridge Wells and Southborough contains 61 of the 156 serviced accommodation establishments in the Plan area, which equates to 62% of total available beds (South East England Tourist Board, 1999). Due to the presence of businesses and the leisure market in Royal Tunbridge Wells, hotel occupancy is fairly constant all year round.
- 8.18** Of the larger serviced establishments with over 10 rooms in Royal Tunbridge Wells and Southborough almost 90% of the rooms available are located in the Tunbridge Wells Town Centre Access Zone (Residential), as defined on the Proposals Map. A large-scale hotel development is defined as 10 bedrooms and above for the purposes of this Local Plan.

Provision of Serviced Tourist Accommodation in Royal Tunbridge Wells

- 8.19** In the context of identifying the demand for additional accommodation in Royal Tunbridge Wells over the Plan period, the Tunbridge Wells Borough Hotel Needs Assessment (1999) highlights the town centre as presenting a realistic development opportunity for a modern hotel together with additions to existing hotels to satisfy a demand of up to 150 bedrooms. For the purposes of this Local Plan, a large-scale hotel development is defined as 10 bedrooms or above or with a floorspace of 500 square metres or more.
- 8.20** PPS6 identifies leisure uses, including hotels, as being a key town centre use. Large-scale hotels in particular are major generators of travel demand and should be highly accessible by public transport and link closely with a wide range of other tourist facilities, including Tourist Information Centres, places to eat and drink, shops and entertainment. As identified in the 1999 study, the historic core of Royal Tunbridge Wells presents an ideal location for the development of further hotel provision.
- 8.21** Of the total serviced accommodation stock in the Plan area, 26% is located outside of the Limits to Built Development of Royal Tunbridge Wells and Southborough and accounts for 30% of the total room nights spent in the Borough. Existing provision includes 10 hotels of 10 bedrooms or more, of which two are located outside the Limits to Built Development. Six smaller establishments are located within the Limits to Built Development of the towns and villages.
- 8.22** To meet future demand for accommodation over the Plan period outside Royal Tunbridge Wells and Southborough the 1999 study identified the need for about 20 additional rooms in the traditional hotel/guest house/bed and breakfast market. Such provision may be met by additions to the bed and breakfast stock (which can occur without planning permission) or small-scale extensions to existing accommodation.
- 8.23** In order that hotel provision is well located in relation to a wide range of other tourist facilities and means of transport, all proposals for large-scale development should satisfy the sequential test set out in POLICY CR1. This may include the expansion of existing premises or the development of new serviced accommodation. ~~Specific provision for large-scale hotel development is made on a number of Mixed Use Development sites in the Town, Village and Neighbourhood Centres Chapter within POLICY CR4. On these sites it is envisaged that the hotel use will form part of a larger mixed use development. This will strengthen the vitality and viability of the centre and generate further employment opportunities.~~
- 8.24** Smaller-scale hotels of less than 10 bedrooms or 500 square metres are dispersed within the Limits to Built Development of Royal Tunbridge Wells and Southborough. In order to reflect the current distribution of hotels and in recognition of the lower travel impacts, small-scale proposals for new, or the expansion of existing, serviced tourist

accommodation need not be restricted to the town centre. Proposals that provide less than 10 bedrooms or have a floorspace of less than 500 square metres will be permitted within the Limits to Built Development, subject to satisfying POLICY EN1 and other relevant policies in the Plan.

NON-SERVICED ACCOMMODATION

- 8.25** South East England generally has an under-supply of self-catering units and the South East England Tourist Board, in their Tourism Strategy (2000), identified a demand for additional non-serviced accommodation as a priority for the whole of the region, including Royal Tunbridge Wells. Research carried out by Kent County Council (1997) identified a total of 97 registered units.
- 8.26** Both the urban and rural areas are considered suitable for this type of accommodation and demand is high, due to the touring opportunities and the proximity of the A21, M25 and M20. In view of this demand, new or extended small-scale, non-serviced accommodation of less than 500 square metres will be permitted within the Limits to Built Development, as defined on the Proposals Map. POLICY T3 refers to opportunities outside the defined Limits to Built Development.

POLICY T1

Small-scale proposals for new or extended serviced and non-serviced tourist accommodation will be permitted within the Limits to Built Development, as defined on the Proposals Map.

RETENTION OF EXISTING TOURIST ACCOMMODATION

- 8.27** If Royal Tunbridge Wells and the surrounding area is to function effectively as a tourist centre, an adequate range and supply of accommodation of suitable quality is needed in both the serviced and non-serviced sectors. To limit losses within the existing stock of accommodation, and in order to meet future demand for tourist accommodation over the Plan period, the Local Planning Authority will not permit the loss of existing serviced and non-serviced accommodation to other uses, unless the premises are unsuitable for tourist use in respect of the standard of accommodation provided and are incapable of being made satisfactory at reasonable expense or it can be demonstrated that the continued use as tourist accommodation is not viable. In order to determine this, the following tests will be applied.

Suitability of Premises

- 8.28** A premises may no longer be considered suitable for tourist use in respect of the standard of accommodation provided. In such circumstances, it will need to be demonstrated to the Local Planning Authority that the premises are unsuitable in respect of the standard of accommodation provided and are incapable of being made satisfactory at reasonable expense.

Assessment of Economic Viability

- 8.29** Occasionally, a lack of market demand for an individual establishment may be given as a reason for cessation of provision of tourist accommodation. Where this leads to the decline of the business to the point that the continued commercial use of the premises as tourist accommodation is no longer economically viable and all reasonable attempts to market the existing business have been made, the Local Planning Authority may permit a change of use of the premises.

- 8.30** In assessing viability, evidence will be required of occupancy rates and other relevant factors such as previous marketing, business plans, locational factors and ease of access for visitors by a variety of modes of transport. For the purposes of this Local Plan 'reasonable marketing' would include the placement of advertisements in the regional and national trade press and the provision of evidence of the attempted sale of the business. Proprietors should also be able to demonstrate that the business has been marketed as a going concern, including the maintenance of up-to-date inspections, membership of trade organisations and current advertising.
- 8.31** In assessing whether the accommodation is no longer suitable for tourist use, or is not economically viable for such a use, the Local Planning Authority will seek the views of Tourism South East.

POLICY T2

Proposals resulting in the loss of serviced and non-serviced tourist accommodation will be refused, unless it can be proven that:

- 1 The premises are unsuitable for tourist use in respect of the standard of accommodation provided and are incapable of being made satisfactory at reasonable expense; or**
- 2 It can be demonstrated that the continued use of a premises as serviced or non-serviced accommodation is no longer economically viable and that the premises do not have the potential to become viable.**

New Tourist Accommodation Outside the Limits to Built Development

- 8.32** Outside the Limits to Built Development the conversion of rural buildings to tourist accommodation can be acceptable, resulting in an increase in the range and amount of available accommodation in the Borough and providing a valuable economic use for redundant buildings. In addition to POLICY T3, proposals for the conversion of rural buildings to serviced and non-serviced tourist accommodation, including extensions, will be assessed against POLICIES MGB1, EN1, EN25, ~~EN26, EN27~~, ED5 and all other relevant policies in the Plan.

POLICY T3

Outside the Limits to Built Development, as defined on the Proposals Map, the following types of serviced and non-serviced accommodation will be permitted:

- 1 The change of use or conversion of a listed building, a building whose loss would be detrimental to the character of the countryside, or an existing building in keeping with its surroundings; or**
- 2 The extension of existing accommodation.**

Provision of Other Tourist Accommodation

- 8.33** Tourism policies contained within the Kent Structure Plan 1996 and the Kent & Medway Structure Plan 2006 permit camping and holiday chalet accommodation, and static and touring caravans, subject to environmental and other considerations.
- 8.34** There are three recognised camping sites in the Plan area. Larger-scale proposals accommodating more than five caravans require planning permission. Suitable permanent sites for this type of accommodation are likely to be located beyond the built up limits of towns and villages where countryside policies, including POLICIES EN25, ~~EN26 and EN27~~, will apply.

Implementation

- 8.35** The policies and paragraphs set out in this Chapter will be applied by the Local Planning Authority to retain and encourage appropriate development consistent with the sustainable objectives of this Plan.