

Tunbridge Wells Borough Local Plan Examination

Stage 3: Hearing Day 1 Tuesday 18 June 2024

Introduction Statement by William Benson Chief Executive

The Leader of the Council, Cllr Ben Chapelard, is unable to attend today. He has therefore asked me to speak on his behalf.

The first thing the Leader has asked me to emphasise is the fact that he strongly supports the modified Submission Local Plan. Following a change of political administration last month, Cllr Chapelard has taken on responsibility for the Local Plan in his area of Cabinet responsibilities. The second point he wishes to make is that the local plan is a key priority for his administration.

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has been preparing its Local Plan since 2016 and, following extensive evidence gathering and consultation, submitted it for examination on 1 November 2021.

In my opening statement to the Stage 1 Hearings back in March 2022, I made reference to the challenges of preparing a development plan and gave details of the local factors that made it particularly challenging.

Following detailed scrutiny during the Stage 1 and 2 Hearings (which resulted in a number of Action Points), in November 2022 the Council received the formal Initial Findings setting out the outcomes of the examination.

These Initial Findings raised a number of strategic issues that the Council was asked to respond to (and resolve) so that the Local Plan could progress through the examination process. I will return to these matters in a moment.

First, I would like to take the opportunity to reflect on what has changed in the interim period since the plan was submitted for examination back in 2021 and the constraints affecting the Borough and the Council's response to these Initial Findings.

Since that time, the Borough has had three sets of local elections. May 2022 saw the introduction of a 'Borough Partnership' – an administration comprised of three political groups – and the most recent elections in May 2024 saw the Council move to a majority (Liberal Democrat) administration. The important thing to emphasise is that, irrespective of the political changes that have taken place whilst the Local Plan has been developed, there has been cross-party support for the Plan and firm commitment from all political administrations to support the modification and adoption of the Submission Local Plan.

I will now return to the challenges I referenced a little earlier on that the Council faces.

- First, constraints: 75 per cent of the Borough is made up of the High Weald National Landscape and areas of Green Belt. The Borough is rich in historic features and supports a wide network of biodiversity sites, and parts of the borough are located in areas which are prone to flooding. All of these factors have steered the Council in determining the development strategy and, importantly, how it has responded to the Initial Findings.
- Second, demand and national policy: Since the hearings last November, national housing delivery targets continue to make national headlines – and this has been reinvigorated in advance of the forthcoming General Election. Whilst different political parties have differing approaches to – or place different emphases upon – how they propose meeting the country's

housing needs, it is clear that there is a cross-party consensus that planning for houses is an essential matter for local authorities to include in their plan making.

- Another point I emphasised in my earlier introduction was that the Borough of Tunbridge Wells has higher average house prices than most of Kent and the South-East. Since the initial hearings, prices have risen a further 15 per cent and the rate at which they have risen post-Covid has been greater in Tunbridge Wells than either Kent as a whole or the South-East.
- Finally, I thought I should also touch on the progress of our neighbouring authorities on their own Local Plans. With both Tunbridge and Malling and Sevenoaks' Local Plans being found unsound, they are both now at the early stages of preparation of their local plans. In a similar manner to Tunbridge Wells, both authorities are also heavily constrained, having Green Belt and AoNB (Now National Landscape) areas. Wealden District Council is also at an early stage in progressing a new Local Plan with its previous plan also having been found unsound. Wealden too is constrained by significant areas of National Landscape. The limited progress of our neighbouring authorities' plans underscores the importance of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council having an adopted plan in place and also illustrates the tough decisions that it has had to make to get to this stage.

Moving on to the initial findings, we were always aware that the decision to remove land from the Green Belt for development purposes within the Submission Local Plan (and the decision to promote some major development within the High Weald National Landscape) was obviously controversial. I should emphasise that the decision to allocate sites in those locations has been taken only after all reasonable alternatives have been considered and is based on a significant evidence base. The Initial Findings raised a number of matters that need addressing on this issue – principally related to the Green Belt, Tudeley Village and Paddock Wood (together with land at east Capel) – and I will briefly address these three matters.

We fully recognise that the proposal for a new settlement at Tudeley and the transformational expansion of Paddock Wood and east Capel continues to cause concern to many residents.

It has always been the Council's position that these proposals for strategic growth would follow the Government's garden community principles and the Council has undertaken a huge amount of work to establish a framework for the comprehensive masterplanning of these sites and delivery of infrastructure to mitigate the impact of this development and to deliver betterment in terms of flooding.

As part of the process of drafting the Submission Local Plan the Council explored opportunities for meeting our development need by reducing the pressure on Green Belt land and limiting the level of major development in the High Weald National Landscape area.

Land at Paddock Wood represents a logical choice for growth, so the Council has sought to resolve concerns regarding land susceptible to flooding. This has resulted in a reduced level of development at Paddock Wood and east Capel by approximately 1,000 dwellings.

The initial evidence gathering for the Submission Local Plan was thorough and extensive in its search for appropriate housing sites. The additional Green Belt work has not revealed any other reasonable strategic options for housing growth and, in relation to smaller sites, has concluded that the original justification for their omission no longer applies.

With regards to Tudeley, there are clear benefits from delivering housing through larger scale development – through new settlements where infrastructure and transport needs can be met in a sustainable manner – which is recognised in National Policy. However, following careful consideration of the Initial Findings, we concluded that there were some matters identified which could not be resolved without significant further work in order to provide the necessary confidence at

this stage that the strategic allocation would be found sound. Undertaking this further work would result in significant further delay to the adoption of the Local Plan. As a result, we have decided to remove the site allocation for Tudeley Village from the Plan.

This means that the full 15-year supply of housing cannot be met through specific deliverable sites. Consequently, the Council will seek to undertake an early review of the plan, in order to identify further sites in the Borough for housing to meet the housing needs of the community for the remainder of the plan period.

Given the work undertaken to date, particularly given the many constraints to development, Tudeley Village has been explored in significant detail. Ultimately, we have concluded that the exceptional circumstances have not been met for its release from the Green Belt at this time; however, it is inevitable that the Council will have to evaluate it further as an option to deliver part of its growth strategy in the future (alongside all other reasonable alternatives as they manifest themselves through the local plan review process).

The final element that I would like to address is the political support for the Local Plan. In my experience many councillors become involved politically (and ultimately stand for election) because of concerns about planning. Despite the multitude of services that the Council provides, Planning remains at the top of the tree in terms of the political importance attached to it and this has continued to be the case over the past three years.

Because of this, we have worked in an exceptionally inclusive manner to develop our Submission Local Plan and to respond to the Initial Findings. Portfolio Holders of all political hues (and the past four years have seen the planning lead on Cabinet being held by councillors from three different political parties) have been keen to keep all councillors briefed and involved. This involvement has included a cross-party Planning Policy Working Group and regular all-councillor briefings. We have worked through the Initial Findings – and our proposed response to them – in a painstaking manner and I cannot think of another council where elected councillors are so highly engaged with the Submission Local Plan and – perhaps as a result – where cross-party support has been maintained throughout three changes of control and numerous local elections.

The fact that the decision of the Tunbridge Wells Full Council last December to submit the proposed changes to the Plan received such strong cross-party political support is, I believe, a testament to the level of councillor engagement and the urgency of needing an up-to-date Local Plan in place to provide the certainty required for good decision-making in the public interest. This decision and the commitment to an early review will not prejudice the longer-term interests of the Borough and its residents.

Amidst the changes in political control I have just outlined and the work we have put in to exploring and responding to the Initial Findings, the Council has made a fundamental decision to progress with the Plan with an acceptance that an early review of the plan will be necessary.

Conclusion

In concluding, Sir, we recognise and welcome the efforts that you have gone to, to identify matters that can be resolved with further work – and importantly those which you felt need no further work. The Council will continue to work pro-actively with you and other parties to resolve any potential further soundness and compliance issues wherever possible, in order to get the TWBC Local Plan adopted.