

Sevenoaks Local Plan 2015 to 2035**Hearing Position Statement on behalf of Squerryes Estate (ID 4822)****Issue 6: Is the Local Plan positively prepared, justified and effective in respect of housing (need)? (Qs 35-43)**6 September 2019

Introduction

This statement has been prepared by RPS Consulting Services with Now Planning. RPS were the authors of Appendix 1 to Reg 19 Representation that was also on behalf of Morants Promotions (Squerryes Estate).

Housing Need [Policy ST1]

Q35. Does the Local Plan clearly set out the Council's objectively assessed housing need for the Plan period having regard to the NPPF and Planning Practice Guidance [PPG] which require that a local housing needs assessment using the standard method in national planning guidance should be used to determine the minimum number of homes needed, with the baseline set using the 2014-based household projections?

- 6.1 It is clear that the 2014-based projections should be used for the calculation of the housing need under the Government's standard method. This is consistent with paragraph 2a-005-20190220 of the Planning Practice Guidance updated in February 2019, which is clear that these projections are consistent with the Government's aims of significantly boosting the supply of housing.
- 6.2 It is noted that the Office for National Statistics ("ONS") considers that these projections are methodologically accurate (as evidenced in their paper dated 27 August 2019¹) and whilst this point is not disputed, the more important point is that these projections are not recognised by Government as a firm basis from which to base the assessment of housing need.

Q36. The Local Plan, as submitted, refers to the housing need as 13,960 dwellings over the period 2015-2035, or 698dpa. Should this be updated from 698dpa (in the submitted Plan) to 707dpa (in the Schedule of Amendments) or 11,312 dwellings over the period 2019-2035, based on the projected household growth for 2019-2029 rather than 2018-2028?

- 6.3 We made this point on in our Reg 19 Representation (Appendix 1) which set out, based on the latest methodology/data, that the minimum Local Housing Need ("LHN")² should be increased from 698 dpa to 707dpa.
- 6.4 Although we welcome the updated figure in the Schedule of Amendments (SUP010a), it is important to note that this represents the minimum figure for homes to be planned for (paragraph 2a-002-20190220 of the PPG refers).
- 6.5 In this context it is important to understand what the PPG expects in terms of planning for growth. Whilst the minimum figure is clearly something that the Council should plan to meet, the 707dpa figure does not actually represent the full extent of housing need in Sevenoaks. The

¹ Comparing the differences between the 2014-based and 2016-based household projections for local authorities in England. Office for National Statistics. 27 August 2019.

² Also referred to in our other Issue Statements as the OAHN (objectively assessed housing need).

house price to earnings ratio in Sevenoaks is one of the worst in the country outside of London and whilst the severity of this position is captured within the standard method is captured, it is not reflected in the minimum LHN which is subject to a capped limit. Such caps are implemented at 40%, which limit the scale of adjustment that could be made to the baseline demographic projections. For Sevenoaks however, the uncapped uplift would be 66%, which gives an indication of the significant imbalance in the District. The true 'uncapped' figure for the District would be 838 dpa, which is 18.5% higher than the minimum figure planned for by the Council. The PPG is quite clear on the relationship of the minimum LHN and the actual 'uncapped' need for the District:

“The cap reduces the minimum number generated by the standard method, but does not reduce housing need itself. Therefore strategic policies adopted with a cap applied may require an early review and updating to ensure that any housing need above the capped level is planned for as soon as is reasonably possible.

Where the minimum annual local housing need figure is subject to a cap, consideration can still be given to whether a higher level of need could realistically be delivered. This may help prevent authorities from having to undertake an early review of the relevant policies”. PPG 2a-007-20190220

- 6.6 Although the Council is keen to highlight the minimum LHN, what is exempt from the evidence base, is the reference to the actual uncapped figure of 838 dpa. The Council has not undertaken an exercise to consider whether this higher figure can be met, presumably because the Council maintain the view that the minimum figure is too difficult to achieve.
- 6.7 This should not diminish the fact that the actual need for Sevenoaks is indeed much higher which, in our view, is an important factor in considering whether the overall supply of sites should be increased to move further towards addressing affordability pressures in the District through the increased supply of housing.

Q37. Does the Local Plan make it clear that the housing need cannot be met within the Plan period and the reasons for this? Does the Plan propose how this unmet need should be dealt with?

- 6.8 The plan makes no provision for how the significant unmet needs of Sevenoaks will be met, conceding that this matter has been unable to be resolved following DtC discussions. The failings of the Council in this regard are brought to the fore as part of the jointly prepared Sevenoaks Developer Forum response.

Housing Requirement (Policy ST1)

Q38. Does the Plan provide for the objectively assessed need for housing to be met in full, as a minimum, in accordance with Paragraph 11.b) of the revised NPPF? If not, would either paragraph 11.b) i. or ii. apply in this case? If so, what is the evidence of factors which prevent the full housing need from being met within the Plan area and should the housing requirement (as opposed to the housing need) set out in the Local Plan reflect this?

- 6.9 The Plan does not do this and falls considerably short from meeting its assessed need for housing, which is 1,902 dwellings less than the standard method calculation (16.8% below the minimum LHN).

- 6.10 In arriving at a justification for a reduced housing requirement the Plan points to high Green Belt coverage and the difficulties in addressing a figure which is four times higher than the previous requirement of 150dpa 93% of Sevenoaks is covered by Green Belt (SDC001 paras 1.5 and 1.6). However, given the acceptance of the need to build on Green Belt, the excuse that the District is constrained by Green Belt does not assist the Council and is inconsistent with its necessary strategy. There is no explanation for why the line is drawn where it is drawn, nor is any evidence advanced to support it.
- 6.11 Although the Green Belt is clearly an important consideration embedded in national polic, there is also a requirement to reflect on the need for individual settlements and this relates to the overall spatial strategy in the Plan. In particular, there is a mandate to promote sustainable growth in the District, and ensure that the District's more sustainable settlements, such as Westerham, are not fossilised over time through the Plan's failings to release enough land for growth. The Council's approach is not justified in this regard, and the Council fails to give strong reasons why the provisions of Paragraph 11b(i) and (ii) of the NPPF should inhibit the minimum LHN from being met. The absence of justification is even more striking given the spatial strategy and the settlement hierarchy, which seek to focus development in the four towns. That is not being achieved in Westerham particularly and is wholly unbalanced in the smaller settlements listed in the hierarchy. Indeed, the Council's approach is inconsistent with its own spatial strategy and cannot be sound for that reason if for no others.

Q39. As the Plan does not propose to meet the objectively assessed need for housing in full, should the Plan set out clearly the housing requirement and the level of unmet need?

- 6.12 Yes, it should. That is a critical failing of the Plan, and greater efforts to meet the need should be made through the Plan. It is not enough to simply state that the needs are unmet. It must take steps to meet those needs. The obvious step to take is to increase the quantum of development on Green Belt sites adjoining the higher tier settlements. Westerham is an obvious example given the existing 36 dwellings allocated.

Q40. Should the Plan set out the housing requirement in a policy such as Policy ST1?

- 6.13 Yes. This matter is covered by Lichfields' Issue 6 HPS on behalf of the Sevenoaks Developers Forum.

Q41. Can any neighbouring authorities assist with meeting the unmet housing need in the District? Can the Council demonstrate that it has undertaken effective and on-going joint working with other strategic policy making authorities in order to determine where additional housing could be accommodated to address the unmet housing need that cannot be met within the District?

- 6.14 This matter is covered by the Sevenoaks Developers Forum.

Q42. Why is it necessary to amend the Plan period from 2015-2035 in the submitted Plan to 2019-2035?

- 6.15 It is not necessary. It seems to be a crude attempt by the Council to reduce the minimum LHN for the District by removing the formative years from the Plan process. That is readily apparent when viewed against the Council's delivery record over this period. TSDC008 Table 4 indicates that 1,558 dwellings were delivered 2015/16 to 2018/19 – which equates to just 55% of the

minimum LHN for these four years (707 x 4 = 2,828 dwellings) and thus a very significant under-delivery over the formative years of the Plan if remains for the 2015-2035 period.

- 6.16 The NPPF (2019, paragraph 22) states that strategic plans should look ahead over a minimum period of 15 years from adoption, to anticipate and respond to long-term requirements and opportunities. Although the Council's amended period does cover a 15 year period, we consider there scope to go beyond this figure and that the Council should give good reasons why the minimum period is being planned for, particularly when the Submission Plan looked beyond this period.
- 6.17 The Council's justification in this regard is weak (SUP010a, Change to Exec Summary, P7):
- “As part of the submission review process, we propose a 16 year plan (2019-35). This is due to the use of the government's standardised methodology for calculating housing need, which already accounts for any earlier shortfall.”*
- 6.18 We note the reference here to the purpose of the standard method as a means of addressing affordability concerns, and the PPG does make indicate that the affordability adjustment is applied to account for past-delivery (paragraph 2a-011-20190220 refers). The Council's view that this wipes the slate clean in terms of the shortfall of housing for these years is a bold claim and we dispute its logic.
- 6.19 The actual uncapped need figure for Sevenoaks is far greater than 707dpa, resting at 838 dpa. This figure would more accurately address the District's affordability needs, and if the Council were suggesting a figure anywhere near this, the Council's claim would be more credible.
- 6.20 Finally, it is neither appropriate nor justified for the Council to use the provisions of the standard method to draw back the Plan period by four years. Whilst the standard method and provisions of the PPG have only recently been published, the need to boost housing in the District has existed for much longer. Indeed, the Council's own evidence from 2015 (SHMA HOU001, paragraph 9.29) states that the Council should be planning for a need of 620 dpa 2013-2033 – making clear that the Council has known for some time that its growth targets from 2013 onwards would be significantly higher than previously planned for.

Q43. Does the distribution of housing in the Local Plan reflect the spatial strategy of focussing growth in existing settlements, including at higher density; redevelopment of previously developed 'brownfield' land in sustainable locations; and development of Green Belt land only in 'exceptional circumstances'?

- 6.21 We hold the same concerns that we held in our Reg 19 Representation. There is a significant disconnect between the Plan's spatial strategy (ST1) and how it is to be implemented through the ST2 distribution. In short, the spatial strategy is not reflected by the proposed selection of sites.
- 6.22 Our concern is not the Plan's spatial strategy which we broadly support. Our problems is that the distribution does not, in particular, reflect Westerham's status as a town and thus a focus for growth beyond Sevenoaks Urban Area.

6.23 The Council's evidence with regard to supply remains unclear. However the document "5 Year Supply of Deliverable Housing Sites" (SDC008, dated April 2019) does appear to shed some light on this issue (although would also seem to be at odds with the ST2 allocations in the Plan itself – see Table 1 in our Issue 4 Statement). Appendices 1 and 2 (at the rear of SDC008) include a list of all development sources known to the Council, detailing sites with planning consent and sites proposed for allocation. This is not evidenced by way of the settlement hierarchy, but we have undertaken this exercise, outlined below for known sources, including sites with planning permission and proposed allocations:

- I. Principal Town
 - o Sevenoaks & Adjoining Areas – 4,208 dwellings (20.1%)
- II. Towns
 - o Swanley (inc Pedham Place) – 3,329 (40.8%)
 - o Edenbridge – 817 dwellings – (10.0%)
 - o Westerham – 62 dwellings – (0.8%)
- III. Local Service Centres
 - o Hartley – 69 dwellings (0.8%)
 - o New Ash Green – 107 dwellings (1.3%)
 - o Otford – 15 dwellings (0.3%)
- IV. Villages and Hamlets
 - o Villages (Various) – 1,560 dwellings (19.1%)
 - o Hamlets (Various) – 558 dwellings (6.8%)
 - o N/A (Wrotham) – 5 dwellings (0.1%)

6.24 On the basis indicated above, between 2019-2034, Westerham is expected to deliver 62 dwellings over the Plan period, which equates to only 0.8% of the total 8,161³ dwellings outlined in SDC008. This is significantly lower than the allocation for the other towns and similar to that of lower order settlements including the Local Service Centres of Hartley and Ash Green. The position is even worse when one looks only at the allocations in emerging policy ST2 (where only 36 are allocated in Westerham, 26 of which are carried over from the current development plan).

Meeting the needs of Westerham

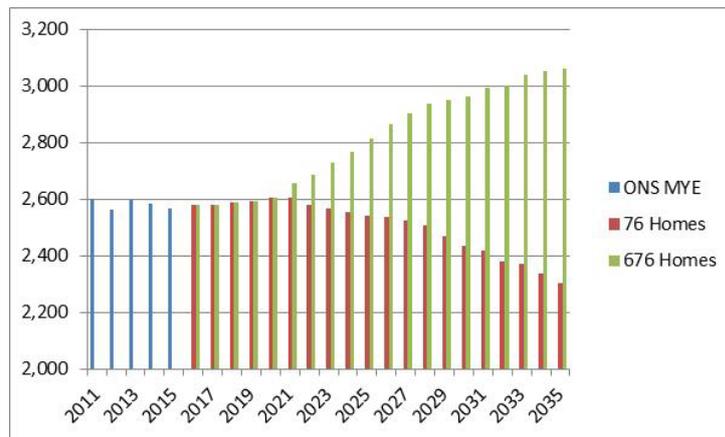
6.25 As indicated, the Council's current plan for 62 dwellings (0.8% total) at Westerham is inconsistent with the Plan's strategy for growth (Policy ST1) or the site allocations at Policy ST2 (ST2-35 and ST2-36), and fails to deliver the housing growth that the town needs to sustain its position in the settlement hierarchy. This decision does not meet the provisions of paragraph 35 of the NPPF, in providing a positive, or effective, strategy for Westerham.

6.26 In earlier submissions to the Plan, we submitted evidence to show how Westerham could be expected to grow under current demographic projections. This evidence, prepared by the demographer John Hollis and dated March 2018 (submitted with Squerryes' Reg 18 submission and referenced in, as well as appended to, Squerryes' Reg 19 Representation at paragraph 4.81), has drawn on the same source material as the officially published ONS Sub-National Population Projections, to understand how Westerham's population is likely to change over the

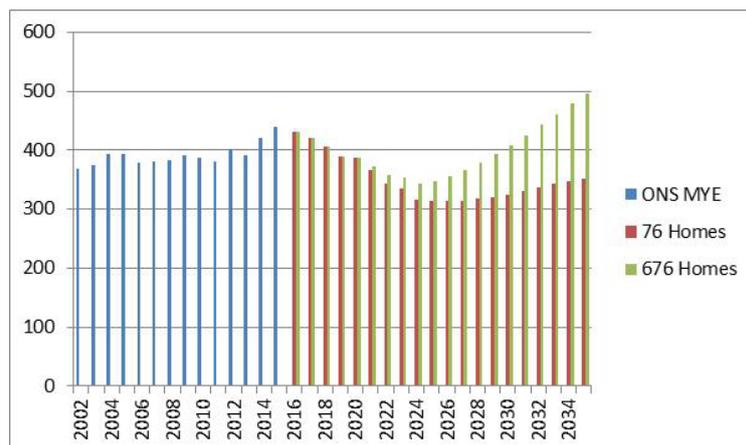
³ Figure of 8,161 dwellings taken from sum of extant permissions and proposed allocations outlined in SDC009 Housing Trajectory. NB figure of 100 completions from extant permissions in Yr 2023/24 inconsistent with detailed table in SDC008 which indicates 47 expected completions. Hence overall figure of 8,139 should instead be 8,161.

Plan period. This report modelled two scenarios, considering 76 dwellings (broadly accounting for the Council’s baseline position) and 600 dwellings (to inform, and thus aligning with, the WWW proposal). Although the figure of 76 dwellings is noted to be slightly higher than the figure of 62 dwellings recorded in the Council’s latest evidence (SDC008), this provides a reasonable basis from which to observe how the change in Westerham’s housing stock might influence changes to the population.

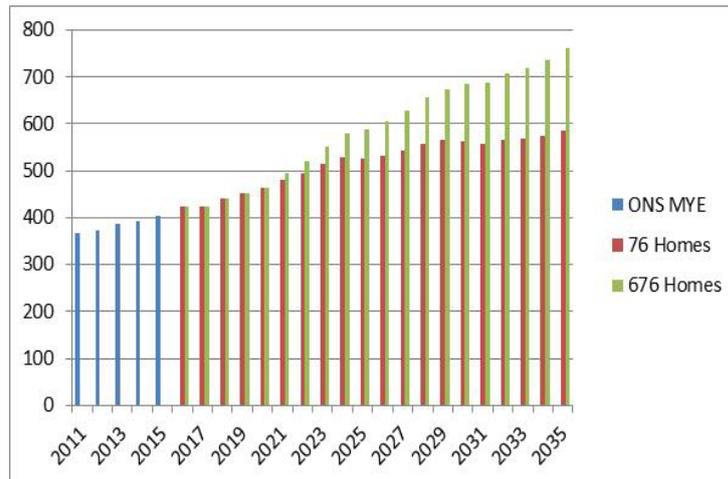
6.27 Utilising the modelling, the scenarios indicate that if 76 dwellings were developed, Westerham’s working age population (age 20-64) would drop significantly, whereas the population of 75+ would continue to rise. This is illustrated below (taken from Figure 8 of 2018 John Hollis report).



6.28 This reduction is also evident in the forecast growth in working age population in Westerham, as illustrated below, which captures the 4-11yr cohort covering primary school age children. This is important in the context of ensuring the future viability of education establishments in Westerham and, more widely, ensuring a balanced demography.



6.29 By contrast, positive increases in the working age population are projected under proposals for around 600 dwellings, but again the 75+ population, as indicated in the below chart (Figure 9 of 2018 John Hollis report).



6.30 This is important in the context of Westerham as the town is enveloped by the Green Belt. Beyond what must be an increasingly limited number of windfalls, there are limited avenues for growth. The consequences for the town’s sustainability of not providing enough land are clearly evidenced in the John Hollis report: by not providing enough growth to the town, the working and school age population will decline with consequent risks to the town’s ability to sustain its services. Put simply, there is a significant risk that the town will stagnate, as the demographics of Westerham become older, with fewer people (most especially working and school age people) to support the variety of services and facilities in the town, including those concentrated in the town centre, and the primary school while also placing still greater pressure on the town’s GP service as the population ages disproportionately to the District average.

Defining Exceptional Circumstances (ECs)

6.31 For Westerham, we are of the firm view that exceptional circumstances exist to justify the Plan in meeting the housing need for the town, and that consideration alone outweighs the harm to the openness of the Green Belt in this location (which in any case is offset by compensatory improvements in the rest of the Green Belt that amount to more than double the land the WWW proposal would allocate to development). The consideration of the Green Belt around Westerham is a separate matter we deal with this in our Issues 4 and 5 Statements.

6.32 Where ECs are demonstrated it is right that the Council turns to how specific needs can be met through the Plan, which is the appropriate vehicle for delivering these needs, rather than attempting to address these in a piecemeal fashion (NPPF paragraph 136). There have also been a number of recent Local Plan Inspector Reports which have dealt with this matter.⁴

6.33 It is necessary for the Council to again reflect on the Plan’s spatial strategy for growth and thus to consider whether all realistic alternatives for meeting the LHN have been considered, having regard in particular to the position of the alternatives in the settlement hierarchy which are capable of delivering sustainable growth.

6.34 We find that there are clear parallels here with the findings of the numerous Local Plan Inspectors’ reports as cited in Footnote 3, which reflect upon the conditions which can necessitate

⁴ Of particular note are: Vale of White Horse Report – November 2016, paragraph 76; Bromsgrove Report, 2016, paragraph 83; Stevenage – October 2017, paragraph 81; South Cambridgeshire – 2018, paragraphs 98-104; Kirklees Report – January 2019, paragraphs 47-49; Nuneaton & Bedworth – April 2019, paragraphs 52-67; and Rugby – May 2019, Paragraphs 68, 160-163.

and justify the release of Green Belt land. In particular, we draw on the relatively recently published Nuneaton and Bedworth Local Plan Inspector's report, *published 09 April 2019 which exhibits clear similarities with the difficulties faced at Westerham* as we explain below.

- 6.35 The Inspector here found that the second-tier settlement of Bedworth could not provide any further growth, owing to the Green Belt restriction (our emphasis):

“In terms of fulfilling its spatial role, particularly as an employment base close to the M6, it is important to note that the town is virtually encircled by Green Belt including by very narrow margins between its southern edge at Exhall and the M6 and northern fringe of Coventry at Longford. The only edge of Bedworth which is not Green Belt is at Bedworth Woodlands to the north-west of the town. Part of this area forms a proposal in the submitted Plan. Consequently, at a strategic level there would be insufficient non-Green Belt capacity for Bedworth to accommodate a scale of development that appropriately reflected its ability to sustainably accommodate identified development needs”. N&B Inspectors Report, Paragraph 52

- 6.36 It is the same situation for Westerham, which requires that the needs for delivering growth justify the selective release of Green Belt land. Reflecting on this further in the case of Bedford, the Inspector found that ECs were met in order to satisfy the Plan's need to deliver growth around sustainable growth centres:

“Therefore, in principle, at a strategic level there are exceptional circumstances for considering altering the Green Belt around Bedworth. Given the proximity of Coventry and the City's unmet needs being a key component of the scale of development planned for, it is appropriate that options to the south of Bedworth should be the focus. The Joint Green Belt Study presents mixed findings in relation to the function and character of Green Belt parcels around Bedworth such that at a strategic level the performance of the Green Belt is not a moratorium on additional growth”. N&B Inspectors Report, Paragraph 56

- 6.37 We hold the clear view that local housing need, not just for the District but also for Westerham, provides a firm basis for demonstrating exceptional circumstances, with the consequent benefit overall and in Westerham of facilitating more growth in the town that is consistent with the Council's own spatial strategy. National policy states that justified exceptional circumstances can provide a basis for amending the Green Belt boundary. However ECs need to be defined in a way that is consistent with the consequences for sustainability (NPPF3, paragraph 135c/138) and ensures that the boundary endures and does not simply amended again in the future (NPPF paragraph 136).

- 6.38 The Council indisputably recognises that Westerham, as a town in the settlement hierarchy, is among the group of settlements that is capable most sustainably of accommodating the balanced growth which is the aim of the spatial strategy (Policy ST1). The Plan does not reflect this in the distribution of development for Westerham. Instead, the Plan provides only for nominal growth, and as demonstrated here and in our Reg 19 Representation, fails to provide a quantum of growth that will secure the town's sustainability.

- 6.39 The Council had previously included the WWW proposal for Westerham in the July 2018 Draft Plan. As we set out in detail in our Reg 19 Representation, the “further information” that purports to justify the exclusion of the WWW proposal from the Plan is inadequate – either in respect of the Plan's “balanced strategy for growth” or in providing for any share of the planned growth in Westerham, one of four towns which Policy ST1 states will be the focus of the Plan's development.

- 6.40 The residential-led sites (References HO371 & HO372 HO373 & HO374) for 600 dwellings and a needed employment site (EMP17) would provide a more balanced and more sustainable pattern of growth for the District over the 2035 Plan period.
- 6.41 We therefore strongly advocate that the WWW proposal is reintroduced into the Plan. Main Modifications are necessary for the Plan to be sound both to address the housing need in the town over the Plan period and achieve a sustainable pattern of development for the District as we set out in our Statements on Issues 3, 4 and 5.