

Good morning everyone, welcome to Sevenoaks and welcome to the Stag theatre

Firstly, and on behalf of the Council, I would like to welcome our inspector, Karen Baker and those attending these examination hearing sessions.

On behalf of the Council, I would like to thank:

- Programme Officer Louise St John Howe – who has worked tirelessly to bring these sessions together; and
- Local Members, in particular Cllrs Julia Thornton, Avril Hunter, and Robert Piper who have been the Portfolio leads, but also to all Members who have played such an important role as leaders within their communities.

It is good to see so many of you here today and I would hope that a common factor between all of us is that we recognise the importance of the Local Plan for our district.

There has, perhaps, never been a more challenging time to bring forward a Local Plan in Sevenoaks. From the outset, officers have sought to prepare a positive and pragmatic plan, that responds to rising district-wide housing need and the Government's broader objective to build 300,000 new homes each year at a national level. We are also aware of the continued emphasis placed on the protection of the Green Belt and that brownfield sites should be the first port of call to meet development needs.

The Council has been mindful of these factors and the inherent tension between them whilst preparing the plan that is before you today. We aware that the issue of housing need will be central to the discussions during these hearing sessions, but it is important to stress that this is not simply a plan for housing. Substantial parts of the document deal with other matters such as employment provision, infrastructure delivery and the protection of natural and heritage resources.

The Council has given full regards to all aspects of the Government's National Planning Policy Framework; which includes the significant weight that national policy

places on both meeting objectively assessed needs so far as it is consistent with sustainable development, and giving a high level of protection to the Green Belt.

For those who are not familiar with Sevenoaks, it may be helpful to give a brief overview of the district. Covering an area of 143 square miles from the boundaries of East Sussex in the south to the edge of Greater London and Dartford borough in the north, we have a population of approximately 118,000 residents, about half of which are located in our main towns of Sevenoaks, Swanley, Edenbridge and Westerham. The largest of these towns is, of course Sevenoaks itself and there are a further 30 villages and smaller settlements across the district.

This is popular place to live, partly because of its proximity to London and the excellent transport links to other parts of the country. However, its popularity has fuelled an upward trend in house prices, which are higher than the Kent average, making it difficult for first time buyers and young families to remain the district. The provision of genuinely affordable homes is therefore a particular challenge for the Council.

The population of Sevenoaks is expected to grow by more than 20,000 people over the plan period, in line with other authorities in Kent and the south east region. This reflects an increasing birth rate, people moving from London and an increase in the percentage of the population over the age of 65 during the plan period, from 20 -25%. The provision of infrastructure to address existing deficiencies and the additional needs arising from these demographic changes is a key priority.

Sevenoaks has the lowest level of unemployment in Kent. The majority of residents of working age work in the West Kent area and a high proportion travel into Greater London. The rural economy is also important, as is the growing trend to work from home. Whilst Sevenoaks is, overall, a relatively prosperous district and the second least deprived local authority in Kent as a whole, there are individual areas within the 20% most deprived parts of the country.

Heritage and the natural environment are fundamental aspects of Sevenoaks, which is mostly rural in character. 60% of the district lies within the Kent Downs AONB and 93% is designated Green Belt, the third highest percentage by geographic area in

England. The extent of these areas and the protection afforded to them to them by national planning policy is a significant challenge to meeting development needs.

This Local Plan before you today takes account of these circumstances and sets out how land will be used in Sevenoaks up to 2035 to address development needs, protect natural and heritage assets and deliver much needed local infrastructure.

The production of the Plan has been subject to an extensive and transparent consultation exercise, which exceeded the requirements of our Statement of Community Involvement. Initial versions referred to as Issues and Options and the draft Local Plan sought to gather views on what the final version of the document ought to contain, resulting in the submission of 12,500 and 8,500 responses respectively.

Taking account of these comments and the content of national planning guidance, the Council then prepared the Proposed Submission version of the Local Plan that is before you today. The third and final round of consultation on this version prior to submission prompted 3,500 comments, highlighting the level of interest in strategic planning across the district.

Unsurprisingly, the matters that attracted the highest number of comments during the consultation process related to the proposed release of Green Belt land to meet a district wide housing need of 707 units per annum. To address this issue, the Council firstly sought to accommodate as many units as possible within the 7% of the district outside of the Green Belt. Following this approach, it is calculated that approximately 1,600 units can be delivered in these predominantly urban areas, over the plan period.

We then looked to suitable brownfield sites outside of urban confines to accommodate 1,338 units and propose to release greenfield sites in the Green Belt, only where there are exceptional circumstances for doing so. It is calculated that 83% housing need in Sevenoaks can be met through this strategy over the plan period.

The Council has a good working relationship with its immediate neighbours and other authorities across Kent, which is facilitated, by Kent County Council. All authorities are working towards the production of positive plans for their areas to address

challenging development needs. We are a co-operative bunch and co-operate at both officer and political level, to address matters of strategic, cross boundary importance. This is not a 'new' process' and many of the policies in the plan before you today are shaped by co-operation.

The policies and proposals within the document reflect the calls from successive Secretaries of State to be pragmatic in the plan making process. It has been said that planning is in itself a form of pragmatism and for us, this means preparing a document that seeks to achieve the objectives of national policy in the context local circumstances. A pragmatic approach should also bear in mind that the circumstances of the plan contemplate review. All considerations touching on the plan can have that in mind.

The Council proposes to bring forward sustainable sites and broad locations to meet the objectives of the NPPF as a whole. Development needs in years 1-5 of the plan will be met and exceeded and we have taken the difficult decision to release a significant area of Green Belt land to meet the vast majority of need in years 6-10.

Overall, the Council will meet the vast majority of its housing need in an area where 93% of land is subject to nationally significant development constraints. The general extent and permanence of the Green Belt will be maintained, and we believe this represents a sound and pragmatic approach to Plan making for Sevenoaks. The emerging Local Plan has been through an extensive and multi-stage peer review process from independent bodies to ensure this is the case.

The Council has sought to bring forward the plan in short order, in the firm belief that it is not possible to plan positively without a plan. If it is not adopted, development will simply continue at the current rate. In addition to being positively prepared, we also believe it is justified by appropriate evidence and has taken into account reasonable alternatives. It is effective, based on joint working and meets the objectives of the NPPF as a whole.

In summary, the plan before you today meets the tests of soundness set out in the National Planning Policy Framework and the Council therefore welcomes this public examination.