

Local Plan to 2030 Examination – ABC Opening statement to EiP

This is the first LP for the whole borough since the major changes to national planning policy that occurred at start of this decade. This context is especially relevant to Ashford given the town's designation as a regional growth area by the previous Labour government and how that was reflected in the Core Strategy of 2008. The challenge then was more to show how the town could grow quickly and the scale of infrastructure necessary to enable that to happen over a relatively short period of time. This was, of course, in sharp contrast to the policy adopted for the rural parts of the borough which were subject to very different growth targets.

There were, of course, many external reasons why the growth of the town planned for then has not occurred at the rate envisaged then – and I'm sure we will return to some of these during course of the Examination.

However, the demise of the regional plan-led system and the advent of the NPPF has therefore shaped this Local Plan, and it is the first for the borough to be produced without a higher tier plan being in place.

We recognise two key aims that now underpin government planning policy. Deliverability and flexibility are now fundamental aspects that should form part of any sound Plan and the evidence base assembled to support this Plan, we think, demonstrates that both of these elements are embedded within the Council's planning strategy.

However, it is also clear that the government's planning policy is not solely about delivery. There is an overarching need to ensure that development is sustainable. This means there needs to be a balance between the drive for new development and ensuring that the important elements that contribute towards the wider character of the borough and the individual settlements and countryside within it, are suitably protected. Essentially, we see that striking this balance is one of the key purposes of the Local Plan. Such a balance manifests in the location, scale and mix of the Plan's allocations and its policies to manage windfall development. The Council believes that balance has been achieved and it welcomes the opportunity for that belief to be examined here.

But this Plan should not be seen simply in terms of meeting quantitative needs. It also aims to ensure that the type of development that is delivered is of a good quality and will be fit for purpose now and in the years going forward.

In recent years, the Council has been at the forefront of trying to deliver high quality development (e.g. Chilmington Green design code and the use of independent Design Reviews) but also through the application of internal and external space and layout standards and the layout and design of parking spaces, to ensure that schemes deliver homes and places that people want to live in and which work functionally in today's world.

This also relates to the infrastructure needed to support new development and understanding how best this can be delivered for the benefit of new residents. The policy approach in the Local Plan seeks to ensure such infrastructure is provided through new developments where possible, on a fair and proportionate basis. We believe these

aspects are fundamental to good planning and the concept of sustainable development, without which the Plan would not be sound.

Preparation

The Local Plan has been shaped by consultation since the start of the plan-making process. The 'Plan-it Ashford' exercise which involved meeting community and interest groups to understand what was most important to them or their areas; local consultation events on the site submissions made in 2013/14; further local consultation events following publication of draft Plan in summer 2016 and the Main Changes in Summer 2017. The Consultation Statement (SD05) document in front of this Examination sets all this out.

The Council has also consistently published its evidence base on its website throughout the plan-making process so the basis for the emerging Plan could be transparent to all.

There has been early and continuous engagement with the principal statutory bodies on the Plan and this is evidenced by the Statements of Common Ground with those parties and the lack of any outstanding objection in principle to any of the proposed site allocations.

We have sought to accommodate the emergence of Neighbourhood Plans in several parishes around the borough by seeking to avoid making non-strategic allocations in parishes where the local Parish Council were actively bringing forward NPs.

Conclusion

This Local Plan reflects the context of how development is now coming forward. There are now clear signs of a fundamental change in attractiveness of the town centre as a place to invest and develop; new infrastructure is in place or is soon to be, and several housing sites on the periphery of the town are now starting to come forward. All this is a demonstration that Ashford can fulfil its role in the Plan and provides empirical support for the wider strategy of the Plan.

This Plan builds on the foundations established by the Core Strategy and its subsequent daughter DPDs. But there are important differences – there is a greater scope of rural locations where housing is allocated; there is a more flexible approach to proportionately scaled development in rural areas; and there is a sharper focus on the how and when sites may come forward. It is not just aspirational but deliverable.

The Council considers that this Plan has been positively prepared, and has not shied away from difficult decisions and does promote a scale and pattern of growth that will be sustainable whilst also providing opportunities for new residential development at a wide range of rural settlements and in other accessible locations.

In conclusion, we consider this Plan provides a sound basis for delivering growth in the borough through to 2030 and we commend it to you.