



Sittingbourne Town Centre Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)

Statement of Consultation Report

June 2022

The Sittingbourne Town Centre - Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) Statement of Consultation Report

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1. Introduction

With a view to scope the approaches for the future of Sittingbourne town centre in 2020 the Council held a workshop for Councillors. The findings formed the basis of a long-term strategic vision for Sittingbourne that meets the needs and aspirations of a broad range of users and stakeholders to achieve the ambition to shape a place where people want to live, work and spend their leisure time within an active high street.

2. The Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) Challenges

It is known that our town centres are changing - the way in which we shop, move, socialise and interact has changed and will continue to change even more in the wake of Covid-19. Town centres therefore need to adapt and reposition themselves in order that they continue to thrive and meet the needs of their local communities. Sittingbourne town centre requires refurbishment, regeneration and public realm investment. Like many smaller towns it has struggled in the recessionary period, suffering declining sales, footfall and closures. The Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) is a proactive plan to transform the place, looking not only to future retail and development, but to other uses and activities, that may draw people, enhance prosperity and improve the look, role and general feel of the town centre including the needs of businesses, landowners, traders and the community.

3. The Supplementary Planning Document Proposals

The Supplementary Planning Document was developed over 2021 and summarises the drivers for change as the follows:

1. **Residential** - more residents in and around the Town Centre,
2. **Creative, cultural, social** – historic environment, more culture, arts, creativity, health and education,
3. **Employment** – employment creation and retention, and
4. **Events and activities** – events, activities, family use, temporary pop-ups.

The aim was for a highly graphic explanatory document that should excite the community, provide guidance and certainty for the stakeholders such as landowners and set a steer with regards planning and design policy for the Council's Development Management role.

4. Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) adopted 2018

A Supplementary Planning Document has is a formal consultation process as set out in the Statement of Community Involvement as follows:

Supplementary Planning Documents

Document and Stage	What Will We Do	Who Will We Consult	How Will We Consult
Supplementary Planning Documents			
<p>Stage 1: Prepare Supplementary Document (SPD)</p> <p>Evidence and ideas are gathered, and alternative approaches are considered</p>		<p>We will consult with those individuals and bodies who are relevant to the successful implementation of the SPD.</p> <p>We may consult more widely if it is considered relevant and appropriate to do so.</p>	<p>This will depend on the type of SPD. The council will consider using one or more of the following methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Correspondence by letter or email • Workshops or focus groups • Meetings • Drop in events
<p>Stage 2: Publish draft Supplementary Planning Document</p> <p>The council is required to consult on the SPD. Publishing a draft provides opportunity to get comments on the document before it is finalised.</p>	<p>As a minimum, the council will comply with the relevant planning regulations</p> <p>We will consult for at least 6 weeks and make copies of the draft SPD available for inspection on the website and at the council's main office and other locations as appropriate to the type of SPD</p> <p>We will make all the comments received publicly available</p> <p>We will consider all representations received.</p>	<p>We will consult the specific, general and other bodies who are relevant to the topic of the SP being prepared</p> <p>We will consult residents or persons carrying on business in the area where it is appropriate to</p>	<p>This will depend on the type of SPD. The council will consider using one or more of the following methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making documents available on the council's website and at inspection points • Workshops or drop in events • Correspondence through letters or emails • Leaflets/Newsletters • Targeted measures for hard to reach groups relevant to the topic of the SPD
<p>Stage 3: Adoption</p> <p>Once the council has taken into account comments and made any changes to the document, it will be adopted by the council's Cabinet. An independent examination is not required.</p>	<p>We will prepare a consultation statement</p> <p>We will adopt the SPD</p> <p>We will publish the SPD, consultation statement and an adoption statement on the website</p> <p>These documents will also be available for inspection at the council offices and other locations as appropriate to the type of SPD</p>	<p>We will send a copy of the adoption statement</p> <p>to any person who has asked to be notified of the adoption.</p>	

The consultation that took place for the STC included the following:

Statutory Consultation

- Online Questionnaire– 6 weeks.
- Hard copies of questionnaire made available at Libraries (subject to public health guidelines).

- Specifically contact Statutory Consultees, persons carrying out business and activity in the area and resident's of the town centre – 800 letters were issued advising of the consultation.
- Contact with journalists and the press.
- Alert the community that consultation is taking place through SBC's website, social media and letter drops.

Informal Consultation

- In 2021 meetings were held with landowners with sites of significant opportunity.
- 7th February to 21st March 2022 unmanned exhibition through-out the consultation period with a series of exhibition boards held in three town centre location including The Forum, Sittingbourne Library and Swallows Leisure centre before returning to The Forum again.



Exhibition at The Forum

- Comments could be made on the council website, by email to Lpcomments@swale.gov.uk or by post to Planning Policy Team at Swale House.

Future Programme

September 2022 – SPD Consultation report to Planning & Transport Policy Working Group and Policy & Resources Committee, and

Autumn 2022 – adoption of the SPD by Full Council.

5. Summary of the Consultation Feedback of the SPD

Feedback was received both electronically from members of the community as well as statutory consultees. There were twenty-four respondents in total of which three used the portal. The full list of consultees and their detailed comments are available to view on the Council's website. A summary of the main points is as follow:

Retail and business

The feedback on the retail offer in Sittingbourne is polar from recognising that the town should play to it's strengths which lies in budget shopping whilst also having the ambition for "specialty retail" and the café culture, flexible working space, improved street market, art galleries, event space and

night-time economy. However, there is a consistent message to stop empty shops and prevent the rate of loss of businesses to out-of-town shopping and neighbouring towns and cities.

It is suggested that the Council must play a larger role in addressing supply/demand imbalance. Incentivise opportunities for retailers to come into the town centre by reducing Business Rates, the Council purchasing leases on shops and renting them out according to the retail needs of the town.

Rodmersham Town Council feedback the following: "residents constantly tell us they want nice cafes, good quality clothing boutiques, specialist shops on their doorstep, shops where local food is sold etc. as they no longer want to drive to towns further away we want an attractive town with good quality retail."

Public realm, biodiversity and car parking

There is large support for overall public realm improvements, 'greening', tree planting and a storm water drainage strategy through the town centre although there is also scepticism that it can be achieved. Particular support is for the provision of street tree planting throughout the Spring Street, High Street, St Michael's Avenue, Avenue of Remembrance, Central Avenue, Eurolink Way and Bell Road open space as well as the provision of space for wildflower meadows, wildlife ponds etc. A request for clarity over the funding of public realm improvements, such as S106, is required.

There is concern about the loss of car parking both in the car parks and on-street with some call for cheaper or more free car parking. There is particular concern that the loss of free parking on Avenue of Remembrance will lead to an increase in parking on Albany Road and Connaught Road for example, however, free parking in the town centre should not be an option as there is plenty of well priced car parking available in the town centre. Residents request continuation of free public toilet access.

Environment

Better explanation of "climate change and ecological emergency" required.

Housing

Despite some support for the need for more housing, especially affordable, there is concern that more housing will increase the strain on local resources especially roads and medical facilities. More hospitals and school needed to cope with the increase and this needs to come before homes are built.

The overall support for more housing in the town centre, to take the pressure off of green field development in our countryside, is both as mixed-use schemes and through conversion of upper floors of retail but care to be taken so as not to replace retail with residential.

Town centre living needs to be a good mix of rented/private but also across the budgets including high end and also with a good proportion of disabled and elderly accommodation. Key worker accommodation should also be provided in the town centres.

Sport England is supportive of the objectives of the SPD, however they recommend a further objective that enables people to live an active and healthy lifestyle.

Mixed use

There is mixed support for the new mixed-use development at Bourne Place and for the proposed Community Quarter on Central Avenue as well as improvements around The Forum. The scepticism relates to the need to get the type of uses right, in the right place with the correct supporting infrastructure. For example, a consultee fed back that “the area at the back of Wilkos should be made better use of economically and visually”. In addition, encouraging economic activity not just food and beverage but late opening shops, art galleries, exhibitions, events etc and encourage footfall would make the town centre feel more vibrant and lived in.

There is support for new health facilities in a range of forms in the town centre from a new hospital, to GPs surgery to CCG facilities and so forth. In addition, there is support for new community facilities due to the loss of Phoenix House. Appleyard currently functions as a meeting place for community groups but concern is expressed about the role of Applyard as a community centre. There is also mixed support, both for and against, for an adult education centre.

Across the board there is positive support for the promotion of heritage in the town especially for it’s role in revitalisation of the town centre. It really important the SPD reflects the new Sittingbourne Conservation Area Character Appraisal 2011 and its new boundaries. A specific Heritage and Visitor Centre is requested by some.

Movement

The largest current complaint regards too much traffic congestion in the town centre with new development equated with further grid-lock and bottle-necks in the future as summarised as follows: “aspirations for people to walk, cycle or take a bus are laudable but in truth people have cars and need to get from one end of town to another”. Specific support for improvements to St Michael’s Road, Avenue of Remembrances and Central Avenue and to Eurolink Way must be carried out in conjunction involving wider highways strategy for the town involving alternative routes, measures to restrict HGVs etc

However other consultees identify the benefit of improvements to public transport, such as real-time bus information; provision of good, safe cycle routes particularly with electric cycles; overall support for the “20 minute neighbourhood concept” for the town with improvements to pedestrian movement especially where crossing the railway and improvements to the alleys provide an important pedestrian network as well as having a role in economic regeneration where promoted for use by the businesses such as creative industries.

Concern is expressed that, despite Sittingbourne being an historic town and in need of beautification coupled with the Council’s strategy for biodiversity opportunity as an element of the Climate Emergency, it should not be at the expense of vehicular access or on-street parking spaces facilitating passing trade for retailers on the High Street therefore, the request is to ensure continued ability to drive through and park short-term in the High Street. However,

National Highways request the Council add National Highways and Kent County Highways as key stakeholders. The SRN impacts of an additional 850 dwelling in/around the town centre as part of the new Local Plan will need to be assessed

General

There is an overall majority support expressed for the SPD and the vision set out within the document with strong support for the accompanying extensive objectives. However, two respondents expressed concern that the plan is 'divorced from reality'.

Due to the historic nature of the town and its important role within the borough, there is support for commitment to high quality design as set out in the document. However, there is a request to be more specific with building heights and landmarks with a suggestion of 6-8 storeys and an emphasis on how actual building heights can be determined through the DM process.

To prevent antisocial behaviour a request is made to ensure a visible Police presence (not part-time PCSOs).

Lastly, important planning comments include that a future CIL charge shouldn't render the aims and objectives of the SPD unviable and the SPD will need to coordinate with the emerging Local Plan.

Summary of the Changes to the SPD

The number of changes proposed to the SPD as a result of the consultation is minimal. A summary of the respondent and any resulting changes is as follows:

Clarification of National Planning Policy Framework reflected in change to text as follows:

4.1 The NPPF identifies that planning policies should define the extent of town centres and the primary shopping area. The only change to the Town Centre Boundary is minor and removes residential terraces on Park Road.

SBC Heritage Officer – Conservation Area now includes East Street. Historic England have good relevant reference documents to be referred to. *Conservation Area and Listed Buildings* plan to be updated to reflect new Conservation Area. Text changes as follows:

9.3 The Conservation Area has been extended to include East Street.

9.4 The documents "Places Strategy" 2019 [HE - Places Strategy \(historicengland.org.uk\)](https://historicengland.org.uk) and "Streets for All" 2018 <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/streets-for-all/heag149-sfa-national/> both by Historic England have been prepared in accordance with the Historic England 'Place making Strategy Brief' (Dec 2017) and 'Place making Strategy Project Design' 2018) and with reference to the 'Wellbeing and the Historic Environment' report 2018 providing a wealth of useful guidance with examples of good design.

Cllr Rowles – new wording regarding No 34 High Street to reflect cultural activities undertaken under the new lease by Swale Media Arts Centre CIC. Text changes as follows:

19.5 Sittingbourne has cultural facilities within the town centre including the Avenue Theatre on Central Avenue, the heritage centre within the Forum, a local museum on East Street and the cultural centre No.34 The High Street. Further investigation into future opportunities for cultural facilities is required building on existing town centre facilities and the new Dolphin Barge Museum on the Creek.

Development Management Officers - Clarification of the building height policy requested. Text changes as follows:

31.1 Bullet 2. Medium height buildings will be accommodated to the north and south of the town centre and around Central Avenue. Appropriate heights are likely to be between four and six storeys.

31.1 Additional bullet 6. Applications will include a 3-D massing and building height study to explain and justify the building heights in the context of the submission site, the existing built form and any other submissions within the town centre within the public arena such as Planning Applications and Swale Rainbow Homes Ltd data.

Active Travel Officer – Use of the High Street by vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians. Text changes as follows:

33.1. Add the following additional text: In the future further review and consultation of closing the High Street to vehicular traffic at different times of the day and evening will be undertaken.

Network Rail – include proposals for some form of footbridge from north Sittingbourne to the railway station. Text changes as follows:

33.2 Bullet 5. A particular challenge is the pedestrian and cycle connectivity to the town centre and railway station to and from the north via Crown Quay Lane and Milton Road as the railway line is a barrier to movement. To facilitate better use of the railway station by residents from the new residential developments in the north and by people accessing Eurolink, Ridham and Kemsley for employment Network Rail are planning improvements to pedestrian and cycle movement below the railway line bridges and provision of a pedestrian footbridge over the railway line from the north to better access the railway station. Similarly, to St Michael's Road, Eurolink Way will be more pedestrian and cycle friendly with new tree-lined, wider provision to encourage people to walk in the north of the railway line.