

Leader's Statement to Full Council – Wednesday 17 February 2016

Local Plan Update

A report on the Inspector's Interim Findings and the next steps in the Local Plan process will be made to the Local Development Framework Panel of 25 February. The purpose of these Interim Findings is to give the Council an early steer on the new housing target for the Local Plan, and the development strategy.

The Inspector has provided a clear recommendation that the housing target be increased to 776 dwellings per annum, and that the Council should proceed to allocate sites to meet this revised target. This clarity will help officers put the necessary work in hand.

The key headlines we have already received are:

- the dwelling target will be 776 dwellings per annum, and the Council should proceed to allocate sufficient additional sites to meet this new target;
- the Local Plan period is revised to 2014-31, making a total housing target of 13,192 dwellings over the whole of the 17 year period;
- the evidence base, particularly the Strategic Housing Market Assessment and Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment, were found to be NPPF-compliant and sound;
- the Plan's settlement strategy of two distinct planning areas is confirmed, with the focus of development on the Kent Thames Gateway part of the Borough. A "proportional" boost to allocations in Faversham and rural areas in a sensitive way, without detriment to the overarching settlement strategy, is also recommended;
- the Inspector indicates that the new housing need figure can be met without incursion on local landscape designations, but notes that this does not preclude use of countryside gap areas;
- the Duty to Cooperate with neighbouring districts and key service providers during Plan preparation, and on the additional work to inform proposed modifications, has been found to be met; and
- there is consequently no need to rely upon an early Local Plan Review, and the Plan should plan positively for the full period through to 2031.

There are some further detailed Interim Findings from the Inspector due late February / early March, which will expand on these 'headlines' and other matters discussed at the Examination in Public last autumn. This will form the lion's share of the Proposed Modifications for the Plan. The Council will then need to identify sufficient sites and work up new housing allocation policies to meet the new target.

Proposed Modifications to the Plan will be presented to an LDF Panel in late May (date tbc). There will then be a six week public consultation on them in the summer.

It is important to note, however, that the Examination in Public is technically still open, and the results of the public consultation will go back to the Inspector (not the Council) for consideration. Depending on those responses, she may then decide to reconvene the Examination Hearings for a few days in the autumn, before issuing her Final Report.

Our Inspector has taken a very pragmatic approach, both in her advice for new research before the hearings, and in her recommendations after them. Whilst we will have some difficult decisions to make, it is gratifying that the Council's new research and the strength of its preferred development strategy have been confirmed. This was in the face of strong arguments from the developers for annual housing targets as high as 1,100 dwellings per annum.

We have consequently been able to keep the Plan alive, and avoided the time and expense of having to return to the starting point. As such, the Council welcomes the publication of the Inspector's Interim Findings, and the summaries and recommendations therein.

The Council will commence work towards the Proposed Modifications to the Local Plan in accordance with these 'headline' findings, and with the confidence that we can now achieve a sound Local Plan.

Cllr Andrew Bowles
Leader