

Horsmonden Neighbourhood Plan – Overall Strategy Chapter

Sustainable development

The National Planning Policy Framework (**NPPF**) states ‘The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. At a very high level, the objective of sustainable development can be summarised as meeting the needs of the present [population] without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs¹.’

Horsmonden Parish Council (the **PC**), the lowest tier of government in the UK, has its own Sustainable Development Policy which states: ‘Through our actions and our behaviour, we aim to equally promote the three aspects of sustainable development: social; environment and economic whilst maintaining the character of the parish and without causing detriment to any aspect.’ For Planning this means: ‘all developments (large and small) are designed and built with sustainability in mind. Where possible, properties should include consideration to high sustainability targets in line with the government’s 25 Year Environment Plan that aspires towards a low carbon lifestyle.’

The Horsmonden Neighbourhood Plan (**HNP**) has been written with these goals in mind and will, in each chapter, set out how development can be achieved more sustainably within the parish.

The role of neighbourhood plans in planning

Planning in England is framed by the government’s National Planning Policy Framework (**NPPF**). However, in September 2020 the government released its Planning for the Future White Paper and is already making sweeping changes to town and country planning in England. In spite of this, the government appears to remain committed to neighbourhood plans, in particular supporting the work they do to improve the design of new developments. The PC has made a formal response to the White Paper which is available on the PC’s website.

Other challenges that the HNP will need to be able to respond to over the immediate and longer term include:

- **Climate Change** – The government is now committed to achieving Net Zero Carbon emissions by 2050. To achieve this a range of targets will evolve including new sustainable construction standards for homes by 2025, ceasing the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2030 and transferring from coal and gas generated electricity to renewables (wind, solar, wave).
- **Covid-19 pandemic** – The pandemic has produced severe shocks and will result in some lasting changes to our priorities. New challenges, opportunities, and accelerated rate of change may include a long-term switch from commuting to homeworking (full or part-time), increased importance of local services that people can walk or cycle to, wider pavements for social distancing and local open spaces for outdoor exercise, recreation and mental health.

More immediately, neighbourhood plans must have due regard to the NPPF and Local Plans drawn up by the Local Planning Authority (LPA), which in Horsmonden’s case is Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (**TWBC**). The Localism Act 2011 made provision for neighbourhood plans to have the same weight in planning decisions as the Local Plan – but only as long as they are in conformity with

¹ NPPF, February 2019, Chapter, 2, Paragraph 7

national planning policy and 'strategic' policies of the Local Plan. Neighbourhood plans provide additional, fine grain detail specific to very local areas such as Horsmonden.

Introduction to the Horsmonden Neighbourhood Plan (HNP)

In this first draft of the HNP, the HNP Steering Group (SG) and the PC set out a draft vision, objectives and a range of policies and projects and to ask residents and stakeholders (such as the borough and county councils, statutory bodies such as Natural and Historic England, landowners and developers) to give their feed-back. Based on this feedback a second draft will be drawn up and submitted to TWBC. Following further consultation, the plan will be independently examined to make sure it meets the required legislation and will then progress to a referendum. Everyone on the electoral register for Horsmonden will be able to vote on whether they agree or disagree with the proposed plan. If more than 50% of those who vote agree, the plan will then have the same status as the TWBC Local Plan and with the Local Plan and other Neighbourhood Plans become part of the overall Tunbridge Wells Development Plan and be used by TWBC to decide on planning applications².

This first draft is based on the extensive consultation that has taken place over the last two and a half years. The results of the consultation events and other activities that are listed below are explained in more detail in the following themed chapters:

- Village Visioning Event, April 2018 (**Visioning Event**)
- Development Exhibition, Autumn 2018 (**Exhibition**)
- Household questionnaire, Winter 2018/19 (**Questionnaire**)
- Evidence gathered by the steering and working groups 2019
- Themed community workshops that took place spring and summer 2019 (**Workshops**),
- Masterplanning and Design Guidance work undertaken by AECOM including the public workshop in Autumn 2019
- Housing Needs Survey undertaken by Action for Communities in Rural Kent (ACRK), January 2020 (**HN Survey**)
- Site Options Assessment undertaken by AECOM, October 2020 (**Site Assessments**)
- Meetings with developers for the Brenchley Road (HO2) and Bassetts Farm (HO3) sites.

Vision for Horsmonden

At the Visioning Event residents worked together in groups to develop a range of possible visions for what Horsmonden should be like in 15 years' time, the length of the neighbourhood plan. One of these visions had the right balance of valuing the best from the past and embracing positive change:

"In 15 years' time, Horsmonden will be a village that has retained its character, community spirit and rurality but that has embraced new technologies and social and economic opportunities. It will have diversified to allow improvements in transport, housing, and leisure, to cater for all members of the community."

We would like your views on this vision (using our online survey or the response form on the back of the summary leaflet). The vision and other consultation findings have been used to develop a series of objectives for each chapter that, together with the supporting evidence and policies, will make up the land-use elements of the HNP (i.e. those elements that will regulate the way that land in Horsmonden can be used and developed). Other issues of importance to Horsmonden could be

² The parish council will remain a consultee but not a decision maker on planning applications.

addressed through projects or actions that were identified in consultation events and are set out in an appendix to the Neighbourhood Plan.³

For each of the themes in the HNP, an objective has been drawn up to assist in achieving the vision for that theme. Below are the objectives and a short description of the strategy for each theme:

Access and movement

Objective: To improve access and movement across the parish, to create a ‘walkable village’ for all, including residents of new developments.

Although the HNP is unable to rectify existing issues, it will seek to ensure that residents and visitors of new developments, the able, disabled, very young and elderly are able to walk, cycle or otherwise safely access village services and facilities such as the shops, pub and primary school without recourse to the car, reducing congestion on roads at peak times and reducing the risk of accidents, particularly at the cross-roads.

Business and employment

Objective: Provision should be made for businesses to expand and flourish.

A common concern was that Horsmonden should not become simply a dormitory for people working in Maidstone, Tunbridge Wells or London. The pandemic has driven homeworking opportunities, which are expected to be long-lasting to some degree. This will enable more people to support local businesses such as the pub and shops. The potential for a new enterprise or business hub, building on the success of the existing Business Centre, has also emerged for business start-ups or simply for home-based workers to get out of the house, network or share facilities. A final goal is for people employed locally to be able to buy a home close to where they work.

Community, Health and Leisure

Objective: New development should bring with it the opportunity to provide improved community, health and leisure facilities to existing and new residents of the parish.

Horsmonden has a strong community spirit and this is reflected in the large number of groups and activities that take place. Lack of parking at the current village hall and other halls such as the social club and church halls, is a limiting factor, and the condition of some buildings in particular St. Margaret’s Church Hall, is also a concern. The HNP will consider whether the development of a new village hall and medical centre can be achieved within the plan period.

Design and style

Objective: To provide general design guidance and policies that can be applied to any new development proposals in the parish to help ensure that they are sustainable and in keeping with local character.

With the historic Heath and conservation area at its centre, over 100 listed buildings, strong links to iron making (Furnace Pond), Jane Austen’s family and hop growing (oast houses and Hop Pickers’ railway line), Horsmonden is a village with immense character. New development should reflect this character, respond sensitively to its location on the edge of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and at the same time be environmentally efficient and of high quality.

³ By law only the land-use aspects of a Neighbourhood Plan will be examined and therefore have legal weight, unless it is agreed that developer contributions are required to offset the impact of that development for example on roads, schools, health, social care or affordable housing requirements.

Housing and development

Objective: New homes and development should meet the needs of the local community, particularly for smaller new homes, should regenerate previously developed land, and affordable and accessible to village facilities.

High property prices and a predominance of privately owned homes means that some local people are unable to afford a home in Horsmonden⁴. At the same time, TWBC's draft Policy STR/HO1⁵ proposes that approximately 225-305 new dwellings be built on three sites (Furnace Lane, Brenchley Road and Bassetts Farm) before 2036. A housing site options assessment⁶ carried out on behalf of the PC found no alternative viable sites and identified issues with TWBC's proposed sites, in particular in relation to pedestrian access. Policies will seek to balance the potential benefits from growth on this scale, while ensuring that new and existing residents can continue to live safe and healthy lives and contribute to the vitality of the parish.

Landscape and recreation

Objective: To retain the distinctive agricultural heritage of the parish, protect views, enhance biodiversity, protect ancient woodland and green spaces and retain dark night skies.

Horsmonden is recognised as being set in a highly sensitive landscape. It is wholly set within Natural England's High Weald Special Landscape Character Area, with a large part within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It has beauty spots such as the church, Sprivers' historic park and gardens and Furnace Pond, all connected by the High Weald Landscape Trail. The HNP identifies local green spaces and important views that should be protected from development. It provides that new developments should enhance historically important but neglected areas such as the Hop Pickers' Line and should create new and publicly accessible open space for local people to enjoy.

A challenging planning landscape

A challenge that the HNP faces is that Tunbridge Wells are still⁷ in the process of developing their new Local Plan to 2036. TWBC undertook a Regulation 18 consultation on their draft Local Plan in the summer and autumn of 2019. The emerging policies in that draft Local Plan have yet to be examined by the government's Planning Inspectorate and may not become adopted policy until late in 2021 or even 2022. Changes set out in the government's White Paper "Planning for the Future" may bring further changes and so the HNP needs to be flexible enough to respond to these changes.

The status of the draft Local Plan has made one decision a particular challenge – namely, whether or not the PC (as the qualifying body for the HNP) should allocate sites for housing development, in preference to sites allocated by TWBC's Local Plan. In order to assist with this decision, a Site Assessment was conducted by AECOM⁸. This assessment reviewed all 24 of the sites put forward to TWBC in their Local Plan 'call for sites'. The sites were assessed against a range of criteria including whether they were:

⁴ Source: HN Survey

⁵ Local Plan

⁶ Site Assessments

⁷ Summer 2020

⁸ This was one of the several pieces of technical work commissioned by the PC in connection with the HNP. Such technical assistance was funded by Locality, which offers government-funded grants to those parishes preparing neighbourhood plans. AECOM were appointed by Locality to undertake the Masterplanning, Design Guidelines and Site Assessments.

- Available (is the site available for development?),
- Achievable (is the site economically viable for development?) and
- Deliverable (whether the site is likely or able to be delivered in the period of the plan before 2036).

Based on these and other criteria AECOM gave each site a score, using a red, amber, green (RAG) scoring. No additional or alternative sites were identified beyond those that TWBC has already proposed in their draft Local Plan for Horsmonden. Considerable constraints were identified for all three sites, in particular, in relation to the lack of pavements and the possibility of adequately providing these. Visual impact (including on the setting of the High Weald AONB) was also a concern. As at November 2020, this is the status of the three sites proposed by TWBC for development:

- HO1 (Furnace Lane) has been granted outline planning permission.
- HO2 (Brenchley Road) was rated as Amber by our Site Assessment. The plans so far drawn up by the developer to provide adequate pavements to the site were not considered to be proven.
- HO3 (Bassets Farm) was rated a Green by our Site Assessment, although some concerns remain regarding access by vehicles and on foot to the rest of the village.

TWBC housing policy for Horsmonden is identified as a “strategic policy”. As our Site Assessment did not identify any viable alternative sites, it is proposed not to allocate sites in the HNP. We have instead focussed on design, environmental sustainability, access and other issues listed under the objectives.