

Staplehurst Parish Council (SPC) commends Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) for aiming to complete its Local Plan Review in a time frame that avoids being allocated even more housing in the immediate future by the Government's new formula for housing need.

We remind you that we are one of the few parish councils that have a Neighbourhood Plan which our residents voted overwhelmingly to support and which we will use to inform our opinion.

SPC is pleased to see Policy SP11c protecting our local shops, community facilities and green spaces in our parish.

Regarding the 'Call for Sites', MBC has rejected all those sites north of the railway line including a Garden Village. This is very important to our parish as once the railway boundary is breached there would be no control over the spread of development. SPC thanks you for this. The council supports more employment land at the Homeleigh site in the Maidstone Road.

SPC also notes that most of the 'green' sites put forward south of the railway line are on hold.

SPC responded to the Call for Sites at the beginning of 2020, following a public meeting held about future housing in Staplehurst, with a strong "No" to all the sites except for employment (see Appendices A & B) for many valid policy reasons.

Staplehurst already has 700 homes being built out on three sites allocated in the 2017 MBC Local Plan. With only a fraction of these homes finished, the traffic has increased dramatically, especially at the crossroads. When planning permission was granted for two of these sites it was decided that any improvement at this junction was not a viable option. Residents are experiencing daily disruption as a result of development on the two sites, such as traffic issues, light and noise pollution, air quality and wear and tear to our community's rural lanes.

We appreciate that MBC has to allocate housing numbers but we also have to consider the future of our current residents alongside the needs of potential new residents. We also note that KCC and MBC have declared a climate emergency and further housing would seem to be in direct conflict with that position.

Added to this, Staplehurst has accommodated about 200 windfall sites which should be included in the 'numbers', with small pockets of development, homes being demolished and replaced with more houses, home conversions into flats, commercial sites demolished and replaced with housing, extensions built and subsequently sub-divided, and numerous barns and agricultural dwellings being changed to residential use. Our G & T sites have been subject to many sub-divisions of plots, which has added to our resident numbers and should also therefore be included. This increased residential population is putting an enormous strain on the creaking infrastructure of Staplehurst (roads, health facilities, shopping, education, parking, sewage, use of estate roads as rat runs and inadequate sports facilities). This means residents have to travel to be able to access facilities.

The A229 through Staplehurst will also be greatly impacted by the Tunbridge Wells Local Plan which will be allocating large numbers of housing to its satellite communities to the south of our village. This needs to be taken into account when delivering more growth to Staplehurst. We have asked Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Parish Council to review the number of residents which travel to access the railway station in Staplehurst when formulating its Neighbourhood plan.

Two "preferred sites" for Staplehurst generating a further 127 housing units

Land at Home Farm 114

SPC does not support this site for the following reasons: -

- This site is too far from public transport, schools, services and shops making it an unsustainable location, totally dependent on the car (against Policies SP23, DM1 Building for life 12 and the NPPF).
- To suggest the provision of a new bus route to make this site viable is financially unrealistic.
- This site will generate more traffic to the crossroads and to suggest that this allocation can pay for improvements here is at best optimistic. The significant changes previously suggested at the crossroads would totally destroy the rural character of the village scene (monument, Chestnut Avenue, historical housing).
- This site will also generate traffic over the dangerous Hawkenbury River Bridge with no provision for improvements to highway safety here. This is a priority on the Highways Improvement Plans for both Headcorn and Staplehurst. This will also increase the use of rat runs in the country lanes in this area.
- It is potentially another cul-de-sac estate which is against the Staplehurst Neighbourhood Plan (SNP) Objective 3 and Building for life 12.
- This site forms part of the Landscape of Local Value, being part of Staplehurst Low Weald (against MBC Policy SP17).
- MBC acknowledges that the northern part of the site is in Flood Zone 2 and so not suitable for development. Building on the rest of this site will exacerbate the surface water situation with its high water-table (against MBC Policy DM1). Staplehurst is currently experiencing unprecedented levels of flooding.

Land East of Lodge Road 066

This site has allocation for commercial use. SNP Policy H6 states that mixed use on this site could provide more employment with residential units. The parish council wishes to see 'live/work' units as rural courtyard employment areas with living accommodation above. SPC was represented at the Inspection of the 2017 MBC Local Plan and put a strong case for this to be accepted. Sadly, the Inspector chose to support MBC's allocation as a purely business site. SPC is now pleased to see that MBC is suggesting a mixed-use allocation. We feel that this development could be more imaginative and innovative with a mix of housing and business use as per the suggestions in our Neighbourhood Plan policy H6. It might be worth considering if the allocation of housing here could be increased in order to help compensate for removal of the 114 site.

It should be noted that SPC only supports this allocation if the Lodge Road 'vehicle link' to the adjacent site (Dickens Gate) is built (SNP Policy H6). This is considered a critical point. The council maintains that there is a benefit to the community through providing an alternative route for light traffic as is supported in the SNP. SPC does not want to provide access along this road for heavy goods vehicles, so recommends a width restriction to prevent this and reassure current and future residents. The SNP Objective 3 is to avoid any more cul-de-sac estates. SPC would expect all new buildings on this site to be 'carbon neutral'.

Employment

SPC is aware of the lack of employment offered across the borough in the recent 'Call for Sites.' Brattle Farm (214) did offer an employment and residential mix. MBC may wish to re-visit this site regarding the employment aspect, although from a planning aspect any housing here would be considered to be in an unsustainable location. Thought regarding public transport access should be considered to address this.

In summary, the lack of infrastructure as previously mentioned (parking, mixture of shops, good public transport, medical, education, sports facilities, drainage, sewage) means SPC currently cannot support

more housing in Staplehurst. Our residents continue to experience many problems related to these issues, even on the new developments, and therefore it is unreasonable for SPC to support further development until these issues are resolved.

Attached

APPENDIX A SPC's Response in January 2020

APPENDIX B SPC's Presentation to residents in February 2020