

Wealden Local Plan Update – 6 September 2017

Following the endorsement of the draft Wealden Local Plan by WDC Full Council on 22 March, officers have been progressing and completing the evidence base in order to propose an updated Plan to Members for the Representations stage of the process.

This has included significant work on:

- The Sustainability Appraisal (SA);
- Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA)
- Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) and Objectively Assessed Housing Need (OAHN)
- Infrastructure Delivery Plan
- Strategic Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment
- Economy Retail and Town Centre Studies
- Transport model
- Ashdown Forest Visitor Study
- Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment update
- Strategic Flood Risk Assessment
- Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Housing Need
- Summary of Master Planning and Neighbourhood Planning Work
- Green Infrastructure
- Open Space and Leisure Study
- Site Ecology and Landscape Study
- Burial Ground Requirement Study
- Viability Study

The majority of the Sustainability Appraisal in relation to the draft March 2017 WLP is now complete. All of the policies (and reasonable alternatives to those policies) have been assessed; however, some will require further review. The remaining work includes:

- An SA of the Plan as a whole – this will follow completion of the HRA
- An SA of the Plan in combination with other plans – this includes neighbouring authorities emerging plans and Town and Parish Council Neighbourhood Development Plans

In addition the SA does not reflect proposed changes since March 2017. These will need to be incorporated including planning applications granted and the implications of any significant new planning applications received.

One of the key elements required to complete this stage of the plan process is the HRA and any Appropriate Assessments required for Ashdown Forest SAC. Since March work has been undertaken on reviewing and updating the evidence base and incorporating feedback from a peer review of the evidence by national specialists.

The updated draft report, incorporating air quality and ecology evidence in relation to the Ashdown Forest SAC based on this work, was some 4 weeks late due to delays with the consultants and has only recently been received. This requires review by WDC officers and by Natural England to ensure it is comprehensive and complete before sharing any wider.

In addition draft reports have been received in relation to air quality impacts on the Pevensey Levels SAC and Ramsar Site and the Lewes Downs SAC. These include the in combination effects on these sites following the High Court judgement earlier this year. Again these draft reports will require review by Natural England and additional input from them and possibly other experts, to assess the implications and inform any Appropriate Assessments required.

These reviews by Natural England for all of the protected areas are required before the HRA can be progressed further for air quality. Whilst these are underway we are working with partners to complete other HRA elements that do not relate to air quality. It will be necessary for Natural England to review the draft documents before an indication of the timescales for completing the overall WLP HRA, and therefore moving to the next stage of the Plan, can be given.

In the meantime work is being progressed to assess potential mitigation and compensatory measures for the Ashdown Forest as part of the HRA requirement.

As a result of the issues highlighted above the timetable for the next stage of the Plan has been delayed. An updated timetable will be provided once the input from Natural England outlined above has been received.

It is recognised that the delay to the HRA and the consequent delay to the overall Plan is not ideal. However, the need to have a comprehensive and complete evidence base including a robust HRA and overall plan is paramount. Failure to have this in place before proceeding with the plan will be counter productive and ultimately lead to a longer process with less predictable outcomes.

The Council are continuing to update landowners, agents, developers and builders on a regular basis through the Agents Panel, Developers East Sussex, the House Builders Federation and the newly formed Ashdown Forest Forum. In addition Town and Parishes and neighbouring Councils are being kept informed through the Parish Planning Panel and the Ashdown Forest Officer Group.

Ongoing regular updates will continue to be provided as further information becomes available.

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