

Written evidence submitted by Hever Parish Council [FPS 007]

Hever civil Parish lies in the West of the Sevenoaks District, which itself is the western area of Kent, near to the boundaries of Surrey and Sussex (East and West). It includes the rural villages of Four Elms, Hever and Markbeece, 3,062 acres with a population of ~1,200¹.

The place-name 'Hever' is first attested in a Saxon charter of 814. In the parish church of St Peter (one of 3 Churches in the parish) is the tomb of Thomas Boleyn, the father of Anne Boleyn and grandfather of Queen Elizabeth I.

Sevenoaks District is 93% green belt.

The landscape of Hever parish is dominated by flat to gently sloping, open mixed farmland, large arable fields and is in parts seasonally flooded. The parish is entirely washed over by Green Belt, nearly 50% of the landscape is also within the High Weald AONB, of international importance being outstandingly beautiful and one of the best preserved medieval landscapes in North West Europe. The seismic shift in working from home patterns over the past 7 months make living in a rural area more appealing and these changes should be allowed for in plan making.

A report in 2017² rated the green belt as performing “strongly” - as an area in retaining attractive landscapes, securing nature conservation, retaining land in agriculture and also as a boundary – preventing urban sprawl.

As a Parish Council, we are statutory consultees to planning applications and take this role extremely seriously as one of the most democratic aspects of local government and engage with District and County tiers and associations on broader aspects of planning too, engaging in Local Plan proposals etc.

We welcome and support the Governments intentions of;

- Streamlining the planning process, with “more democracy taking place more effectively at the plan making stage” and introducing processes which greater certainty and speed to the actual construction of the appropriate approved applications.
- Identifying zones for an area base approach (growth, renewal and protection) but are unclear how re labelling will speed up house building from the current allocation terminology.
- Strengthening of planning enforcement powers and sanctions
- Using digital tools to integrate data, enhance efficiency and accessibility. This should not be at the exclusion of more traditional methods, but in addition to (see 2i).

- Improving the focus on design quality

We do however have concerns over the following aspects of the proposals;

The costs of operating any new planning system, should in the main be funded by those who gain financially i.e. landowners and developers, as opposed to local or national taxation.

The proposed improvements to almost exclusive online consultation would disproportionately disadvantage and undermine the communities who struggle with digital technology (due to lack of confidence, skills, a disability, poor resources or connectivity). In rural areas, the unfairly much maligned notice on a post / site notice is still frequently the first (and only) notification to locals of an application. Non digital approaches should continue in tandem with online consultations in order to maximise and *increase* engagement.

Hard copies for large planning applications are still required – poor broadband quality in rural areas limits the ability to study large plans.

Town and parish councils contribute a valuable and unique perspective on local planning with in depth local knowledge and a greater infrastructure and community understanding than any other tier of local government. Sevenoaks District Council recognise and support this retained role for town and parishes.

The use of workplace based house price to earnings ratio is not appropriate universally as not reflective in rural areas where there is a relatively high level of out commuting to urban areas in higher paid jobs³. Hever has its own train station with direct links to London Victoria and London Bridge.

It would be more accurate to use residence based earnings for these calculations.

The proposal to quadruple the size of development for which there is a requirement to include affordable homes, would be catastrophic, especially for rural communities. Communities with less than 3000 residents should be exempt from this change.

The main need in rural areas is for affordable rented accommodation. There is an acute shortage. In 2019 just 5,558 new affordable homes were built in smaller rural communities - less than one affordable home in each village⁴.

Creating competition between the proposed First Homes scheme for landowners will be unnecessary and unwelcome and lead to fewer affordable housing schemes.

Each new development needs to generate its own affordable rental units on site, rather than financial contribution, which will better serve local rural communities.

Rural exception sites should remain as the only form of exception sites in rural areas.

“For many rural households, finding somewhere affordable in their local community remains a barrier. Small developments of local needs housing schemes can provide affordable housing for local people, thereby enabling them to stay in their community and contribute to village life.”

December 2014, the Rural Housing Alliance

- Hever Parish Council Housing Needs survey 2018 67% of respondents have lived in the parish for over 10 years. 72% of respondents supported more affordable housing.

October 2020

1 2011 Census

2 2017 Arup report commission by Sevenoaks District Council

3 ONS report February 2020.

(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/868755/Earnings_February_2020.pdf)

4 RSN

- High Weald AONB High Weald Housing Design guide 2019
- SPD Sevenoaks Countryside Assessment (2011)
- National Housing Federation / RTPi