

Report to	Planning Committee
Date	8 August 2011
By	Head of Planning
Title of Report	Submission of Joint Core Strategy by the South Downs National Park and Wealden District Council
Purpose of Report	To inform Members of the representations made with regard to Wealden District's Proposed Submission Core Strategy and recommend that the National Park Authority agree to submit it to the Secretary of State.

Recommendation: That the National Park Authority be recommended to agree to submit the Core Strategy Development Plan Document of Wealden District to the Secretary of State.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At the Planning Committee Meeting held on 8th November 2010, the Committee endorsed the draft Wealden Core Strategy as the proposed strategic planning policy framework for that part of the National Park within Wealden District for submission to the Government following a period for representations on its soundness, with the proviso that a further report be brought to the Committee following the period for representations for the Committee to consider the representations made, in the light of which the Authority may wish to review its position.
- 1.2 The (Regulation 27) consultation period for the Wealden District Proposed Submission Core Strategy was conducted between 14th February 2011 and 18th April 2011. In total 1770 representations were received from 272 separate individuals, agents or organisations. All representations made will be submitted alongside the Core Strategy document for consideration by the Planning Inspector.
- 1.3 This report sets out the key issues raised with particular reference to those relating to areas within the National Park or policies which may affect the setting of the South Downs National Park.

2 Context of Wealden District

- 2.1 Wealden is a large rural district, with a large number of settlements, comprising small market towns, villages and hamlets. The five towns of Crowborough, Hailsham, Heathfield, Polegate and Uckfield are the larger settlements within the district, with approximately half of the districts population living outside of the towns. Larger settlements outside Wealden also play an important role for the residents of Wealden District, namely Brighton and Hove, Eastbourne, Tunbridge Wells and Crawley/Gatwick.
- 2.2 Wealden has significant areas of protected landscape including the South Downs National Park in the south west (7% of the District), the Ashdown Forest (Special Area of Conservation) in the north west and Pevensy Levels (RAMSAR site) in the south east. A large proportion of the north of the district forms part of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which, combined with the South Downs National Park covers some 60% of the District. These significant assets have been important factors when assessing the potential for and impacts of growth and development within the district.

3 Summary of representations received

- 3.1 The significant majority of representations received relate to overall housing numbers and to the broad areas for growth identified within the strategy. Other matters received proportionally far fewer comments. In terms of overall distribution, most supported the proposed emphasis on urban extensions but others sought a substantial increase in the rural distribution i.e. growth within villages. Some representations supported the proportional split between north and south of the District, which mirrors that proposed in the Regional Spatial Strategy, whilst others felt that there should be more growth in the north of Wealden.
- 3.2 Many of the representations received focussed on the overall housing target proposed in the submission core strategy document of 9,600 homes between 2006 and 2030. The figure of 9,600 homes includes 4889 which have either been built or have been committed through extant planning consents or deliverable Non Statutory Plan allocations. This is lower than the housing target set out in the Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East, also known as the South East Plan, which set a target of 11,000 dwellings in Wealden District between 2006 and 2026.
- 3.3 During the past 18 months there has been significant debate regarding the Governments proposed abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies. However, following two High Court judgements, the Regional Spatial Strategies remain in place and it remains a requirement under Section 24 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 that a Core Strategy is in general conformity with the Regional Spatial Strategy.
- 3.4 In order to accord with the requirement for general conformity with the South East Plan all relevant policies of the RSS need to be considered. Policy H1 of the South East Plan requires that Wealden should allocate and facilitate the delivery of 11,000 dwellings between 2006 and 2026, of this total 7000 dwellings should be allocated to the part of Wealden within the Sussex Coast Sub Region and 4000 to the remainder of Wealden.
- 3.5 However, with two large sites subject to the Habitats Directive situated within Wealden other policies from the RSS must be taken into consideration. Policy NRM2 requires that the environmental water quality standards and objectives required by European Directives are met and that the rate and the location of development does not breach 'no deterioration' objectives or environmental quality standards. Policy NRM5 of the RSS is also of relevance and states that "if after completing an appropriate assessment of a plan or project local planning authorities and other bodies are unable to conclude that there will be no adverse impact on the integrity of any European sites, the plan or project will not be approved, irrespective of conformity with other policies in the RSS, unless otherwise in compliance with article 6(4) of the Habitats Directive." It further states that alternative distributions should be considered that avoid adversely affecting the integrity of European Sites. In the event that a local planning authority concludes that it cannot distribute an allocation accordingly, or otherwise avoid or adequately mitigate any adverse effect, it should make provision up to the level closest to its original allocation for which it can be concluded that it can be distributed without adversely affecting the integrity of any European Sites."
- 3.6 As described above, a number of other RSS policies need to be considered in assessing the matter of general conformity with the South East Plan. A significant element of these allows some flexibility for Local Authorities in developing their core strategy and clearly flag issues of sustainability, environmental capacity and infrastructure. The degree of compliance with such policies is also part of any assessment of "general conformity".
- 3.7 Other key issues raised by the representations received include: *(a more detailed breakdown of comments received can be found at background document "Reg 27 Appendix of representations June 2011")*
- Settlement Hierarchy – whilst there was general support for a settlement hierarchy approach, some felt that their particular settlement classification should be changed. Several representations made reference to Heathfield and Maresfield being reclassified in a higher category. Some felt that the classification of settlements outside of Wealden

District was not appropriate (Eastbourne, Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge are classed as Primary Centres).

- Housing development in villages – Overall there did appear to be support for development but only where it is sustainable and commensurate with the size of the village and its capacity to support growth. The proposed distribution, which identifies the capacity for a further 455 to be delivered within the districts rural villages, was felt by some to be too high (at 14% of the overall total of 9,600 dwellings) and too low by others who proposed 30% of all proposed dwellings could be accommodated within rural villages.
- Development Boundaries – a number of representations felt that Development Boundaries should be retained, citing the inability of rural exception policies to provide housing, as a reason for this. Others felt that Development Boundaries should only be removed when the proposals map changes and retained where 50 or more dwellings are proposed.
- Location of development / strategic growth areas – Views were varied and often conflicting. Some representations proposed more growth than proposed for example in Halisham / Hellingly, Crowborough and Uckfield, whilst others felt levels of proposed development were too high, citing infrastructure capacity being unable to cope with proposed levels of development, as an important reason for this.
- Infrastructure – a number of representations received have either queried the capacity of infrastructure (both existing and planned) to accommodate the levels of growth proposed or the deliverability of what is proposed. This included road infrastructure (particularly A259 and A27 in the south of the district), the restricted capacity of water and waste water treatment works, particularly in the south as well as the impact of discharge of waste water on the Pevensey Levels Ramsar site.

3.8 Representations made with particular significance to the South Downs National Park, or the Setting of the South Downs National Park were limited. The South Downs Society welcomed references to the high quality environment of the District, including the National Park and to the National Park attracting visitors to the District and the need to increase visitor spend through appropriate means, while also seeking to relieve pressures on vulnerable areas. With regard to area specific comments, the South Downs Society welcomed the removal of Honey Farm location for development, the principle that strategic land release for housing be kept further away from the boundaries of the National Park, in particular “the wording of para 6.26 to the effect that impact on views from the downs limits the potential for urban extension especially seen against a rural backdrop north and west of Polegate, and that existing main transport routes provide firm limits to expansion in these directions.” They made several comments endorsing specific mention of the National Park / “downs” (in Policy SPO 1, WCS 13, and the Environment Section)

3.9 Representations made by Natural England were generally supportive of the document and the approach taken to: recognition of the importance of the environment, including mitigation measures that will be required; the settlement hierarchy; constraints of the Hailsham waste water treatment works and potential impact on the Pevensey Levels. They also welcomed the ‘recognition of the South Downs and High Weald designated landscapes but [were] disappointed to note there is no separate policy on landscape or that it does not feature more highly”.

3.10 It was felt that the potential impact of other sites on the setting of the National Park had not been recognised, following the removal of the previous allocation at Honey Farm. However, the Core Strategy document does comment that with regard to development at Polegate and Willingdon the “surrounding landscape is dominated by the chalk uplands of the South Downs National Park to the south west, forming a backdrop to Polegate and Willingdon. Panoramic views from the Downs limits urban expansion opportunities particularly against the rural backdrop to the north and west of Polegate”. It goes on to say that following the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) two broad housing locations were identified, one to the north of Polegate and the other to the south of

Polegate and east of Willingdon. The area to the north has been discounted and the second area, to the south and east, has been proposed in the core strategy, after conducting a Sustainability Appraisal of both areas.

4 Conclusion

- 4.1 The representations received were varied and often conflicting. The proposed core strategy has been based on evidence of housing land availability, the identification of housing and employment needs, sustainability attributes and the need to meet the stringent requirements of the Habitats Regulations. It is felt to provide a reasonable and balanced approach to planning for the future needs of the District. The document is felt to be a justified, effective and deliverable strategy that will effectively meet the broad Strategic Objectives of the Strategy and is in general conformity with the South East Plan.
- 4.2 It is therefore recommended that the Planning Committee recommend to the National Park Authority to agree to submit the Core Strategy Development Plan Document of Wealden District to the Secretary of State.

5 Resource Implications

- 5.1 The joint submission of the Core Strategy DPD will require staff and Member time to ensure equivalence of decision-making. Any financial costs incurred by the examination, publication and publicity of the Joint submission Core Strategy will be met from the planning budget.

6 Risk Management

- 6.1 Without a comprehensive, sound and robust planning policy framework for the National Park underpinned by up-to-date evidence the Authority risks losing control over inappropriate new development, which may be allowed on appeal, and losing opportunities to guide and facilitate appropriate new development.
- 6.2 These risks are significantly reduced by the timely preparation of a sound Core Strategy or joint Core Strategies and associated Development Plan Documents for the South Downs National Park. In order for joint adoption to be successful, there has to be a clear understanding of and commitment to pursuing a joint approach by equal partners.

7 Human rights, equalities, health and safety

- 7.1 There are not considered to be any human rights, equalities, or health and safety issues arising from this report.

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Appendices
SDNPA Consultees

Monitoring officer, Deputy Chief Financial Officer, Senior Solicitor,

Background Documents

Wealden District Proposed Submission Core Strategy
Wealden District Draft Core Strategy (report to Planning Committee
8 November 2010)
Reg 27 Appendix of representation June 2011, Wealden District
Council