Secretary@wkps.org.uk
Registered Charity No 261992

WKPS Parish Planning Brief 1 | August 2026
Understanding the Changing Planning System

Prepared by the Weald of Kent Protection Society (WKPS)
Editor: John Crawford, Member of the WKPS Council

This briefing has been prepared to provide impartial, evidence based information on strategic planning issues affecting communities across the Weald of Kent. It is intended to complement the local knowledge and practical experience of parish and town councils by providing strategic context on the planning issues that shape future development.

It complements "*Watch on the Weald" magazine*, which reports on WKPS activities and other significant issues affecting the Weald. This briefing focuses on strategic planning issues rather than individual planning applications or matters that are primarily local in nature.

Many issues affecting individual communities are influenced by national and strategic decisions on housing growth, infrastructure provision, environmental capacity and Local Plan preparation. Understanding this broader planning context can help parish and town councils engage effectively in the planning process.

This first edition focuses on:

- Understanding the changing planning system and community engagement
- WPKS Strategic Advocacy
- The changing role of local democracy in planning
- Planning applications, decision making and effective representations

1. Understanding the Changing Planning System and Effective Community Engagement

WKPS has launched this Strategic Planning Briefing as a 12 month pilot for parish and town councils across the Weald of Kent.

Its purpose is to highlight national policy changes, Local Plans, Neighbourhood Plans and other strategic planning issues that influence future development, complementing the local knowledge and practical experience of parish and town councils.

The planning system is undergoing significant change. The direction of travel is towards a stronger plan led system, nationally consistent policy frameworks and faster decision making.

These changes will affect how communities engage with planning and where opportunities exist to influence future development.

Communities are likely to have the greatest opportunity to influence future development through early engagement in Local Plan preparation, Design Codes and Neighbourhood Plans rather than responding only after planning applications have been submitted.

Local Plans establish the framework for future growth by identifying development locations, infrastructure requirements and policies protecting landscape, heritage, biodiversity and local character.

Design Codes provide further detail on the quality, character and appearance of new development. They establish locally appropriate principles for layout, design, materials, landscape and public spaces, helping ensure development reflects local character and achieves high standards of design.

Neighbourhood Plans remain an important community tool, allowing locally specific priorities to be established, although they must operate within the wider framework of national policy and adopted Local Plans.

For parish and town councils, effective engagement will increasingly depend on:

- Understanding planning policies and evidence
- Engaging early in Local Plan preparation
- Identifying infrastructure and environmental constraints
- Building evidence to support consultation responses

Future development decisions will need to consider not only land availability and housing need, but also whether infrastructure, utilities and the natural environment have sufficient capacity to support sustainable growth, while ensuring development respects landscape character, local distinctiveness and the vernacular of existing communities.

Local government reorganisation in Kent and Medway will also create a changing administrative framework. During this transition, communities will need to continue engaging with existing planning authorities while understanding future governance arrangements.

2. WKPS Strategic Advocacy

The WKPS engages constructively with Government departments, local planning authorities, infrastructure providers and other organisations on strategic planning, infrastructure and environmental matters affecting communities across the Weald of Kent.

Through consultations, correspondence and ongoing engagement, WKPS seeks to promote robust evidence based decision making and encourage sustainable development supported by appropriate infrastructure and environmental capacity.

WKPS advocates that:

- Local Plans should remain the primary mechanism for shaping future growth.
- Infrastructure should be identified, funded and delivered alongside development.
- Planning decisions should be supported by robust environmental and infrastructure evidence.
- Communities should have meaningful opportunities to influence Local Plans at an early stage.

WKPS supports planning reform that improves efficiency while maintaining democratic accountability, public confidence and the principles of sustainable development.

3. The Changing Role of Local Democracy in Planning

Government planning reforms are changing how and when local communities can influence decisions on future housing growth and development.

The planning system remains democratically accountable through elected councils, planning committees, public consultation requirements, examination of Local Plans and the right to submit representations on planning applications. However, reforms and changes in practice mean that the greatest opportunity to influence the principle, location, scale and design of development is increasingly during Local Plan preparation, before site allocations and planning policies are finalised.

National planning policy, legislation and regulations place increasing emphasis on a plan led system. Local planning authorities are expected to prepare up to date Local Plans within shorter timescales, identify sufficient land to meet development needs and establish a clear policy framework against which planning applications are determined.

For communities, this means that early engagement in Local Plan preparation, evidence gathering and consultation on development options are becoming increasingly important ways to influence future housing decisions.

Government reforms to planning committees, delegated decision making and appeals are intended to support faster decision making within the planning system. A greater proportion of applications may be determined by planning officers, with planning committees focusing on applications that meet defined criteria.

For parish and town councils, these changes are likely to influence how local knowledge and community views are most effectively represented within the planning process.

Local Plans provide the main opportunity to shape:

- Where growth takes place;
- What infrastructure is required;
- How landscape, heritage and biodiversity are protected; and
- What standards should guide future development.

Neighbourhood Plans remain an important community tool, allowing locally specific priorities and policies to be established within the wider planning framework.

Once sites have been allocated and planning policies adopted, the ability to influence the principle of development is likely to be more limited. The focus then shifts towards ensuring that proposals are well designed, comply with planning policies and provide appropriate mitigation.

This does not mean that local communities have lost their voice. Rather, influence is increasingly exercised through earlier engagement, evidence gathering and participation in the plan making process.

Parish and town councils should therefore focus on:

- Engaging early in Local Plan preparation by reviewing evidence, site assessments and emerging development options.
- Identifying infrastructure constraints, environmental considerations and community priorities before policies and site allocations are finalised.
- Maintaining up to date Neighbourhood Plans (where they exist) that provide a strong local policy framework.
- Building evidence to support consultation responses and representations.

Local government reorganisation in Kent and Medway will also change the future administrative framework within which planning decisions are made. During the transition, existing planning authorities and adopted Local Plans will continue to provide the basis for planning decisions.

When responding to planning applications, comments should focus on material planning considerations and explain how proposals comply with, or conflict with, relevant planning policies. Where appropriate, representations should refer to the NPPF, adopted Local Plan policies, Neighbourhood Plan policies, Design Codes and other relevant planning guidance. Design Codes can be particularly important in assessing whether proposals reflect local character, landscape setting, design expectations and the quality of development.

Evidence relating to matters such as highway safety, flooding, drainage, landscape character, heritage, biodiversity, water resource availability, infrastructure capacity and community facilities can assist decision makers and provide a stronger basis for influencing outcomes.

Parish and town councils may also find it helpful to maintain records of recurring local issues, such as flooding, highway safety concerns, infrastructure constraints, landscape change and the capacity of community facilities. Over time, this locally derived evidence can provide valuable support for consultation responses, planning representations and engagement during Local Plan preparation.

4. Planning Applications, Decision Making and Appeals

Planning Committee Reform and Decision Making

The Government has introduced reforms to planning decision making through the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025. The Government's stated aim is to support a faster and more predictable planning system, with changes to the way planning decisions are considered and determined.

The reforms introduce a National Scheme of Delegation, establishing a more consistent approach to determining which planning applications should be decided by planning officers and which should be considered by planning committees.

Under the new framework, decisions on whether applications are referred to planning committees will be guided by nationally defined criteria. This represents a change from previous local arrangements, where individual councils had greater discretion over which applications could be referred for committee consideration.

Planning committees will continue to have an important democratic role, particularly for significant or complex applications that meet the criteria for member consideration. However, as decision making becomes increasingly structured around delegated processes, the timing and quality of consultation responses will become more important.

As more applications may be determined through delegated decision making, the quality of consultation responses and supporting evidence will be increasingly important in informing planning decisions. Effective representations should clearly identify relevant planning considerations and explain how proposals relate to adopted policies. Representations supported by evidence are more likely to assist decision makers than comments that simply express support or opposition.

Early engagement with applicants and developers, where appropriate, can also help parish and town councils understand proposals and seek improvements before applications are formally submitted.

Changes to Planning Procedures and Appeals

The Government has introduced changes to planning appeal procedures intended to create a faster and more streamlined planning system. For planning applications submitted on or after 1 April 2026, a revised appeals process applies. Most planning appeals will initially follow the Planning Inspectorate's Part 1 Written Representations procedure.

The revised process places greater emphasis on the quality and completeness of information submitted during the original planning application process. Under the Part 1 Written Representations procedure, appeals are generally determined using the application documents, consultation responses and other information that was before the LPA when it made its decision. Significant new evidence will not normally be accepted unless there has been a material change in circumstances.

For parish and town councils, this reinforces the importance of submitting clear, relevant and evidence based representations during the original consultation period. The appeal process should not be viewed as a second opportunity to introduce new objections or evidence.

Effective community influence depends on early engagement and the submission of well supported representations during the original consultation process.

5. Making Effective Planning Representations

The planning reforms outlined in this briefing reinforce the importance of parish and town councils engaging early and providing clear, evidence based representations. As planning decisions become increasingly focused on adopted policies, Local Plans and supporting evidence, communities will have the strongest influence where they can demonstrate how proposals relate to the planning framework rather than simply expressing support or opposition.

A well prepared representation should explain the planning issues raised by a proposal, identify the relevant planning policies and provide evidence to support the points being made.

Preparing Effective Responses

Consultation responses should focus on whether a proposal complies with, or conflicts with, the development plan and explain the specific planning matters that require consideration.

Where appropriate, responses should refer to NPPF policies, adopted Local Plan policies, Neighbourhood Plan policies and other relevant planning guidance.

Representations are strengthened when supported by evidence relating to matters such as infrastructure capacity, highway safety, flooding and drainage, landscape character, biodiversity, heritage assets and community facilities.

Effective representations should also consider whether proposed development is supported by appropriate infrastructure provision, environmental capacity and realistic mitigation measures.

The most effective representations clearly relate local concerns to recognised planning considerations, explain how a proposal complies with or conflicts with adopted planning policies, and are supported by relevant evidence.

Why Evidence Matters

The planning system places increasing emphasis on evidence and policy compliance. General objections based only on the level of local opposition or the principle of development are unlikely to carry significant weight unless they identify relevant planning considerations.
Evidence based representations can assist decision makers in understanding the impacts of proposals and provide a stronger basis for decisions. This is particularly important as planning decisions become increasingly influenced by Local Plans, NPPF and delegated decision making processes.

Drawing on their detailed knowledge of local communities, parish and town councils are well placed to identify local circumstances, infrastructure constraints and environmental considerations that may not be readily apparent from application documents alone. Presenting this knowledge within the planning policy framework can significantly strengthen representations.

In the current planning system, the greatest opportunity to influence outcomes is through early engagement, supported by relevant evidence and clear reference to adopted planning policies.

6. Purpose of the Briefing Series and Future Editions

WKPS hopes this briefing provides a useful strategic overview of the planning issues affecting the Weald of Kent and complements the knowledge and experience already held within parish and town councils.

We welcome feedback from parish and town councils on the topics covered, the level of detail, the usefulness of the information and any strategic planning issues that are particularly relevant to local communities.

Future editions will provide updates on strategic planning, infrastructure and environmental issues affecting the Weald of Kent, reflecting emerging policy, new guidance and information from MHCLG, LPAs, infrastructure providers and other relevant organisations.