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Understanding Local Plans

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About the WKPS Parish Planning Briefing Series

The WKPS Parish Planning Briefing Series provides independent, evidence based guidance to help parish and town councils understand strategic planning issues and engage effectively throughout the planning process.

Why this Brief on Understanding Local Plans Matters

Local Plans will help shape the future of communities across the Weald of Kent for the next 15 to 20 years. They will influence where new homes, employment opportunities and supporting infrastructure are located, and how our towns and villages respond to future change.

For parish and town councils, this is one of the most important opportunities to influence the future of their communities. Decisions made during Local Plan preparation will guide future planning applications, making early involvement essential.

We recognise that planning can appear complex and technical, particularly for councils that may only become closely involved when major proposals affect their community. This briefing is intended to help make the process clearer and explain where local councils can make a difference.

Parish and town councils know their communities better than anyone. They understand where pressures are being felt, which places are valued and what issues may not always be visible from technical studies alone.

This is therefore the time for councils to understand what is being proposed, identify what can still be influenced and provide the local evidence needed to help shape the emerging plan.

Introduction

The recently published Edition 1 explained how the planning system is changing and why it is becoming increasingly important for communities to engage early.

This edition focuses on Local Plans and, more importantly, on the opportunity they give parish and town councils to help shape the future of their communities. It explains:

- The Government's Local Plan reforms.

- Why Local Plans matter.
- How parish and town councils can contribute.
- Neighbourhood Plans and Design Codes.
- Current Local Plan progress across the Weald of Kent.
- How to review an emerging Local Plan.

Understanding how Local Plans are prepared, enables parish and town councils to identify what matters locally and provide the local knowledge and evidence needed to influence the emerging plan. This local perspective should complement the technical evidence prepared by Local Planning Authorities and help ensure that the plan properly reflects local circumstances.

1. Local Plan Reform and Community Engagement

The Government has introduced reforms intended to strengthen the plan led planning system and provide a clearer framework for preparing Local Plans.

The reforms place greater emphasis on keeping plans up to date, engaging communities early and using robust evidence throughout plan preparation.

For parish and town councils, this reinforces the importance of engaging early and constructively. Local knowledge can identify opportunities, constraints and issues that may not be fully captured by strategic evidence alone.

Understanding the process, reviewing the evidence and identifying what can still be influenced at each stage will help councils make their contribution as effectively as possible.

2. The New Local Plan Making Process

The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2026 introduce a new statutory process for Local Planning Authorities preparing Local Plans. The process establishes a series of defined stages from the start of plan preparation through to examination and adoption, with greater emphasis on early engagement, evidence, readiness and independent scrutiny.

For parish and town councils, the significance of this staged process is that there are defined opportunities to influence the emerging plan. This gives councils the opportunity to contribute while the plan is still being shaped, rather than simply responding once key decisions have already been made. Following the published timetable and understanding the purpose of each stage will help councils identify when their local knowledge and evidence can have the greatest influence.

The revised process provides several opportunities for parish and town councils to influence the preparation of a Local Plan. Councils should follow the plan throughout its preparation and provide relevant evidence and representations at the appropriate time.

New Regulation Steps Introduced Under Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2026

STEP	WHO DOES WHAT?
Publish local plan timetable	**LPA:** publishes and maintains the timetable, setting out the anticipated and actual dates for plan making. **Parish council:** uses the timetable to plan its engagement and evidence gathering.
Publish notice of intention to commence local plan preparation Regulation 19	**LPA:** publishes a notice at least 4 months before plan making is due to commence. **Parish council:** uses this period to prepare local evidence, identify issues and plan its engagement.
Scoping consultation Regulation 20	**LPA:** consults stakeholders on how they should be engaged and what the plan should contain. **Parish council:** identifies local priorities, evidence and issues for the LPA to consider.
Gateway 1: self-assessment of readiness Regulation 21	**LPA:** prepares and publishes its self-assessment of readiness for Local Plan preparation. **Parish council:** has no formal role for this gateway. Reviews the published information and prepares for forthcoming engagement and consultation.
Consultation: proposed Local Plan content and evidence Regulation 23	**LPA:** consults for at least 6 weeks on the proposed plan content and supporting evidence, including the draft vision. **Parish council:** assesses the proposals against local circumstances, evidence and priorities and submits a focused response.
Gateway 2 Regulation 26	**LPA:** seeks observations and advice from the appointed person (on behalf of the Planning Inspectorate) on progress with the proposed Local Plan. **Parish council:** has no formal role for this gateway. Monitors the process and prepares for Regulation 27 consultation.
Consultation: proposed Local Plan Regulation 27	**LPA:** consults for at least 8 weeks on the proposed Local Plan and supporting documents. **Parish council:** makes its formal representation, identifying specific concerns, supporting evidence and proposed changes where appropriate.
Gateway 3 Regulation 31	**LPA:** seeks observations and advice from the appointed person (on behalf of the Planning Inspectorate) on whether the proposed Local Plan complies with the prescribed requirements. **Parish council:** has no formal role for this gateway. Its Regulation 27 representations should already have been submitted.
Submission Regulation 34	**LPA:** submits the Local Plan and supporting documents to the Secretary of State for independent examination. **Parish council:** may be invited to participate in the examination by the Inspector, depending on the matters under consideration and the Inspector's discretion.
Adoption	**LPA:** publishes and adopts the Local Plan following examination. **Parish council:** uses the adopted plan when considering future development proposals and monitors its implementation.

Regulation 20 Scoping Consultation provides an early opportunity to help shape the scope of the Local Plan.

Regulation 23 Local Plan consultation provides the key opportunity to influence its emerging content, strategy and evidence before the plan becomes more settled.

Regulation 27 Proposed Local Plan consultation provides a later opportunity to challenge the proposed plan and seek changes supported by evidence. At independent examination, those who have made relevant representations can, where appropriate, appear before the Inspector to explain and defend their evidence and representations.

The process also provides defined points at which the emerging plan is tested before it reaches independent examination. This makes it important for parish and town councils to understand:

- What is being consulted on.
- What evidence is available.
- What decisions have already been made.
- What can still be influenced.
- What local evidence should be provided.

Parish and town councils should:

- Monitor the Local Planning Authority's published timetable.
- Understand what each stage is asking them to influence.
- Review the evidence supporting the emerging plan.
- Contribute relevant local knowledge and evidence.
- Identify infrastructure, environmental and community constraints.
- Respond within the published consultation periods.
- Continue to engage as the plan progresses towards examination and adoption.

The key message is that Local Plan preparation is a staged process, with different opportunities to influence, test and inform the emerging plan at different points.

3. Why Local Plans Matter

Every Local Planning Authority prepares a Local Plan that establishes the long term framework for future development.

The Local Plan sets out the strategy for future growth and provides the policies used when determining planning applications. It identifies where development should take place and how housing, employment, infrastructure and environmental considerations should be addressed.

Local Plans should help ensure that development takes place in the right locations, where it can meet identified needs and be supported by the infrastructure, services and environmental capacity needed to create sustainable communities. For local parishes, these decisions matter because they will influence the character, services and infrastructure of their areas for many years to come.

Under the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2026, a Local Plan must contain a vision for the future of the Local Planning Authority's area and

no more than 10 measurable outcomes to monitor progress towards that vision. The vision should reflect the particular characteristics and circumstances of the area.

For parish and town councils, this provides a useful test: does the proposed strategy, policies and development locations provide a credible way of achieving the vision and its intended outcomes?

The August 2026 NPPF reinforces this approach, with greater emphasis on directing development towards appropriate locations and ensuring that plans provide for the homes needed by their communities. The evidence base considers matters including:

- Housing and employment needs.
- Transport and accessibility.
- Water supply and wastewater capacity.
- Schools, healthcare and community facilities.
- Landscape, biodiversity and heritage.
- Flood risk and drainage.
- The capacity of existing communities to accommodate future development.

For the Weald of Kent, an important challenge is ensuring that planned development is directed to locations where it can be supported by appropriate infrastructure while respecting the area's distinctive landscape, environment and settlement pattern.

For parish and town councils, the key question is therefore: where should development be located, and can it be delivered sustainably?

4. The Role of Parish and Town Councils

Parish and town councils play an important role in the preparation of Local Plans by contributing detailed local knowledge that may not be available through strategic evidence alone.

Their understanding of local communities, infrastructure, environmental assets and settlement character enables them to identify opportunities and constraints that should inform the emerging plan. This knowledge comes from understanding the community and seeing how a place works in practice, something that cannot always be captured in a strategic evidence base.

This local perspective is particularly valuable when considering whether proposed development can be successfully integrated with existing communities. Parish and town councils are well placed to identify:

- Settlement patterns and the relationship between neighbouring communities.
- Important views, landscapes and local character.
- The capacity of local facilities and services.
- Transport connections and accessibility.
- Community needs and existing infrastructure pressures.

Local Plans are supported by an extensive evidence base, but published evidence cannot always capture the day to day experience of a community or every local circumstance. Parish and town councils can strengthen the plan by bringing forward clear, factual evidence on:

- Pressure on roads and public transport.
- Flooding and drainage issues.
- Water supply and wastewater constraints.
- The capacity of schools, healthcare and community facilities.
- Landscape character, biodiversity and heritage assets.
- Local employment and economic needs.
- Settlement identity and the relationship between neighbouring communities.

Participation in the Local Plan process should not focus simply on objecting to development. It is about helping ensure that future development is planned in appropriate locations, supported by the necessary infrastructure and integrated successfully with existing communities.

Parish and town councils can make a valuable contribution by bringing their understanding of the community into this process, identifying what needs to be protected, where there are opportunities for improvement and where development may create pressures that need to be addressed.

Representations supported by local evidence and planning policy provide a stronger basis for influencing the emerging Local Plan than comments based solely on support or opposition.

5. Neighbourhood Plans and Design Codes

Neighbourhood Plans and Design Codes provide additional opportunities for communities to influence how development is delivered locally. They can help ensure that new development reflects local priorities and reinforces the distinctive character of individual places.

For parish and town councils, they provide an opportunity to build on local knowledge and community priorities, helping to shape not just where development takes place, but how new places fit into the communities around them.

Neighbourhood Plans

Neighbourhood Plans form part of the statutory development plan and enable communities to prepare locally specific planning policies that reflect their priorities and aspirations. Neighbourhood Plans give communities a clear and lasting way to express what they value about their area and how they would like it to develop. A well prepared Neighbourhood Plan can help:

- Protect local character.
- Guide the location and form of development.
- Identify valued green spaces.
- Support local facilities and services.
- Reinforce community priorities.

As Local Plans are reviewed, councils with Neighbourhood Plans should consider whether their plan remains up to date and continues to reflect current planning policy and local priorities.

Design Codes

LPA Design Codes provide a practical framework for achieving well designed development that responds positively to local character. They establish clear expectations for the design of new development and can cover:

- Building scale, layout and density.
- Materials and architectural character.
- Landscape and green infrastructure.
- Streets and public spaces.
- Biodiversity and environmental enhancement.
- Climate resilience and water efficiency.

For the Weald of Kent, Design Codes provide an opportunity to ensure that new development complements the existing landscape, settlement pattern and local distinctiveness. They can also help communities have a clearer say in what good design should look like in their area.

6. Local Plan Progress Across the Weald of Kent

Local Planning Authorities across the Weald of Kent are all preparing new Local Plans under the Government's revised plan making system. Although each authority is at a different stage of preparation, every Local Plan presents an important opportunity for parish and town councils to influence future development.

For parish and town councils, knowing where their Local Plan has reached is important because the opportunities to influence it change as the plan progresses.

The table summarises where each authority is now and what parish and town councils should do next.

Local Planning Authority	Current position (August 2026)	What parish and town councils should do
Ashford Borough Council	Notice of Intention published on 30 June 2026. The Scoping Consultation runs from 2 September to 23 September 2026.	Review the Scoping Consultation documents and submit evidence, particularly on community impacts, infrastructure, and environmental issues.
Tunbridge Wells Borough Council	Local Plan Review Scoping Consultation is underway from 14 July to 11 August 2026.	Continue engaging as further evidence and consultation stages are published.
Maidstone Borough Council	Preparation of the new Local Plan is underway.	Monitor the emerging Local Plan programme, review published evidence and participate when the Scoping Consultation is announced.

Parish and town councils should monitor their Local Planning Authority's planning policy webpages and published timetable so they do not miss opportunities to contribute.

The Local Plan will shape housing, infrastructure and environmental protection across Ashford for decades. A key challenge will be ensuring that future growth is supported by secure water supplies, adequate wastewater treatment, transport, schools, healthcare and other essential infrastructure.

The question is not simply where housing can be developed, but whether the infrastructure needed to support it can be delivered at the right time and in the right place.

Ashford Borough Council has confirmed to WKPS that it will work with South East Water and Southern Water throughout preparation of the Local Plan. South East Water's current Water Resources Management Plan concludes that water supplies are expected to be sufficient across most of Ashford Borough until 2030. Beyond that date, action will be required to increase supply capacity. As the new Local Plan extends to 2043, long term water resilience will therefore need to be considered alongside planned growth.

7. Reviewing a Local Plan

The consultation provides an opportunity for parish and town councils to explain what they support, what concerns them and what they consider should change. A clear response helps ensure that local knowledge and community concerns are properly understood when the emerging plan is considered. A clear response should:

- Identify the planning issue.
- Explain why it matters locally.
- Refer to relevant planning policy and evidence where appropriate.

- Use local knowledge to support the council's view.
- Clearly state what change, clarification or further work is considered necessary.

The aim is not simply to support or oppose the Local Plan, but to identify what should change and provide the evidence to support that view.

The practical message is to engage early to help shape the plan, use Regulation 23 to influence its emerging content, use Regulation 27 to challenge the proposed plan, and use independent examination to explain and defend the case where appropriate.

8. The WKPS Perspective

At WKPS, we are actively engaged in the preparation of Local Plans across the Weald of Kent, working constructively with Local Planning Authorities, infrastructure providers and other organisations to promote planning that is supported by robust evidence, appropriate infrastructure and environmental considerations.

We have engaged with Ashford Borough Council on the relationship between future growth and infrastructure capacity, particularly water supply resilience and wastewater infrastructure.

We have also responded to the Tunbridge Wells Local Plan Review Scoping Consultation, emphasising the need for clear environmental and infrastructure baselines, growth aligned with infrastructure capacity, and development guided by landscape character and environmental capacity.

WKPS considers that parish and town councils should test whether emerging Local Plans:

- Direct development to sustainable locations.
- Ensure infrastructure is identified, funded and delivered alongside development.
- Recognise environmental capacity and landscape character.
- Protect the distinctive identity of towns and villages.
- Strengthen the resilience of existing communities.
- Provide meaningful opportunities for communities to participate.

9. Looking Ahead

Understanding the Local Plan is only the first step. Edition 3 moves on to preparing parish and town councils for the Regulation 23 consultation on the emerging Local Plan.

It will explain how councils can prepare their local evidence, review the emerging plan and assess proposed development sites before submitting their consultation response.