

Examination of the Dartford Borough Council Local Plan

Opening Statement

9th June 2022

1. Good Morning Sir. I am Sonia Collins, Head of Planning Services for Dartford Borough Council.
2. The Borough Council is pleased to present the Dartford Local Plan pre-submission document September 2021 for public examination. The Council is very grateful to the Inspector for the notes and questions provided to date and the time he has no doubt taken to review the many documents associated with the Local Plan. The Council recognises that there are a number of issues in the area, which add to the complexity for the consideration of this Local Plan. The Council is also thankful to the Programme Officer for his support and assistance in organising the administration of the examination, particularly the support given to Dartford in hosting this virtual event.

Commitment to Plan led growth

3. Dartford Borough Council is fully committed to a plan led system and the Council is keen to build on the success of the existing Core Strategy 2011 – supported by 2017 development management policies - in driving forward economic regeneration and continuing to deliver new homes to provide for housing needs.
4. Dartford has a good track record of forward looking Plans, and delivering sustainable growth locations. There is an absolute commitment from Members of the Council both to the existing adopted Local Plan and to the new draft plan now under examination. Dartford's development strategy has boosted growth in line with Central government ambitions and the Borough has consistently met the national Housing Delivery Test. The submitted Local Plan has been prepared to positively maintain and update this successful approach.
5. This support across the Council to the Local Plan is, I consider, a result of the fact that the high levels of growth in the Borough have been planned carefully and delivered in accordance with adopted Local Plans. The Core Strategy plans for the delivery of mixed-use housing-led public transport orientated development (which seeks to minimise the use of the car) and also for the integration of new infrastructure to meet the needs of the new development in a highly sustainable way. This has been achieved utilising brownfield sites, which deliver a mix of housing typologies and associated facilities creating cohesive new and expanded communities. The Borough now hosts prestigious international employers and substantial economic developments, such as Crossways Business Park, Bluewater and The Bridge, and attractive new neighbourhoods, such as Ingress Park, Stone House, the Bridge and Castle Hill. Recent growth in

the urban north of the Borough has helped to support the economic resilience of the High Street. Whilst development currently being built out in the town centre itself is leading the planned transformation of the town.

6. The large-scale release of sites identified in the Core Strategy resulted in a long-term plan setting out a vision of a transformed Borough, with themes that resonated beyond the plan period. In order to do this the Borough Council had taken difficult decisions to achieve growth and regeneration. The Core Strategy provided for a significant Green Belt release (4.5% of the whole Borough area), much of this in the Ebbsfleet Valley area. The Ebbsfleet Development Corporation has, since, been established to progress the delivery of the community envisaged here and the Council through the draft Local Plan seeks to support this momentum and public investment by continuing to identify Ebbsfleet as a priority growth location for development.
7. The Council has proactively met the Government's agenda with regard to housing delivery and economic success, with strong housing delivery – especially during stable national economic conditions - and continued success in attracting employment (large and small scale). The growth achieved is in accordance with the Core Strategy, rather than via planning appeal, and therefore brings forward the benefits of planned growth, such as innovative public transport, new schools, new community facilities and major highway improvements. However, the impact of this growth on the local population of what is the smallest Borough in Kent should not be under-estimated:
 - Dartford has had one of the highest growth rates in the country (proportionate to the number of residents). Population growth totalled 10% in the five years to 2020, the highest in Kent and the second largest population increase nationally, outside of London. This was a continuation of a trend as population growth from 2004-2020 was 29% (compared to 13% for the south east region/ England as a whole).
 - A busy strategic road network within the Borough, which includes the Dartford Crossing, acts as a constraint to development and incidents on this strategic network regularly cause traffic congestion on the local road network impacting on the lives of the community living and working in Dartford.
8. The Council considers that the provision of supporting infrastructure is fundamental in mitigating against potential impacts of new development. The Borough's growth ambition, first set out in the Core Strategy, has proved to be effective, delivering and continuing to deliver major developments, of both homes and employment, together with associated infrastructure provision including the award winning Fastrack bus system - the continuing success of which is dependent upon planned development.

9. The Council considers it essential therefore that this long term plan led approach to sustainably located development and deliverable sites is taken forward in the new Local Plan.

The new Local Plan

10. The new Local Plan seeks to embed the current Dartford approach to accommodating sustainable development, which as I have noted puts a strong emphasis on planned development integrated with infrastructure in order to minimise the need for use of the private car. This is a fundamental principle, which underpins every decision made on a planning application by Dartford Officers and Members and is ingrained into the DBC approach. The new Local Plan builds upon the achievements so far and seeks now to tackle the challenges of Climate Change and places greater emphasis on the need for Active Travel to be embedded into new development and integrated with the existing communities.
11. The new Local Plan is concise but far-reaching, focussing on the provision of high quality development that meets needs in highly sustainable locations. It is intended to be flexible to change in the future whilst also providing clarity for investment and infrastructure planning. The draft Local Plan considers Dartford's own unique characteristics based on evidence (notably the Sustainability Appraisal) and forms proposals for sustainable development of the Borough, which is in line with national policy.
12. In summary the Local Plan needs to respond to a range of key Borough social and economic factors including:
- **A rapidly growing population** needing new local infrastructure, particularly for health and education.
 - **A population profile that includes a high percentage of children and young adults** who will require educational, employment and leisure opportunities, and access to housing.
 - **A sizeable workforce with high employment rates** but a limited choice of local high order/ professional job opportunities.
 - **High levels of mobility** that puts pressure on public transport and creates traffic/ congestion in the Borough contributing to pollution levels.
 - Requirements to support **healthy living** with the potential for greater walking and cycling, promoting clean air and access to the countryside and greenspace.
 - **An ageing population** that should have the right kind of community infrastructure easily available to meet needs
- (Para 1.34 of pre-submission Dartford Local Plan – September 2021)*
13. The new Local Plan expands on the vision for Dartford Town Centre, focussing on the opportunities that the town centre can offer whilst supporting a diversified economy and encouraging more residents to live within the town centre. It provides for future growth through maximising the use of brownfield sites, which

are already closely related to supporting infrastructure and which will assist in delivering the planned transformation of the town centre, so that it can fulfil its role as the community heart of the Borough. In the east of the Borough, the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation is bringing forward plans for the under-used land around Ebbsfleet International Station. The new Local Plan offers the opportunity to update the vision for development of Ebbsfleet following the creation of the Development Corporation, and to finally deliver the huge opportunity of Ebbsfleet Central, creating a vibrant and enterprising urban hub which will ensure a successful Garden City and integrate it into the surrounding areas.

14. The new Local Plan sets out a clear vision for the Borough at paragraph 1.35, which reflects the aspirations for change in the Borough and the Council's policy for Dartford's future. This is progression of the growth in the Borough and the new Local Plan adoption is critical to delivering this vision.

Local Plan preparation

15. Despite the increased complexity in delivering new Local Plans, reflected in the issues that neighbouring authorities have had in bringing their Plans forward, Dartford has sought to move ahead in collaboration with its neighbours in the production of this new Local Plan. The Council wishes to build on the momentum gained and enable the evolving vision for the area to be embedded in a new Plan rather than simply rely on the continued build out of existing permissions and existing allocations.
16. Local uncertainties in the form of the proposed London Resort and the designation of a new Site of Special Scientific Interest at Ebbsfleet/Swanscombe Peninsula have created some uncertainty in bringing forward this new Local Plan. However, the Council is committed to seeking to ensure they continue to have an up-to-date Local Plan on which to guide new development, growth and infrastructure whilst protecting the quality of life and character of the Borough.

Duty to Co-operate

17. Dartford, together with surrounding local authorities, has faced changing housing need requirements due to government policy changes. Additional uncertainty has also been created due to the inability of some neighbouring authorities to make any meaningful Plan progress in recent years. The Council feels that the Dartford Local Plan is a positive response to this prevailing uncertainty. Indeed, when adopted it could assist other Plans to progress and help other authorities meet their housing needs and contribute to the plan led growth in north Kent insofar as it provides a healthy surplus over requirement.
18. Dartford Borough Council has sought to approach the Duty to Cooperate requirement seriously and positively from the outset:

- The Council has formed good long-lasting working relationships with neighbouring authorities and agencies. This has been integral to strategic infrastructure planning, funding and delivery required to meet the needs of high level growth, and has been an established way of working across North Kent for many years, including working together to establish the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation.
 - We have considered the principles behind good collective engagement from the early days of plan making and the Duty to Cooperate, and actively sought to learn from and discuss issues with others.
 - We constructively shared information and held events with partners throughout evidence gathering and plan making stages.
 - Dartford has therefore built good relationships and open communication resulting in a series of highly positive agreements (Statements of Common Ground)
19. Positive discussions and areas of agreement have been secured by Dartford across strategic matters with a range of councils and partners as outlined in the seven Statements of Common Ground submitted. DBC has constructively sought ongoing clarification. However not one Local Plan in the adjoining area has been adopted following the adoption of the Dartford Development Policies Plan in 2017, albeit I note that the London Plan came into force in 2021.
20. The Council considers that one aspect throughout the progression of the Dartford Local Plan has been limited by material lack of clarity and information available on housing capacity and need in the wider area. The ongoing lack of data and certainty that has affected neighbouring authorities has created a situation with the potential to significantly hamper the production of Local Plans. This has driven Dartford's further discussions with partners over several years, and the continued requests by Dartford for additional dialogue and information which will be the subject of discussion in the opening sessions. Nevertheless, it still remains unclear as to whether and to what extent authorities neighbouring DBC will or will not meet their own housing need. The Council does not feel, however, that this is a reason to delay the updating of the Dartford Local Plan and so despite these uncertainties has continued cooperation and made a contribution to unmet needs to progress the Local Plan. This is regarded as consistent with government objectives of cooperating together and getting ambitious growth plans in place.
21. The evidence submitted as part of this examination shows, in our opinion, that Dartford Borough Council has engaged in constructive, active and on-going cooperation with partners on strategic matters. Also that, the Council has continuously sought the level of information necessary to enable an informed judgement to be made as to the extent of unmet neighbouring housing needs and the extent to which it would be appropriate to help meet them in the borough. Given the similar constraints, that DBC and its neighbouring boroughs have to contend with in terms of the Green Belt, this becomes especially poignant and important, particularly in respect of the need to demonstrate exceptional circumstances if there is the prospect to consider green belt releases.
22. Working collaboratively with partners, Dartford has taken a proactive approach to these challenging circumstances, sharing and taking on board available

information to enable the Local Plan to progress and reach agreements with partners whilst identifying matters about which more information and analysis is required.

Conclusion

23. In conclusion, the Council considers that they have risen to the challenges of delivery growth and successful urban regeneration in the Borough. There is political support to build on these successes and deliver further economic and housing growth in the Borough - where this is properly planned within the context of a new Local Plan and associated infrastructure delivery plan.
24. Therefore, Sir, we look forward to working with you pro-actively to demonstrate legal compliance, and to resolve any potential soundness issues, where possible, in order to move the new Local Plan forward.