



Possible Future Development Proposals

Frequently Asked Questions – March 2019

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There is currently a great deal of speculation and debate about possible future development proposals in and around Marden. Not all of the stories in circulation are accurate, so the Parish Council has prepared this briefing note for residents to clarify the situation.

Who sets planning policies in England?

The government's National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for England is available online here:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2. For rural areas, this states:

“To promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. Planning policies should identify opportunities for villages to grow and thrive, especially where this will support local services.”

The government's clearly stated objective is to significantly boost the supply of homes. Local planning authorities are required to demonstrate that there is sufficient land allocated in their area to provide a specified number of houses in their area over the next five years and for the life of their local plan.

How are planning decisions taken in the Maidstone area?

The local planning authority for our area is Maidstone Borough Council (MBC), and the Maidstone Borough Local Plan 2017 is available online at: www.maidstone.gov.uk/home/primary-services/planning-andbuilding/primary-areas/local-plan-information/tier-3-primary-areas/what-is-the-local-plan.

The local plan must be consistent with the general policies of the NPPF but it contains the detailed planning policies that are used when MBC makes planning decisions.

As residents will be aware, the Marden Neighbourhood Plan is shortly to be submitted to MBC. This is a community produced planning document which is designed to influence development (but cannot contradict the local plan). The Steering Group will be providing further information shortly.

Most planning applications are decided by MBC planning officers but a small proportion are heard by the borough council's planning committee. This means that the issues are debated in public and your elected borough councillors make the final decision based on professional advice.

What is the role of Marden Parish Council?

The Parish Council is able to make recommendations about planning applications in Marden. However, MBC is not obliged to accept these recommendations, and any response based on 'local opinion' rather than material planning considerations (such as national or borough planning policies) is likely to be ignored. If the Parish Council's recommendation differs from the planning officer's view then the application can be heard at MBC's planning committee. It is possible for a Parish Council representative to address the meeting for a maximum of three minutes in the same way as applicants and members of the public.

MBC also consults with Parish Councils and the public when it is updating its local plan, and again it is essential that any responses are consistent with the NPPF otherwise they will be discounted.

Why are so many people talking about possible future development proposals now?

The Maidstone Borough Local Plan covers the period to 2031, but it is required by the government to update this over the next few years. The borough's housing requirements set by the government have also increased from an average of 883 homes/year to about 1200 annually.

In order to begin the Local Plan Review, MBC has issued a 'Call for Sites' about land which could potentially be developed for housing, employment and other uses in the future. Developers have also been specifically invited to submit proposals for urban extensions and new settlements as 'garden communities'.

This starting point may be open to misinterpretation, so MBC has made this very important statement:

Importantly, submitting a site through the Call for Sites does not mean that it will prove suitable for inclusion in the Local Plan Review or that it will get planning permission in the future.

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Some landowners and developers might choose to publicise their proposals but others may not.

What happens next?

The closing date for the Call for Sites is 24 May 2019, and MBC will then assess the planning merits of each proposal and produce a Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA) report for the Local Plan Review. Until that assessment is completed, nobody will know which sites will be judged by MBC to be suitable for inclusion in the Local Plan Review and which ones will be discounted from further consideration. The first public consultation on the emerging Local Plan Review is expected this summer with further consultations following in 2020 before the updated Local Plan is submitted for examination by an independent planning inspector in 2021 and adopted by MBC in 2022.

What is the Parish Council doing?

The Parish Council is committed to ensuring residents are kept informed as and when definite information about any proposed sites becomes available.

Details about the first of these proposed sites for a new garden community of about 2,000 homes on the northern side of the village was distributed with the Parish Council's Spring 2019 newsletter. However, this does not imply that the proposal is any way endorsed.

The Parish Council will continue to seek information about any other sites that may be put forward and communicate this to residents. However, caution is urged if rumours are heard from other sources as these may prove to be unfounded.

It will be responding to the SLAA report when that is published, with particular attention being paid to any proposed sites in Marden that MBC plan to take forward (although it may turn out that none are selected).

The Parish Council will also participate fully in all the Local Plan Review consultation stages to help ensure that the updated Maidstone Borough Local Plan works in the best interests of the community (subject to the constraints imposed by the government in the NPPF).

Can't the Parish Council just respond now?

Legally, Parish Councillors have to keep an open mind until all the issues are considered at a public meeting before responding to planning consultations or making recommendations about planning applications.

If a Parish Councillor gives the impression that they have already made up their mind before a decision is taken they cannot then vote without risking the council at best losing its influence with MBC and at worst being drawn into a legal challenge at Council Tax payers' expense.

It is appreciated that residents may find this apparent lack of a public stance frustrating, but it is in everybody's interest that the Parish Council remains able to take decisions on your behalf at the right time and doesn't get shut out of the process.

What can residents do?

Individuals and groups of residents are not bound by such restrictions and can make representations to MBC, either directly or through our borough councillors, at any time. However, depending on what committees they sit on, some borough councillors may also be unable to take a public stance on the matter in advance of a decision being taken.

You are also invited to attend any Parish Council meeting where such planning matters are on the agenda to help inform the decisions being taken, but as noted above it is vital that any objections are based on planning policy reasons rather than personal opinion for these to be taken seriously by MBC.

Of course, passions can run high when controversial planning issues are being discussed in meetings and around the village, but it is unfortunate that a number of inappropriate comments have been made in public and online so please respect the fact that other residents may not share some or all of your views.