

Housing Spatial Strategy Topic Paper

Profile of Maidstone

1.1 The borough of Maidstone covers approximately 40,000 hectares and is situated in the heart of Kent. Maidstone is the County Town of Kent and approximately 75% of its 171,800 population live in the urban area. The Maidstone urban area, located in the north west of the borough, has a strong commercial and retail town centre, with Maidstone comprising one of the largest retail centres in the south east. A substantial rural hinterland surrounds the urban area, part of which enjoys designation due to its high landscape and environmental quality. The borough encompasses a small section of the Metropolitan Green Belt (1.3%), and 27% of the borough forms part of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

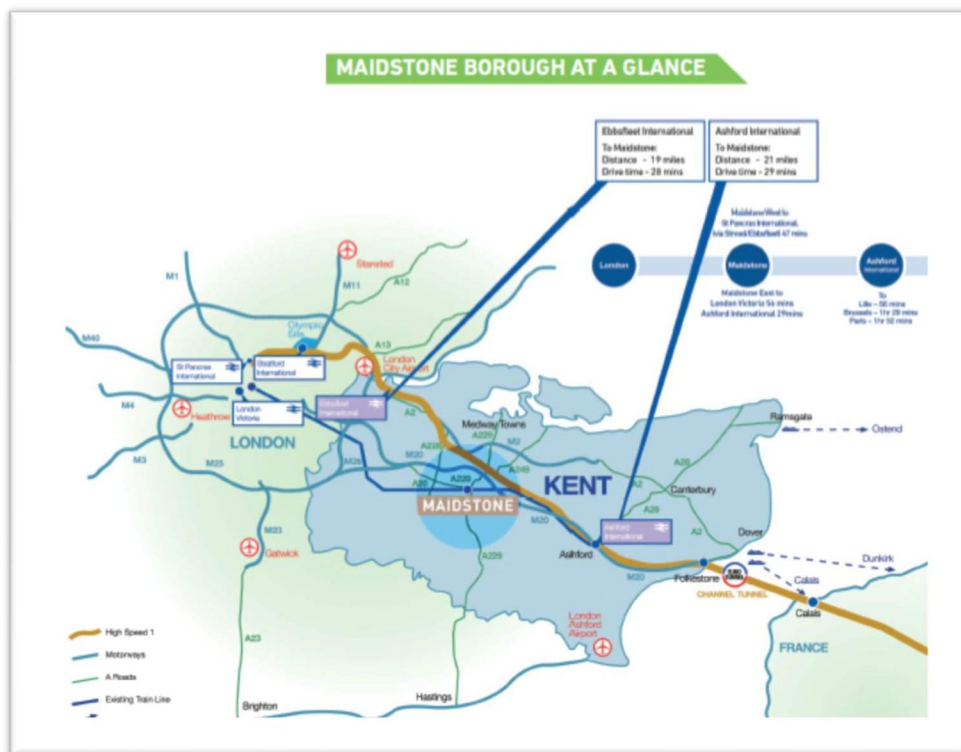


Figure 1 – Maidstone Borough at a glance

1.2 The borough is strategically located between the Channel Tunnel and London with direct connections to both via the M20 and M2 motorways. Three central railway stations in the town connect to London, Ashford, Tonbridge and to the Medway Towns. Maidstone Borough has a close interaction with the Medway Towns that provide a part of the borough's workforce. The town centre acts as the focus for retail development throughout the borough and has an important role to play in the visitor economy with the tourist information centre located at Maidstone Museum.

1.3 The rural centres of Harrietsham and Lenham lie on the Ashford International - Maidstone East - London Victoria line; and Headcorn, Marden and Staplehurst lie on the Ashford International, Tonbridge - London Charing Cross and London Cannon Street lines. Yalding lies on the Medway Valley Line, Paddock Wood - Maidstone West - Maidstone Barracks - Strood.

- 1.4 The Channel Tunnel link known as High Speed 1 (HS1) runs through the borough, providing fast links into London (a service links to HS1 from Maidstone West station, via Strood to Ebbsfleet). A number of main highway routes cross the borough including the A20, A229, A249, A274 and A26.
- 1.5 The borough is relatively prosperous with a considerable employment base and a lower than average unemployment rate compared to Kent. However, the borough has a relatively low wage economy that has led to out-commuting for higher paid work.
- 1.6 The local housing market crosses one adjacent borough boundary into Tonbridge and Malling, with relationships identified with the Ashford, Medway, Tunbridge Wells, and London housing markets. All of these markets are influenced by their proximity to London, resulting in relatively high house prices.
- 1.7 There are parts of the borough that would benefit from renewal, primarily including Maidstone town centre and there are pockets of deprivation that exist, particularly in the urban area. The rural service centres and larger villages provide services to the rural hinterland and some larger villages also play a vital part in the rural economy. There are a number of significant centres of economic activity in and around the rural settlements, and smaller commercial premises are dotted throughout the borough.
- 1.8 Agriculture remains an important industry to the borough including the traditional production of soft fruits and associated haulage and storage facilities.
- 1.9 The borough is fortunate to benefit from a number of heritage and natural assets including 41 conservation areas, over 2,000 listed buildings, 26 scheduled ancient monuments and 15 registered parks and gardens important for their special historic interest. Seven percent of the borough is covered by areas of ancient woodland, there are 63 local wildlife sites, 34 verges of nature conservation interest, 11 sites of special scientific interest, three local nature reserves and a European designated special area of conservation. The River Medway flows through the borough and the town centre and, together with its tributaries, is one of the borough's prime assets. Protection of the borough's distinct urban and rural heritage remains an important issue for the council.

Political makeup of Maidstone

- 2.1 Maidstone is currently under Conservative control following the May 2021 local elections. Maidstone can be considered to be somewhat of a swing authority, with control fluctuating between Conservative 1976-83, 2008-2014, and 2021-present, and no overall control 1974-76, 1983-2008, and 2014-2021. The Council at present operates a Committee system, with Local Plan matters being determined through decisions of the Strategic Planning & Infrastructure Committee, and where appropriate sent to Full Council for adoption. Kent County Council is also under Conservative control, and has been since 1973, with the exception of a 4-year period between 1993-1997 when there was no overall control.
- 2.2 It is pertinent that across the plan making period for both the adopted Local Plan 2017, and the Local Plan Review, the Council has for much of the time been under no overall control. This has meant that there is a history of local politicians needing to reach “across the aisle” to reach compromises that allow for an agreed spatial strategy and growth proposals, and by virtue of that, a Local Plan that can be adopted by the Council. This approach has been entered into in the production of the Local Plan Review, to ensure that the Local Plan Review is carried out in a

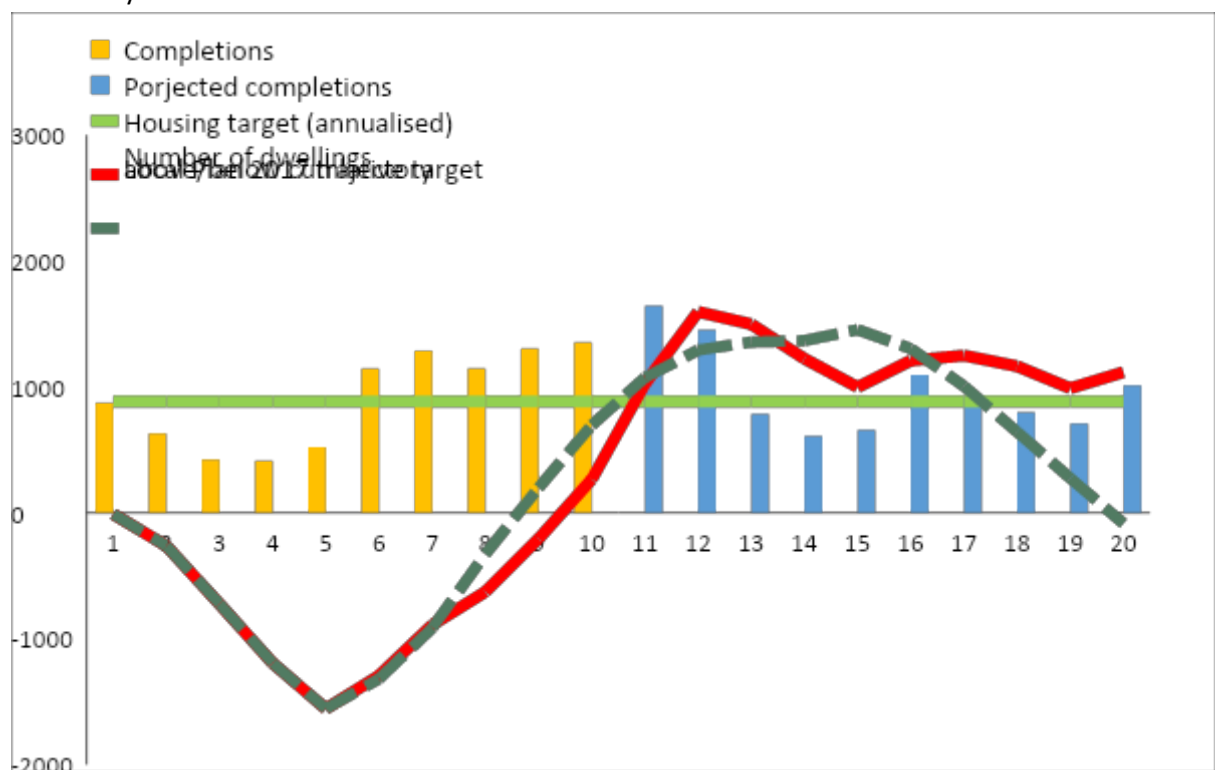
timely manner, in order to meet the requirements of the NPPF and Policy LPR1 of the Local Plan 2017.

LP17 distribution of growth

3.1 The extant Local Plan was adopted in 2017, and allocates growth for the period 2011-2031.

During the early years of the Plan period (ie before it was adopted), development was below the level of identified housing need in the borough. Since the 2017 adoption, development has been significant, exceeding per annum housing targets, and bringing target supply and delivered supply to a broadly neutral position in 2021.

3.2 Development is expected to exceed the target/ need amount for the next 2 years, with the quantum then expected to fall back to the 883 per annum level overall and cover the plan period sufficiently.



3.3 The distribution of growth in the 2017 Plan is highly focused on existing settlements within Maidstone Borough. The largest quantum of growth was allocated in and at the edges of Maidstone, with significant growth allocated within the Town Centre, as well as at growth points in North-West and South-East Maidstone.

3.4 Policy SS1 of the Local Plan sets out the Settlement Hierarchy within Maidstone. Maidstone Urban Area sits at the top of the hierarchy as the main town within the area. There are then tiers of villages, with five Rural Service Centres, and five Larger Villages. Development in the countryside is at the bottom of the hierarchy, with development generally resisted in preference to the more sustainable locations above.

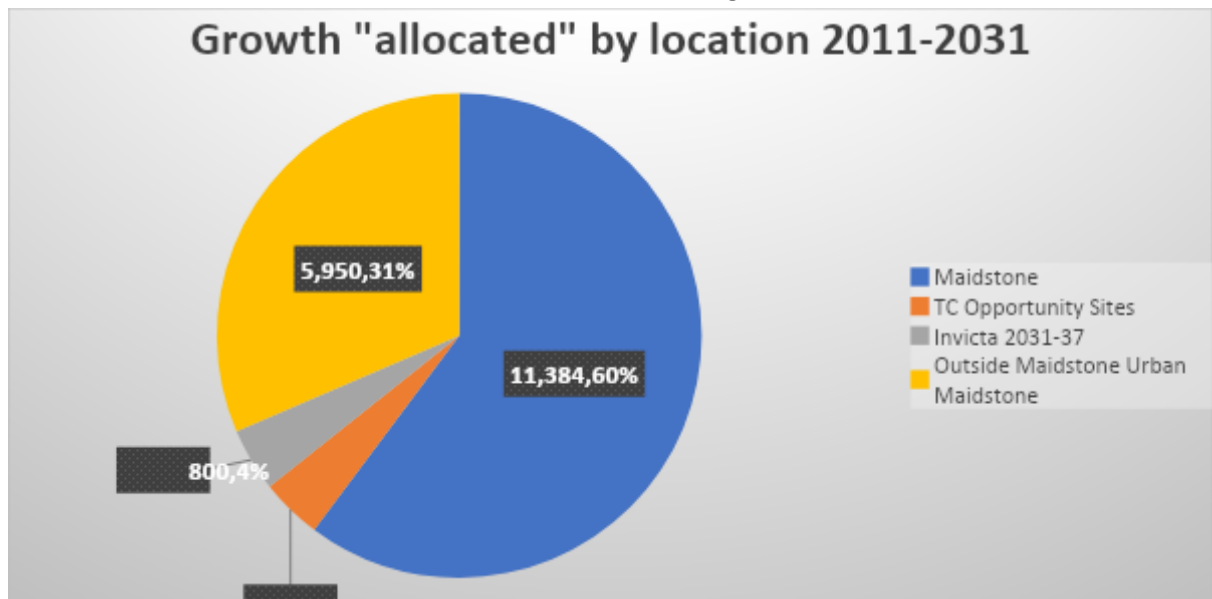
3.3 To get a true picture of the quantum of growth anticipated, it is important to understand the components of growth that have been delivered, allocated, and anticipated up to today. The Plan

itself allocated development for 17,575 new residential units. This left a deficit of 85 units against the objectively assessed housing need of 17,660.

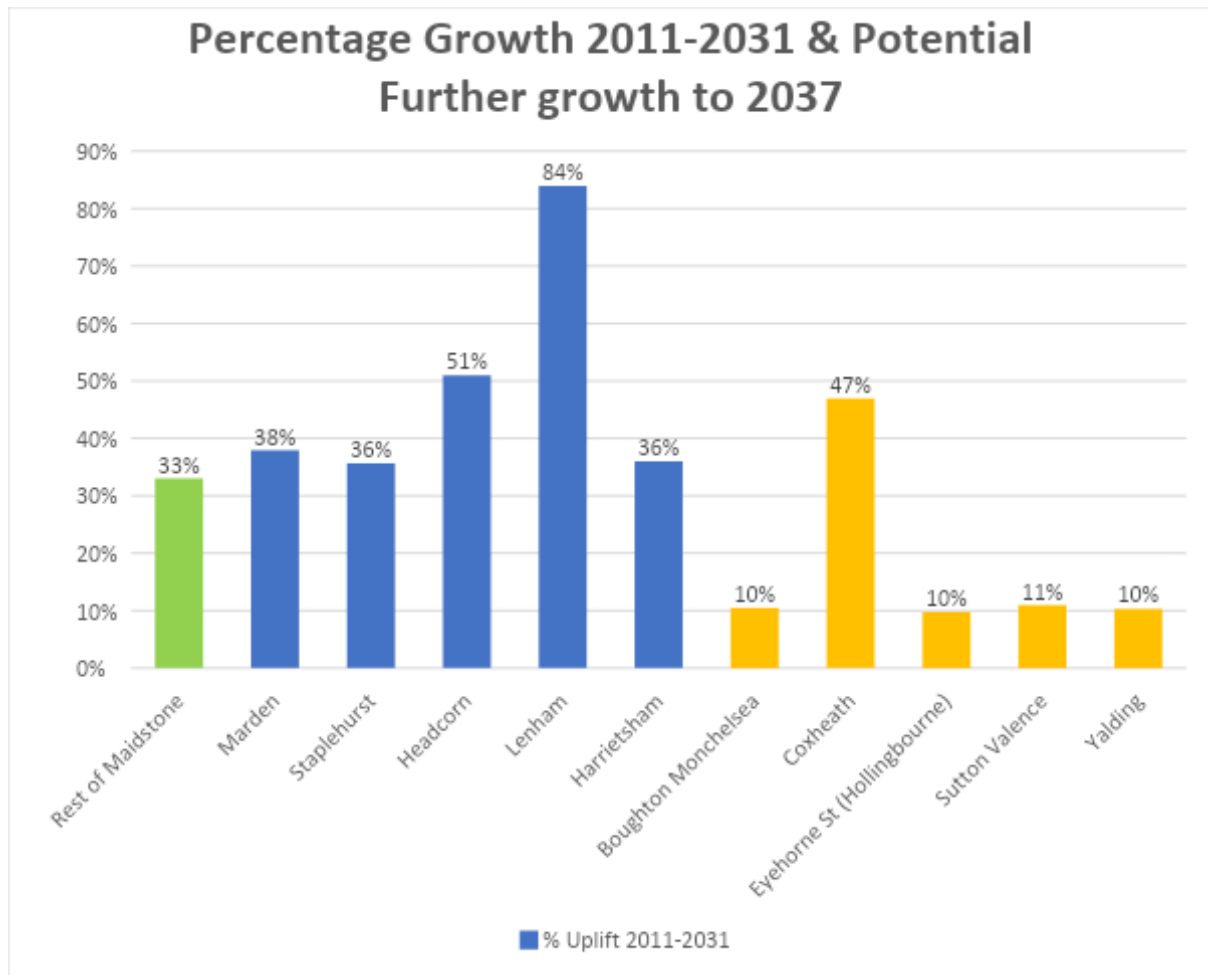
3.4 Of the 17,575 units:

- 2,860 had already been completed between 2011-2016
- Extant permissions as at 1st April 2016 stood at 5,475 (including a non-implementation discount, and subject to S106)
- The Plan itself allocated housing sites for 5,150 units (Policies H1(1)-H1(66))
- 2,440 units were allocated as broad locations at Lenham (1,000 units gross), Maidstone Town Centre (940 units gross), and Invicta Barracks (1,300 of which 500 are anticipated to come forward by 2031) (Policies H2(1)-H2(3))
- 1,650 were expected to come forward as windfall development, and hence were not allocated as sites in the Plan.

3.5 Including the Town Centre Opportunity sites, which were agreed by SPI Committee in 2019, and the completing beyond the plan period of Invicta Barracks by 2037, development in and around the Maidstone Urban Area accounted for 68% of “allocated” growth since 2011.



3.6 Growth in villages around Maidstone has also been significant, particularly when compared to existing Ward population.



Impressions of the 2017 Plan

- 4.1 The spatial pattern contained in the 2017 Local Plan has colloquially been referred to as a “dispersal” approach. As shown above, approximately two-thirds of the total development since 2011 has been located in and around the urban area of Maidstone with the remaining third being absorbed generally in higher amounts in the more sustainable Rural Service Centres and Larger Villages. It is not surprising that these locations were selected for development in the 2017 plan, they have existing transport access, services, and jobs, and generally represent sustainable locations for development.
- 4.2 They are also areas in which local communities already live. This is of significant benefit to new residents who require access to local services, community, and transport connections to other areas. It also means that development is highly visible to existing communities, who are naturally concerned about the impacts of development on their local amenity and services.
- 4.3 The rate of development has increased following the adoption of the 2017 Local Plan. This is logical as there was increased certainty on the deliverability of sites included in the Plan, and the increase was required to address shortfalls in delivery in the period 2011-2017. While justified in relation to meeting housing need, it is clear that the increase following adoption of the 2017 Plan can be seen as a “step change” in the delivery of new housing in the borough.

4.4 The increase in housing delivery since 2017 has been marked, and the implications of this have been recognised by local communities. In addition to the visible impact of new housing sites, there are more cars on the road, greater demand for school places and medical appointments. Investments have been made in upgrading infrastructure across the borough, but with an increasing population and changing demographics, how those services are provided, and where they are accessed will change too.

4.5 Change is an integral part of planning for development in the south east of England. House prices are high when compared to average income, and under the current model of meeting housing need based significantly on housing affordability, further growth, and therefore change is likely to continue.

4.6 With the growth in the Local Plan Review forecast to increase year-on-year compared to that included in the 2017 Plan, the Council, have explored how the challenge of growth and change can be addressed differently. This response significantly informs the spatial approaches explored in the Local Plan Review.

The Maidstone Strategic Plan 2019

5.1 The Maidstone Borough Council Strategic Plan 2019-2045 in the Council's Corporate Plan, and was prepared on a cross-party basis. It directly informs the direction of the Local Plan Review. It contains 4 key priorities:

- Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure
- Safe, Clean & Green
- Homes and Communities
- A Thriving Place

5.2 We can see that the Council as a whole is seeking to take an active role in the management of growth locally, including maintaining what is valued locally, and ensuring that the challenges and opportunities arising from growth are managed appropriately at the borough level. All of the priorities and outcomes included in the Strategic Plan have implications for the Local Plan Review, which carries a significant role in delivery of the stated aims through land use management and local placemaking. Additionally the Council has consistently placed an emphasis on seeking to have a plan in place in order to maintain control over where development is allocated.

Commencement of the Local Plan Review 2019

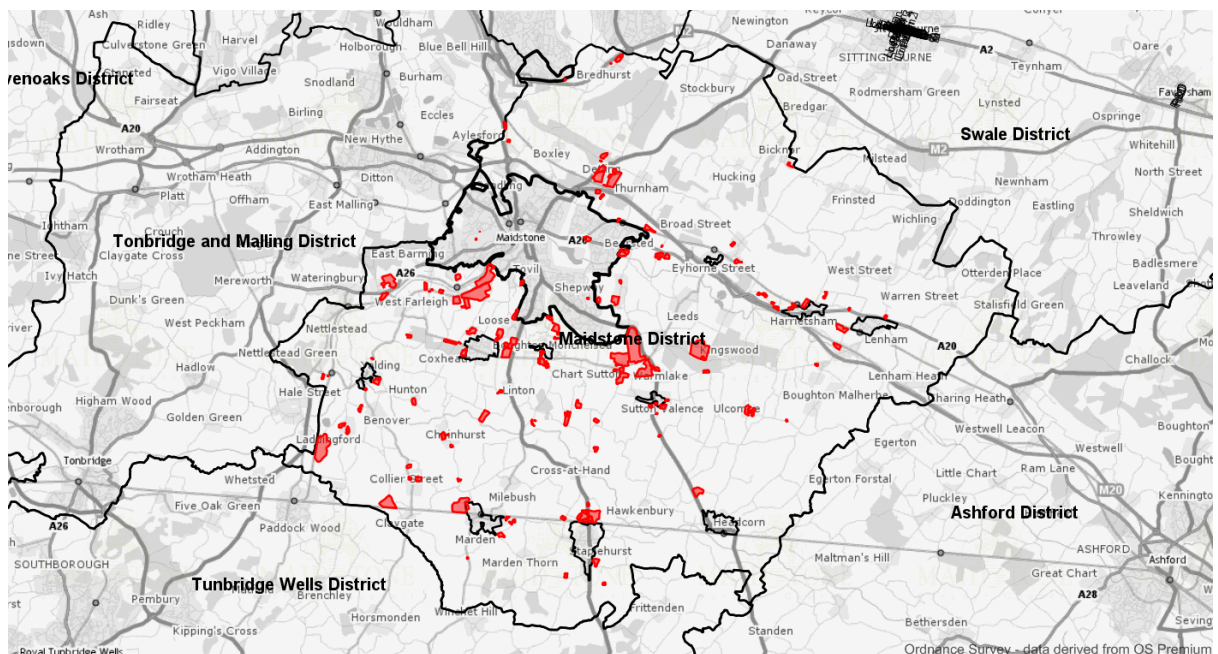
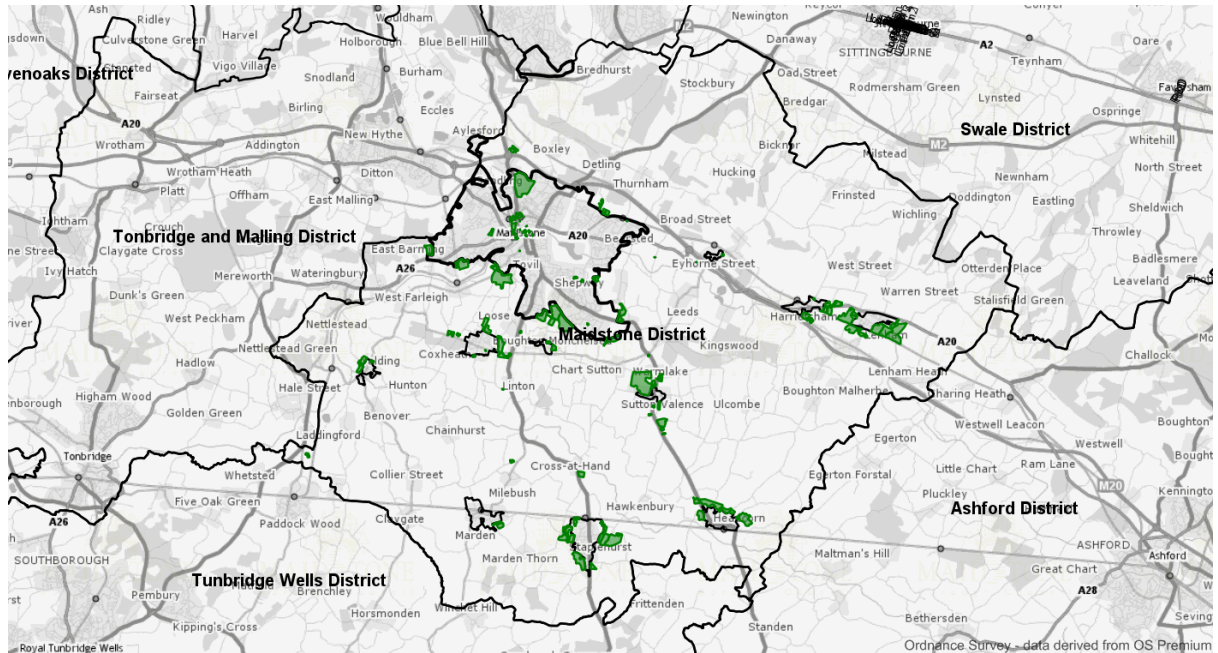
6.1 2019 represented the start in earnest of the development of a spatial strategy for the Local Plan Review. Following the publication of the Local Development Scheme and Statement of Community involvement in 2018, a Call for Sites was launched in March 2019 seeking options for meeting the need for housing in the period up to 2037.

6.2 All Local Planning Authorities are required to plan for development which meets housing need in accordance with the NPPF. The objectively assessed housing need for an area is informed by a statistical model taking into account local house price and income data in the locality, and includes a 40% cap on the increase from a previous Local Plan. The maximum (capped) number of new houses required would be 1,236 units compared to 883 per annum in the 2017 Local Plan.

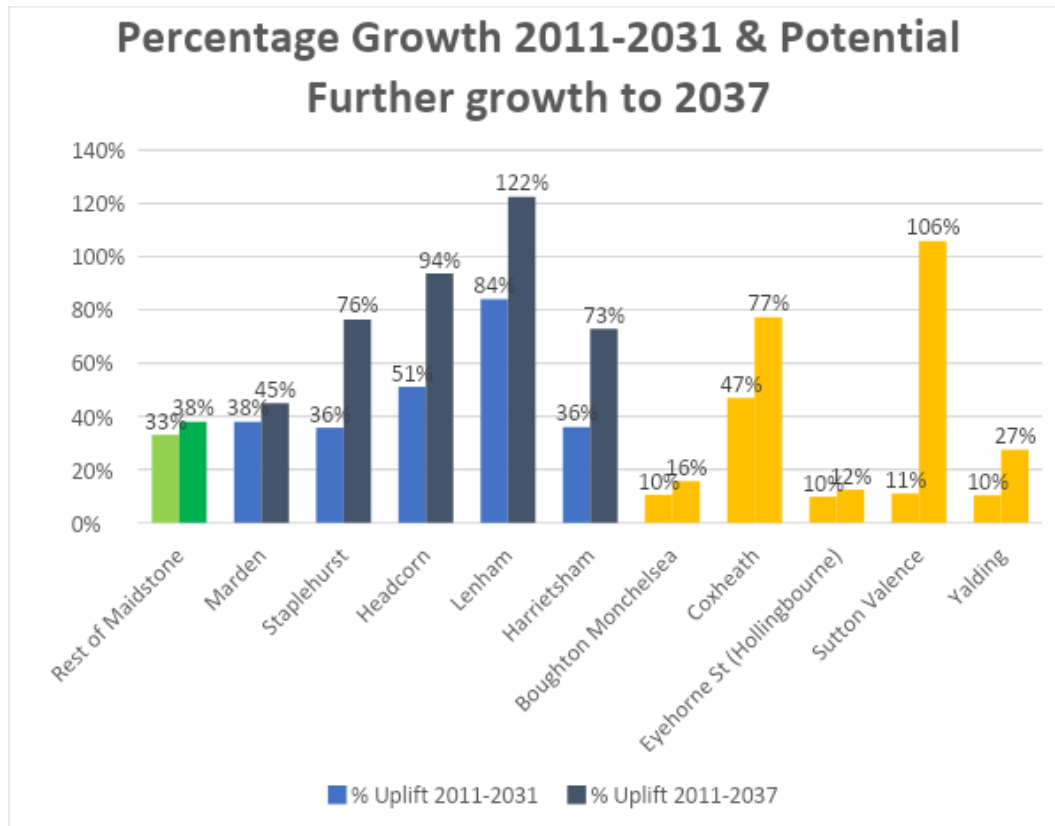
- 6.3 Taking into account delivery rates, windfall development, allocated development, undersupply from the 2017 Local Plan and a capped 1,236 housing target, and a 10% contingency amount, the Council's Scoping, Themes and Issues consultation document in 2019 identified that 9,227 new homes would need to be identified in order to meet a "worst case" need figure (of a capped housing need target +10% contingency).
- 6.4 In late 2020 a preferred approach consultation version of the Local Plan Review was released. This used updated housing need data from the 2019 Strategic Housing Market assessment (1,214 new homes per year), as well as updated housing delivery information from 2017 allocation and extant planning consents. No contingency was applied at this time due to uncertainty around the changes to the housing need calculation methodology, and the unknown impacts from the UK leaving the European Union. This provided an updated quantum of growth to be identified in the Local Plan Review of 5,790 units (not capped housing need + no contingency). Importantly this included Town Centre opportunity sites, which were agreed by Strategic Planning & Infrastructure in late 2019 of 883 units that will need to be confirmed as allocations in the Local Plan Review. Without accounting for these sites, the total need figure was 6,673 new homes.
- 6.5 Updates to the house price to income ratio, as evidenced in the 2021 update to the Strategic Housing Market Assessment show a need for 1,157 units per year between 2022-2037. This equates to a gross housing need figure of 17,355 units over the Plan period.
- 6.6 As set out above, alternatives to the site dispersal approach which was contained in the 2017 Plan was forthcoming, and specifically the search for new development locations which could meet need along Garden Community Principals was set out in Maidstone Borough Council's Garden Communities Prospectus.
- 6.7 The results arising from the Call for Sites were significant; over 300 sites were put forward, including proposals for 9 areas with the potential to meet the minimum scale of development for the allocation of a Garden Community (1,500+ new residential units + appropriate other facilities).
- 6.8 The land submitted was assessed for suitability, availability, and achievability through a Strategic Land Availability Assessment. This assessed each site against the criteria set out in the Call for Sites, specifically:
- Access to the highways network, public transport, services, and utilities
 - Proximity to Ancient Woodland
 - Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
 - Green Belt
 - MLB Landscapes of Local Value & Landscape Capacity
 - Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Nature Reserves, Local Wildlife Sites, Special Areas of Conservations, Hedgerows, Ecology (including ponds)
 - Potential impact on heritage assets such as Conservation Areas, Listed buildings, and areas of Archaeological potential
 - The presence of TPOs & Veteran Trees
 - Air Quality Management Area
 - Flood Risk
 - Drainage matters
 - Contamination/ pollution
 - Land stability

- Public Rights of Way
- Utilities (underground)
- Pylons
- Neighbour/ residential amenity

6.9 Having regard to the criteria above, sites were classified as being potentially suitable (green), or unsuitable (red) for consideration for allocation within the Local Plan Review. Proposed Garden Settlement-scale developments were assessed in further detail. Site capacities were calculated having regard to the site's size, densities based on their location, and the land take required to mitigate constraints on each site. Detail of capacity calculation is set out in the Council's Strategic Land Availability Assessment.



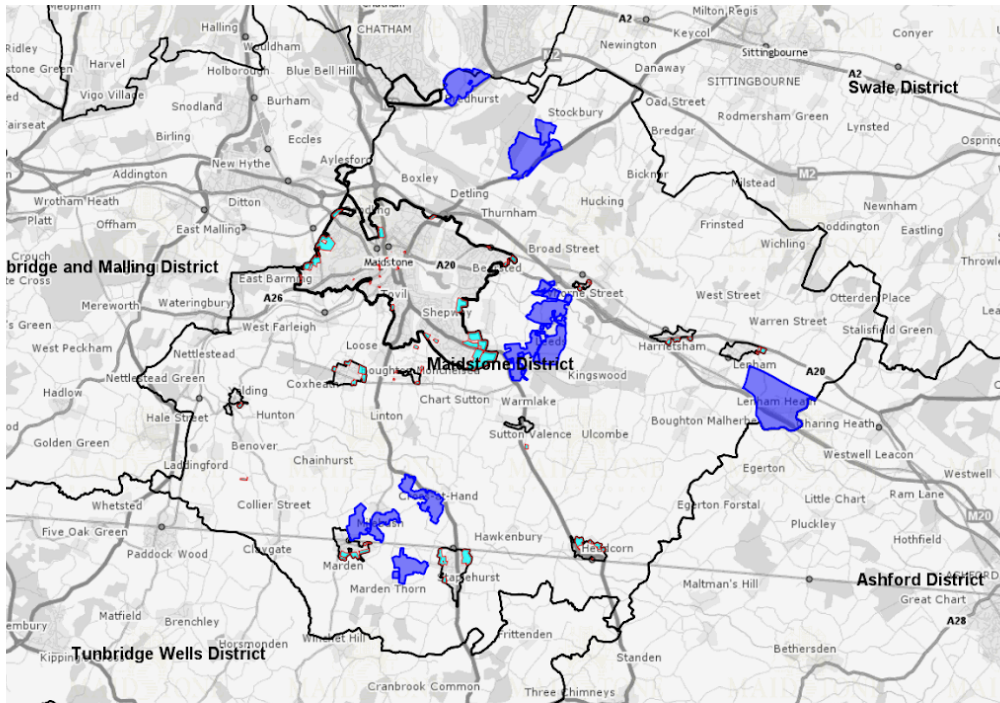
The quantity of land submitted was comfortably enough to meet the borough’s housing need. Interestingly the land put forward was sufficient to continue the Local Plan 2017 “dispersal” approach (ie without need to resort to garden community developments). In particular, there were a large number of sites identified in and around the Rural Service Centres and Larger Villages in the borough. This reflected not only a signal from the development industry that they considered these locations to be highly deliverable, which is confirmed with viability evidence supporting the 2017 plan which supported higher affordable housing contributions in these locations, compared to in and around the Maidstone Urban Area.



Garden Community options

7.1 Proposals for 9 garden-settlement scale development areas were received through the 2019 Call for Sites. Three of these were in the Leeds-Langley corridor, so while there was potentially the land available to establish any combination of 3 new communities here, the area was treated as a single potential development area for analytical purposes.

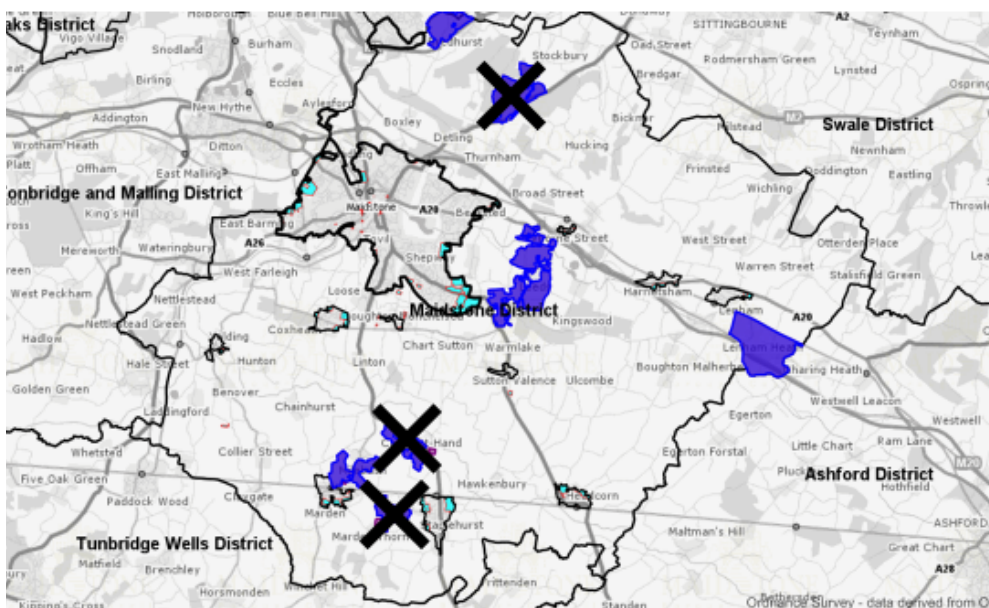
7.2 The proposals ranged from detailed proposals for new settlements and urban extensions, to red lines on maps with sufficient scale to accommodate a Garden Community-level of development. Some were proposals for stand-alone Garden Communities (Binbury Park, Heathlands, North of Staplehurst, Pagehurst Farm), to urban extensions to existing settlements (Lidsing, North of Marden), to proposals to enable specific new infrastructure projects (Leeds-Langley area).



7.3 Further underlining the Council’s attempts to explore alternative growth approaches to the “dispersal approach” included in the 2017 Local Plan, one proposal was received from the Council itself. To avoid the perception of the Council marking its own homework, an independent review of the suitability and deliverability of the garden community proposals was commissioned, to be carried out by Stantec.

7.4 In 2019 Stantec provided a report which reviewed the suitability of each Garden Community-scale proposal. This considered the proposals against the same criteria as other sites in the SLAA, but in more detail commensurate with the scale of the potential developments.

7.5 Four proposals were found to meet, or to have the potential to satisfy all of the Call for Sites and Garden Community Prospectus criteria: Heathlands, the Leeds-Langley corridor, Lidsing, and North of Marden.



- 7.6 North of Staplehurst and Pagehurst Farm were both found to lack the scale and locational characteristics to deliver standalone garden community proposals. Their locations were found to lack the necessary transport infrastructure to make them sustainable, and this compounded their attractiveness to establish themselves as employment locations. It is considered that they would in all likelihood become dependent upon rail access at Marden and/ or Staplehurst to establish sustainable travel patterns.
- 7.7 Binbury Park, is located within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural beauty and due to the significant alternative land provision received in the Call for Sites, whereby need could be met with or without use of non-AONB Garden Community options, Binbury was discounted at this stage.
- 7.8 In early 2020 Stantec were commissioned to undertake a Stage 2 (deliverability) assessment of the 4 potentially suitable Garden Community proposals. This would look in greater detail at the site's ability to meet the Garden Communities Prospectus principals, and their viability. Early in this process it was agreed with the promoters of the sites in the Leeds-Langley corridor that there was not sufficient progress and certainty in terms of an agreed road alignment for the sites in this area to be tested as garden community propositions.
- 7.9 The results from the Stantec Stage 2 work showed that all three remaining garden community proposals at Heathlands, Lidsing and North of Marden were potentially deliverable and viable. As such these three proposals were used as building blocks in the consideration of Reasonable Alternatives for the spatial distribution of growth in the Plan.
- 7.10 A key conclusion at this stage was that there were viable and deliverable garden community proposals, and that by building at scale there is an opportunity to capture value and provide infrastructure alongside new development, at the same time.

Reg18a

- 8.1 The Council consulted on its Spatial Themes & Issues document (Regulation 18a) in July-Sep 2019. This document included a range of questions seeking to explore stakeholder's view on where growth should be located, and what it should achieve.
- 8.2 There was considerable response from local communities close to which major developments had emerged into the public realm, notably North of Marden, in the proximity of Staplehurst, and in Maidstone Town Centre. This is understandable as responses to the Call for Sites and the progress of the Town Centre opportunity Sites (notably for the Broadway shopping centre) were the source of considerable public discourse at that time.
- 8.3 Regarding the spatial strategy for the Local Plan, options were established as follows
- A – Maidstone focus
 - B – Dispersal (Maidstone, Rural Service Centres, Larger Villages)
 - Bi – Dispersal plus additional villages
 - C – Focus on Garden Communities
- 8.4 Of these there was modest support for focusing development within the urban area of Maidstone, and notable support from the development sector for a dispersal approach.

When it came to the potential for focusing on garden settlements there was a mixed response, but notably support from expert agencies including Kent County Council.

Reasonable Alternatives Testing

9.1 The testing of reasonable alternative options when preparing a plan is a key aspect of selecting a preferred Spatial Strategy. In addition to the 3 deliverable garden communities identified above, there were other choices available to the Council in terms of where to locate growth in the Local Plan Review:

- Higher or lower amounts of growth in the Maidstone Urban Area (including Maidstone Town Centre)
- Higher or lower amounts of growth in Rural Service Centres & Larger Villages

9.2 The testing of alternatives was carried out in two phases; firstly the Initial Appraisal of Spatial Strategy Options focussed on identifying highly varied spatial approaches, which were tested to understand what the particular sustainability impacts of each would be. Three options were identified, having regard to the capacities of various areas, and the need to meet objectively identified housing need:

1. Local Plan Review Continued (Maidstone maximum + RSCs + Larger Villages)
2. No development in Maidstone (Garden Settlements + RSCs + Larger Villages)
3. Maximise Garden Settlements (Garden Settlements + Maidstone + RSCs + Larger Villages)

9.3 These approaches were analysed based on a fixed quantum of growth being distributed according to the patterns above, and were interrogated using the Sustainability Appraisal criteria, as well as through Transport Modelling. The outcomes were that Maidstone was suggested to be the most sustainable location for more development, with the RSCs and Larger Villages being relatively sustainable due to their existing infrastructure assets. The Garden Settlements were not sustainable locations at present. This is because they do not have allocated infrastructure and services. It is expected that they would become more sustainable when properly planned with supporting infrastructure.

9.4 The next stage involved the analysis of a set of “refined” spatial strategy options, having had regard to the outcomes from the initial analysis. The analysis was based on the allocation of quantum of development directed to different areas based on site availability.

9.5 As such the testing of refined alternatives consisted of three key variables:

Location	Scenario 1 LP 2017	Scenario 2 2 Garden Settlements			Scenario 3 1 Garden Settlement		
		A	B	C	A	B	C
Maidstone (Urban)	V. High	Low	Low	Low	High	High	High
Rest of Borough (Rural)	V. High	Low	Low	Low	High	High	High
Garden Settlements	0	Marden & Lidsing	Marden & Heathlands	Lidsing & Heathlands	Marden	Lidsing	Heathlands

Identification of the Preferred Spatial Approach

- 10.1 Throughout late 2019 and 2020 a cross-party Spatial Planning group of senior members and officers was established to ensure that political consideration was included in the identification of the preferred spatial strategy. Meetings were held regularly to feed back on the impacts of the existing pattern of growth emerging from the 2017 Local Plan, and to consider the options and potential impacts for distribution of additional growth through to 2037.
- 10.2 It was reiterated that there was support for garden communities being an appropriate method of accommodating growth in a manner that secured new infrastructure “at source” and alongside new development in a way that continued dispersed development could not deliver. Officers agree that due to the enhanced value capture available on garden community sites, they could be supported as an appropriate vehicle for accommodating growth in the Local Plan Review.
- 10.3 A key assumption made at this stage was the decision that due to the risk profile and relatively long lead-in times of garden settlements, that the Local Plan Review should include a maximum of two such projects within it. The impact of this assumption was that sites in existing development locations (Maidstone and the villages) would be needed to maintain a short-term land supply, before the garden communities started to come online from 2027. Indeed it was noted that while garden communities can make a significant contribution to meeting housing need, that at 100-200 units per year each, development would continue to be needed to be allocated in traditional locations in subsequent Local Plan Reviews.
- 10.4 The Garden Settlement assessments had by this time identified three potentially suitable and deliverable locations: Heathlands, Lidsing, and North of Marden. After careful consideration and assessment of potential spatial strategies based around areas of significant focused growth it was agreed that of the three, Heathlands and Lidsing offered the best opportunities to create new or enhanced infrastructure through their development.
- 10.5 Heathlands and Lidsing present suitable and deliverable opportunities to deliver sustainable growth. They will both be delivered according to garden community principles, with value captured from the raising of land values coming from the change of uses on these sites to help to fund infrastructure improvements, and place-shaping facilities. They will both operate as sustainable locations in their own right but will also help to provide opportunities for surrounding areas in terms of improved employment opportunities and service choice.
- 10.6 Heathlands is a Council-proposed stand-alone new settlement, with the potential to accommodate around 5,000 new homes and a mix of employment and services within the Plan Period, and beyond. Development will be focused on the delivery of a new rail station on the Maidstone-Ashford line, with new infrastructure and employment opportunities focused around this.
- 10.7 Lidsing is a significant site in largely unified ownership to the south of the Medway urban area. It has strategic access to the M2 via Junction 4 and presents as an excellent opportunity to create new employment uses harnessing this accessibility. The delivery of approximately 2,000 new homes both within and beyond the Plan Period will enable the delivery of improved infrastructure that will benefit surrounding areas including enhanced bus routes linking

Lordswood and Hempstead, as well as improved general access to the M2, and enhancements to the infrastructure within the Capstone valley.

- 10.8 Once extant planning permissions, allocations, broad locations, and the town centre opportunity sites were accounted for, the Local Plan Review's residual target stood at 5,790 units. Heathlands at 1,400 (200 units p.a. 2030-37) and Lidsing at 1,300 (130 p.a 2027-37) reduced this quantum to 3,090, and together accounted for 47% of the new development required to be allocated in the Local Plan Review.
- 10.9 With this principal established it was possible to secure a broad agreement on the split of development to be allocated between Maidstone and the other relatively sustainable settlements across the borough. This had regard to the availability of sites in each area, the relative sustainability of each type of location, but also the need to ensure that a distribution of development was agreed that would be adoptable as a Local Plan in the future.
- 10.10 The steer from members was to strike a balance between the different types of area (Maidstone Town Centre, Maidstone urban area, villages), and officers looked at the site options in each area and consulted with ward councillors about the local merits of different sites. Of the 3,090 units remaining, it was agreed that 700 should be allocated to the Town Centre, beyond the Town Centre Opportunity Sites, with a split between the Maidstone Urban Area and rural centres.
- 10.11 An additional spatial opportunity was identified in relation to development within and around smaller settlements that lie below the larger village tier of the settlement hierarchy. Whilst acknowledged that these are not particularly sustainable locations for the allocation of large amounts of development, many face demographic challenges and limited services which rely on continued local visitation for them to remain viable. Taking the recommendations from the Settlement Hierarchy Report, a new tier of smaller villages was introduced, with limited growth allocated to each.