

Maidstone Character Area Assessment Pilot Studies

Report on Pilot Studies and Recommendations for the Future



Tony Fullwood Associates
Chartered Town Planners

Contents

1. Overall Conclusion
2. The Process Towards Adoption
3. Stakeholder Engagement
4. The Areas Selected
5. Content of SPD
6. Recommended Way Forward

1.0 Overall Conclusion

- 1.1 Maidstone Borough Council are one of the leaders in developing Character Area Assessments as Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) in the County and also nationally. For this reason, two pilot studies were undertaken for two parts of Maidstone town: the Loose Road area and the London Road area (see Appendix 1).
- 1.2 The general conclusion is that
 - the process of developing the draft SPDs has been successful following an appropriate methodology and good community engagement
 - the pilot SPDs have been successful in engaging local stakeholders
 - the published documents have been well received by Members and professional officers of the Council
 - the draft documents are clear in their presentation and, despite the extent of the areas covered, have been easy to follow for users
 - the content is detailed and interesting to local people
 - public response at the exhibitions and to the consultation has generally been supportive, and
 - stakeholders such as resident and amenity groups as well as development control officers are already referring to the draft documents
- 1.3 Clearly it has not been possible at this stage to test the effectiveness of the documents in terms of the Council's decision making or at appeal. The real test of the SPDs will be whether over time following adoption there are resultant improvements in the planning applications received, or negotiated by the Borough Council, and consequent improvements to the design of buildings in these parts of Maidstone town.
- 1.4 This evaluation provides some options for reviewing the process used to develop the SPDs, the type of areas included within Character Area Assessments and the content of the documents.

2.0 The process towards adoption

- 2.1 This report reviews the process from inception to the formal public consultation stage.
- 2.2 The Character Area Assessment SPDs were commenced in July 2007 and exhibitions of the draft documents were held in September 2008. The time taken for the pilot studies is a consequence of
- the deliberate use of an extensive community engagement programme
 - Members' request to amend the draft documents to ensure each character area had separate policy criteria
 - internal delays in the checking procedure
- 2.3 As a result, there was some loss of momentum with the project which may have had some impact on public involvement and interest.
- 2.4 In relation to the first point, it is a recommendation of this report that the stakeholder engagement programme be repeated for future areas (see below). This will have an impact on the time taken to produce the SPD.
- 2.5 Regarding the second point, the pilot exercise was deliberately designed to test the format of the draft SPDs. The report contains options for the content of future SPDs (see below).
- 2.6 In relation to the third point, dedicated staff resources to steer the SPDs through the LDF processes and regulations are crucial to ensure the publication programme is adhered to. However, there will always be an element of risk to the production timetable through staff vacancies, sickness or maternity leave.

Recommendation 1 - Project Planning

Maintain momentum throughout the project to ensure continuous community engagement and interest through careful project planning and following an agreed format for all future SPDs.

3.0 Stakeholder Engagement

3.1 The process deliberately set out to be inclusive of a range of stakeholders from the earliest stage in the process for a number of reasons:

- Planning Policy Statement 3 – Housing (DCLG 2006) advocates that Local Planning Authorities should develop a shared vision with their local communities of the type(s) of residential environments they wish to see and develop design policies that set out the quality of development that will be expected for the local area
- By Design – Urban Design in the Planning System (DETR, 2000) advocates wide public consultation as part of the methodology for assessing the character of a place
- the Borough Council's adopted Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) promises to provide early opportunities for people to put forward their ideas and views on issues through a range of methods and techniques used to try to reach as many people in the wider community as possible, including the network of various resident, community and specialist interest groups active in the area. Elected Borough Councillors, as part of their ward representation, and Parish Councils are also cited in the SCI
- best practice shows that early engagement builds trust in an open and transparent process and leads to an improved document
- when adopted, the document has increased ownership from the stakeholders who will use it

3.2 The Engagement Process

3.2.1 The process involved setting up a local Working Group for each area comprising local groups covering a range of interests eg historical groups, the Parish Council (in Loose), residents' associations, amenity groups and local pressure groups. The Working Group also included Borough Council ward councillors and Borough Council planning, conservation and landscape officers.

3.2.2 The Working Group met for a briefing on site at the outset of the project. The Working Group was subdivided into smaller groups to conduct a walkabout of the character areas previously identified by consultants, recording the local character and features of interest. Each group contained either consultants and/or Borough Council officers and at least 2 local stakeholders.

3.2.3 Next the Working Group met for a follow up workshop to discuss and confirm the recorded findings of the walkabout which were summarised on boards and townscape maps by the consultants. The consultants drafted the Supplementary Planning Documents based on the outcomes from the workshop.

3.2.4 The draft SPDs were discussed at a meeting with Borough Council planning, conservation and landscape officers and amended as necessary.

3.2.5 The draft SPDs were presented to LDDAG for discussion and approval for public consultation purposes and resultant amendments to structure and content made.

3.2.6 The formal consultation period was arranged for a 6 week period from 15th August to 26th September 2008.

3.2.7 Publicity was given to the formal consultation period, including the exhibitions, through advertisement in the local press, articles in Planning Viewpoint and on the Borough Council's website as well as direct contact with the Working Group members, all Borough Councillors and those registered on the LDF database.

3.2.8 Members of the Group, alongside all interested stakeholders, were invited to a staffed 3 hour Saturday morning exhibition in each area to view the document, discuss the draft SPDs with officers and consultants and make comment. Over 60 residents attended the Loose Road area exhibition and over 30 the London Road exhibition (a smaller area). The documents were also put on the website and on line opportunities to comment were promoted.



Loose Road Area Exhibition



London Road Area Exhibition

3.2.9 The engagement process was generally very successful in building trust in the process, creating an improved document through a wide input of knowledge and expertise and increased ownership from the stakeholders who will use it. There is opportunity to widen interest groups further to include other institutions within the area such as schools and churches. Properly handled it provides an opportunity not only to produce an SPD which will influence future initiatives but also to raise awareness locally of the positive role of planning and improve rapport between the planning authority and local interest groups. It also follows best practice advice. For these reasons it is recommended that the engagement process be repeated in the development of future Character Area Assessment SPDs.

Recommendation 2 - Engagement Process

The engagement process used for the Loose Road and London Road SPDs be repeated in the development of future Character Area Assessment SPDs, subject to Recommendations 3 - 5 below.

Recommendation 3 - Working Group

Include as many relevant local groups as possible covering a range of interests eg historical groups, Parish Council (where relevant), residents' associations, amenity groups, local pressure groups, schools, churches. Individuals with particular local knowledge or relevant expertise should also be invited. It is also important that all relevant councillors and Borough Council officers attend.

Aim for a minimum group size of about 8 (excluding consultants/officers) and maximum of about 16 depending on the size of the area to ensure sufficient representation.

Balance the number of representatives from each group to avoid dominance by one interest group. Programme all working group meetings as early as possible to give sufficient notice (ideally 4 weeks)

Recommendation 4 - Walkabout

Ideally have at least 2 people in each group who are neither consultants/Borough Council officers.

Include one consultant or officer with each group to help keep things on track.

Note all relevant features and identify on a map.

Recommendation 5 - Exhibition

Ensure wide advanced publicity of the exhibition through as many means as possible, particularly through the residents' groups, the column for the local area in the local newspaper, local notice boards and shops, schools etc.

4.0 The Areas Selected

4.1 Maidstone Urban Area

- 4.1.1 Two areas were selected for this exercise shown in Appendix 1. Some comments back from the London Road area remark on the exclusion of adjoining areas which it is considered form part of the character of the London Road area. The original proposal was for a wider area to be included within the SPD. However, Members wished to focus the pilot on a smaller area.
- 4.1.2 If Members are minded to continue with a programme of Character Area Assessments, the unique 'stellar' shape of Maidstone town with built up areas separated by green wedges, allows each 'limb' to form an appropriate area for a Character Area Supplementary Planning Document. In this way, all adjoining built up areas and identifiable communities are likely to be captured within an SPD. The treatment of the town centre is discussed below.

4.2 Maidstone Town Centre

- 4.2.1 For the purposes of the Core Strategy and subsequent DPDs, the town centre will need to be defined. Work is to be undertaken on Maidstone Town Centre Public Realm Improvements. In addition, part of the centre is defined as a Conservation Area and a Conservation Area Appraisal is in preparation (see below). For these reasons, it is not recommended that a separate Character Area Assessment be carried out.

4.3 Rural Service Centres

- 4.3.1 The purposes of producing the SPDs include providing design guidance on the appropriateness of, and potential for, types of development within an area and assisting the appraisal of particular proposals (allocations or planning applications) within an area.
- 4.3.2 As Rural Service Centres are identified in the Core Strategy Preferred Options as places to accept the most development after Maidstone town, it would be logical to complete Character Area Assessments for these settlements, as well as simultaneously producing separate Conservation Area Appraisals (see below).
- 4.3.3 As a result of the extensive stakeholder engagement and level of detail contained in each SPD, it is important that a manageable programme is identified for officers and Members to ensure sufficient quality control within, and consistency between, SPDs.

Recommendation 6 – Priority Areas

Each part of the 'stellar' shape of Maidstone town forms an appropriate area for a Character Area Assessment Supplementary Planning Document.

Rural Service Centres form appropriate areas for Character Area Assessment SPDs.

4.4 Conservation Areas

- 4.4.1 Conservation Area Appraisals cover areas of architectural or historic character. The designation and review of Conservation Areas is controlled by the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Planning Policy Guidance Note 15: Planning and the Historic Environment advises local planning authorities about the special protection afforded within conservation areas and there is specific guidance on the content of Appraisals from English Heritage. Conservation Areas are therefore determined through separate legislation and guidance from Character Area Assessment SPDs and there should be a distinct content to the documents.
- 4.4.2 The London Road area Character Area Assessment SPD contained a portion of the Rocky Hill Conservation Area within it. As this was part of the Character Area to be reviewed, the conservation area was included as part of the Character Area Assessment.
- 4.4.3 There is a potential conflict and duplication in content and process where Conservation Area Appraisals and Character Area Assessment SPDs overlap. For this reason, it is recommended that each area only has an Appraisal or an Assessment dependant on the planning status of the area.
- 4.4.4 Maidstone Borough has 41 designated Conservation Areas. It is important that Conservation Area Appraisals are kept up to date (Government targets previously indicated that Appraisals should be adopted or reviewed every 5 years) as these represent the most important areas of architectural or historic character in the Borough. So far six Conservation Area Appraisals have been approved (for Maidstone All Saints, Maidstone Holy Trinity, Detling, Linton, Boughton Monchelsea Green and Maidstone Ashford Road). One Conservation Area Management Plan has been approved, for Maidstone All Saints.
- 4.4.5 Given the statutory nature of their designation, it is important that the boundaries of conservation areas are reviewed before, or at

least in parallel with, Character Area Assessments. In this way, Conservation Area Appraisals will abut Character Area Assessments.

- 4.4.6 If Character Area Assessment SPDs are prepared ahead of Conservation Area Appraisals, there is a strong possibility that a subsequent review of the conservation area boundary will either be extended and therefore overlap a Character Area Assessment SPD or, because an area is removed from the conservation area, will leave an area excluded from either document.
- 4.4.7 The most practical solution for the preparation of Character Area Assessment SPDs in areas containing conservation areas is for the surveys and early public engagement for both areas to be conducted as one exercise. The information can then be used to determine the boundaries of the Conservation Area and the Character Area Assessment as well as the content of both distinctive documents.
- 4.4.8 Prior to the preparation of this report, the Borough Council approved a programme for the preparation of a further 15 Appraisals and 8 Management Plans over the next three years. There are no proposals to prepare Conservation Area Appraisals for the urban area of Maidstone other than the town centre. This could inhibit the production of further Character Area Assessments in the town. In 2009/10 it is proposed to conduct Conservation Area Appraisals for Marden and Lenham and in 2010/11, Staplehurst but there are currently no proposals to undertake an Appraisal for Headcorn Conservation Area.

Recommendation 7 - Conservation Area Appraisals and Character Area Assessment SPDs

Either a Conservation Area Appraisal or a Character Area Assessment be prepared for each area selected, dependant on the planning status of the area.

In areas containing a conservation area(s), surveys and early public engagement for both conservation area(s) and character areas be conducted as one exercise. The information to be used to determine the boundaries of the Conservation Area and the Character Area Assessment as well as the content of the Conservation Area Appraisal and Character Area Assessment SPD.

4.5 Industrial and warehouse estates

4.5.1 The Loose Road area Character Area Assessment SPD contained an industrial area within it (Area 21 – Depots). As this was part of the Character Area to be reviewed, the area was included as part of the Character Area Assessment.

4.5.2 There is an option to exclude clearly defined and extensive industrial and warehouse estates from the Assessment, so reducing the time/ cost of preparation.

4.5.3 The SPDs aim to

- identify the locally distinctive features that define the character of the area;
- provide design guidance on the appropriateness of, and potential for, types of development within an area;
- supplement adopted design policies for assessing development proposals within an area; and
- assist the appraisal of particular proposals (allocations or planning applications) within an area.

4.5.4 There are arguments that the SPD could influence the character of proposals within existing industrial/ warehouse areas, but the character of such areas is often not unified or distinctive. Nor is the character as 'fine grained' as residential areas. Finally, the use of the more extensive industrial and warehouse estates is unlikely to change in the short to medium term. For these reasons, there may be more difficulty in an SPD fulfilling its objectives in such areas.

4.5.5 Conversely, where pockets of business premises are dispersed within a predominantly residential area, there are strong reasons for including such sites within a Character Area SPD (as in the Loose Road area in particular). Firstly, these areas are an integral part of the character of an area and, secondly, if the use of the business site is to change, it is important that the character of the site, its surroundings and appropriate policy criteria are contained in the SPD.

Recommendation 8 – Industrial and Warehousing Estates

Exclude extensive purpose built industrial and warehousing estates from Character Area Assessment SPDs.

5.0 Content of SPD

- 5.1 It is important to assess the content of the SPD to provide a format for any future documents.

5.2 Summary Text Boxes

- 5.2.1 It is helpful to extract contextual, positive and negative features into text boxes to highlight key points.

5.3 Photographs

- 5.3.1 Extensive use has been made of photographs to illustrate different parts of each character area and residents have identified with this approach. There is an opportunity to be more selective in the use photographs to highlight points in the text and to bring out the differing character of each sub-area. Annotated photographs are efficient ways of capturing character. Superfluous photos add to document length, cost and down-load times.

5.4 Townscape Maps

- 5.4.1 Townscape maps have been used by residents and development control officers to identify key features of an area and are an important component of the SPDs. A further development of the maps would be to annotate the maps in more detail (eg 'View of North Downs' instead of an arrow on the plan requiring the reader to cross reference the text).

5.5 Text

- 5.5.1 The text is extensive and follows a descriptive 'walk through' style. Consequently, residents have closely identified with the documents. An alternative approach would be to follow a more analytical style and to rely more heavily on annotated photographs and townscape maps. The latter would be effective for development control officers, members and those wishing to develop in an area. This approach would be quicker to produce and result in shorter documents. The former approach may be more accessible to residents.

5.6 Policy criteria

- 5.6.1 A document in which each character area is self-contained with analysis and policy criteria seems most popular with Members and officers and for this reason, future documents should follow this format.

Recommendation 9 – Content of Character Area Assessment SPDs

Each Character Area Assessment should comprise:

- contextual, positive and negative features text boxes
- annotated photographs
- annotated Townscape Maps
- policy criteria

Recommendation 10 – Text Content

Members are recommended to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the analytical and 'walk through' styles of textual presentation and conclude on the most appropriate style for future SPDs.

6.0 Recommended Way Forward

- 6.1 National planning statements emphasise the commitment to protecting and enhancing the quality of the built environment and achieving high quality design which contributes positively to making places better.
- 6.2 By Design – Urban design in the Planning System (DETR, 2000) states:
"The central message is that careful assessments of places, well-drafted policies, well-designed proposals, robust decision-making and a collaborative approach are needed throughout the country if better places are to be created." This is the approach now being followed by the Borough Council.
- 6.3 Planning Policy Statement 3 - Housing (DCLG, 2006) affirms that good design should contribute positively to making places better for people and advocates that Local Planning Authorities should develop a shared vision with their local communities of the type(s) of residential environments they wish to see and develop design policies that set out the quality of development that will be expected for the local area.
- 6.4 The Government's response to the South East Plan contains a new policy which clearly indicates the importance of improving the built environment based on local character and distinctiveness (Policy BE1- Management for an Urban Renaissance):
- 6.5 *Local authorities and their partners will use opportunities associated with new development to help provide significant improvements to the built environment. They should:
i.e. Through their Community Strategies and Local Development Frameworks, set out an overall strategy for enhancing the quality of life in each urban area which reflects a vision developed in consultation with local communities...
v. Promote and support design solutions relevant to context and which build upon local character and distinctiveness and sense of place, including the sensitive reuse of redundant or under-used historic buildings*
- 6.6 Should this Policy be confirmed, the SPDs are a key mechanism for its implementation in Maidstone Borough in the future and the pilot studies give the Council a head start in achieving improvements in design locally.
- 6.7 There is support in national and regional planning statements for the development of local development documents which promote and support design solutions relevant to context and which build on

local character and distinctiveness. Should the Council wish to pursue further Character Area Assessment SPDs for additional areas of the Borough, there are a number of recommendations derived from the two pilot areas contained in this report to form the basis for expanding the project.

- 6.8 There are high expectations that, once approved, the SPDs will improve the quality of development in the parts of Maidstone town covered. It would be helpful to achieve some 'quick wins' following adoption of the guide to demonstrate the Council's successful use of the Supplementary Planning Documents.

Recommendation 11 - Awareness

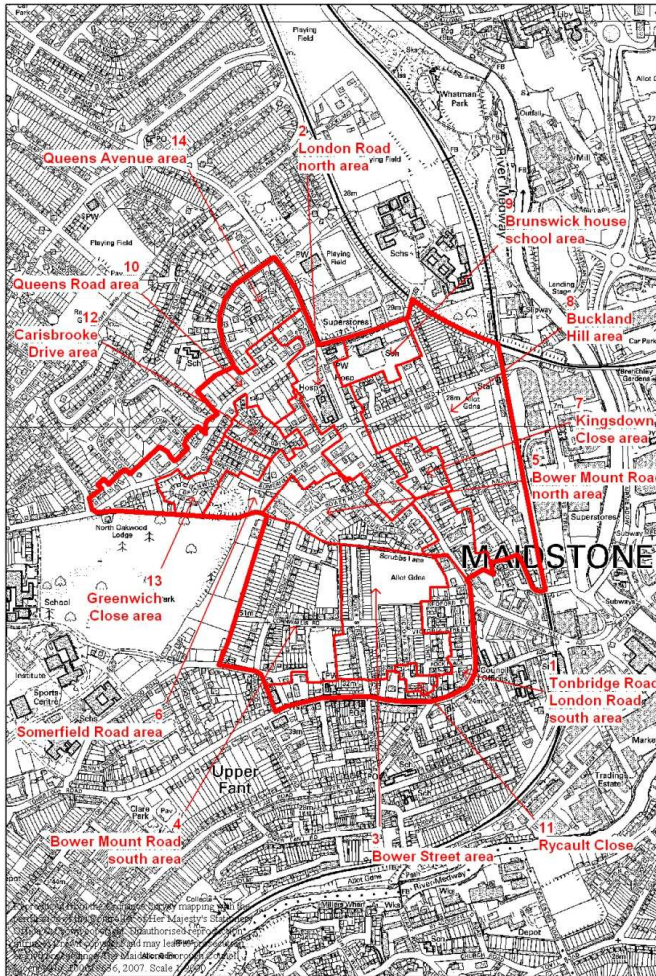
Ensure officers and Members are aware of the purpose and content of the Character Area Assessment SPDs, once adopted through a joint training event.

Recommendation 12 – Publicity

Character Area Assessment SPDs be publicised to local agents following adoption.

Recommendation 13 – Use of the SPDs

Following adoption, Character Area Assessment SPDs be used in negotiations with applicants and referred to in delegated and Committee reports in justifying approval or as a reason for refusal. Similarly, use the SPDs in appeal statements and publicise any successful outcomes.



London Road Area