



Town Centre Strategy Brief

1. Introduction and Purpose

- 1.1 Sevenoaks District Council (SDC) is seeking to commission consultants to prepare a Town Centre Strategy (TCS) for the four towns within Sevenoaks District. This is an important study which will help to shape the future of the District.
- 1.2 This will be a NPPF and NPPG compliant Strategy, which provides the Council with an up-to-date objective assessment of town centre needs and provision, the health of our four town centres, and a consideration of possible strategic policy responses to any prevalent or emerging issues in those centres.

2. Key Objectives

- 2.1 The TCS has multiple purposes:
 - To provide up to date town centre and retail evidence for Local Plan policies and sites, to develop a clear vision for town centres, strategy to achieve the vision and governance structure to ensure the strategy is implemented, in accordance with the NPPF/NPPG and best practice.
 - To inform an update of the Economic Development Strategy, which sets out the major priorities for economic development in the District over the next three years, with a particular focus on town centre management
 - To assist with lobbying and securing support and funding for town centre improvements in the District and to assist with regeneration plans for Council-owned sites.

3. Context

- 3.1 Sevenoaks District has four towns – Sevenoaks, Swanley, Edenbridge and Westerham. Each town centre has its own unique character and they vary widely in terms of their economic success, built form and design, retail offer and range of facilities and services.
- 3.2 We want to support each of these town centres with tailored policies and strategies to ensure that they grow, thrive and adapt to the changing climate. The post-COVID high street is now a different place to the one that existed 18 months ago, but we believe the pandemic has simply sped-up retail trends that were already in motion. In addition, national policy changes are reconfiguring the high street. Our previous retail strategies focused on comparison and convenience floor-space requirements and

primary and secondary retail frontages, but these concepts are now somewhat obsolete, due to changing retail trends and changes in use classes and permitted development rights.

- 3.3 We therefore want to commission a strategy which will help to guide our high streets to be successful places, which people desire to visit to shop, work, and relax. We understand that we will need to act as a coordinator between partners, to ensure that our high streets suit local needs and shifting customer preferences. We want to create resilient places, which are flexible to change in these uncertain times, which also embody the Council's Net Zero 2030 commitment. We want to put the policies, strategies, mechanisms and teams in place to ensure a thriving, competitive and prosperous town centre offer in Sevenoaks District.

4. Policy Background

- 4.1 The Sevenoaks adopted planning policy consists of the Core Strategy (CS, 2011) and the Allocations and Development Management Plan (ADMP, 2015). The Core Strategy contains strategic locational policies related to Sevenoaks Town Centre (LO3) and Swanley Town Centre (LO5), which are further developed in ADMP Policies TLC1 (Sevenoaks Town Centre), TLC2 (Swanley Town Centre), TLC3 (Edenbridge Town Centre) and TLC4 (Neighbourhood and Village Centres). These policies identified town centre areas, primary and secondary retail frontages and attempted to safeguard A1 uses (which now fall within the new commercial, business and service use class E).
- 4.2 The 2016 Retail Study (GVA) forecast that the District would require an additional 32,000m² retail floorspace to 2035 (split 10,400m² convenience and 21,700m² comparison). The draft Local Plan policy (EMP2 Town and Local Centre) sought to be flexible in terms of where this additional floorspace would be located, in line with settlement hierarchy and also flexible in terms of town centre uses, albeit restricting residential at ground floor level. It also sought to maintain A uses classes (now E) within village and neighbourhood centres and proposed a lower sequential test threshold for out-of-centre uses. These policies will need to be re-written in light of national policy changes, which is central to this brief.
- 4.3 The draft Local Plan was examined in autumn 2019 and in March 2020 the Inspector concluded that the Plan was not legally compliant in respect of the duty to cooperate. Following this, SDC was granted permission to bring a judicial review against the Inspector's decision, but the judgement in November 2020 found against the Council. SDC lodged an application to appeal against the Judicial Review ruling, which was refused in April 2021. The Plan is no longer at examination and officers are liaising with government to put forward a strategy that ensures a new Local Plan can be put in place as soon as possible.
- 4.4 The evidence base to support the new Local Plan can be accessed at:
https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/info/20069131/emerging_local_plan/463/local_plan_examination_library_index_including_evidence_base_documents

A number of these documents are in the process of being updated to ensure they reflect the latest evidence, trends and policy. This includes a targeted SHMA review, an Urban Capacity Study and a District-wide Characterisation Study. We are also developing a Movement Strategy to promote accessibility and sustainable transport choices. The latest town centre health checks were undertaken in November 2019 which showed vacancy rates of 4% in Westerham, 7% in Sevenoaks, 8% in Swanley and 10% in Edenbridge, which was broadly consistent with the previous round of monitoring.

- 4.5 The Economic Development Strategy covers the period 2018-2021 and is in the process of being refreshed. Key emerging themes, objectives and priorities can be noted in Appendix 1. In addition to the existing EDS, the Council is also delivering against the West Kent Economic Priorities for Growth which can be found in Appendix 2.
- 4.6 SDC is also developing a District 'place' campaign to promote distinctiveness and attractiveness to live, work, visit and invest in Sevenoaks. We have also launched a Town centre high street campaign to promote our high streets, increase footfall, using Reopening High Streets Safely funding. This work is led by a recently-appointed Town Centre Project Officer, who is responsible for the safe reopening of high streets – further information on these projects can be provided.

5. Location

- 5.1 Sevenoaks is situated in West Kent, on the boundary of Greater London. Large parts of the District (93%) falls within the Green Belt and more than 60% is classified as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The character of the District is diverse. Areas in the north, such as Swanley, are more urban in character, with clearer linkages to London and there are pockets of deprivation. In contrast, the south of the District is largely rural, characterised by small villages and hamlets. SDC is currently commissioning a Characterisation Study which will explore the District's character in further detail.
- 5.2 The paragraphs below give a view brief overview of the current situation, opportunities and challenges within the four towns. These issues will need to be further explored as part of this commission.
- 5.3 Sevenoaks Town is the District's principal town (population 30k). It is situated in the centre of the District, with good road and rail connectivity. The town centre is relatively vibrant, with a historic core and ample listed buildings, an affluent local population, expanded car parking, a range of complementary uses including the Stag theatre, farmers market, numerous restaurants and adjacent Knole park and an active town partnership/chamber of commerce. There is some retail vacancy in the secondary frontage and there is a particular concern regarding residential conversion in these areas. A Neighbourhood Plan for the town is at an advanced stage of preparation <https://sevenoaksndp.wordpress.com/>.

- 5.4 Swanley is the District's second town (population 16k), located in the north-west of the District, adjacent to the London Borough of Bromley. It also has good road and rail linkages, situated within the Oyster zone and at Junction 3 of the M25. The town grew around the railway junction and horticultural industry and much of the residential fabric of the town dates from the post-war period. The 1970s shopping centre was remodelled in the 1990s when the Asda supermarket, which, together with surface-level parking, dominates the high street, was extended. There is a popular weekly market and a neighbourhood plan is in preparation. The physical fabric of the town centre is aging, there are multiple vacancies and there is planning consent for redevelopment (SE/17/02279).
- 5.5 Edenbridge is the District's third town (population 9k), it is situated in the rural south-west of the District. The town has a mediaeval core, but expanded with the introduction of the railways (Edenbridge has two railway stations). The high street provides a range of local shops and services to meet the needs of the town and surrounding villages. It is anchored with a Waitrose store and a neighbourhood plan is in preparation <https://www.edenbridgetowncouncil.gov.uk/say/neighborhood-plan/>. There are some vacancies and prime sites in need of redevelopment.
- 5.6 Westerham is the District's fourth town (population 4k) and the village dates back to the Domesday book. The high street provides for day-to-day needs (it is classified as a village centre within the ADMP). Due to the proximity to a number of heritage assets and attractions, the high street also provides a range of visitor facilities, including cafes and boutiques.
- 5.7 New Ash Green village centre is not a town centre, but has been a regeneration priority for many years. The village centre has struggled, with vacancies, aging building fabric and multiple ownerships. A neighbourhood plan is in preparation and the area benefits from an active village association. Therefore, a commentary on New Ash Green village centre is also sought as part of this commission.
- 5.8 The existing town centre boundaries (Appendix 3) should be reviewed as part of this commission to ensure they are still appropriate. Some boundary amendments were proposed as part of the draft Local Plan. Mapping is also available of the allocated employment areas, SDC owned sites and constraints such as conservation areas.

6. Scope

- 6.1 Subject to consultants' views, the TCS is expected to provide advice in the following areas in order to bring SDC's evidence on retail and town centre support and requirements up to date.
- 6.2 Context – this research should provide an overview of the issues affecting the District's high streets, up to date market information and an assessment of whether the current town centre offer is fit for purpose. This should include commentary on:

- Zeitgeist / emerging trends / impact on the high street e.g. online shopping / home working / high street consolidation/contraction / ten minute towns
- Up to date local trend analysis of future office and retail markets and other uses (permanent and temporary) that can assist in reinforcing our town centres
- A current unit vacancies snapshot will be provided (Appendix 4 – see AMR Table 9.2 (Nov 2019), which will be updated prior to the commission)
- Advice on triggers to assist monitoring of the health of the centres
- Household survey (see 7.1 below) to understand issues facing retail/leisure sector and feed into needs assessment
- Capacity overview of town centre spaces and buildings / retail/office capacity update, reflecting the requirements of the NPPF/NPPG (Paragraph: 004 Reference ID: 2b-004-20190722). This should reference the most appropriate mix of uses to enhance overall vitality and viability of the town centre. It should also consider the ability of the town centre to accommodate that assessed need and whether there is need for expansion, consolidation or restructuring, to enable new development or the redevelopment of under-utilised space.
- Analysis of residential as a complementary rather than competing use
- Consideration of the future of out-of-centre retail parades, which meet day-to-day needs of local residents and how these can best be supported

6.3 Vision – this is central to this commission as a focus and end point, with advice sought on the content and development of the Vision. We are keen to embody the Council's Net Zero 2030 goal and these Visions should reflect the sustainability and carbon free agenda, for example through consideration of ten minute towns and active travel. The Vision should be communicated as a future state, in the present tense, and the advice should include:

- Key opportunities and risks for each town centre (SWOT analysis) to inform the vision
- USP / Illustrated bespoke Vision for each town centre / building on Place Campaign
- Place competition with neighbouring areas – need to complement not compete. We want to understand how towns within Sevenoaks compare with other nearby 'commuter-belt' market towns, to ensure that our places are successful. There is also competition from out of town retail and office locations within the District – e.g. Northern Sevenoaks and Dunton Green,
- Town-centre investment. If not retail-led, what is the driver – health, leisure, education, business, tourism/heritage etc?

6.4 Leadership and Governance – advice is sought on what different models are in place and what works well in which environment. This will involve stakeholder engagement with partners. The research should include:

- Town centre management models and which are most appropriate for each town
- Partnerships and voluntary sector (town centre partnership / chamber of commerce / association of small businesses / Sevenoaks District Business Board, KMGH, KMEP, SELEP, Neighbourhood Plan, Town and Parish Councils)
- Role of town centre managers / ambassadors
- Delivery and implementation – how will projects be delivered, timescales, risks

- Funding / grants / inward investment / lobbying – to provide a framework for future bid applications.

6.5 Potential Projects

This is a list of potential projects which we believe could support the town centre. We would be interested in advice in these areas, but this list is not exclusive and if there are others areas which should be considered, or should be of higher priority, please provide additional recommendations.

- Temporary/meanwhile uses on vacant sites/units / flexible space / pop-up shops
- Programme of seasonal events, to reinforce cultural/arts offer and increase footfall within the town centres, facilitated through town centre management
- Focus on night-time economy
- Public realm improvements, including outdoor seating and informal communal space for al-fresco eating / green-space/environmental improvements
- Commentary on town centre transport – including car parking (e.g. stop and shop) and sustainable transport modes (linking to our emerging Movement Strategy)
- Markets – farmers, day-to-day, tourist
- Linkages with tourism
- Business / office space / start-ups / flexible work-space / incubators - flexible, low cost, easy in-easy out business space – focus on creative, digital, tech business, to reflect emerging trends
- Further guidance to support independent traders e.g. on shop fronts / shop signage / improving the external appearance of retail units / visual merchandising training for shopkeepers. Analysis of on-line/digital presence and how this supports the physical environment
- Promotion / branding

6.6 Development Opportunities

Identification of proposals for key vacant/redevelopment sites, how these could contribute and complement the town centres, building on the Urban Capacity Study and Sevenoaks Urban Area Economic Study, as applicable. The Strategy should also provide a commentary on how edge of centre sites inform the vitality and viability of the town centre.

7. **Deliverables**

- Full analysis of the issues outlined above under ‘requirements’, for each of the five sub-headings – context, vision, leadership & governance, projects and development opportunities.
- Bespoke analysis, Vision and recommendations for each of the four town centres and New Ash Green, including illustrated examples
- Recommended update to existing town centre policy within the Local Plan, to cover the updated Plan period.
- Recommended priorities to inform the Economic Development Strategy update

- Recommendations for securing support and funding for town centre improvements in the District, a phasing plan outlining quick wins and an indicative cost plan.

Surveys and engagement

- 7.1 An updated household survey will be required to feed into the quantitative and qualitative needs assessment, comparing changes in shopping and leisure patterns since the 2016 study, and to update policy in compliance with the NPPF/PPG. In addition, there may be a case for on-street and businesses surveys, with a focus on the implications of COVID-19 on businesses to ensure the study is informed by the latest local information. The consultant is to advise of the format and scope of this survey, but it is suggested that a smaller and more nuanced sample is required than the 2016 study, focusing on, for example trends towards online shopping, independent retail and how town centre spaces are being used in COVID times.
- 7.2 It is expected that engagement with key stakeholders will also be required as part of the development of the Strategy. The consultant is to advise on what, when, how and with whom this will be conducted. Key stakeholders are likely to include the relevant town councils, chamber of commerce, town centre partnership association of small businesses, Sevenoaks District Business Board, SDC Town Centre Manager and ambassadors, Neighbourhood Plan teams and other retail and business representatives.

8. Presentation of Findings

- 8.1 SDC requires an electronic copy of the final report in both Microsoft Word and PDF formats. In addition, an executive summary containing the key information, is to be presented in a concise and engaging way, with full use of visualisations, mapping and illustrated examples. Shape files of all relevant mapping should be provided to be incorporated into our GIS systems.
- 8.2 The consultant will be expected to present the findings of the Strategy to the officer steering-group and members of the Council.
- 8.3 The consultant will need to be available to support SDC at their Local Plan examination when it takes place at a future date. This will be commissioned separately to this piece of work as necessary.

9. Information to be submitted with the Quotation

- 9.1 The consultant is expected to submit the following information with the quotation:
- A proposed work programme and timetable for carrying out the Strategy;
 - A methodology for how the Strategy will be developed;
 - Confirmation of how the Strategy will meet the requirements of national guidance, policy and best practice;
 - The quotation should include a detailed breakdown of the cost/days of the work;

- The names and qualifications of the staff who will undertake the work, including an explanation of their previous relevant experience;
- The names, addresses and contact details of two referees, preferably for whom the consultants have carried out similar work;
- The consultant is invited to provide examples of similar project work they have been involved in; and
- Written confirmation that, if requested, evidence can be given at the subsequent Local Plan examination on behalf of the District Council and that there is no conflict of interest in carrying out this work.

10. Timeline

- 10.1 SDC would like to appoint a consultant at the earliest opportunity. The below timetable sets out the key dates for undertaking the assessment.

Task	Deadline
Deadline for quotations	13 July 2021
Consultant interviews	Late July
Appointment of consultant	Late July
Inception meeting	Early August
Consultant to submit draft Strategy	September
Presentation of findings to officers and members of the Council	September
Consultant to submit final Strategy	October

11. Contact Details

- 11.1 The deadline for quotations is 13 July 2021, 5pm.
- 11.2 The quotation and any other supporting information should be sent via email to james.gleave@sevenoaks.gov.uk
- 11.3 Enquiries can be made to:
James Gleave
james.gleave@sevenoaks.gov.uk
Planning.policy@sevenoaks.gov.uk
01732 227326 / 01732 227000

12. Evaluation Criteria

- 12.1 The evaluation criteria is set below and the assessment framework is attached (Appendix 5):

Price 40%
Quality 60%

Quality will be evaluated against:

- Approach and Method
- Previous experience
- Staff resourcing
- Social value/sustainability commitment
- Quality assurance
- Innovation and consultation approach

Links to existing evidence base:

- 2016 Retail Study (GVA)
https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/downloads/file/1508/eco002_sevenoaks_district_retail_study_november_2016
- Town Centre Health Checks (AMR 2019, Chapter 9)
https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/downloads/file/2965/authority_monitoring_report_2019
- Sevenoaks Urban Area Economic Study (March 2019)
https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/downloads/file/1958/eco007_sevenoaks_urban_area_economic_study_-_part_1_april_2019
https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/downloads/file/1959/eco008_sevenoaks_urban_area_economic_study_-_part_2_march_2019
- Settlement Hierarchy
https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/downloads/file/1509/eco003_sevenoaks_district_settlement_hierarchy_april_2018
- Economic Development Strategy
https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/downloads/file/2/economic_development_strategy

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Economic Development Strategy - emerging themes, objectives and priorities

Appendix 2 - West Kent Economic Priorities for Growth

Appendix 3 - Town Centre boundary mapping

<https://maps.sevenoaks.gov.uk/planning/> (existing)

https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/downloads/file/1569/sdc001d_appendix_5_-_town_and_local_centre_maps (proposed)

Appendix 4 - Town centre vacancies (Nov 2019)

https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/downloads/file/2965/authority_monitoring_report_2019

Appendix 5 - Tender assessment framework