

Southborough and High Brooms Neighbourhood Development Plan 2024-2038

**A report to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
on the Southborough and High Brooms
Neighbourhood Development Plan**

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Executive Summary

- 1 I was appointed by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council in June 2025 to carry out the independent examination of the Southborough and High Brooms Neighbourhood Plan
- 2 The examination proceeded by written representations. I visited the neighbourhood area on 1 August 2025.
- 3 The Plan seeks to bring forward positive and sustainable development in the neighbourhood area. It also includes policies to safeguard the built and historic environment, seeks to encourage vibrancy in Southborough town centre and neighbourhood centres, and proposes the designation of a package of local green spaces. The Plan is commendably focused on a clear set of locally-distinctive issues. It has been produced in short order.
- 4 The Plan has been underpinned by community support and engagement. All sections of the community have been engaged in its preparation.
- 5 Subject to a series of recommended modifications set out in this report, I have concluded that the Plan meets all the necessary legal requirements and should proceed to referendum.
- 6 I recommend that the referendum area should coincide with the neighbourhood area.

Andrew Ashcroft
Independent Examiner
7 January 2026

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report sets out the findings of the independent examination of the Southborough and High Brooms Neighbourhood Development Plan 2024-2038 ('the Plan').
- 1.2 The Plan was submitted to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (TWBC) by Southborough Town Council (STC) in its capacity as the qualifying body responsible for preparing the neighbourhood plan.
- 1.3 Neighbourhood plans were introduced into the planning process by the Localism Act 2011. They allow local communities to take responsibility for guiding development in their area. This approach was subsequently embedded in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in 2012, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2023 and 2024. The NPPF continues to be the principal element of national planning policy.
- 1.4 The role of an independent examiner is clearly defined in the legislation. I have been appointed to examine whether the submitted Plan meets the basic conditions and Convention Rights and other statutory requirements. It is not within my remit to examine or to propose an alternative plan, or a potentially more sustainable plan except where this arises because of my recommended modifications to ensure that the plan meets the basic conditions and the other relevant requirements.
- 1.5 A neighbourhood plan can be narrow or broad in scope and can include whatever range of policies it sees as appropriate to its designated neighbourhood area. The submitted Plan has been designed to be distinctive in general terms, and to be complementary to the development plan. It has a focus on safeguarding its built and natural environments, developing an approach for the town centre, and designating a package of local green spaces.
- 1.6 Within the context set out above, this report assesses whether the Plan is legally compliant and meets the basic conditions that apply to neighbourhood plans. It also considers the content of the Plan and, where necessary, recommends changes to its policies and supporting text.
- 1.7 This report also provides a recommendation as to whether the Plan should proceed to referendum. If this is the case and that referendum results in a positive outcome the Plan would then be used to determine planning applications within the neighbourhood area and will sit as part of the wider development plan.

2 The Role of the Independent Examiner

- 2.1 The examiner's role is to ensure that any submitted neighbourhood plan meets the relevant legislative and procedural requirements.
- 2.2 I was appointed by TWBC, with the consent of STC, to conduct the examination of the Plan and to prepare this report. I am independent of both TWBC and STC. I do not have any interest in any land that may be affected by the Plan.
- 2.3 I possess the appropriate qualifications and experience to undertake this role. I am a Director of Andrew Ashcroft Planning Limited. I have 43 years' experience in various local authorities at either Head of Planning or Service Director level, and more recently as an independent examiner. I have significant experience of undertaking other neighbourhood plan examinations and health checks. I am a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Neighbourhood Planning Independent Examiner Referral System.

Examination Outcomes

- 2.4 In my role as the independent examiner of the Plan, I am required to recommend one of the following outcomes of the examination:
- (a) that the Plan as submitted should proceed to a referendum; or
 - (b) that the Plan should proceed to referendum as modified (based on my recommendations); or
 - (c) that the Plan does not proceed to referendum on the basis that it does not meet the necessary legal requirements.

- 2.5 The outcome of the examination is set out in Section 8 of this report.

Other examination matters

- 2.6 In examining the Plan, I am required to check whether:
- the policies relate to the development and use of land for a designated neighbourhood plan area; and
 - the Plan meets the requirements of Section 38B of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (the Plan must specify the period to which it has effect, must not include provision about development that is excluded development, and must not relate to more than one neighbourhood area); and
 - the Plan has been prepared for an area that has been designated under Section 61G of the Localism Act and has been developed and submitted for examination by a qualifying body.
- 2.7 I have addressed the matters identified in paragraph 2.6 of this report and am satisfied that they have been met.

3 Procedural Matters

- 3.1 In undertaking this examination I have considered the following documents:
- the submitted Plan (and Appendices A-D).
 - the Basic Conditions Statement.
 - the Consultation Statement (and its appendices).
 - the TWBC Strategic Environmental Assessment screening report.
 - the TWBC Habitats Regulations Assessment screening report.
 - the Housing Needs Assessment
 - the representations made to the Plan.
 - STC's responses to the clarification note.
 - the adopted Tunbridge Wells Borough Local Plan 2020 to 2038.
 - the National Planning Policy Framework (December 2024).
 - Planning Practice Guidance.
 - relevant Ministerial Statements.
- 3.2 I visited the neighbourhood area on 1 August 2025. I looked at its overall character and appearance and at those areas affected by policies in the Plan in particular.
- 3.3 It is a general rule that neighbourhood plan examinations should be held by written representations only. Having considered all the information before me, including the representations, I concluded that the Plan could be examined by written representations and that a hearing was not required.
- 3.4 The examination of the Plan has overlapped with the final stages of the examination of the Borough Local Plan. TWBC adopted the new Borough Local Plan on 10 December 2025. It covers the period between 2020 and 2038. TWBC and STC jointly concluded that it would be appropriate to delay the examination of the submitted Neighbourhood Plan so that it could be assessed against the strategic policies in the Borough Local Plan (once adopted). This process has ensured that, if made, the Plan will be fully consistent with the up-to-date development plan in the Borough.

4 Consultation

Consultation Process

- 4.1 Policies in made neighbourhood plans become the basis for local planning and development management decisions. As such, the regulations require neighbourhood plans to be supported and underpinned by public consultation.
- 4.2 In accordance with the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 (as amended), STC prepared a Consultation Statement. It is a very good example of a document of this nature. The Statement is concise and is underpinned by a package of appendices.
- 4.3 Section 2 of the Statement records the various activities that were held to engage the local community and the feedback from each event. It is helpfully organised into four stages. Table 1 sets out the sequence of events and activities.
- 4.4 Stage III comments on the extensive consultation processes that took place on the pre-submission version of the Plan (December 2024 to January 2025). Paragraphs 2.36 to 2.49 helpfully summarise key feedback on a topic-by-topic basis.
- 4.5 Appendix B outlines the comments received on the pre-submission Plan and advises about the way in which STC refined the Plan because of the comments received at this stage. This analysis helps to describe how the Plan evolved and progressed to the submission stage.
- 4.6 I am satisfied that consultation has been an important element of the Plan's production. Advice on the neighbourhood planning process has been made available to the community in a positive and direct way by those responsible for the Plan's preparation. From all the evidence provided to me as part of the examination, I conclude that the Plan has promoted an inclusive approach to seeking the opinions of all concerned throughout the process. TWBC has carried out its own assessment that the consultation process has complied with the requirements of the Regulations.

Consultation Responses

- 4.7 Consultation on the submitted plan was undertaken by TWBC and ended on 25 July 2025. This exercise generated representations from the following organisations:
 - Applause Rural Touring
 - Environment Agency
 - Kent County Council
 - National Highways
 - Natural England
 - Southern Water
 - Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council

- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

4.8 Representations were also received from local people.

4.9 I have taken account of all the representations in preparing this report. Where it is appropriate to do so, I refer to specific representations on a policy-by-policy basis.

5. The Neighbourhood Area and the Development Plan Context

The Neighbourhood Area

- 5.1 The neighbourhood area is the whole of the civil parish of Southborough. It is located at the north-western edge of the borough of Tunbridge Wells to the north of Royal Tunbridge Wells and south of Tonbridge. High Brooms is an area within the parish that was originally a separate settlement and has retained its own identity. The town of Southborough is mainly urban in character and forms what is referred to as the Main Urban Area of the Borough alongside Royal Tunbridge Wells. The neighbourhood area had a population of approximately 12,459 in 2021. The parish was designated as a neighbourhood area on 11 August 2023.
- 5.2 The town of Southborough is well-served by public transport and has a frequent bus service to several local destinations, including Royal Tunbridge Wells, Tonbridge, Maidstone, and Edenbridge. High Brooms has its own mainline station (located just outside the parished area) which serves High Brooms, Southborough, and residents of the north east of Royal Tunbridge Wells. Both Southborough and High Brooms benefit from a range of services and facilities. Southborough has several retail units offering a range of everyday and specialist goods, as well as a number of small supermarkets. High Brooms has a parade of shops for everyday needs. The Southborough Hub (Southborough Civic Centre) development in the centre of the town, has now been completed which offers a new doctor's surgery, a library and enhanced community and cultural facilities. The parish has two primary schools, nursery and pre-school provision, and easy access to several secondary schools.
- 5.3 Whilst this urban context has had an influence on the content of the Plan, 66% of Southborough parish is within the Green Belt and 64% is within the High Weald National Landscape. This broader context is reflected in other policies in the Plan. In the round the neighbourhood area is a very interesting location within which to prepare a neighbourhood plan.

Development Plan Context

- 5.4 The development plan context in the Borough has evolved as the examination of the neighbourhood plan has proceeded.
- 5.5 The Plan was prepared and submitted in the context of the former Tunbridge Wells Borough Core Strategy which was adopted in June 2010. It covered the period up to 2026. The Core Strategy sets out policies for the use and development of land across the Borough. Core Policy 1 and Boxes 3 (Spatial Strategy) and 4 (Settlement Hierarchy) set out an approach which has an urban focus for development to optimise the vitality of the Borough's town centres and to protect the distinctive character of the rural environment. In this context most of the new development is focussed at Royal Tunbridge Wells and Southborough. Core Policy 14 comments about development in the Villages and the Rural Areas.
- 5.6 The Core Strategy was underpinned by the Sites Allocations Local Plan. It was adopted in 2016. That Plan identifies a series of housing allocations in the Borough.

- 5.7 TWBC adopted the Borough Local Plan on 10 December 2025. It covers the period between 2020 and 2038. TWBC and STC jointly concluded that it would be appropriate to delay the examination of the submitted Plan so that it could be assessed against the strategic policies in the new Borough Local Plan rather than those in the Core Strategy.
- 5.8 Policy STR1 of the Borough Local Plan sets out the Borough Local Plan's Development Strategy. It delivers the Plan's vision which is:
- for Royal Tunbridge Wells and Southborough, to maintain their role as the main urban area, with a mix of housing, employment, leisure, and cultural developments, including by making effective use of urban land, whilst protecting their respective distinctive natural and built environmental qualities;
 - for Paddock Wood, to provide for comprehensive planned strategic growth (including on land in east Capel parish) that is fully aligned with timely infrastructure provision and which delivers significant improvements in local employment, town centre, leisure, and other services/community facilities commensurate with its enhanced role, as well as ensuring that it is not vulnerable to flooding;
 - for other settlements, to retain their essential local character, with high-quality sustainable development that reflects their environmental context, infrastructure, and site circumstances, having due regard to local needs; and
 - for the countryside, to retain its landscape, biodiversity, and historic character for its own sake, as well as a setting for settlements, whilst supporting sympathetic rural enterprise.
- 5.9 The BLP Plan's strategy for Southborough is captured in Policy PSTR/SO 1 which advises that the development strategy for Southborough is to:
- Set Limits to Built Development for Southborough on the Policies Map (Inset Map 3) as a framework for new development over the plan period;
 - Build approximately 26 new dwellings on one site (Policy AL/SO 3), including affordable housing, allocated in this Local Plan in the plan period;
 - Identify the Southborough Hub (Civic Centre) recreation area as a local sports hub as part of the Sports Strategy;
 - Protect and retain the public car park(s) within Southborough, as defined on the Southborough Policies Map;
 - Retain an appropriate mix of uses within the town centre, as defined on the Policies Map, and support proposals which would contribute to the vitality and viability of the centre;
 - Seek developer contributions, either in kind (normally land) and/or financial, from residential schemes to be used towards the provision of a range of facilities
- 5.10 Other strategic policies in the Borough Local Plan which are relevant to the submitted neighbourhood plan include:
- Policy STR2 Place Shaping and Design.

- Policy STR4 Ensuring Comprehensive Development
- Policy STR5 Infrastructure and Connectivity
- Policy STR6 Transport and Parking
- Policy STR8 Conserving and Enhancing the Natural, Built and Historic Environment
- Policy STR9 Green Belt

5.11 The Local Plan allocates two sites in the neighbourhood area for residential development as follows:

- Policy AL/SO 2 Land at Mabledon House (for hotel and leisure uses).
- Policy AL/SO 3 Land at Baldwins Lane, North Farm Road (for residential use).

5.12 The Basic Conditions Statement had carefully assessed the Plan's policies (at that time) against the strategic policies both in the adopted development plan and the emerging development plan (now the adopted Borough Local Plan). I recommend later in this report that the references to the former planning policy context included in the submitted neighbourhood plan are updated to reflect the current context.

Visit to the neighbourhood area

5.13 I visited the neighbourhood area on 1 August 2025. I approached it from the A21/A26 to the north. This helped me to understand its position in the wider landscape (including the Green Belt) and its accessibility to the road network.

5.14 I looked initially at the proposed local green spaces off Birchwood Avenue (LGS 27 and 28). I noted their scale and significance in the local landscape.

5.15 I then looked carefully at the Common. I saw the mature trees, the cricket ground, and their relationship with St Peter's Church.

5.16 I then walked along the A26 London Road to Yew Tree Road. In doing so I saw the range of retail and commercial services in Southborough town centre. I also saw the importance of the Southborough Civic Centre which includes the Library, the Medical Centre, the pharmacy. Its importance to the local community was self-evident.

5.17 I then drove to High Brooms. I saw that its character was different to that of Southborough. I also saw the significance of the High Brooms railway station.

5.18 I left the neighbourhood area and drove in Royal Tunbridge Wells. This part of the visit highlighted the relationship of the neighbourhood area with the wider built-up area to the south.

6 The Neighbourhood Plan and the Basic Conditions

- 6.1 This section of the report deals with the submitted neighbourhood plan as a whole and the extent to which it meets the basic conditions. The submitted Basic Conditions Statement has helped in the preparation of this section of the report. It is an informative and well-presented document.
- 6.2 As part of this process, I must consider whether the submitted Plan meets the basic conditions as set out in paragraph 8(2) of Schedule 4B of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. To comply with the basic conditions, the Plan must:
- have regard to national policies and advice contained in guidance issued by the Secretary of State;
 - contribute to the achievement of sustainable development;
 - be in general conformity with the strategic policies of the development plan in the area;
 - not breach, and otherwise be compatible with, the assimilated obligations of EU legislation (as consolidated in the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 (Consequential Amendment) Regulations 2023; and
 - not breach the requirements of Chapter 8 of Part 6 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

I assess the Plan against the basic conditions under the following headings:

National Planning Policies and Guidance

- 6.3 For the purposes of this examination the key elements of national policy relating to planning matters are set out in the National Planning Policy Framework December 2024 (NPPF).
- 6.4 The NPPF sets out a range of land-use planning principles to underpin both plan-making and decision-taking. The following are particularly relevant to the Southborough and High Brooms Neighbourhood Development Plan:
- a plan-led system - in this case the relationship between the neighbourhood plan and the development plan context as described in Section 5 of this report;
 - building a strong, competitive economy;
 - recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and supporting thriving local communities;
 - taking account of the different roles and characters of different areas;
 - highlighting the importance of high-quality design and good standards of amenity for all future occupants of land and buildings; and
 - conserving heritage assets in a manner appropriate to their significance.
- 6.5 Neighbourhood plans sit within this wider context both generally, and within the more specific presumption in favour of sustainable development. Paragraph 13 of the

NPPF indicates that neighbourhoods should both develop plans that support the strategic needs set out in local plans and plan positively to support local development that is outside the strategic elements of the development plan.

- 6.6 In addition to the NPPF, I have also taken account of other elements of national planning policy including Planning Practice Guidance and the recent ministerial statements.
- 6.7 Having considered all the evidence and representations available as part of the examination I am satisfied that the submitted Plan has had regard to national planning policies and guidance subject to the recommended modifications in this report. It sets out a positive vision for the future of the neighbourhood area and includes a series of policies that address a range of development and environmental matters. It has a focus on safeguarding its built and natural environments, developing an approach for the town centre, and designating a package of local green spaces.
- 6.8 At a more practical level, the NPPF indicates that plans should provide a clear framework within which decisions on planning applications can be made and that they should give a clear indication of how a decision-maker should react to a development proposal (paragraph 16d). This is reinforced in Planning Practice Guidance (ID:41-041-20140306) which indicates that policies in neighbourhood plans should be drafted with sufficient clarity so that a decision-maker can apply them consistently and with confidence when determining planning applications. Planning practice guidance also advises that planning policies should be concise, precise, and supported by appropriate evidence.
- 6.9 As submitted, the Plan does not fully accord with these practical issues. Most of my recommended modifications in Section 7 relate to matters of clarity and precision. They are designed to ensure that the Plan fully accords with national policy.

Contributing to sustainable development

- 6.10 There are clear overlaps between national policy and the contribution that the submitted Plan makes to achieving sustainable development. Sustainable development has three principal dimensions – economic, social, and environmental. I am satisfied that the submitted Plan has set out to achieve sustainable development in the neighbourhood area. In the economic dimension, the Plan includes policies for the location of development (Policy SHB1), Southborough High Street (Policy SHB6), and for flexible spaces and home working (Policy SHB8). In the social dimension, it includes policies on meeting housing needs (Policy SHB2), local green spaces (Policy SHB10), walking and cycling (Policy SHB13), and community facilities (Policy SHB15). In the environmental dimension, the Plan positively seeks to protect its natural, built, and historic environment in Policies SHB3 to SHB5 (and which address design, energy efficiency, and heritage assets) and identifies significant local views (Policy SHB11). This assessment overlaps with the details on this matter in the submitted Basic Conditions Statement.

General conformity with the strategic policies in the development plan

- 6.11 I have already commented in detail on the development plan context in this part of the Borough in paragraphs 5.4 to 5.12 of this report.
- 6.12 I consider that the submitted Plan delivers a local dimension to this strategic context and supplements the detail already included in the adopted development plan. Subject to the recommended modifications in this report, I am satisfied that the submitted Plan is in general conformity with the strategic policies in the development plan.

Strategic Environmental Assessment

- 6.13 The Neighbourhood Plan (General) (Amendment) Regulations 2015 require a qualifying body either to submit an environmental report prepared in accordance with the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 or a statement of reasons why an environmental report is not required.
- 6.14 TWBC prepared a screening report in November 2024. It concludes that it is unlikely there will be any significant environmental effects arising from the draft Plan. As such, it does not require a full strategic environmental assessment to be undertaken.

Habitats Regulations Assessment

- 6.15 TWBC also prepared a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) screening report of the Plan at the same time. It assesses the potential impact of the Plan on protected sites.
- 6.16 The report assesses the impact of the Plan on the Ashdown Forest Special Protection Area (SPA) and the Ashdown Forest Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Natura 2000 site. It concludes that it is unlikely there will be any significant environmental effects arising from the submitted Plan. As such, the 'appropriate assessment' stage of the HRA process that ascertains the effect on integrity of the European Site) does not need to be undertaken.
- 6.17 Having reviewed the information provided to me as part of the examination I am satisfied that a proportionate process has been undertaken in accordance with the various regulations. None of the statutory consultees have raised any concerns regarding either neighbourhood plan obligations. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, I am entirely satisfied that the submitted Plan is compatible with this aspect of the basic conditions.

Human Rights

- 6.18 In a similar fashion I am satisfied that the submitted Plan has had regard to the fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and that it complies with the Human Rights Act. There is no evidence that has been submitted to me to suggest otherwise. There has been full and adequate opportunity for all interested parties to take part in the preparation of the Plan and to make their comments known. On this basis, I conclude that the submitted Plan does not breach, nor is in any way incompatible with the ECHR.

Summary

- 6.19 On the basis of my assessment of the Plan in this section of my report, I am satisfied that it meets the basic conditions subject to the incorporation of the recommended modifications contained in this report.

7 The Neighbourhood Plan policies

- 7.1 This section of the report comments on the policies in the Plan. It makes a series of recommended modifications to ensure that the various policies have the necessary precision to meet the basic conditions.
- 7.2 The recommendations focus on the policies in the Plan given that the basic conditions relate primarily to this aspect of neighbourhood plans. However, in some cases, I have also recommended changes to the associated supporting text.
- 7.3 I am satisfied that the content and the form of the Plan is fit for purpose. It is distinctive and proportionate to the neighbourhood area. The wider community and STC have spent time and energy in identifying the issues and objectives that they wish to be included in their Plan. This sits at the heart of the localism agenda.
- 7.4 The Plan has been designed to reflect Planning Practice Guidance (Section 41-004-20190509) which indicates that neighbourhood plans must address the development and use of land. It also includes a separate section on non-policy actions and projects.
- 7.5 I have addressed the policies in the order that they appear in the submitted Plan. I comment on the non-policy actions and projects.
- 7.6 For clarity, this section of the report comments on all the policies.
- 7.7 Where modifications are recommended to policies they are highlighted in bold print. Any associated or free-standing changes to the text of the Plan are set out in italic print.

The initial parts of the Plan (Sections 1-3)

- 7.8 The initial elements of the Plan set the scene for the policies. They are proportionate to the neighbourhood area and the subsequent policies.
- 7.9 The Introduction sets out a clear background to the Plan. It identifies the neighbourhood area (in Figure 1) and the Plan period (in paragraph 1.2). It also comments about:
- the national neighbourhood plan agenda;
 - national planning policy;
 - local planning policy;
 - the High Weald AONB Management Plan; and
 - community engagement
- 7.10 Section 2 comments about the parish to very good effect. The information helpfully underpins several of the policies. Section 3 comments about the vision and five objectives of the Plan and how they provide a structure for the resulting policies. The comprehensive Vision addresses each of the three dimensions of sustainable development and is as follows:

'In 2038 Southborough and High Brooms will be vibrant, thriving places, where people choose to live, work and visit.

The two settlements will remain closely connected while recognising their distinctiveness both from each other and from nearby places, such as Royal Tunbridge Wells.

Our High Street will have been regenerated to offer a range of recreational, retail and community facilities, as an appealing destination for those living here or visiting from the wider area. Within this, the Southborough Civic Centre and town square will provide a safe, inclusive spaces to host events, live music and other activities that bring together local culture and creativity.

The High Brooms Industrial Estate will have evolved its offering to a mix of commercial and other leisure/ recreational uses.

New housing will be carefully planned and managed to meet local needs and all development will seek to reinforce the character of the local area, with design that is both attractive and sustainable. Our residents will have opportunities to work locally should they wish.

We will celebrate our rich history, protecting and further promoting our heritage. Equally, our rural Green Belt setting, within the High Weald National Landscape, will continue to be highly valued and we will seek opportunities to enhance opportunities for accessing open space and enabling biodiversity. Treasured green spaces and views will be protected for our future generations. The Common will remain a focus for traditional community activities and events.

We will strive to be a walkable, rideable, and 'wheelable' (mobility scooters, pushchairs etc.) area, promoting safe, attractive, and well-signposted routes to access local facilities, the wider countryside and nearby towns and villages with the infrastructure to support this, including lobbying for improved public transport links.

- 7.11 The remainder of this section of the report addresses each policy in turn in the context set out in paragraphs 7.5 to 7.7 of this report.

General comments on the policies

- 7.12 The policies are presented in clear policy boxes and are clearly distinguished from their supporting text.
- 7.13 Each policy has a Purpose and a Justification. This helps all concerned to navigate their way through the Plan. For consistency I use the Purpose in the Plan to summarise each of the policies. Each policy lists its conformity references to the Plan's objectives and to other elements of the development plan, and to the National Landscape (formerly AONB) Management Plan. This is best practice.

POLICY SHB1: LOCATION OF DEVELOPMENT

- 7.14 This policy sets out the Plan's approach to the location of development. It emphasises the importance of new development being directed to the most

sustainable locations, near to local services and amenities, which will help to protect the valued National Landscape, the Green Belt and important green spaces and green corridors in the area. The Plan advises that the approach taken will also help to retain the identity of the two main settlements, notably where they abut Royal Tunbridge Wells to the south, Bidborough to the northwest and Tonbridge to the north, by restricting further coalescence.

7.15 In general terms this policy provides a positive spatial strategy for the neighbourhood area and will focus sustainable development within easy reach of its commercial and community facilities. In this context it has regard to Sections 2 and 5-8 of the NPPF. It is also in general conformity with Policies STR1 and STR3-5 of the recently-adopted Local Plan and will assist in their implementation.

7.16 In the clarification note I sought advice from STC on how it decided to identify development which would be supported beyond the Limits to Built Development (in part B of the policy) and the extent to which it would be practicable to attempt to identify a definitive list of such development. In its response to the clarification note STC advised that:

‘The principle of development is established within the Limit to Built Development. The purpose of Part B is to set out guidance for any development on land that might come forward outside the Limit to Built Development, the majority of which either falls in Green Belt and/or the National Landscape. The policy takes a cautionary approach to such development by setting out the instances where it might be appropriate and the criteria it should adhere to in order to ensure that it takes place sustainably. It is accepted that producing a definitive list of acceptable developments may be difficult and therefore the SG would be minded to amending Part B of the policy to:

“Development in the countryside, beyond the Limits to Built Development, will be strictly controlled in the interests of conserving the nationally important landscape of the High Weald National Landscape (and its setting) and the Green Belt, and will only be supported where they involve development supported in such locations in national and local planning policies.’

7.17 I have considered these issues very carefully. I am satisfied that STC’s suggested change to the policy resolves the issues associated with attempting to define in a comprehensive way the types of development which may be acceptable outside the Limit to Built Development. I am also satisfied that its general reference to national policy and the strategic policies in the development plan avoid the need for the Plan to summarise national policy on the Green Belt.

7.18 I recommend modifications to the structure of the policy to achieve these outcomes. In doing so, I recommend a series of modifications to the remaining criteria in the policy to bring the clarity required by the NPPF and to allow TWBC to be able to implement the policy through the development management system. I also recommend that part A of the policy is recast to acknowledge that the new Borough Local Plan has now been adopted, and consequential revisions to the details shown in Figure 3.

- 7.19 Kent County Council suggests that the policy should be expanded so that it addresses sustainable drainage. Such an approach would be appropriate and broaden the effect of the policy. However, it is not necessary to ensure that the Plan meets the basic conditions. In addition, it is an issue that is already addressed in national and local policies, and the submitted policy has chosen to focus on the location of new development rather than how it is technically configured.
- 7.20 With the incorporation of these modifications I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of each of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace Part A with:

Development proposals will be supported within the Limits to Built Development as shown on the map in Figure 3. Development proposals on brownfield land will be particularly supported, subject to compliance with other policies in this plan.'

Replace Part B and i. to v. with:

'Development in the countryside, beyond the Limits to Built Development, will be strictly controlled in the interests of conserving the nationally important landscape of the High Weald National Landscape (and its setting) and the Green Belt. Development proposals in these locations will only be supported where they involve development identified in national planning policy (Section 13 of the December 2024 NPPF), and in local planning policies (including Policies STR8 and STR9 of the Borough Local Plan).

Replace the remainder of the policy with a new Part C to read:

'Development in the countryside, beyond the Limits to Built Development which meets the tests in Part B of this policy should: [Include vi to x as I to v]

In vi (as submitted) replace 'aways' with 'areas'

Replace ix (as submitted) with 'not unacceptably affect road and pedestrian safety by traffic generation and/or parking'; and

At the beginning of x (as submitted) add: 'where it is practicable to do so,'

Revise the Limits to Built Development boundary on Figure 3 so that it is consistent with than in the recently-adopted Borough Local Plan

POLICY SHB2: MEETING LOCAL HOUSING NEEDS

- 7.21 This policy seeks to ensure that there is a range of housing to meet the specific housing needs of the neighbourhood area. The approach taken is underpinned by the findings of the Housing Needs Assessment. The policy has five related parts as follows:

- housing mix;
- meeting the needs of older people;

- the integration of affordable housing into wider developments;
- the potential for off-site commuted payments for affordable housing; and
- self/custom build housing.

7.22 In general terms the policy takes a very positive approach to these issues and has regard to Sections 5 and 8 of the NPPF.

7.23 The final sentence of Part Ai of the policy does not provide clarity either to TWBC or to the development industry. I sought advice from STC about the evidence to justify the 5% figure quoted in the policy for 4-bedroom houses. In its response to the clarification note STC commented that:

‘The sentence was added into the Submission Version following comments received from TWBC on the Pre-Submission Version Plan. The comment received was that larger (4 bedrooms and over) homes should be restricted to a low percentage of the overall site total, perhaps up to 5% of overall dwelling numbers. Para 1.32 of the Housing Needs Study notes that if the NDP are seeking to improve housing affordability then more 1 – 3 bed homes should be provided. Smaller 1 and 2 bed homes should also be designed to be accessible and adaptable to help meet the growing need for older persons housing. The purpose of Part Ai is to ensure that any new homes focus predominantly on delivering smaller (in terms of bedroom numbers) homes to address the needs of single people, young couples, smaller families, and those wishing to downsize as identified in the Housing Needs Assessment. It may be that removing the final sentence retains the overall thrust of the policy.’

7.24 Based on all the evidence, I recommend that the final sentence of Part Ai is deleted. The general tenor of this element of the policy (a particular focus on homes between 1- and 3-bedroom homes) remains unaffected by this recommended modification. Otherwise, the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

In Part A i of the policy delete the final sentence.

POLICY SHB3: CHARACTER AND DESIGN OF DEVELOPMENT

7.25 The policy seeks to encourage development proposals within Southborough and High Brooms to comply with the highest design standards, adhere to the High Weald Housing Design Guide and the locally specific Design Guidelines and Codes (Appendix A) prepared for the Parish. The policy and its supporting text add greater detail to the policies in the Borough Local Plan, and specifically to Policy STR2 which requires development to respond positively to local character and context but is not specific in how this is achieved at the neighbourhood level. The policy has three parts as follows:

- development proposals should be landscape- and heritage-led and incorporate a high quality of design, which responds to and integrates well with its surrounds in the context of the character area it falls within (Part A);

- as appropriate to their scale, nature, and the Character Area in which they are located, development proposals should demonstrate how they have sought to address the following matters (Part B); and
- where development sites abut open countryside, development on the rural boundary edge should mitigate any detrimental visual impacts on the countryside (Part C).

7.26 This is an excellent, locally-distinctive policy which is underpinned by the equally-impressive Design Guidance and Codes. In the round, it is a first-class local response to Section 12 of the NPPF. In this context I am satisfied that it meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

POLICY SHB4: ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND DESIGN

7.27 This policy seeks to ensure that development meets the highest environmental standards in terms of its construction, materials, and energy use. The Plan comments that this approach will help to mitigate against climate change and contribute to achieving the national target of zero net carbon by 2050.

7.28 The policy has four related parts as follows:

- development proposals which incorporate measures and standards to adapt to, and mitigate, the impacts of predicted climate change will be supported;
- as appropriate to their scale, nature and location, development proposals which incorporate a series of sustainable design features will be strongly supported;
- proposals for the retrofitting of historic buildings, including designated and non-designated heritage assets, to reduce energy demand and to generate renewable energy; and
- proposals for individual and community scale energy schemes, for instance the installation of solar panels on community and public sector buildings.

7.29 The policy takes a very positive approach to these matters and has regard to Section 14 of the NPPF. In addition, its non-prescriptive nature responds positively to the Written Ministerial Statement Planning: Local Energy Efficiency Standards (December 2023).

7.30 In this broader context I recommend a series of technical modifications to the criteria in part B of the policy to ensure that its approach is more closely aligned to that taken in Policy EN 3 of the recently-adopted Borough Local Plan. This approach was agreed by STC in its response to the clarification note and will ensure that the development plan has a complementary suite of policies. Otherwise, I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace part B ii with: ‘reduced embodied carbon using high quality, thermally efficient sustainable building materials linked to a fabric-first approach.’

Replace part B iii with ‘the installation of energy efficiency measures such as loft and wall insulation and double glazing as part of a fabric-first approach.’

Replace part B iv with: ‘incorporating on-site energy generation from renewable sources such as solar panels, ground source heating, air source heating and energy generation.’

POLICY SHB5: CONSERVING HERITAGE ASSETS

- 7.31 This policy recognises the important contribution that heritage assets (both designated and non-designated) make to the local character and distinctiveness of the area, both individually and collectively. The Plan advises that they should be conserved, enhanced, and celebrated wherever practicable.
- 7.32 Part C identifies 15 non-designated heritage assets. They are detailed in Appendix B and the supporting text.
- 7.33 In general terms this is a very positive policy which responds positively to Section 16 of the NPPF. In this context I recommend the following modifications to bring the clarity required by the NPPF and to allow TWBC to be able to implement its details through the development management process:
- the revision to the wording used in part B of the policy to avoid a potential confusion on designated assets;
 - including a reference in part C of the policy to the relevant policy in the recently-adopted Local Plan; and
 - a simplification and recasting of the wording used in part D of the policy.
- 7.34 Otherwise I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

In part B replace the first use of ‘designated’ with ‘identified’

Replace part C with: ‘Proposals affecting the non-designated heritage assets will be determined based on national planning policy and Policies STR8 and EN4 of the Tunbridge Wells Borough Local Plan.’

Replace part D with: ‘Development proposals in the Southborough Conservation Area should take particular care to ensure that alterations and new buildings conserve or enhance the historic environment, in accordance with the guidance in the Southborough Conservation Area Appraisal.’

POLICY SHB6: SOUTHBOROUGH HIGH STREET AND OTHER NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRES

- 7.35 This policy seeks to support uses that will enable an economically vibrant, mixed-use high street destination in Southborough, attracting additional footfall, enhancing its historic setting, supporting the reuse of vacant buildings, improving accessibility, and improving overall the look and feel of the public areas. The policy also seeks to

ensure the continued provision of smaller, neighbourhood centres, which provide convenience facilities to residents across the area.

7.36 The policy has five related elements as follows:

- promoting a diverse range of town centre uses;
- the use of upper floors for residential purposes;
- the change of use of existing retail premises;
- temporary uses;
- the re-use of historic buildings; and
- the public realm.

7.37 I looked carefully at Southborough High Street and the other Neighbourhood Centres during the visit. Their importance to the local community was self-evident. The policy acknowledges the importance of economically vibrant mixed-use centres. It has a positive approach which reflects the details in Sections 6 and 7 of the NPPF.

7.38 In the clarification note I sought advice from STC on the intended purpose of the reference to permitted development rights in Part C of the policy. In its response, STC commented that:

‘The inclusion of this wording seeks to acknowledge the fact that some development proposals may be undertaken under permitted development and therefore this clause would not apply. An alternative approach may be to amend the wording to Insofar as planning permission is required. This could be elaborated on within the justification.’

7.39 I am satisfied that STC’s suggested revision to the policy will clarify this matter, And I recommend accordingly. Otherwise, I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of each of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

In part C replace ‘Notwithstanding permitted development rights,’ with ‘Insofar as planning permission is required,’

At the end of paragraph 7.7 add:

‘Policy SHB6 seeks to provide a broad context within which an economically vibrant, mixed-use high street destination in Southborough can be achieved, Section C of the policy recognises that the Use Classes Order now provides a significant degree of flexibility for retail and commercial uses/changes of use to take place using permitted development rights. Plainly this will limit the Plan’s broader ambition to safeguard existing retail facilities within the Plan period.’

POLICY SHB7: SUPPORTING THE CULTURAL AND CREATIVE ECONOMY

7.40 The Plan advises that cultural wellbeing is identified as one of the twelve core planning principles underpinning both plan-making and decision-making in the NPPF. This policy supports a flourishing creative and arts sector in Southborough and High Brooms.

- 7.41 This is an interesting and locally-distinctive policy. In general terms it has regard to Sections 6-8 of the NPPF. I note the commentary in paragraph 7.22 of the Justification. Nevertheless, elements of Part A of the policy read as a process matter rather than a land use planning policy. In addition, it is unclear about the way in which STC would expect TWBC to apply the policy through the development management process either generally or in a proportionate way.
- 7.42 In its response to the clarification note on this matter, STC advised that:
- 'it is accepted that the second and third sentences of Part A are largely process and may sit better within the justification. In terms of applying the policy, the SG consider that it would be possible for even a modest planning application to consider how it might contribute to the overarching cultural aim for the High Street. Nevertheless, Part A could be amended to offer additional flexibility for those applying the policy, for instance: "Subject to their scale and nature, non-residential development proposals in the High Street should demonstrate that future cultural provision has been considered (which may include the provision of public realm capable of hosting events and performances, as well as cultural space within buildings).'*
- 7.43 I have considered these matters carefully. Based on all the evidence I recommend that Part A of the policy is recast so that it has a clearer outcome and that the explanatory text is repositioned into the supporting text. This will bring the clarity required by the NPPF.
- 7.44 Part B of the policy offers support to development proposals which address a series of cultural and creative industry issues. In this context I recommend that the policy clarifies that a development proposal does not have to meet all the six identified types of development (which would be impracticable).
- 7.45 Otherwise I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of each of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace Part A of the policy with:

'Subject to their scale and nature, non-residential development proposals in the High Street should demonstrate that future cultural provision has been considered (which may include the provision of public realm spaces capable of hosting events and performances, as well as cultural space within buildings).'

In Part B replace the full stops after i. to v. with '; and/or'

Insert new text at the end of paragraph 7.20 to read

'Part A of the policy comments that non-residential development proposals in the High Street should demonstrate that future cultural provision has been considered This assessment should be included in a Cultural Wellbeing Action Plan, describing how the above provisions of this policy have been addressed (as outlined in the Borough Council's Section 106 Planning Obligations Good Practice Guide). The Cultural Wellbeing Action Plan should be developed through detailed engagement

with the local community and its proposals should be co-designed at an early stage at pre-application.'

POLICY SHB8: SUPPORTING FLEXIBLE WORKSPACES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR HOMEWORKING

- 7.46 This policy recognises the growing contribution of home-based and small-to-medium sized businesses and seeks to encourage opportunities for them, including by supporting the provision of start-up and move-on business units as well as the provision of shared office space. The Plan advises that this would provide a greater incentive and opportunity for local people to work locally. The Plan also advises that homeworking has become commonplace for many since the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 7.47 The second part of the policy builds in appropriate environmental safeguards and comments that as appropriate to their scale, nature and location, proposals for new workspaces should demonstrate the way in which they can be incorporated within their immediate locality without generating any unacceptable impact on the amenity of residential properties and on the capacity and safety of the local highways network.
- 7.48 This is another positively-worded policy. It recognises the importance of homeworking in the neighbourhood area. Its approach has regard to Sections 6 and 8 of the NPPF. In this context, I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of each of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

POLICY SHB9: LANDSCAPE AND BIODIVERSITY

- 7.49 This policy seeks to ensure that the multiple benefits of the area's green (land) and blue (water) spaces (including their importance in combating pressure on wildlife, habitats, biodiversity, and geodiversity and in off-setting the effects of air pollution) are recognised and enhanced. The Plan advises that this approach applies particularly where individual spaces have a greater collective value as part of wider chains of green infrastructure and will serve to support the requirement to conserve and, where possible, provide a net gain in biodiversity through planning policy whilst accommodating sustainable development. It also sets out how development proposals should support flora and fauna effectively. The policy has three general parts followed by a fourth part which advises specifically about trees and woodlands, hedgerows, and fauna.
- 7.50 I have noted the representation made by Kent County Council to strengthen the policy with regards to the requirement for new development to not contribute to flood risk via the inclusion of sustainable drainage. Whilst this approach would broaden its remit, it is not needed to ensure that the policy meets the basic conditions.
- 7.51 In the round I am satisfied that this is a very good and locally distinctive policy which responds positively to Section 15 of the NPPF. As such it meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

POLICY SHB10: LOCAL GREEN SPACE

- 7.53 The policy proposes the designation of Local Green Spaces (LGSs) within the neighbourhood area that are demonstrably special to the local community. It is underpinned by the information in Appendix C. The proposed LGS are helpfully shown collectively on Figure 11 of the Plan.
- 7.54 I looked carefully at the proposed LGSs throughout the visit. I noted their various land uses and sizes. I assess the proposed LGS against their overlaps with the Green Belt and the High Weald National Landscape, and the extent to which they are local in character. I then provide specific commentary on proposed LGS 27 Camp Field.

Overlap with the Green Belt/High Weald National Landscape

- 7.55 I note that several of the proposed LGSs are within the Green Belt and/or the High Weald National Landscape. In the context of the contents of Planning practice guidance on this matter (ID: 37-010-20140306 and ID: 37-011-20140306) I sought advice from STC on the approach it had taken. In its response it identified that:

‘Local Green Space designation is a way to provide special protection against development for green areas of particular importance to local communities. They should be capable of enduring beyond the end of the plan period.’

Planning Practice Guidance notes that in instances where a local green space is located within Green Belt or an area protected by designations, consideration should be given to whether any additional local benefit would be gained by designation as Local Green Space. A potential benefit, which is relevant to the spaces in the SHBNDP, is that it serves to identify formally those areas that are of particular importance to the local community.

Five of the local green spaces in the SHBNDP fall within such locations (LGS 10/24/27/28/37). In these instances, the designation will help to identify formally those areas that are of particular importance to the local community. Whilst some are located in the Green Belt, it is considered that the Local Green Space designation would afford the spaces further protection should that status ever change, which could take place as part of any future Green Belt Review or if the presumption in favour of sustainable development were to be applied in the future.’

- 7.56 I have considered this information very carefully. Based on the evidence and my own observations I am satisfied that the approach taken in the Plan for proposed 10//27/28/37 is appropriate and supplements the existing designations. I have noted that the areas concerned are of particular significance to the local community and are adjacent to the built-up parts of the neighbourhood area.
- 7.57 In relation to LGS24 (Apple Orchard) I am not satisfied that the proposed designation brings any added value to the existing Green Belt and National Landscape designations. This judgement relates to its isolated location and its close affinity to the countryside rather than to the built-up parts of the neighbourhood area. As such I recommend its deletion from the policy, and from Figure 11.

The size of the proposed LGSs

7.58 I am satisfied that most of the proposed LGS are local in character and not extensive tracts of land (NPPF paragraph 107c).

7.59 I sought STC's advice on the size of the larger LGSs and was advised that they are as follows:

- LGS13: 9.16 ha
- LGS27: 7.66 ha
- LGS37: 10.26 ha

7.60 Planning practice guidance D: 37-015-20140306 comments that

'There are no hard and fast rules about how big a Local Green Space can be because places are different and a degree of judgment will inevitably be needed.

Blanket designation of open countryside adjacent to settlements will not be appropriate. In particular, designation should not be proposed as a 'back door' way to try to achieve what would amount to a new area of Green Belt by another name.'

7.61 Having assessed all the information, including my own observations of the parcels of land concerned, I am satisfied that the three proposed LGSs are local in character. They relate to clearly identifiable parcels of land and have been promoted within the broader context of Section 8 of the NPPF.

LGS 27 Camp Field

7.62 The proposed designation of Camp Field (LGS27) has attracted an objection from the owner which makes the following comments:

'This area of land is approximately 20 acres and therefore is extensive and considerably larger than other areas you have identified as suitable local green spaces.

This land is used for Agriculture and has been subject of subsidies and therefore will be kept in an agricultural use.

At the moment the land is being used for grazing. With crop rotation, this area must be used again for Arable use, i.e. the growing of wheat, barley etc for example where of course this would be totally unsuitable for informal recreational use including walking. There is a public footpath at the edge of the field but there is no public access on the land itself.'

7.63 Appendix C comments about the proposed designation as follows:

'Open, grassed field. Located in the High Weald National Landscape and Green Belt. Individual mature trees along northern edge separating field from public footpath. Mature trees and high hedging screen field from private houses/gardens that back onto public footpath. Bordered by Doctor's Field (LGS29) on eastern edge and by woodland and fields on western eastern and southern and eastern edges. Currently

used for informal recreation including dog walking by both Southborough and Bidborough residents.

Recreation: Used extensively by residents of both Southborough and Bidborough Parishes for recreational walking and for exercising dogs. With excellent sightlines across the whole field, dogs can safely be allowed to run either on a long lead, or off-lead if suitably trained.

Wildlife: Wildlife corridor between areas of Ancient Woodland and Local Wildlife Sites. In close proximity to Wildflower Meadow. Dark Skies despite nearby housing. Identified in recent draft Kent and Medway Local Nature Strategy as within an area that could become of importance to biodiversity.

Tranquillity: Quiet location with only very limited local road traffic. Doctors Meadow (LGS29 in this document) on eastern border is actively managed as a haven for wildlife and peaceful and tranquil area for Southborough residents.

Beauty: Strong rural aspect despite close proximity of 20th century housing developments. As an open space located on a natural high point, allows appreciation of High Weald topography and long-range views.

Historic: Part of Great Bounds Estate established in early medieval period. Likely to be medieval assart fields with 20th century agglomeration, it was described as valuable pastureland when the Estate put up for sale in 1933. Sits within a typical High Weald medieval landscape. Public footpath follows an historic routeway that is part of the network of ancient droeways, with a Livestock Pen marked on Ordnance Survey Maps in Camp Field.'

- 7.64 I have considered the proposed designation very carefully. I walked along the public footpaths within the site and saw its relationship to the built development on Birchwood Avenue to the north. I also appreciate the extensive views to the south. On the balance of the evidence, I am satisfied that the proposed LGS meets the three criteria in paragraph 107 of the NPPF and the more general criteria in paragraph 106 of the NPPF. Furthermore, it is precisely the type of land which the NPPF provides for a qualifying body to designate as a LGS, and in this case which scores highly on the way in which it is demonstrably special to the local community and holds a particular local significance. This conclusion is consistent with the views I have reached about the proposed LGS earlier in this part of the report based on its overlap with the Green Belt/High Weald National Landscape (paragraph 7.57), and its size (paragraph 7.61).
- 7.65 The policy lists the proposed LGS without setting out a policy approach. In its response to the clarification note STC advised that:
- 'The policy did not include such a clause in the interests of not repeating national policy. However, the (Steering Group) would be content to add detail for the purposes of clarity, for example Policies and decisions for managing development within a Local Green Space should be consistent with national policy for Green Belts as set out in the NPPF.'*

- 7.66 I recommend accordingly and to ensure clarity that the policy will follow the matter-of-fact approach taken in paragraph 108 of the NPPF. Otherwise, the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Delete LGS 24 Apple Orchard

At the end of the policy add:

‘Policies and decisions for managing development within a Local Green Space should be consistent with national policy for Green Belts as set out Section 11 of the NPPF (December 2024).’

Delete LGS24 Apple Orchard from Figure 11

POLICY SHB11: LOCALLY SIGNIFICANT VIEWS

- 7.67 This policy sets out a series of views in and across the neighbourhood area, which have been identified by the community as being important to safeguard. The policy seeks to safeguard the views from inappropriate development. Twelve views are identified which are underpinned by the details in Appendix D. I looked at a selection of the views during the visit.
- 7.68 The policy advises that as appropriate to their scale and nature development proposals within the shaded arcs of the various views as shown on Figure 12 should be designed in a way that safeguards the locally significant view or views concerned. It also advises that proposals for major development should be supported by a landscape/visual impact assessment which clearly demonstrates the potential impacts that such a proposal would have on significant views where relevant and how these impacts will be mitigated.
- 7.69 This is another very good and locally distinctive policy. In this case it is underpinned by the details in Appendix D. It has regard to Section 15 of the NPPF. In this context I am satisfied that it meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

POLICY SHB12: DARK SKIES

- 7.70 The Plan advises that situated in the High Weald National Landscape, parts of Southborough and High Brooms parish provide ideal locations from which to enjoy dark skies and stargazing. The Plan also comments that dark skies also support both nocturnal and diurnal wildlife. This policy seeks to ensure that development does not encroach on this valued aspect of parish.
- 7.71 In the round this is a good policy with appropriate overlaps with High Weald AONB Management Plan.
- 7.72 I recommend that the opening element of the policy is slightly recast so that it sets out requirements for lighting in development proposals rather than commenting that they will be supported. This acknowledges that whilst the focus of the policy is on

external lighting, development proposals will be assessed against all relevant development plan policies.

- 7.73 I also recommend that both the policy and the supporting text make a direct reference to the High Weald Dark Skies Technical Advice Note as suggested by TWBC and as agreed by STC in its response to the clarification note. Otherwise, the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace the opening element of the policy with: ‘Development proposals should protect the night sky from light pollution, and demonstrate that:’

Add a new section to the policy to read: ‘Development proposals in the High Weald National Landscape should respond positively to the High Weald Dark Skies Technical Advice Note.’

At the end of paragraph 8.37 add: ‘In addition, the High Weald National Landscape Skies Technical Advice Note provides useful advice on this matter.’

POLICY SHB13: IMPROVING WALKING, CYCLING AND EQUESTRIAN OPPORTUNITIES

- 7.74 This policy seeks to enhance walking and cycling opportunities along routes which are most likely to encourage a shift away from the private car for short journeys in and around the neighbourhood area.
- 7.75 The policy has four related parts as follows:
- all new major residential or employment developments should ensure safe pedestrian, and where possible cycle, routes to link up with the existing active movement network, and public transport network (Part A);
 - the provision of new, or the enhancement of existing, cycle and pedestrian routes that are, where feasible, physically separated from vehicular traffic and from one another will be strongly supported (Part B);
 - the design and layout of works related to the widening of footways or the provision of traffic-calming measures should enhance the rural, town character, for example retaining and/or providing hedgerows, trees, and soft verges where possible (Part C); and
 - proposals for new bridleways will be supported wherever possible; in all new developments existing bridleways must be retained (Part D).
- 7.76 In general terms the policy takes a positive approach towards sustainable transport initiatives and has regard to Sections 8 and 9 of the NPPF. In this broad context I recommend the following modifications to bring the clarity required by the NPPF and to allow TWBC to implement the policy through the development management process:
- the application of part A to all residential developments in a proportionate way; and
 - the simplification of part D of the policy so that its purpose is clear.

- 7.77 I also recommend a modification to the supporting text to acknowledge the recent adoption of the Borough Local Plan. Otherwise, the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Replace Part A with:

‘To ensure that residents can access social, community, public transport, the primary schools, amenities and other important facilities in the neighbourhood area in a sustainable and safe way, residential and employment developments (as appropriate to their scale, nature and location) should ensure safe pedestrian, and where possible cycle, routes to link up with the existing active movement network, and public transport network, as defined in Figure 15.’

Replace Part D with:

‘Proposals for new bridleways will be supported. Wherever practicable existing bridleways should be retained within new developments or, alternatively, new or amended bridleway links should be provided alongside safe road crossing points that enable connectivity between the built-up area and the wider countryside.’

Replace paragraph 9.7 with:

‘The concept is not intended to stifle development, rather to emphasise the importance of enabling and improving connectivity by foot and by bike. New major development proposals should take account of the walkable town concept and provide the infrastructure to link new homes to existing facilities to encourage active travel.’

POLICY SHB14: PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE OFF-ROAD PARKING

- 7.78 The policy advises that notwithstanding the aim to promote active travel, it seeks to ensure that adequate off-road car parking provision is provided and, where possible, electric vehicle charging points installed.
- 7.79 The policy has three related parts as follows:
- development proposals that would result in the loss of existing publicly available off-street car parking spaces will not be supported (Part A);
 - proposals that enable the provision of additional, publicly accessible off-road car parking spaces will be supported subject to the other policies of the Plan (Part B); and
 - at existing locations and alongside any new public car parking provision a series of sustainable travel facilities will be strongly supported (Part C).
- 7.80 This is a very distinctive policy which seeks to safeguard and enhance public parking facilities and the delivery of associated sustainable transport facilities. The approach taken has regard to Sections 8 and 9 of the NPPF. In this context I am satisfied that

the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of each of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

POLICY SHB15: IMPROVING OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL FACILITIES, SPORT AND RECREATION

- 7.81 This policy seeks to ensure that those living in and moving to the neighbourhood are adequately served with a range of good quality facilities and activities and that there are opportunities for residents to shape this.
- 7.82 The policy has three related elements as follows:
- commentary on proposals for new community, recreational, cultural and leisure facilities, or the improvement of existing facilities (Part A);
 - commentary on the provision of new and upgraded play areas to serve the needs of children of all ages (Part B); and
 - proposals that would result in the loss of community, leisure and recreational facilities will only be supported if either the facility is surplus to requirements and there is no longer a proven need for such a facility or alternative and equivalent facilities demonstrate by comparison to the existing facility that they are appropriate (by reference to three factors) (Part C).
- 7.83 This is a very good policy which seeks to improve opportunities for community and cultural facilities, sport, and recreation. Part C of the policy acknowledges that the use and/or viability of existing services may alter in the Plan period. In this context I am satisfied that the policy meets the basic conditions. It will contribute to the local delivery of the social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Non policy actions and projects

- 7.84 Section 13 of the Plan addresses a series of non-policy actions and projects. This reflects national advice that such matters should be in a separate part of the Plan so that they are distinguished from the land use policies.
- 7.85 I am satisfied that the actions are appropriate to the neighbourhood area and are locally-distinctive. The 'Encouraging Active Travel' actions will prove to be particularly helpful in the built-up parts of the parish.

Implementation and Review

- 7.86 The Plan addresses these issues to very good effect.
- 7.87 As submitted, it commented about the potential impact of the adoption of the emerging Borough Local Plan. That issue has been addressed by the delay in the examination process. In this context recommend consequential modifications to paragraphs 11.3 and 11.6.

In paragraph 11.3 delete the fourth bullet point.

Replace paragraph 11.6 with:

'Whilst it is not a legislative requirement to review a neighbourhood plan, it is good practice to do so periodically. This may be because of any of the points noted above. A future review will enable the Town Council to keep the Plan up-to-date. Any review will be undertaken in partnership with and ensuring the engagement of the wider community.'

Other Matters – General

- 7.88 This report has recommended a series of modifications both to the policies and to the supporting text in the submitted Plan. Where consequential changes to the text are required directly because of my recommended modification to the policy concerned, I have highlighted them in this report. However other changes to the general text may be required elsewhere in the Plan because of the recommended modifications to the policies. Similarly, changes may be necessary to paragraph numbers in the Plan or to accommodate other administrative matters (including any issues associated with the recent adoption of the Borough Local Plan which are not addressed in the following section of this report. It will be appropriate for TWBC and STC to have the flexibility to make any necessary consequential changes to the general text. I recommend accordingly.

Modification of general text (where necessary) to achieve consistency with the modified policies and to accommodate any administrative and technical changes.

Other Matters – Specific

- 7.89 The recent adoption of the new Borough Local Plan has overtaken the commentary in the Plan about the development plan context. I recommend modifications to Section 1 of the Plan accordingly.

Replace paragraphs 1.8 to 1.15 as follows:

'The policies of the SHBNPD must be in general conformity with the strategic policies of the Tunbridge Wells Borough Local Plan 2020 to 2038 which was adopted in December 2025

The Local Plan seeks to deliver, across the borough, a minimum of 12,204 dwellings and 14 hectares of employment (Use Classes B (Business use) and E (Commercial use)) land, together with supporting infrastructure and services over the Plan period (Policy STR 1).

Southborough Town Centre and the Neighbourhood Centres in High Brooms and North Southborough, together with the surrounding built-up areas, form part of what is referred to as the Main Urban Area of Royal Tunbridge Wells and Southborough (MUA). The Limits to built development (LBD) of Southborough merges with the LBD of Bidborough to the north west, and with the LBD of Royal Tunbridge Wells to the south and east. The strategy for the neighbourhood area (Policy PSTR/SO 1) is shown below [Insert Policy PSTR/SO 1]

In addition, Policy ED 1 of the Borough Local Plan identifies Southborough and High Brooms Industrial Area as a Key Employment Area which is appropriate for the following mixed uses: Class E (financial, professional, and other business uses, and appropriate leisure), Class F (appropriate leisure uses), Class B2 (general industrial), Class B8 (storage and distribution), and other sui generis uses of an appropriate type and scale.

Land at Mabledon House (Policy AL/SO2), which sits outside the LBD but within the HWNL and Green Belt is allocated for the development of hotel and leisure uses. Both the house and parkland are Grade II listed.

The Development Plan also consists of the Kent Minerals and Waste Local Plan (KMWLP) 2024 to 2039. It was adopted in March 2025. In addition, The County Council, as Minerals and Waste Planning Authority, has advised that there are significant safeguarded land-won minerals in the neighbourhood area, mainly a suite of sandstones that have low to no current demand. These minerals are now only suitable for historic building/structure restoration and building purposes. Any mineral safeguarding considerations would have to be addressed, as required by the adopted Kent Minerals and Waste Local Plan 2024 to 2039 and policy DM 8 where relevant.'

- 7.90 Given that the Tunbridge Wells Borough Local Plan has now been adopted, I recommend that the Conformity references at the end of each policy now refer only to that Plan rather than to local planning documents which have now been superseded.

Revise the local references in the Conformity section at the end of each policy to refer only to the policies in the adopted Local Plan.

8 Summary and Conclusions

Summary

- 8.1 The Plan sets out a range of policies to guide and direct development proposals in the period up to 2038. It is distinctive in addressing a specific set of issues that have been identified and refined by the wider community. It has a focus on safeguarding its built and natural environments, developing an approach for the town centre, and designating a package of local green spaces.
- 8.2 Following the independent examination of the Plan, I have concluded that the Southborough and High Brooms Neighbourhood Development Plan meets the basic conditions for the preparation of a neighbourhood plan subject to a series of recommended modifications.

Conclusion

- 8.3 On the basis of the findings in this report, I recommend to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council that subject to the incorporation of the modifications set out in this report that the Southborough and High Brooms Neighbourhood Development Plan should proceed to referendum.

Other Matters

- 8.4 I am required to consider whether the referendum area should be extended beyond the neighbourhood area. In my view, the neighbourhood area is entirely appropriate for this purpose and no evidence has been submitted to suggest that this is not the case. I therefore recommend that the Plan should proceed to referendum based on the neighbourhood area as approved by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council on 11 August 2023.
- 8.5 I am grateful to everyone who has contributed to the examination of the Plan. The Town Council's responses to the clarification note were both comprehensive and helpful.

Andrew Ashcroft
Independent Examiner
7 January 2026