

Local Development Framework Core Strategy.

1. These are the submissions of Jonathan Clay. I have lived in Gravesend since 1993. I am a barrister with 20 years of experience specialising in planning and environmental law in chambers in London. I am the former chair of Urban Gravesham, Gravesham's Civic Society. I make this submission in my personal capacity as a local resident. I have shared it with Martin McKay of Urban Gravesham but he is making a separate submission on behalf of UG.
2. Responses to consultation are often framed negatively. Consultees tend to highlight the things they object to or are concerned about, rather than the things they like or do not object to. This submission is no different and most of the points I make are points of criticism.
3. That should not be taken as being a criticism of everything in the document; there is much to be praised within it and I preface these submissions by congratulating the authors on a thorough and very professional document that takes an evidence based approach and provides a high degree of detail and reasoning, much of which, I agree with.
4. My Comments are as follows.

User friendliness of the process.

5. I found it very difficult to navigate the vast amount of documentation and the web based consultation forms were very difficult to use. For that reason, although I have spent many hours on this, it cannot be a comprehensive response.
6. Firstly the proforma sheets are almost impossible to use and a proper response using only the proformas would result in hundreds of them being used. They tend to ask closed questions. There is no opportunity to challenge the evidence base. It is for that reason that I gave up with them and decided to make my response in the form of a stand alone submission.
7. The LDFCS would have benefitted from having a short and pithy executive summary that highlighted the key points. Some of the most significant points, such as the decision not to protect non Green Belt land outside the urban area

(i.e/eg Land west of Wrotham Road) would only be picked up by people alert to the issue and understanding that this was a reference to all of the countryside north of the A2.

8. As a consultation document the LDFCS rather falls between two stools. On one hand it is far too technical for most readers and I suspect that the sheer scale of the exercise of trying to get to grips with it would put most people off. It descends into planner speak so as to be unintelligible to anyone who does not have a background in town and country planning and at times even those of us that do!
9. Thus phrases like: “*Para 10.17: “In developing our policy, we are also consulting on the following town centre boundaries:- Primary Shopping Area made up of Primary Frontages and Secondary Frontages – based on PPS4 principles and representing the 'town centre' for retail policy purposes....”* are largely meaningless to the general public. There is an explanation in the document, but it is not here but much later in the document under Policy 11 Retail Hierarchy. I constantly found myself having to go back to national policy documents to look up or remind myself of the meaning of terms throughout the document that I could not find defined within it.
10. In any case, given that the PPG/S series is imminently about to be abolished and replaced with a single NPPF a document that relies so heavily on the PPG/Ss is vulnerable to sudden obsolescence.
11. On the other hand there is a frustrating lack of reference to documents on which the Document is founded to enable the specialist professional or well informed layman to understand how certain conclusions are reached.
12. The viability chapters are a case in point. The proposition that much of the brownfield land in Gravesham is not viable for housing development is a major proposition in the document and highly contentious. Para 3.3 states that “*A residential viability toolkit is now also available which is designed to calculate the residual value of a development scheme.*” (another great example of planner speak!) The toolkit is not explained [I guess that it may be some version of Three Dragons?] nor how it has been applied to Gravesham. Para 3.7 then states that: “*The viability work makes a **number of***

assumptions....” Unfortunately the document does not tell us what those assumptions are. It then goes on to reach a number of dramatic and fundamentally unsustainable conclusions based on what are, so far as I can see,(because they are not set out in the document) a range of assumptions about availability of mortgages and the current low value of high density development on regeneration sites. (This has a particular irony about it as the Council’s regeneration strategy for the Heritage Quarter is based up just that: hundreds of small cheap small flats crammed onto one of the most sensitive sites in the Borough.) Effectively, this short term economic analysis is at the heart of the principal thesis in the document, which shifts new development away from high density urban redevelopment of brownfield sites towards development in the rural areas. It is impossible to see how these conclusions have been reached; instead we are expected to take them as given. I note that the current economic situation is put forward as justification for abandoning the requirement to develop new housing on PDL, while a much more optimistic scenario is taken to justify the retail Centre Hierarchy. For that reason and for the further reasons given below I challenge those assumptions and much of the central reasoning in the document on which it is founded.

The Overall Strategy: What happened to sustainable development?

13. Sustainable development is at the heart of modern land use planning. The draft NPPF contains a presumption in favour of sustainable development and PPS1 *“Delivering Sustainable Development”* states: *“Sustainable development is the Core Principle underpinning planning”*
14. The CS leaves it to the last chapter to carry out any sustainability appraisal (all two and half pages of it!).
15. Sustainable development is not defined in the document. It is barely mentioned in the body of the document and there is almost nothing in the individual policy chapters to show how sustainability formed any part of thinking of the authors, never mind being its guiding principle.
16. Chapter 10, Policy 2a on Gravesend Town Centre is an honourable exception, but having identified the underlying principle as sustainable development,

there is no real attempt to say what this means in practice and, having paid only lip service to it, no further attempt is made to say how this fundamental principle is to be applied: see Policy 2a specific comments below.

17. In general, I see the absence of reference to sustainability as a fundamental shortcoming in the document. It infects many of the recommendations, including the shift away from sequential release of housing land and prioritisation of brown-field land towards release of green field and Green Belt land for housing development. It would almost certainly mean that the Core Strategy would be unsound.
18. If sustainability had been considered it would have raised major questions about much of the thinking in the document which appears to be mainly concerned with addressing what may turn out to be short term economic issues. In a Thames Gateway borough like Gravesham, with many hectares of derelict or underused brownfield land, to simply abandon the principles of sustainable development and shift major housing initiatives to its precious and high amenity value rural areas, including the Green Belt, is simply a cop out and is fundamentally flawed.
19. Taking the A2 as the dividing line between north and south in Gravesham, the southern rural part of the Borough is characterised by being in the most affluent, healthiest 20% of the national population while the northern part of the borough is in the 10% most deprived and least healthy part of the national population. Life expectancy in the north of the Borough is 10 years less, on average, than the south.
20. The rural south of the Borough with its easy access to fine landscapes, historic villages and the countryside provides a vital resource for the well being of the whole of the Borough. It should continue to be protected for its own sake, rather than being seen as a short term source for delivering new housing in the depths of a recession.
21. There should be a clear starting point; that the principles of sustainable development in Gravesham mean ensuring that we hand on to future generations our irreplaceable assets – the countryside, historic and cultural

assets, our precious urban open spaces (including land west of Wrotham Road) in as good or better state than we found them.

22. The short term need to deliver new housing by releasing Greenfield sites or allowing poor quality high density housing on our prime town centre sites cannot be consistent with the objectives of sustainable development.
23. I do not accept that redevelopment of urban previously developed land is not viable, nor is it possible from the document to see how the authors have reached this conclusion.
24. My own experience of working with housing developers and local authorities in the south east is that outside London, even where permission is obtained on Greenfield sites, the limited capacity of the market and availability of mortgages means that a very low rate of delivery is predicted and achieved.
25. Meanwhile developers are happy to use very short term viability arguments to land bank their permissions, obtained when the market is very limited and low, in anticipation of better times when it frees up. Of course, when it frees up, the deliverability of brown field sites will improve too, but it will be too late. Gravesham should stick to its guns and create a strong local presumption in favour of previously developed land and a sequential approach to the release of land.
26. I strongly object to the suggested release of Greenfield and Green Belt sites for housing development unless there are very special circumstances in terms of local need (for example low cost housing for farm workers etc).
27. If Greenfield sites are to be released, the LPA should also make sure that there is a continuing review on a site by site basis of housing delivery on green field sites which should have specific conditions that tie the permission to a phasing of development to prevent land banking and the obtaining of permissions on green field sites which are not in fact delivered in the short time scale that justified their permission in the first place. Conditions requiring both the commencement and delivery of housing development within a very short time should be rigorously applied in respect of any Greenfield sites.
28. Re 11.9: no defence of Greenfield land between the green Belt and the urban area boundary: Why not? The Council ought to be keen to safeguard land

between the urban area and the Green Belt, or to extend the Green Belt to cover land such as land West of Wrotham Road. The release of any Greenfield land, especially Greenfield land close to the urban area, whether or not designated Green Belt should be on merit only. Perhaps this could be a criteria based policy, rather than being presented *fait accompli*. Such land is often particularly valued by urban dwellers. Land W of Wrotham Road is a case in point – it provides important and rare green open space north of the A2, is used for amenity purposes, brings countryside into the town and the views down the dry valley towards St George’s Church provide important setting of historic town centre. Combined with Golf course on East side there is a major green entry to the town. For all these reasons, such land is far more important in terms of amenity value than much of the Green Belt.

29. I specifically object to the land west of Wrotham Road being identified as a potential development site.
30. If large and important sites such as this are going to be considered for development, they should be subject to planning brief which identifies ways in which their amenity value can be retained.

Policy 2a The Town Centre

31. I preface these comments by saying that there is much that I agree with in Policy 2a; including, in general, the “*key features*” in para 10.7 and the “*issues to resolve*” in 10.8. It is not clear what is the basis for the assertion that the “*demand for modern retail units of a larger size to meet the requirements if multiple retailers remains*” The term “*larger size*” is not defined and no evidence is either provided or referred to support this assertion.
32. The statement that the “*cultural offer of the town centre is limited*” is self evidently true, if somewhat understated. However, so far as I can see the Plan provides no suggestions as to how to improve the “*cultural offer*”. The *potential* cultural offer of the town centre, by contrast is massive. The town contains a genuinely diverse community, including a very dynamic Sikh community which brings cultural diversity and interest to places and events and different perspectives.

33. The Town enjoys a unique position on the Thames – the only town down river from Greenwich with direct access via existing piers and deep water wharfs and a really fascinating history and built environment. There is no suggestion how the Town can capitalise on these unique and special features of the town. The wealth of historic buildings and a potentially very attractive townscape, with the existence of dramatic riverside potential development sites right in the heart of the town and with panoramic views over the Thames and its riparian traffic provide the key to regeneration. The Council’s award winning approach in the past to using conservation of its historic environment as a regeneration tool has been successful in attracting substantial outside funding and making major inroads on dereliction and decay. Far from having failed, it is the only explanation for the town having survived the opening of Bluewater within 5 minutes drive time. In collecting petitions and campaigning in Windmill Street, UG found that many people come to Gravesend town centre from miles away because they *like* the Town.
34. The Town should be alive with events, markets, performances, music and dance, good food (what a disappointment is the Town Pier Restaurant; compare it with the excellent restaurant in the Town Hall that demonstrates that real quality brings people into Gravesend to spend serious money.)
35. Instead of proposals for improving the cultural offer, Chapter 2a disappointingly resorts to the tired and demonstrably failed old reliance on new retail as the “vision” (myopia?) to regenerate the town. This appears to be founded on the approach in Policy 11 concerning the Retail Hierarchy, which is in turn founded on the still emerging Retail and Commercial Leisure Study. There is a need to “get real” about Gravesend. It can never offer what Bluewater or Westfield (Stratford) offers in terms of large multiples and major multinational retailers. (Nor would I see that as being desirable). It needs to trade on its special sense of place and by encouraging a diverse experience of lively and interesting cultural experience and smaller specialist shops.
36. The influential 21st Century Agora Report (see [here](#)) (endorsed by Civic Voice and the Mary Portas Review recognises the following 10 principles:
- ***The high street should be the hub of the community. That means it needs to be planned by the community.***

- *Civic, social and cultural activities, not big stores, are the anchors of our town centres. Encourage them.*
- *Real localism starts when people have space to test their ideas. Use empty shops and public areas to create that space.*
- *Local loyalty is about solidarity between people, not brands. Build markets around relationships and mutual benefit.*
- *Local food and products are not middle class fripperies. They help people build independent livelihoods and create worthwhile work, and create alternative food sources and supply chains.*
- *Every place is unique. That uniqueness is strengthened when ownership is local and money stays in the local economy.*
- *Places don't look after themselves. They need to be animated, which means giving people opportunities to do what inspires them. Town teams should be animators, not office holders.*
- *Climate change, technology, demographics and austerity will change the way nearly all of us live. We need to use our high streets to build interdependence and resilience.*
- *Expecting multinational retailers to solve the problems of town centres is like expecting drug dealers to run rehab clinics. We should dare to be different and be ready to invest in local ideas.*
- *There is no going back to the high street of the past. We can use the ideas of the '21st century agora' to start imagining the future.*

37. That is one of the reasons why type of development which the Core Strategy seems to be encouraging and which can be seen in the recently rejected Edinburgh House scheme is so profoundly inappropriate. Moreover it would probably cause serious damage to the town. It shifts the centre of gravity away from the primary shopping area rather than reinforcing it. St George's Centre and the Thamesgate Centre are both tired and dreary. Perhaps they should be prioritised for retail redevelopment before any new extensions are considered.

38. I disagree with the identified primary / secondary retail frontage proposed. I suggest that the primary shopping frontage should be sought to be shifted back to the crucial axis of New Road, Windmill Street and the old High Street. In fact I am unconvinced that the primary/secondary divide is either necessary or desirable in Gravesend, but if it survives the bonfire of PPSs then it needs to shift the primary frontage further east. I specifically disagree with the first part of the second bullet point in 10.21; not that I would wish to discourage modern multiple retailers and fashion goods, but because I do not see that as a priority and there is nothing in the document to suggest that there are multiples and fashion retailers looking to move into Gravesend but frustrated by the lack of suitable premises. The town needs to take a flexible approach to retail

throughout the *existing* core area, but there is no justification in the document for extending it onto the land to the north of the St George's centre.

39. Gravesend would benefit from becoming a bubbly, unique, diverse, fun place to visit, where the community and its visitors could spend their days engaged in a variety of activities.
40. It is appalling that, for a community of 90,000, there is no cinema, no theatre, no concert hall, no art gallery, no museum, just the Woodville Halls; the architectural and cultural equivalent of Peter Stringfellow; the oldest swinger in town.
41. The feasibility study carried out for the Council for a museum in the town suggested one being provided on the Market Square site and was very positive, but the Edinburgh House developers appear to consider it out of the question and it seems that, instead of pursuing it, the Council has quietly shelved it.
42. The new Library and the re-opened Town Hall are great examples of how to get it right, but so much more could be done. The nasty new development behind the Clarendon (approved on appeal because of the policy vacuum in Gravesham) is an example of how to get it wrong. There is a serious danger, with the new Leader falling over himself to ingratiate himself with Edinburgh House, that the town centre policy will be seriously undermined and pre-empted by permission being granted for inappropriate new retail and housing development on the most exciting and precious town centre site. We await the developers' proposals with trepidation.
43. The Town Centre deserves far more than a chapter in the Core Strategy. I support the proposals at para 10.16 for an SPD and would go further and suggest site specific planning briefs should be prepared as a matter of urgency. We should be getting on with these now, as there is a danger of pre-emption by the Edinburgh House scheme which would seriously damage the special character of the town and rob it of its most exciting development site.
44. I also do not accept that the national decline in commercial leisure provision explains the decline in leisure in the town centre. The old cinema in New Road was deliberately run down by its multinational operators in the 1990s and sold

with a restrictive covenant when Bluewater opened to prevent it from competing. The fact that Bluewater multi screen cinema serving an unrelieved diet of mainline (mostly American) films and popcorn can attract full houses night after night demonstrates a demand for cinema film. It may be that something more specialist would be appropriate in Gravesend.

45. In a small town of 6,000 people in south west France, (where agriculture is 60% of employment) a recent concert by Raoul Paz's band (at the Council run concert hall built and opened last year) was sold out and, quite separately, "Les Intouchables" at the Council run cinema was sold out night after night, turning away many later arrivals.

Policy 6 Infrastructure.

46. I had expected that there would be some explanation as to the Council's proposed strategy for funding infrastructure. I could not find any explanation in the document as to how the Council was proposing to approach the application of the Community Infrastructure Levy.
47. I could not even find any acknowledgement of the effect of CIL. I would assume that this will be developed in parallel with the Core Strategy, as it would need to reflect it.
48. In other parts of the south east, I have seen local authorities using Section 106 and CIL as the basis for major improvements in public facilities and infrastructure and working with developers to ensure that the infrastructure is delivered.

Policy 7 Green Infrastructure

49. Land West of Wrotham Road should be recognised for its value to the Town and a green area complemented by the Golf Course, the new open areas created by realignment of the A2 and the adjacent St George's school playing fields. It should be protected, either by extending the urbane boundary so that it becomes part of the PPG17 strategy, or by extending the Green Belt.
50. I note that although need for more allotments is identified, there is no policy suggestion as to how this could be met. In the economic winter now facing us, and with a population north of the A2 that suffers from bad diet and reduced

life expectancy, this could be a really good policy to promote. The Good Life in Gravesend.

Policy 8 Heritage

51. Is this all it deserves? 4 lines of text?

Policy 10 Economy and Employment

52. I make no real comment on this as it appears that the evidence base for this Policy is completely out of date.

53. We need to be attracting jobs to reduce the need to out commute. The emphasis should be on bringing back into Gravesham all that talent and energy that catches a train to London every morning and does its business elsewhere.

54. We have a great location with fast links to London and the Continent. Perhaps we should start telling the world about it.

55. Where can I find a statement of the Council's up to date economic regeneration strategy?

Policy 11 Retail Hierarchy.

56. I note that the Retail and Commercial Leisure Study has been published but not consulted on. When will this take place? Is this an opportunity to comment on it or will consultation follow later?

57. I also note that the Policy states that additional work will be needed (see para 19.8) to review the Study to reflect the new economic reality.

58. Are we being consulted on a Policy based on a Study that is (i) out of date; (ii) does not reflect current economic conditions; and (iii) has not yet been consulted on?

59. I agree with the reasons given in para 19.8. For those reasons is it not premature to put forward a major retail strategy based on the need for significant new retail space which may be completely unfounded? A policy based upon a need for new large unit floorspace relying on an assumed significant projected increased per capita spend in the town centre would be high risk and unrealistic.

60. I see the relationship between this Policy and Policy 2a on the Town Centre. I suggest that the whole approach to Gravesend should be one of darned an old and much treasured woolly jumper; keep on gently restoring it and knitting back together the gaps in the urban fabric and the local economy.
61. I specifically object to the proposals for the Primary Shopping Area which includes vast areas of the town centre that are not currently part of the retail frontage. It is much too widely drawn, presumably in order to give the Edinburgh House development which is outside the primary and secondary frontage some legitimacy in terms of a sequential approach. As I have suggested above, the Council ought to consider whether the primary /secondary frontage approach is necessary in Gravesend and to adopt, instead, the principles of the 21st century agora report discussed above.

Policy 15 Transport

62. Five short paragraphs constitute the Council's Transport proposals. None of them mentions the term "sustainable development"; hardly surprising, given so much of the rest of the document is running away from sustainable development principles. I had hoped for some explanation for the thinking that underpins the decision to approve a multi storey car park as the main feature of the new Transport Quarter development; a permanent monument to Gravesham's failure to engage with long term strategic and sustainable transport planning.
63. Policy 15 tells us almost nothing about the principles that would guide transport planning and the means by which transport planning would integrate with other proposals in the plan. We are not even asked to respond to any question.
64. The wonderful new HS1 link to London and Stratford is not mentioned. High quality public transport should be the centrepiece of the transport planning in Gravesham. 21 minutes to St Pancras and 14 minutes to Stratford in air-conditioned magic-carpet luxury could, if promoted properly, transform the fortunes of the Borough. It could justify new employment development (other than retail, which is not an area of employment where the area is deficient). The fact that, at £27 for a return journey the HS1 is often full on leaving

Gravesend, shows that Gravesenders are prepared to pay for quality, but also that there is a whole slice of the Gravesend community who are working in well paid jobs in London. We should be encouraging relocation of high quality employment to Gravesend. Tax breaks? Enterprise Zones?

65. There is no reference to passenger and leisure travel by river and the importance of the ferry that brings many south Essex people to Gravesend. UG was astonished at how many people from Tilbury and Grays come to Gravesend on a Saturday to enjoy the town. I could not find a single reference to anything existing on the other side of the river. It may as well be the Atlantic Ocean.
66. Public transport must be at the heart of a sustainable development strategy. It is not mentioned. Of course the proposals to develop significant new housing in the Green Belt would fail any assessment of their accessibility by public transport.
67. I could not find any suggestion that people in Gravesend might use bicycles, except the finding that Ebbsfleet and Northfleet stations are not well served for bicycle users(see Para 13,1). Nor is Gravesend station.
68. On the other hand, vast areas of the Town Centre are blighted by car parking, both open and multi storey. Have we all watched too much Top Gear and decided that Jeremy Clarkson is right after all and the car is king?

Conclusions

69. I welcome the document, which I found to be well written and thoughtful. I agree with much of the thrust of the document but I disagree profoundly with some of it and I have concentrated on identifying objections. Some of my objections are fundamental; in particular the absence of any real attempt to apply the principles of sustainable development which are at the heart of land use planning nationally and locally.
70. I am strongly opposed to the development of Green Field and Green Belt sites for housing when this Borough has so much available previously developed land. I challenge the evidence base in respect of both viability and the

SHLAA. I can see no good reason for leaving out the Lord Street Car park from the available and deliverable sites, given a suitable scheme and an improvement in mortgage lending.

71. I think the Town Centre strategy could be much stronger and needs to get away from a standard larger multiples based retail strategy based on increased per capita spending and start looking at what is working elsewhere.
72. There is a serious danger of pre-emption of the Town Centre policies by development such as Heritage Quarter and Transport Quarter which are taking place outside of the development plan process. .
73. The transport section is very weak and fails to identify major opportunities arising from the HS1. The major part of England which is to be found on the north side of the Thames seems not to exist so far as Gravesham Planning Policy makers are concerned!
74. The Core Strategy is in some respects too complex to be accessible to the non planner and yet many of its conclusions are not adequately explained or supported by available or identified evidence.
75. I hope these comments are helpful. Please inform of me in the event of future further consultation

Jonathan Clay

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