

## **Update on the Examination of the South Downs National Park Local Plan**

Last autumn the development of the South Downs National Park Authority's (SDNPA) Local Plan moved into the Examination phase. This involves the examination of what is known as the Pre-Submission Local Plan by an independent Inspector whose role is to assess whether the Local Plan has been prepared in line with the relevant legal requirements (including the duty to cooperate) and whether it meets the tests of 'soundness' contained in the National Planning Policy Framework. The examination process is not an opportunity to put forward alternative policies but rather to focus on the preparation process itself.

The examination includes the opportunity for the submission of written comments to the Inspector as well as attendance at public hearings at which specific issues are discussed. In an earlier article in Kingston News, we included a copy of a letter we sent last July to the Inspector outlining our general concerns about the preparation of the Plan. These included comments on what we considered was an unsound consultation process, lack of evidence supporting the main proposals and lack of consideration in the Plan for key policy areas as required to be included in the UK Government's Planning Practice Guidance on Local Plans. We also commented that the SDNPA had not specifically addressed our comments on the earlier version of the plan.

We understand that our concerns were noted by the Inspector, who amongst other actions, required the SDNPA to provide specific responses to the issues we raised, but the responses that were provided failed, in our opinion, to properly address those issues.

We therefore took the opportunity to directly participate in the examination process which was divided into a number of topics. The first area we focused on was the Duty to Co-operate with prescribed bodies which includes Parish Councils. As we were aware that this was an issue of concern for many local councils, we decided it would be better to submit our views in writing rather than joining a hearing where it was likely that similar views would be put forward. A copy of our submission may be found under Position Papers at <https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/planning/national-park-local-plan/local-plan-examination/> under reference REP-197-001.

The next areas we decided to participate in were the hearings covering the Settlement Boundary, the policy for housing at Castelmer Fruit Farm and the policy for a permanent gypsy/traveller site at the Pump House off Kingston Ridge. We were very pleased to find that the Inspector put a whole afternoon aside on 11<sup>th</sup> December for the hearing at the Amex stadium on Kingston Village issues. I think it would be true to say that we were the only community to have been offered such a significant allocation of time at the hearings.

I represented KPC and the hearing also involved representatives from the SDNPA, the developer interested in Castelmer Fruit Farm housing together with a number of villagers with personal or development interests.

The hearing was split into the three topics we had requested and the majority of time was spent discussing the Castelmer Fruit Farm proposed housing policy. The Inspector led discussions on a number of pre arranged aspects but in practice allowed a wide ranging discussion which enabled us, and other villagers, to put forward all our concerns and under his guidance to discuss these with the SDNPA planners. These ranged from the process itself, the nature of the evidence base, how the site was selected, how the site would be used along with environmental and affordable housing issues. I think we all agreed that we were given plenty of time to put forward our points of view and the inspector acknowledged that it was quite clear to him what our main concerns were.

We won't know what views the Inspector will take until probably February or March when he submits his findings, and it is not possible to predict what he may recommend. In the extreme he might either accept the Plan as it stands or require the SDNPA to revisit and possibly rework one or more aspects of the Plan. Whatever the comments on the Kingston aspects are, after submission of his report, the SDNPA is likely to be required to do some further work on the Plan as a whole and this may require a further round of consultation. It is therefore unlikely that the final plan will become effective before the second half of next year.

All we can say is that we were given a very fair and extensive hearing and that we hopefully reflected the range of concerns raised by villagers. We will let everyone know what the Inspector's findings are as soon as we become aware of them.

Tony Wheeler