

3 Westerham: its present and future needs

This section summarises what we have learned from the evidence and consulting local people about Westerham's present and likely future needs.

Westerham's present and future needs

The Which Way Westerham proposals – set out in full in Section 4 – are a direct response to these needs. In each case and collectively, with the objective is to manage to the town's advantage the changes in the town that are happening now, or will happen, over the new Local Plan period. The Which Way Westerham masterplan, presented in Section 4, is in turn a response to the evidence, analyses and proposals taken together. They are summarised here to set out a more positive future for Westerham: its special character preserved because of the carefully planned environmentally sustainable growth that is promoted by the Which Way Westerham proposals.

Most people understand that Westerham will change anyway over the new Local Plan period to 2035. Most also agree that planning for change, most especially planning to seize the opportunities that change invariably generates, almost always produces better outcomes than 'doing nothing'. We have worked hard to understand the changes that are underway now in the town and the needs that underlie these changes – why, for example, traffic levels in the town centre are growing and why there are pressures on the GP service and Churchill Primary School – and how these changes and needs are likely to evolve or emerge over the Local Plan period.

Our focus, because Squerryes is the driving force behind Which Way Westerham, is on the kinds of changes and needs which can be addressed through development and other changes on Squerryes' land. Exceptionally, Squerryes controls virtually all of the land that adjoins the built up area of the town. Exceptionally, Squerryes is also willing to take a long term view of the risks and returns of investing its land to ensure that Westerham can respond positively, and to the advantage of the whole town. This long term view extends to the changes that are happening in the town or will happen over the Local Plan period and the needs which are contributing to those changes.

Westerham Now

Westerham is a rural market town with an estimated population in the parish of 4,501 in 2016 – accounting for just under 4% of the district population (ONS mid-year estimates). While the district's population has grown since the 2011 Census (+0.06%), that of Westerham's parish has fallen (-2.4%).

Westerham's 'social economy' is distinguished by a number of features which we outline below. Each of the features individually, but more importantly all of these together, contribute alongside the town's physical features to Westerham's special character and quality of life.

Put briefly, Westerham punches well above its weight as a local economy and as a place to live. The fact that it does is to the great advantage of the town's residents and is a benefit – most particularly as a well-performing economic asset – to the district as a whole.

These features include:

- Westerham supports more and a wider range of services than is typical of towns at its position in the settlement hierarchy. SDC (2015) assigned Westerham a 'service score' of 97 – equivalent (based on the c 3,300 population of the settlement only) to a ratio of one service 'point' for every 34 people (1:34), very substantially higher than the scores of the district's other Local Service Centres and even higher than the 1:55 ratio for the Sevenoaks urban area.
- Westerham has 3,000 employee jobs (2016) – 5.9% of the Sevenoaks District total – a significantly higher share than its population alone would suggest. Moreover, it has 31% more workplace jobs than it has economically active residents (2,289 in 2011).
- Westerham is a small net importer of labour, generally skewed towards manual and lower skilled occupations – in the manufacturing, construction, professional service, education and other services sectors. It is a net exporter of labour in higher level occupations such as professional and managerial workers in the financial services, public administration and health sectors. A high proportion of economically active residents also work at or mainly from home.

- The town's employment structure is skewed in favour of 'arts, entertainment, recreation & other services', 'business administration and support services', 'professional, scientific and technical services', 'financial and insurance services' and 'manufacturing'. There are proportionately more jobs in these typically more knowledge-intensive and higher value-added sectors than the district as a whole.
- Westerham is one of the only locations in the district outside Sevenoaks to function as a significant office location, achieving lease terms and rents that are second only to those in Sevenoaks (and markedly higher than Swanley and Edenbridge).
- The town centre contains 2,861 sq m of comparison goods floorspace (chiefly in independent, up market, shops) – more than Edenbridge's 2,583 sq m which has a settlement population of 8,172 (compared, on the same settlement basis, to Westerham's population of 3,300). Over 40% of Westerham's comparison goods turnover is drawn from beyond the local area.

Key reasons for Westerham's disproportionate economic success are its location and general accessibility, coupled with its landscape setting and the appeal and interest of its historic town centre and - in large part because of all of these in combination - the high level of services and other amenities Westerham supports. These benefit the town's residents, its businesses and their employees and appeal to visitors.

Maintaining Westerham's special character and quality of life will require Westerham to take the actions needed to protect the factors that explain its disproportionate economic success and the levels and diversity of services that its residents, businesses and visitors enjoy and value.

Westerham's present and future needs

The Challenges of Change

Offsetting Westerham's great advantages are a number of challenges, some occurring generally in the wider economy and environment but which already and will continue to affect the town, some district-wide and some that are particular to or intensified in Westerham.

Briefly – drawing chiefly on the evidence base for SDC's new Local Plan – these are:

- Westerham's share of house building in the District has fallen over the last ten or so years and its house prices remain amongst the highest in the District.

The impact, adversely, of high house prices and limited housing choice on the ability of businesses and service providers to recruit and retain labour.

Businesses have to pay higher salaries, thus squeezing profits and the money available to invest in innovation and growth, and productivity suffers including from unpredictable travel delays.

House prices in Westerham are already higher even than the average for Sevenoaks as a whole (£320,000 lower quartile, compared to £250,000 in the district). House building in the parish is also very low – even lower than it is on average in the district. At present, there is provision – in a mix of housing allocations still to be built and recent permissions (some under construction) – for just 76 additional dwellings in the town.

Westerham's GP service, Valence School and Aqualisa all report existing recruitment difficulties – for which there is no solution in sight. Like the respondents in SDC's employers survey (which included businesses located in Westerham), those we consulted link the difficulties in varying degrees to high housing prices and limited choice, particularly in Westerham.

- The changing role of town centres as the inexorable rise in on-line retailing continues.

For town centres to remain competitive they must increasingly become 'destinations' – easy to access, distinctive, pedestrian-friendly – offering a distinctive and appealing range of shops, places to eat and drink and to visit. SDC's Retail Study underscores this point, and SDC's Economic Strategy recognises the changes in the retail sector as a threat to the district's town centre.

As it is, Westerham town centre's ability to continue to appeal as these changes take hold is compromised.

- The impact of the high levels of through traffic on the A25 on the town centre's accessibility, air quality, pedestrian environment and quality of visitor experience. Moreover, traffic growth continues. Squerrys' transport specialist, for example, projects – on very conservative assumptions (allowing for just a quarter of the district's objectively assessed housing need of 12,400 dwellings between 2015 and 2035) – that by 2035 queue lengths at the key town centre junction of London Road at the A25 (close to the historic market green) will reach 18-20 minutes by 2035.

SDC's Retail Study has already found Westerham to be 'not particularly easy access', to be adversely impacted by traffic and in need of improvements to the quality and maintenance of the public realm. Under half of the visitors surveyed found the environmental quality to be good.

SDC's Historic Environment Review also notes the adverse impact of heavy traffic (including the associated noise and vibration) on the town centre's environmental quality and in particular the harm caused by the traffic to the setting of the town centre's heritage assets and thus peoples' ability to appreciate the assets.

- The town's demographic trajectory, explained below. With the 76 dwellings only which are either allocated or permitted, the population of the town will decline between 2021 and 2035, with disproportionate falls in the shares and number of school and working age people that would be more than offset by the increased number and share of elderly people.

Both changes pose significant challenges to the future health and vitality of the town centre. The first is a challenge because of the impact of the high levels of traffic on the appeal of the town centre, including its ability to diversify more fully into tourism markets and exploit in particular the opportunities of the area's artisanal food and drink sector (also a key target of SDC's Economic Strategy).

And the second is a challenge because of the inevitable reduction in local spending due to the fall in the local population coupled with the increased dependence of the town centre on spending by older households. These households tend to have fixed incomes and, typically also, lower levels of spending on a narrower range of goods by elderly people.

- Westerham's population trajectory.

Westerham's population, if only 76 dwellings are built, is projected to fall by 5.4% from 4,618 in 2016 to 4,367 by 2035. The declines would be greatest amongst school and working age people – falls of 19% and 11% respectively. In contrast, the number of people age 75+ is projected to rise by 38% so that by 2035, elderly people will account for 13.2% of Westerham's population compared to 9.2% now.

While the whole of Sevenoaks' population is ageing, the effects across the district as a whole will be diluted by its sheer scale. In Westerham, however, the effects would be intensified.

Nor would a more balanced age structure in the town be achievable through the simple operation of the existing housing market without any significant additions. Only 34 dwellings a year would be vacated; in-movers would be a mix of old and young (by 2035, 42% of households representatives in the district will be 65+); and the share of household representatives in their 40s and 50s that might be candidates for in-moving will also have fallen.

Westerham's present and future needs

- Churchill Primary School is already bigger than the usual facility for a two-form entry school and has to draw on a wider than local catchment to fill its places and the large grounds are costly to maintain. Its single access is constrained and a cause of concern.
- Westerham's GP practice is already under pressure. Though rated good despite its challenges, and distinguished additionally as a GP teaching practice, the service operates from premises that are not purpose built and space is tight. Parking provision is poor, patients are presenting with increasingly complex health problems, no specialist services can be provided on site and patients have to travel including long distances by public transport, and is hard to recruit new GPs including to replace retiring partners.

Resources for addressing each of these challenges are very scarce. While some of these are problems common to very many GP services, the physical conditions in which the practice operates makes the challenges harder to manage.

- Westerham already has to deal with significant surface water flood risks – a situation as explained in Section 2 that is likely to get worse as the climate warms and severe weather events become more frequent. Again, resources to resolve these risks are very scarce indeed.
- Young people in Westerham have too little by way of formalised outdoor recreation facilities to keep them busy and healthy. It is widely thought that this shortage partly explains the incidences of anti-social behaviour that cause much local concern.

The evidence on the changes Westerham is grappling with now – and will have to continue to do in future in the absence of solutions to the challenges the changes give rise to – points to the list of the town's 'needs' that is set out below. As we make clear, for every need, there is an opportunity to provide a solution that will meet that need.

On the other hand, if these challenges are not addressed and the needs they give rise to are not met Westerham is vulnerable, putting the town's special character and quality of life at risk.

Westerham's needs

The evidence shows that Westerham's needs now and over the plan period are:

- **Enough housing, including affordable** housing, to enable the town to:
 - retain the balanced population structure which the town has traditionally enjoyed and to which it can attribute its special character and quality of life – but which otherwise will be lost due to the absence of any significant additional housing development
 - make it possible for local services, including the GP practice, and businesses to recruit from the local labour market and to enable those who work locally to choose to live locally
 - maintain its local primary school, helping to reduce its reliance on filling places from further afield
 - maintain the population levels, structure and spending levels needed to sustain the town centre.
- **A relief road** to divert the through traffic around the town centre – to free the town centre from the adverse environmental consequences of the heavy and growing levels of traffic, to create the trading conditions and provide for the quality of user and visitor experience needed for the town centre's ability to remain competitive, diversify its appeal and develop a stronger tourism market, to provide the means of delivering a second access for the primary school, to make it possible to better connect Valence School to the town and to provide much-needed travel time savings for users of the A25.
- **A modern GP multi-clinic** facility, easy to access by foot and cycle for the town with adequate parking, to allow the service to keep pace with patient expectations, provide specialist services in Westerham and improve the service's competitiveness in the recruitment market.
- Up to date **facilities for the primary school** to help support its drive to fill its places, thrive and excel.
- **Business space** to capitalise on the town's economic strengths and location advantages, support the growth of small enterprises and create needed jobs.

- **Outdoor recreation** facilities for young people and better access for all people to more environmentally rich countryside – to help bring communities together and improve the overall health of Westerham's residents, including that of the growing elderly population.
- A robust response to the **challenges of climate change**, including works to reduce surface flooding in the town and strengthening the local environment's resilience to more frequent and severe weather events.