

Employment Policies and Allocations.

Current Employment Profile.

Maidstone used to have a very mixed economy with manufacturing, retail and commerce as its base. It acted as a true County Town with Regional Head offices for banks, Insurance companies, professional bodies etc.. It located and still does, Kent County Council, the Police HQ, and a high level of educational facilities.

It has lost its appearance as a true country town and is degraded to a run of the mill retail and dormitory place. It has lost many of its historic buildings and replaced these with modern non-descript shopping centres and office buildings. Even the office buildings are now being converted to residential use.

The take up record of existing commercial sites is not good. For instance, commercial development at J7 has never achieved its potential. The site is not fully occupied; many planning consents have not been implemented and sites that are occupied are by local firms that have moved. There seems to be little demand from incoming businesses.

The KIMS site near J7 also has not met its ambitions, in fact, there have been reports of its financial stability. We have seen speculative applications for development at J8 which so far have been rejected by Maidstone Borough Council and up held at appeal.

Para. 4.9 of Maidstone Spatial strategy states *“A restricted level of office demand and take up within the market has been demonstrated over an extended period by persistently high vacancy rates and unbuilt permissions.”*

Maidstone’s proposal for development at J8 are counterproductive to exploiting and increasing the tourist potential in the area.

So, where is this demand for new commercial site allocations?

However, there is enough of the old Maidstone left to be able to exploit its highest potential for employment. The plan under estimates the potential for Maidstone as a tourist destination. If we look at the highest employment profile in Maidstone leaving aside medical and local government this is undoubtedly in retail. Seeing the increase in coffee shops, restaurants and other hospitality type outlets over the last few years. The prospering of this type of outlet together with booming retail figures indicate an extensive but hidden tourist market.

The larger chain hotels regularly achieve 80% occupation levels whilst the smaller hotels and bed and breakfast and breakfast establishments are available at all levels of luxury, ranging from boutique hotels to camping barns

So, where are Maidstone's plans for support to tourism in their plan?

Supporting Stats.

From - The South West Research Company Ltd.- The Economic Impact of the Kent Visitor Economy 2013.

Maidstone Total Value of Tourism	£251,608,000
Total FT and PT employment	8952

Significant figures, but analysis and comparison with other Kent towns shows Maidstone as less importance than Canterbury, Tunbridge Wells, Swale, Sevenoaks and Ashford. Even Medway has a better record of visitor numbers and spend than Maidstone.

If Leeds Castle is left out of the calculation the visitor numbers and spend drops Maidstone to one of the poorest performers in the County.

Leeds castle and its importance.

This Castle is so important to Maidstone that it deserves special consideration.

It is a Grade 1 building in a unique country setting.

Leeds Castle argued at the KIG enquiry that development around J8 would destroy its setting.

Inspector Philipson agreed and rejected the KIG proposals on this and many other issues.

Leeds Castle made the point that coach drivers and their employers are very influential in generating visitor numbers. They like to be able to complete several attractions in the same day and often arrange for their passengers to stay locally.

If J8 is developed to the degree that Maidstone desire, then traffic at and around J8 will interfere with access to the castle.

This part of Maidstone retains the only attractive and leafy approach to the town and is worth preserving on its own merits.

Leeds Castle made the point at the enquiry that if they lose the good will of the coach operators then Maidstone will lose a high proportion of its day and overnight visitors.

The KIG decision emphasizes the importance of this part of Maidstone to the tourist industry sector.

Development at J8 is unnecessary when there are alternative sites available more suitable for long term growth.

J8 suffers from the disadvantages that there is no potential work force in the area. There is poor access by public transport etc. – all the arguments used to demonstrate unsustainability of a site.

Maidstone's own policy for the countryside contradicts their wish to develop J8.

"Countryside

4.22 *It is important that the quality and character of the countryside outside of settlements in the hierarchy is protected and enhanced whilst at the same time allowing for opportunities for sustainable development that supports traditional land based activities and other aspects of the countryside economy, and makes the most of new leisure and recreational opportunities that need a countryside location. The individual identity and character of settlements should not be compromised by development that results in unacceptable coalescence."*

Alternative sites.

Since publication of the plan and during the consultation period proposals have been made for an exciting development at a semi developed site just outside Maidstone.

A proposal is being made for a mixed development of residential, commercial and industrial uses at a brown field site at the old Detling WW2 aerodrome. Currently there are a number of businesses located off the A249.

The proposals are still being worked on but the advantages of this site over J8 are many:

- A village centre for Thurnham.
- Support from Thurnham Parish Council
- Support from Kent Showground
- Improved access to showground
- A new country park with connections to the existing White Horse Wood park.
- Well served by roads e.g. M2 and M20
- New School
- Local medical services
- Upgrade of existing industrial area
- Meets MBC estimated needs for employment capacity
- Can be organically grown
- Located in poor quality AONB – Brown Field site.
- Not visible from remaining parts of AONB
- J8 could be left undeveloped

It is strongly recommended that the Inspector visits this site on his inspection of potential development sites.