

COUNCIL PLAN DRAFT

'Delivering together' our Council Plan

Introduction from Cllr Julia Thornton, Leader of the Council

I am delighted to introduce our new Council Plan which sets out our commitments to you; our residents, businesses and communities.

This plan builds upon the foundations we have laid to make Sevenoaks a district which is ambitious and confident about its future.

Our Plan is being introduced at a challenging time. As our communities and our local economy continue to recover from the impact of the pandemic, we have also seen the cost of many of the things we rely upon rise sharply. The cost of living is high and the effects of climate change are impacting the environment that we cherish.

We have risen to challenges before, and we will do so again.

It is important to me that the Council remains focused on its residents and their wellbeing. That businesses have confidence and our local economy grows. And that we protect our environment and lead locally on addressing the climate change challenge.

We will remain a caring Council, one that has wellbeing running through everything that it does. We will continue to be managed efficiently and be responsible with the money that we have to spend on our services and in our communities.

We will be our most effective by *delivering together*. Listening to what is needed, empowering communities to act, and working with the people and organisations across our District that share our values and ambitions to make the place we live, work or visit the very best it can be, for the wellbeing of all.

This Council Plan sets out our priorities and will help us to keep our focus on the health and wellbeing of our communities, the strength of our local economy and the future of our environment.

Julia

Cllr Julia Thornton,
Leader of the Council

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Wellbeing

Wellbeing runs through everything we do.

Wellbeing isn't just about access to health services. It's about quality of life: doing all we can to provide suitable homes for people to live in, supporting people to live independently for longer, creating a safe, healthy and protected environment and a strong local economy that provides the jobs and services we need.

It's about our lifestyle choices and opportunities to plan for our future, cherishing our natural environment and responding to climate change.

Driven by a desire to improve wellbeing, a focus on good financial management and exceptional customer service we have achieved some great outcomes for our District.

Our **Here to Help** scheme has been supporting residents with the impact of the cost of living. Through the Household Support Fund we distributed £800,000 to help low-income households with essential costs such as food and utilities, as well as supporting food bank provision across the District. There was also practical support provided through our Warm Spaces initiative. Supported by local community venues, people were provided with community support, housing, financial and employment advice, alongside a Family Cooking Programme.

Working with Police and partners through the **Community Safety** Unit, our District has the lowest levels of anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse, drug misuse, robbery, shoplifting & sexual offences in the county, making it the second safest place to live in Kent.

The Council's **Better Together** initiative builds on the legacy and projects that people created during the pandemic in their own neighbourhoods and is helping to provide practical support, skills development and capacity building to individuals and community groups to enable new initiatives and groups.

Through work undertaken by the Council and its affordable housing company, Quercus Housing, we have provided 24 **affordable homes** for the District's residents and worked with partners, including West Kent Housing and the charity Hft, to deliver a further 17 homes since 2020. A further 17 new homes will be delivered by Quercus Housing in 2023.

In 2022 we also opened a brand new **leisure centre** at White Oak in Swanley; secured funding of £1.5m to deliver a programme of **energy efficiency** upgrades to low-income households who live off of the gas grid and were awarded £1.5m of funding to invest in **local businesses** through the UK Shared Prosperity and Rural Prosperity Funding schemes.

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A look back

Sevenoaks District Council was the first council in the country to become self-sufficient of central government funding. We are almost unique in planning our finances over 10 years to give us a stable financial footing and are one of very few public sector organisations to hold Platinum status for Investors in People, the fifth time in a row we have achieved the highest accreditation available.

The years immediately before this plan have been unique in our lifetimes. A pandemic that radically changed how we lived, worked and looked after our health and our neighbours. The pandemic has left lasting change in people's lives and the way in which people and our economy work.

National and international factors have created further uncertainty and challenge. Political change, conflict in Ukraine, heightened energy costs, increased cost of living and high rates of inflation are all impacting communities and businesses as we write this plan.

Local communities and businesses have responded. 1,500 volunteers joined the Care for our Community scheme during the pandemic. Homes have been offered to people seeking safety from the war in Ukraine and for refugees. Community groups have sprung in to action and sustained their efforts to support people locally. Their efforts have been supported and celebrated through events including Run, Walk, Push for Dementia, the Big Sing and the Making It Happen Community Awards.

Local businesses have diversified, sustained their presence in our towns and villages and this has encouraged new businesses in to our local economy. To support our local businesses we have secured funding, prepared our economic development strategy, launched the Sevenoaks So Much More campaign and invested in the Visit Sevenoaks tourism website.

The Council has remained steadfast with a focus on what is needed locally. Services continued throughout the pandemic with Councillors and staff making sure residents had the food and supplies they need, and ensuring tens of millions of pounds of grant funding was distributed to businesses.

We have launched two companies that deliver new income to support our services and make sure more of the affordable homes that the District needs are being built.

When the operator of our leisure centres in Sevenoaks and Edenbridge abruptly ceased trading, we were prepared and ready to act quickly with a new operator to re-open the centres and the health and leisure facilities that our communities value.

And we have made a commitment to Net Zero and addressing the effects of climate change within the district. We have made great strides already, which we report back on annually.

Much progress has been made, but there is always more to do.

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Looking ahead

The years ahead are likely to present us with some difficult challenges.

Over the last decade the Council has worked hard to deliver a strong and sustainable financial position, finding £8.4 million of savings whilst continuing to provide the services that our communities rely upon.

However, the scale of the challenge to our budgets is at its highest level for many years. This is caused by high inflation, large increases in utility costs, wages and the price of fuel for our refuse freighters. We have also seen an increased demand for our services since the start of the pandemic, for example, Christmas week levels of household refuse and recycling has become the norm every week, with more home working and a greater reliance on home deliveries. Securing new contracts for the operation of our leisure centres also came at a cost.

Providing good value for council services, and continuing to collect rubbish and recycling every week, means that there have been managed rises in council tax. From April 2023, the average household payment towards District Council services is £237 per year, just £4.55 per week.

The pressure to provide the housing that people need in a district that is 93% Green Belt means some difficult decisions may need to be taken. At the same time, there are further reforms to the planning system expected from Government and the potential for national standards to be set that could change the way rubbish and recycling is collected.

The climate challenge is one that is upon us and amongst our highest priorities. Our emerging Local Plan, the framework for what can be built where in our district for the next two decades, presents an opportunity to make sustainability a key focus in our planning decisions. This will allow us to manage the inevitable growth of our district in a way that will help local efforts to counter the effects of climate change.

Sevenoaks District Council has a strong financial footing, a track record of delivering and confidence that, by delivering together, we can continue to overcome the many varied and complex challenges that are faced by local government and public services.

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Our Priorities

▪ Communities

We are fortunate to live in one of the safest places in the country, but we understand we will need to continue to work with our communities and partners to maintain this.

We will continue to nurture safe, supportive, and inclusive communities, taking a 'delivering together' approach to keep communities safe.

Empowering local people and supporting our outstanding voluntary and community groups in their work with the most isolated and vulnerable residents in the District will continue to be a priority.

We also have the tools and partnerships in place to support happier and healthier communities. By linking our leisure facilities, housing, open spaces, planning and environmental health work together we can improve health and wellbeing across our district.

Focus areas:

Community empowerment & engagement, health & wellbeing, leisure & active lifestyles, community safety and a strong voluntary & community sector

▪ Economy

The District's economy is greatly influenced by our proximity to London. As the economy changes new jobs will be created and new skills will be required. We will support businesses and residents through the transition ahead, with tailored support programmes, a focus on our towns and rural economies and new opportunities for training.

The rural nature of our district and the post-pandemic shift to home based working further creates demand for high quality broadband and mobile phone reception to be available across the whole district.

With such high visitor numbers to our historic homes and buildings, incredible landscapes and visitor attractions, tourism makes a significant contribution to our local economy and is an area we will continue to highlight, promote and support.

Focus areas:

Skills and opportunity, business growth, improving infrastructure (employment land, broadband, 4G & 5G, transport links), rural economy, green economy, visitor economy & the arts, town centres

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▪ Environment

Our District's high quality natural environment plays a pivotal role in the wellbeing of our residents. Our focus remains on protecting this very special asset.

The number of homes we should be building to meet future demand is a huge challenge in an area that is 93% Green Belt. 60% of the District also falls into recognised and protected Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The district is also fortunate to have a rich historic environment including a significant number of listed buildings, conservation areas and registered parks and gardens. Yet we know there are many families, young people and key workers who need an affordable home of their own or more space to grow.

Adapting to the impact of climate change; reducing our carbon emissions and improving biodiversity are critical both now and for future generations.

Focus areas:

Climate change, Local Plan, natural environment, sustainable travel, biodiversity and waste & recycling

▪ Housing

Having a safe and secure place to live is one of the most critical factors to a person's wellbeing. With the link between housing and health well known, the need to provide the right homes for the future of the District has never been greater.

Available land for new homes is limited by the high quality natural environment that blankets our district. This means that land values locally are some of the highest in the country, making it more expensive than most areas outside of London to build new homes. And when homes are built, their prices for sale or rent are often out of reach of our local residents.

This contributes to making the availability of affordable housing a huge issue facing the future of the district. Through our emerging Local Plan, taking the actions set out in our Housing Strategy and building new homes ourselves we can continue to address the need for more affordable homes across our district.

Focus areas:

To deliver a new Local Plan, deliver more affordable homes, rural housing, housing standards, housing options – right homes in the right places, homes for older people and supported housing and continuing our work to prevent homelessness

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▪ Our Council

Ensuring the Council remains on a sound financial footing, is managed effectively, focused on the customer, provides value for money and seeks continuous improvement will help us to achieve the priorities we have for our communities.

A well run, well managed, open and transparent council provides reassurance and we are determined to remain a fiscally sound organisation that is trusted and relied upon.

It is not only about getting the basics right and delivering excellent statutory services, it's about acting on the things that our residents have told us are most important to them. Providing those discretionary services that make our district a great place to live and work. With budgets continually stretched and savings needed, it is protecting these discretionary services that will challenge us the most.

Despite the current challenges to our budgets, we will continue to work in partnership and seek to secure the funding required to deliver bold and visionary regeneration plans for our own land and assets.

Through our established Advisory Committee structure, new projects and policies are fully and transparently considered and assessed by our Councillors before any recommendations are put forward to Cabinet or Council for adoption.

Focus areas:

Financial responsibility, long-term stability, investments, customer focus, continuous service improvement, regeneration and capital projects

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Photo to be added

Councillor Margot McArthur

Portfolio Holder for Cleaner & Greener

My portfolio...

The services I am responsible for include street cleaning, waste & recycling, Net Zero action plan, CCTV, environmental health, parking, licensing, air quality and emergency planning

▪ Delivering together...

Direct contribution to our Council Plan priorities for our Communities, the Economy and the Environment.

The services in my Portfolio are also important to ensuring that the Council is able to achieve its priorities for Housing and Our Council.

▪ Track Record

Maintained a weekly collection of all rubbish and recycling

91% resident satisfaction with refuse and recycling services (national average 79%)

20% increase in customers using the fortnightly green waste collection service

Reduced the council's carbon emissions by replacing vehicles and reviewing our collection rounds, resulting in reduction of over 30%

Electric vehicle charging points installed in car parks and for taxis

Introduced the additional option of cashless parking payment in our council owned car parks

Investment in our fly-tipping enforcement team has led to a number of successful prosecutions of offenders in court

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▪ **Our Challenges**

The Environment Act 2021 could introduce statutory collections of weekly food and glass waste, standardised containers and significant changes to garden waste

Continuing to collect the high levels of waste and recycling in the most efficient way

Meeting new targets for air quality

Tackling the challenge of climate change with our residents and businesses

▪ **Promises:**

To maintain weekly rubbish & recycling collections

To keep our streets clean and seek to tackle those that break the law by fly-tipping in our District

To continue to reduce our carbon emissions, including making our vehicle fleet more energy efficient

Improving wellbeing by maintaining high standards through our environmental health, animal welfare and licensing services

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Photo to be added

Councillor Simon Reay

Portfolio Holder for Development & Conservation

My portfolio...

The services I am responsible for include the Local Plan, development management, conservation, contributions from developers, building control, transport policy and planning enforcement.

▪ Delivering together...

Direct contribution to our Council Plan priorities for the Environment, the Economy and Housing.

The services in my Portfolio are also important to ensuring that the Council is able to achieve its priorities for our Communities and Our Council.

▪ Track Record

Delivery of the emerging Local Plan remains on course. Our consultations focus on securing district wide engagement, including with traditionally hard to reach groups

Our Development Management team has long been the busiest in Kent, processing more planning applications each year than any other District or Borough Council in the county

Investing heavily in planning enforcement, ensuring it underpins the integrity of our planning function

Our highly respected Building Control Service oversees more than two out of every three building projects within the district

More than £14m secured for the district from developer contributions through the Community Infrastructure Levy, of which £4.2m has been distributed directly to Town & Parish Councils for local projects and facilities

Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan - £1.2m secured to deliver Sevenoaks East to West cycle route. A further £45k secured to plan and design routes from Sevenoaks to Otford, Sevenoaks to Seal to Otford & to develop a Swanley Urban Area Cycling & Walking Plan

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▪ **Our Challenges**

Delivering housing and economic growth through our Local Plan, whilst protecting our high quality natural environment, the Green Belt and our Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Government reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework

Securing the funding necessary for strategic infrastructure

Implementation of the Building Safety Act

▪ **Promises:**

To deliver a new Local Plan for the District, that has a positive impact on the number of new homes, addressing climate change and promoting wellbeing

To protect our historic environment, high quality natural environment and improve biodiversity

To adopt planning policies that secure necessary contributions towards affordable housing and infrastructure from developers

To implement new cycling and walking routes and progress the Council's Movement Strategy

Ensure the health and safety of people, and to help conserve fuel and power through the application and enforcement of the Building Regulations and associated legislation

Improving wellbeing by promoting high quality design and environmental improvements in new developments

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Photo to be added

Councillor Kevin Maskell

Portfolio Holder for Finance & Investment

My portfolio...

The services I am responsible for include financial strategy, assets, investments, business rates, council tax, benefits and council tax support and fraud prevention

▪ **Delivering together...**

Direct contribution to our Council Plan priorities for the Economy, Housing and Our Council.

The services in my Portfolio are also important to ensuring that the Council is able to achieve its priorities for our Communities and the Environment.

▪ **Track Record**

Continuing to set a balanced 10-year budget to help plan for a fiscally strong long-term future

Secured property investments returning £1.5m a year to Council budgets

Reviewed our Treasury Management policies and achieved improved interest returns on Council money held in the bank and other investments

Supported business through the pandemic and beyond, ensuring more than £40m of grant support was distributed to qualifying businesses in the Sevenoaks District since 2020

Supported residents by ensuring benefits and council tax support to the value of £20m are paid annually

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▪ **Our Challenges**

Increasing demand for council services

Continued reductions in funding to maintain council services

Reducing number of grant funding schemes to meet the costs of services and deliver investment schemes

High inflation and interest rates

High land and property values and increased building costs impacting investment in capital schemes

Staff recruitment and wage pressures

Reducing the environmental impact of council activities

▪ **Promises:**

Continue to deliver a long-term balanced budget and maintain our position as one of the most fiscally strong councils in the country

Manage the council's assets and investments effectively to maximise income to support the delivery of Council services

Ensure that council services are resilient by exploring innovative and alternative approaches to service delivery that improve cost effectiveness and quality of provision

Monitor the quality of service delivery to residents and ensure value for money

Improving wellbeing by supporting residents faced with increased cost of living and reducing the environmental impact of council services

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Photo to be added

Councillor Perry Cole

Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Housing & Health

My portfolio...

In addition to being the Deputy Leader of the Council I am responsible for services including housing strategy, housing standards, housing advice & homelessness prevention, rough sleeping, empty homes, health & wellbeing, energy efficiency and fuel poverty.

▪ **Delivering together...**

Direct contribution to our Council Plan priorities for our Communities, the Environment and Housing.

The services in my Portfolio are also important to ensuring that the Council is able to deliver our priorities for the Economy and Our Council.

▪ **Track Record**

Provided 24 affordable homes through Quercus Housing, the Council's affordable housing company. Working with our partners we have delivered 17 further supported housing schemes together

Secured funding of nearly £700,000 over three years to support single homeless and rough sleepers with housing and support

Secured funding of £1.5m to deliver a programme of energy efficiency upgrades and low-carbon heating solutions to low-income households living off the gas grid

Our HERO service has supported residents to manage their household bills and debt, access local support and seek training and employment opportunities

Supported the Homes for Ukraine scheme, ensuring more than 200 privately owned homes were ready to be shared with those seeking safety in our District

Our dedicated One You Team works directly with local residents to improve their health

Reopened Edenbridge and Sevenoaks leisure centres and Lullingstone Park Golf Course following the abrupt closure of the operator. Ready-made plans allowed an interim operator, Everyone Active, to re-open the centres in just six weeks

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▪ **Our Challenges**

High land and property values

Delivering more homes, including affordable homes

Reducing homelessness

Addressing climate change and fuel poverty

Supporting residents impacted by increases in the cost of living

Improving wellbeing and reducing health inequalities

Supporting those seeking asylum through UK Government programmes

▪ **Promises:**

To provide a range of affordable homes to meet the housing needs of our communities including the needs of specific groups

Working with partners to deliver the housing needed to meet local needs, the right homes in the right places

To reduce homelessness and improve routes into permanent accommodation by delivering the Housing and Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategies

To promote high quality homes and optimise the range and suitability of new and existing homes in both the public and private sector

To provide grant funding to adapt homes and reduce the number of empty homes

To deliver the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Action Plan, including the provision of the Council's One You Healthy Lifestyles service

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Photo to be added

Councillor Julia Thornton

Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Improvement & Innovation

My portfolio...

In addition to being the Leader of the Council I am responsible for services including equalities, customer service, service improvement, performance management, communications and the projects we undertake for economic development & regeneration.

▪ Delivering together...

Direct contribution to our Council Plan priorities for the Economy and Our Council.

The services in my Portfolio are also important to ensuring that the Council is able to deliver our priorities for our Communities, the Environment and Housing.

▪ Track Record

Our 2021 resident survey told us that:

81% resident satisfaction with the way the Council runs things (national average 56%)

86% of residents trust Sevenoaks District Council (national average 53%)

82% satisfaction with keeping residents informed

81% resident satisfaction with helpfulness of staff

Provided 17 flats for key workers & the Meeting Point business hub through the redevelopment of 27-37 High Street, Swanley

Secured planning permission for approximately 100 new residential units at Council owned developments across Edenbridge and Swanley, with retail units and a new community hall included within those proposals

Secured over £1.5m funding to invest in local businesses via the UK Shared Prosperity and Rural Prosperity Funds

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▪ **Our Challenges**

Sustained increase in customer demand for council services

Lack of available funding from a national level to invest in locally important public services and local regeneration projects

Difficult market and economic conditions from high inflation and higher cost of living on the Council and local businesses

High land values, borrowing costs and cost of materials required to deliver plans for regeneration

▪ **Promises:**

To provide high quality, customer focused services

To keep levels of resident satisfaction and sense of wellbeing high

To deliver the Economic Development Strategy; supporting businesses to come to the District and to grow

To progress and deliver regeneration plans, like those already underway at the Stangrove Estate and Spitals Cross in Edenbridge and White Oak in Swanley

Improving wellbeing through council services, supporting the economy and well-designed regeneration schemes

To ensure Sevenoaks District remains a special place to live, work and enjoy

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Photo to be added

Councillor Lesley Dyball

Portfolio Holder for People & Places

My portfolio...

The services I am responsible for include the Community Plan, community safety, town centres, tourism, community grants, safeguarding, youth services and leisure activities

▪ **Delivering together...**

Direct contribution to our Council Plan priorities for our Communities, the Economy and Health.

The services in my Portfolio are also important to ensuring that the Council is able to deliver our priorities for the Environment and Our Council.

▪ **Track Record**

Here to Help scheme launched, supporting residents with the impact of the cost of living

Household Support Fund – over £800,000 to help households with food & utility costs, alongside support for food banks

Community grants scheme - £253,000 awarded to local groups supporting people across our District

[Community Plan](#) refreshed in 2022 and supported by new funding through the Local Strategic Partnership Community Wellbeing Fund

Community Safety - In the top 2 safest places to live and work in Kent, with the lowest levels of anti-social behaviour

Opened the new White Oak Leisure Centre in 2022 – Everyone Active outperformed all membership targets

A varied communities programme delivered each year including Family Fun Days, Silver Sunday, Run, walk or push for Dementia event, The Big Sing and the Community Awards

Launched the 'So Much More' place campaign and Visit Sevenoaks website, promoting the Sevenoaks District as a great place to live, work, visit and invest

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▪ **Our Challenges**

Reduction in funding available to provide services in our communities

Impact of cost of living, including higher demand for our community services

Resilience of the voluntary sector, following the impact and greater customer demand from the pandemic and more recently, the cost of living

Understanding the changing skills and employment needs of our District

▪ **Promises:**

To work with the District's Local Strategic Partnership to deliver the 'Better Together' Community Plan, empowering communities to come together to improve their local community

To ensure the District remains a safe place to live and visit by delivering the Community Safety Strategy with our partners

To provide a support programme for households experiencing financial hardship

To support a growing tourism offer in the District through the Sevenoaks So Much More and Visit Sevenoaks campaigns, alongside the Darent Valley Community Rail Partnership

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The next steps

Our Council Plan has set out our promises to you.

Each year we will monitor our progress and report how we are doing publicly.

Undoubtedly things will change that we cannot forecast today. New laws and regulations, changes that effect our economy and changes in the funding we receive to deliver our services are just a few examples. Importantly, our residents and local businesses may tell us that their needs have changed and, as we have in the past, we will be ready to adapt.

Each year, we will take the opportunity to review our progress and ensure our priorities and promises to you remain the right ones.