



Business & Employment

Introduction

The commerce of the historic market town of Cranbrook and village of Sissinghurst was founded on the use of local resources and labour, working in close relationship with the land. This relationship continues, with the farming sector remaining as a significant employer.

The education sector is also very important to the economy of the area, with many excellent schools, centred around Cranbrook School, founded in 1518, being a major employer.

However, many local jobs tend to be at the lower end of the pay spectrum. The TWBC Draft Local Plan 2019 identifying Cranbrook and Sissinghurst as an area of income deprivation. Over 20% of children living in the Cranbrook area live below the poverty line¹, a situation that may be getting worse with the current Coronavirus pandemic.

Nevertheless, the rise of the digital economy is providing local entrepreneurs with access to national and global markets through activities independent of locality.

Cranbrook and Sissinghurst is an attractive place for business in many respects with the Parish benefitting from a diverse range of sectors. A 2017 survey of local business² showed the full spectrum of enterprises active within the parish, from traditional to digital. Most business surveyed had been operating locally for over 15 years, many much longer. A majority expected to be active in five years and most had strong ambitions to grow. However, there were recurrent factors cited that were limiting growth, that need to be addressed.

The challenge for Cranbrook and Sissinghurst is to provide an enabling environment for business of all types to flourish and continue to contribute to the heart and vibrancy of our community. The following policies aim to build a thriving and sustainable business sector, which leverages heritage and tradition, is based on entrepreneurial diversity, capitalises on digital opportunities, and is integrated into the community.

Overall Policy Aims

¹ Parish Cake Summer 2020 p.34

² See Appendix

- To enable low wage employees to live and work in the Parish without commuting
- To provide space for IT and highly skilled businesses to create highly paid employment so the young do not need to leave the Parish once they are educated.
- To create office and production space for low risk start-ups and expansion of existing businesses.
- To prevent the loss of employment land to residential, particularly in the town centre
- To meet the growing need for health services and ensure sustainability of supply
- To leverage heritage and tradition to maximise tourism and related business opportunities in ways sensitive to the town and landscape
- To integrate business and community by developing shared retail and amenity spaces and services that meet the needs of the whole population.
- To reinvigorate the relationship between business and countryside through the innovative use of local resources, production and marketing

Draft Policy BE3.1

Business and Employment Space

- a) The creation of new business opportunities will be supported, when designed in ways sensitive to the town and/or landscape setting. This includes:
- Small-scale business, residential and community mixed-use clusters
 - Flexible, multi-use workspaces, 'hot desking', digital hubs
 - Redevelopment of brown field sites and restoration of buildings for small-scale industrial use
- b) Applications which seek to enhance the town centre business offer will be supported, provided they complement the local context. The conversion of long-term vacant High Street spaces into business premises is particularly welcomed.

Policy Supporting Text

This policy aims to meet the demand for business premises, given that 54% of the local businesses surveyed in 2017 were looking to expand over the following five years. There is a chronic shortage of small to medium sized business units which is limiting growth. A few businesses interviewed stated that there are insufficient estate agencies dealing with this sector.

Providing sufficient workspace for businesses within the parish will allow the local economy to thrive and prevent people from being forced to commute to outside areas. Active business spaces will foster a vibrant high street and transform otherwise lifeless brownfield sites, therefore benefiting local residents and attracting additional workers to the area. Working locally will improve both the environment and people's own well-being, with time otherwise spent on commuting instead spent with family or other enjoyable activities.

Draft Policy BE3.2

Tourism

- a) Proposals to increase the diversity of retail, hospitality, community, cultural and business activities, that reflect the market town character of Cranbrook and the village nature of Sissinghurst, will be supported. Potential improvements include, but are not limited to:
- Providing hotels, B&Bs, restaurants
 - Opening-up of heritage buildings to paying visitors
 - Providing new attractions
 - Improving transport and access and public toilet facilities
 - Self-catering, camping or holiday accommodation

- b) Proposals that promote sympathetic active ground floor uses will be supported, and flexible and multi-functional retail and outdoor spaces in the town and village centres will be encouraged.
- c) Development proposals that can demonstrate a positive impact on tourism across the parish will be supported.

Policy Supporting Text

Local facilities are currently insufficient to encourage, sustain and expand tourism within the parish. The rich local heritage and tradition could be leveraged to maximise tourism and related business opportunities, providing new facilities and services within a characteristic setting. Cranbrook should celebrate its medieval history and present existence as a rural yet bustling market town, while Sissinghurst can attract visitors as a picturesque village, with the smaller settlements each possessing their own unique character. Potential improvements include the provision of shared retail and amenity spaces and services that meet the needs of the whole parish, the creation of shared open spaces for retail, farmers' market, and daytime and night-time entertainment in the centre of Cranbrook. Active ground floor use along the shopping streets will create vibrancy and invite interest from passing pedestrians and visitors.

A significant number of visitors are attracted to the area by the built heritage and the Wealden landscape, with approximately 200,000 people visiting Sissinghurst Castle every year³. This creates opportunities for tourism in the wider parish. Feedback from the public at consultation events provided a list of potential improvements which could enhance the tourist economy, including low-cost changes and more substantial interventions. At the lower end of the scale, members of the public requested improved signage to events and heritage assets, designed in keeping with the historic setting and which do not clutter the high street. Volunteer-run tours and heritage trails were also suggested, with potential links to geocaching and other similar activities. More substantially, people felt the need for a staffed tourist office and a variety of visitor accommodation. All such measures would have a positive impact on tourism and enhance the parish for residents and visitors alike.

Draft Policy BE3.3

Education & Skills

Planning applications for new buildings, change of use, extensions or new facilities that seek to address lack of adult education and vocational training opportunities,

³ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sissinghurst-castle-garden/features/tower-conservation-at-sissinghurst-castle-garden>

and which can demonstrate that they are designed in ways sensitive to their town and/or landscape settings, will be supported.

Policy Supporting Text

This policy aims to meet the need for skills through adult education and vocational training. Whilst the quality of our existing secondary education establishments has been recognised, there are few opportunities for young people to obtain tertiary and vocational skills. In the Business and Employment Survey, 37% of businesses surveyed cited lack of core skills is limiting business growth. This policy aims to enable local education resources to connect with business needs and expand their offerings to provide adult and vocational training for existing and emerging sectors.

Education is essential to allow people to reach their full potential, and in turn allow the wider parish to flourish. Providing learning opportunities later in life allow individuals the freedom to explore other areas previously inaccessible to them, with greater choice of employment and an enhanced understanding of the world. The local area and beyond will benefit from an educated workforce and the multitude of skills which are then made available as services to all parish residents.

Draft Policy BE3.4

The Rural Economy

- a) Redevelopment of historic farmsteads will only be permitted where they retain their original function as economically active settlements. Development proposals should include both residential accommodation and a variety of employment opportunities.
- b) Proposals which promote economic, social and environmental sustainability through farm diversifications schemes (e.g. sustainable rural tourism, local food production, small scale equestrian, retailing, hospitality, food and land-based arts and crafts, environmental education, professional and business services) will be supported.
- c) Planning applications involving farms, farmsteads and land use change will be supported, providing they meet the following criteria:
 - provide local employment
 - make use of local resources
 - enhance productivity
 - are sensitive to landscape settings
 - protect and enhance the environment

Policy Supporting Text

The High Weald has over 3,500 historic farmsteads with a third incorporating at least one building dating from the seventeenth century or earlier⁴. The range and types of farmsteads in the landscapes have been mapped by English Heritage and the High Weald AONB Unit. Study of their historic character and current use has informed a greater understanding of the significance and sensitivity to change of these essential buildings. It has also provided character statements with details those aspects, features and qualities of our local farmsteads that contribute most to their character. The research has re-emphasised the importance of historic farmsteads to rural areas within Tunbridge Wells Borough. Re-development of redundant farm buildings has been successful within the parish, such as Hazelden Farm, but it should be of good design and should identify, preserve and enhance the built, rural and landscape setting. Vision 2034⁵, by the AONB partnership, sets out aspirations for the High Weald AONB for the next 20 years:

- A landscape adapting well to changing economic and climatic conditions
- A landscape embracing a low-carbon future with green technologies underpinning a strong rural economy and thriving communities

Producing food to consume in local area using less carbon would positively impact the people, employment, well-being and manage the land. The parish will retain its remarkable character and scenic beauty and will function as an attractive place to live and work. Agriculture and farming have a vital role in the management of the countryside and landscape and in producing high quality products and services for consumers and the public. Developments must be sensitive to the landscape, should seek to promote and enable local employment and the use of local resources which positively enhance the relationship between people and the countryside.

In order to survive, farmers need to be allowed to diversify and make best use of local resources whilst respecting the landscape setting, making small scale improvements which are suitable to the surroundings. Historical evidence from farmers shows that there is poor land quality and a need for diversification. Given the appropriate alteration of spaces, diversification of farmland would greatly benefit both the farmers and the parish as a whole. Disused farm buildings can provide the space necessary for the potential new facilities outlined in other policies, such as adult education provision and accommodation to support tourism. Reusing such spaces makes more intelligent use of the land supply, rather than unnecessarily encroaching on green space. The sensitive expansion of a farmstead enhances its historic presence within the parish and takes it into the 21st century, remaining embedded with local resources as it adapts to the needs of the present.

⁴ Historic Farmsteads & Landscape Character in the High Weald AONB:

<http://www.highweald.org/downloads/publications/uk-landscape-research-reports/1037-historic-farmsteads-a-landscape-character-in-the-high-weald-aonb/file.html>

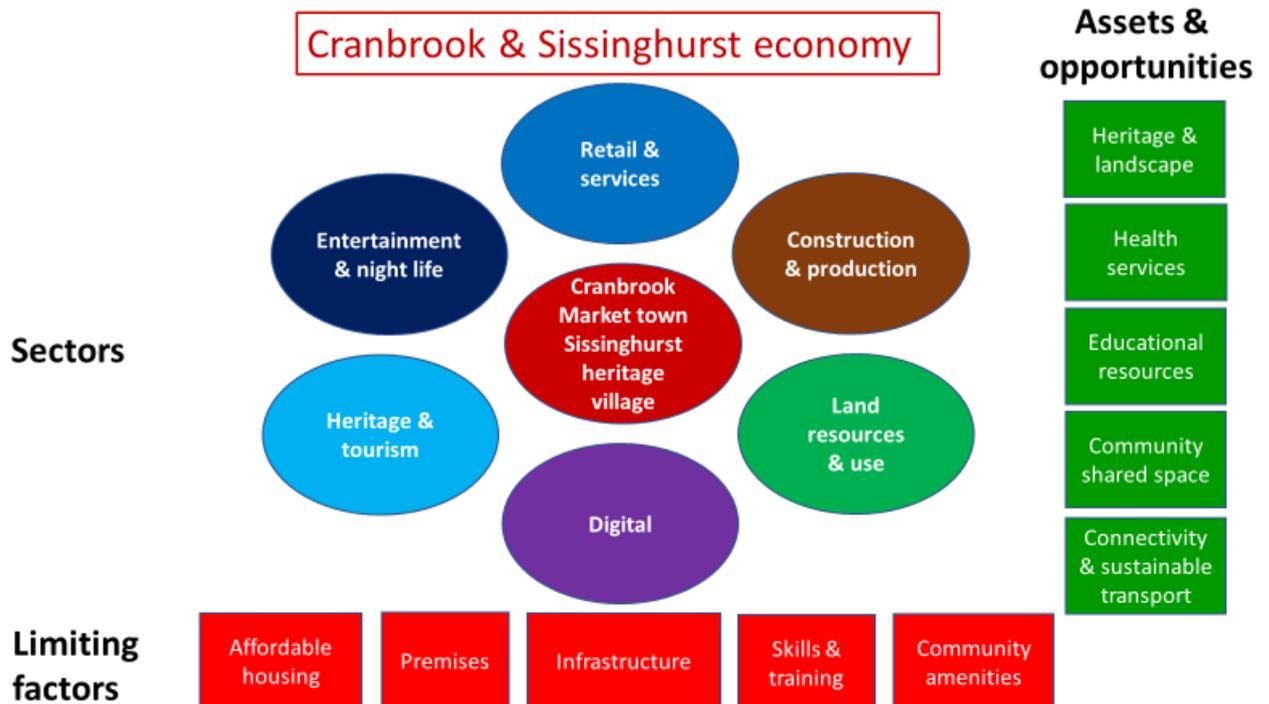
⁵ Vision 2034: <http://www.highweald.org/high-weald-aonb-management-plan/vision-2034.html>

APPENDIX

Business & Employment Survey - Autumn 2017

KEY FINDINGS

The Local Economy



Factors Limiting Growth

Lack of affordable housing

- 65% of enterprises surveyed said their staff need affordable housing
- 82% of employees travel into the parish to work because they cannot afford to live locally, some from as far away as Gillingham and Bexhill.

Recent studies show that the Parish has one of the highest ratios between income and average house prices nationally at 1:15. There is a shortage of rental accommodation at affordable rates. This makes living and working in the Parish impossible for most people who wish to do so. Major consequences include increased traffic, parking shortages, work-life balance stress and difficulties in staff recruitment and retention.

Poor infrastructure

- Parking
 - 53% cited insufficient parking for customers and staff.
- Transport
 - 25% of businesses surveyed cited lack of public transport as growth limiting
 - 93% of employees drive to work
 - 5% walk/cycle
 - 2% use public transport.
- Internet speed and reliability
 - 35% cited poor internet speeds and reliability limiting growth
- Mobile phone coverage
 - 100% complained of patchy coverage in the parish
 - 40% cited poor mobile phone limiting their business growth.

Shortage of premises

- 54% of business are looking to expand over the next five years
- chronic shortage of small to medium sized business units limiting growth.

Lack of skills and training

- 37% of enterprises says lack of core skills is limiting business growth.

Assets and Opportunities

The NDP Design Forum identified a range of under exploited opportunities for growth. These included making the most of the area's:

- rich heritage and landscape to revitalise the use of local resources as a source of enterprise and boost tourism and related services
- well-established health provision sector that needs to expand to meet growing demand and ensure continuity of provision
- outstanding education resources to meet the skills gap
- need for community shared spaces and entertainment
- public rights of way to provide greater connectivity and sustainable transport options.

