

The Lewes Planning Group - Creating a ‘Masterplan’ for Lewes

1. Background: Lewes’ long-term challenges

Lewes has many great physical assets – the Castle, the Priory Ruins, the medieval high street and unique network of Twittens, Harvey’s Brewery, a wealth of Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian architecture, and the River Ouse – all nestled against the stunning backdrop of the South Downs. There is much to cherish.

These features shape the town’s identity and make it widely valued as a place to live, work and visit. Protecting and strengthening these qualities is central to future planning.

Challenges

However, alongside these strengths, the town faces significant pressures that require careful and coordinated long-term assessment.

Social and demographic pressures

- An increasingly ageing population
- Limited provision for young people and families
- Very high house prices
- A shortage of genuinely affordable homes.

Economic limitations

- Limited range of suitable local employment opportunities
- Limited light industrial and makers space for businesses to establish and grow
- Risk that people working locally cannot afford to live locally
- Gradual shift to becoming a dormitory town for London workers.

Environmental risks

- Flood risk linked to the River Ouse and surface water
- Climate change impacts
- Need for sustainable construction and resource use.

Accessibility and movement

- Traffic tends to dominate the historic centre, reducing quality of public space
- Many accessibility challenges for older residents and people with mobility needs

All these challenges can badly affect the town’s future prospects: its ability to support a diverse and vibrant population of all ages and backgrounds; to enable local businesses to grow and prosper; for the town to function as a commercial, leisure and administrative centre; and to be resilient in the face of climate change.

Plus, the town’s situation – on a spur of the chalk Downs, next to a flood plain and within a National Park – severely restrict opportunities for expansion and demand that plans for every potential development site need to be carefully considered within the context of the needs of the whole town.

2. How planning policy is currently addressing these challenges

The South Downs Local Plan

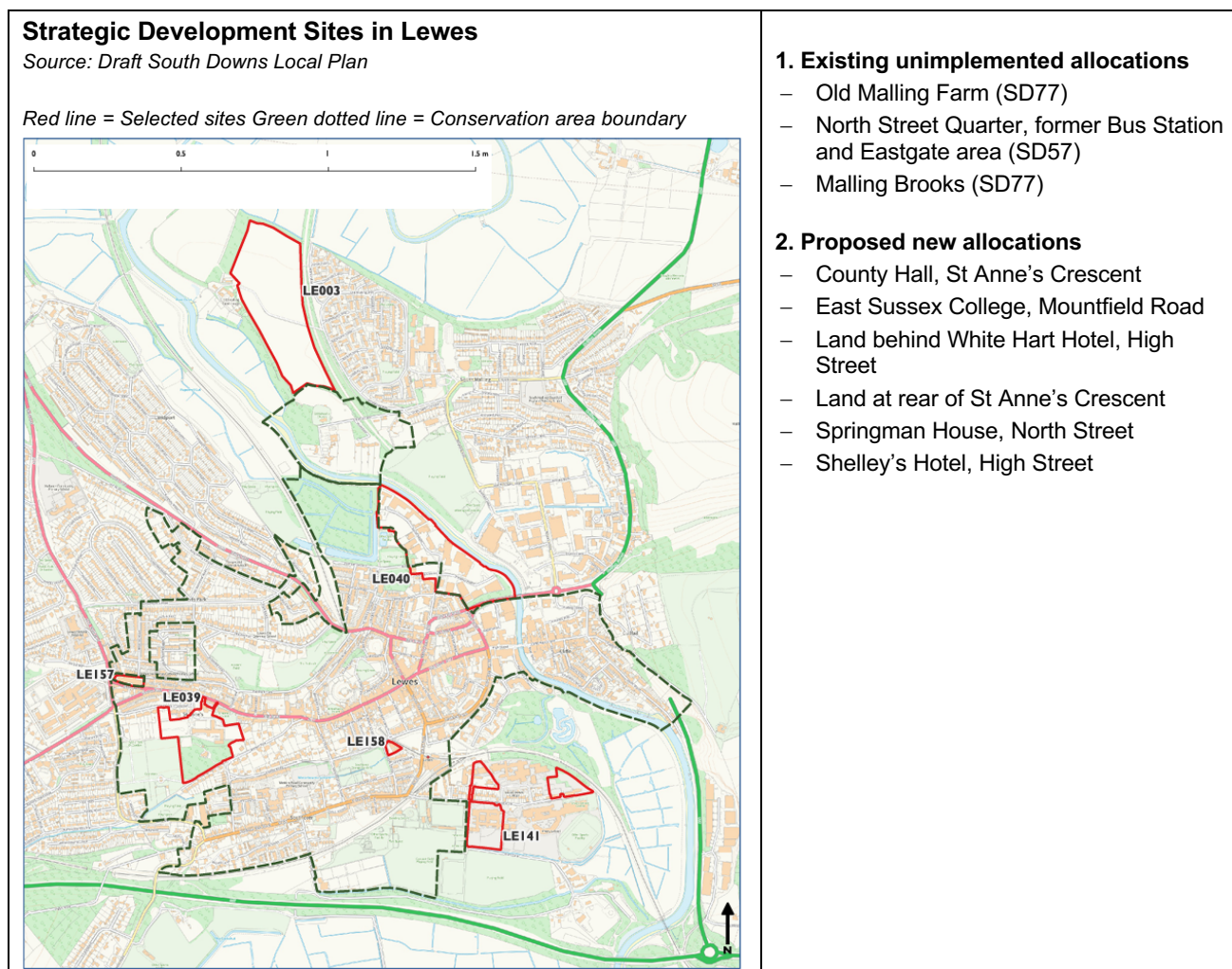
Lewes is in the South Downs National Park. Planning and development in the town is therefore guided primarily by the South Downs Local Plan. In late 2024, the South Downs National Park Authority published a new draft Local Plan (known as the Regulation 18 Plan) to guide planning decisions across the National Park, including Lewes, for the next 15-20 years.

The Reg 18 Plan included proposals that could see 1,500 new homes built in Lewes in coming years at strategic development sites such as County Hall, East Sussex College, the Phoenix/North Street site, and Old Malling Farm – see map below. If these are built the way many other schemes have been approved recently this could mean:

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- Many more large expensive houses that only the wealthy can afford
- Few or no affordable homes
- Limited employment opportunities
- As many as 3,000 extra cars in town¹, adding to congestion and pollution.

The Reg 18 Plan also said little about addressing the shortfall of infrastructure in the town – water and sewerage, edge-of-town car parking, public transport, and health facilities – adding to pressure on the provision of essential services and the proper functioning of the town.



A call for a town-wide Masterplan

Large numbers of people objected to the Reg 18 Plan. Following extensive engagement with local organisations and community groups, Lewes Town Council therefore approved a response to the Reg 18 plan in March 2025, proposing that Lewes requires a coordinated, town-wide, design-led planning framework, known as a 'Masterplan'.

Recommending the creation of a Masterplan recognises that:

- Lewes is physically constrained by the surrounding Downs and the Ouse floodplain. This limits development land and makes it essential that major sites are planned carefully and used to meet clearly identified local needs.
- The South Downs National Park Authority is primarily set up to develop policy for smaller rural settlements and to protect the natural landscape; additional expertise and perspectives are needed to support the SDNPA in fully understanding the economic, cultural and demographic requirements of a larger, commercial centre

¹ Assuming an average of 2 vehicles per new residence

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like Lewes.

The Town Council emphasised that the Masterplan should be used to think about major development sites in Lewes in an integrated way and how they could, in combination, contribute, to improving:

- Affordable housing and workspace
- Utilities and drainage
- Health and education provision
- Transport and parking.

Although developed plans have been created for sites SD77 and SD57 there is still a lot of uncertainty over their delivery and an opportunity to consider what's appropriate on these sites to serve the wider town.

3. Establishing the Lewes Planning Group (LPG)

Some work on these issues had already been started by the Neighbourhood Plan Working Party and a 'Task & Finish Group' set up by the Town Council (with representation from civic society groups and the Chamber of Commerce among others) to explore a movement strategy for the town.

After discussion, the representatives from the Task & Finish Group established themselves as an 'outside body' to lead on the work to create a Lewes Masterplan. This would allow the group to be more nimble and work within the very constrained timescales that the South Downs Local Plan team was working to, while still consulting with the Town Council.

This group formed itself as the Lewes Planning Group (LPG) in July 2025. It is now constituted as an unincorporated association with open membership for anyone in the town interested in planning and development. It comprises a steering group and wider management team of community group representatives, Town Council representatives, and local residents with professional planning experience – see Appendix 1.

4. Drafting a Lewes Masterplan

Confirming the validity of a Draft Masterplan

Formal consultation on the South Downs Regulation 18 Plan ended in April 2025. However, the LPG was able to confirm with the South Downs National Park Authority that a Draft Masterplan could still be considered as a response to the Reg 18 Plan, provided it was delivered to the SDNPA by the end of October 2025.

October 2025 – The Draft Masterplan Workshop

To consult the town on what should be included in the Draft Masterplan, the LPG held a major workshop at Lewes Town Hall on 22 October 2025. This was one of the largest civic planning events in Lewes for decades, with more than 60 representatives from many different aspects of Lewes participating, including:

- Councils and public bodies, including the South Downs National Park
- Businesses and traders
- Transport providers
- Civic and community organisations
- Access and disability groups
- Education, sports, arts and leisure providers.

Additionally, video contributions captured views from groups often under-represented in planning processes, including young people, older residents, minority communities and those experiencing poverty.

After presentations detailing the long-term challenges and opportunities for the town, a series of structured and facilitated sessions were held to capture needs, priorities and long-term vision for future development in Lewes across five areas:

- Provision of housing
- Land use, infrastructure and climate change

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- Employment, economy and tourism
- Sports, culture, well-being and leisure
- Public engagement for decision-making.

These issues were discussed in groups, with all participants able to review, interrogate and contribute to findings and collectively identify points of consensus across the five themes.



Priorities of the Draft Masterplan

Drawing on a significant evidence base that had been compiled by many groups over previous years, and the extensive discussions and group-wide review at the Workshop Day, a Draft Masterplan – an outline of proposed policies – was co-created.

In summary, this calls for:

- More genuinely affordable housing
- Smaller homes for young people and downsizers
- New employment space
- Protection of educational facilities
- An arts, leisure and cultural quarter
- Edge-of-town parking linked to improved public transport
- Continued public involvement in planning decisions

The Draft Masterplan can be viewed at www.lewesclimatehub.org/lewesplanninggroup.

Referencing the Lewes Masterplan in the South Downs Local Plan

This Draft Masterplan was submitted to the National Park on 31 October 2025. The South Down National Park agreed to reference this work in the next version of the Local Plan (called the Regulation 19 Plan) and suggest a special set of policies for Lewes town itself. The draft version of the Reg 19 Plan – approved at the National Park’s Planning Committee in February 2026 – includes these references.

5. Turning principles into practice

i. Adding detail to the Draft Masterplan

To ensure the work doesn’t stop at a few words, the Lewes Planning Group has now commissioned (at a

significantly reduced cost using funds provided from constituent bodies and other Lewes sources) an urban design practice and transport specialists to produce:

- **A long-term town vision** articulating how local people want the town to be for those living, working and visiting there now and into the future, and what its role now is as the County Town of Sussex
- **An illustrative ‘masterplan’** showing visually how priorities identified in the Draft Masterplan can be realised on the ground
- **A movement strategy** outlining how transport – from cars and public transport to walking and cycling – can align with the Masterplan’s aspirations for greener, safer, less-polluting movement.

The National Park is fully engaged with this work. Discussions are taking place as to what specific planning mechanism can be used to ‘anchor’ the Masterplan into the suite of planning documents affecting the town. This is essential to ensure that the Lewes Masterplan is accorded due weight and is regarded as a key consideration when it comes to the determination of future planning applications.

Masterplan vs Neighbourhood Plan: What’s the difference?

A Neighbourhood Plan is a community-led, legally binding document used to guide the development and use of land in a specific local area. After six years of community consultation, a Neighbourhood Plan was created and adopted for Lewes in 2019.

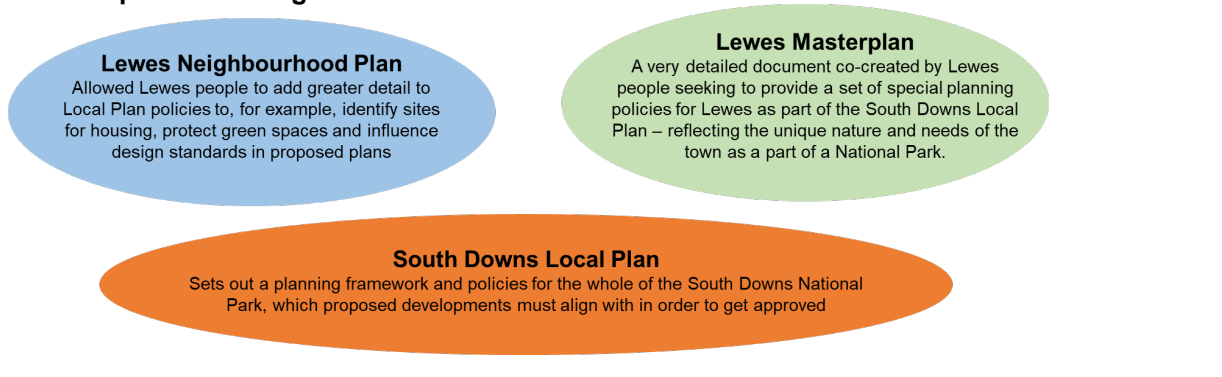
Lewes Planning Group is working very closely with the Town Council’s Neighbourhood Plan Working Party as well as with the Town Council itself. The Masterplan builds upon the Neighbourhood Plan (NP) by taking the vision agreed in the Neighbourhood Plan as its starting point, taking use of its evidence base, and adopting specific policies from the NP like the ‘Lewes Low-Cost Housing’ policy

However, the Masterplan aims to go well beyond the agreed scope of the Lewes Neighbourhood Plan in significant areas. Notably, unlike the Lewes Neighbourhood Plan, the Masterplan will:

- consider strategic development sites in Lewes (i.e. those identified by the South Downs National Park in the map above to help meet housing quotas)
- also consider infrastructure implications of those sites (e.g. transport, utility provision, community infrastructure)
- recommend how development can be used to address economic issues such as employment and tourism.

The intention is that the Lewes Masterplan and the Lewes Neighbourhood Plan will complement each other, together delivering a co-created planning framework for Lewes that accurately and comprehensively reflects local people’s priorities for the town over the next 15 to 20 years.

How the plans work together



ii. Next steps

Lewes Planning Group’s aim is to co-create a full Lewes Masterplan that has been shaped by, and is supported by, the people of Lewes, so it can be included in the final version of the South Downs Local Plan when this is adopted in the first half of 2027. A rigorous process of consultation is therefore essential to ensure the Lewes Masterplan properly reflects the needs, wants and concerns of the town.

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Following the completion of the Illustrative Masterplan detailed above, the next steps are:

Initial consultation - This will take place with the LPG membership (and the stakeholders represented through them) and representatives of the neighbourhoods in the town.

Public engagement - Following revisions to the vision and other plans over the summer, a more extensive public consultation and engagement will be held. Alongside this work, there will be regular engagement and discussion with Lewes Town Council and the National Park itself to ensure that their views are taken on board.

Full Masterplan creation - Ideally, and subject to the ability of LPG to secure additional funds (possibly from government sources or local charitable trusts) the illustrative masterplan will be 'fleshed out' with specific designs for each of the strategic development sites in Lewes.

This will illustrate exactly what can be achieved on each site to meet the overall objectives alongside a comprehensive infrastructure delivery plan that clarifies what additional public infrastructure is required and how this will be paid for and delivered, with proportionate contributions from each of the strategic sites.

The aim is to have an agreed Full Masterplan (possibly supported by designs for each of the strategic sites) that commands the support of the town for discussion at the Examination in Public that will consider the South Downs Local Plan towards the end of 2026.

To contact the Lewes Planning Group, email stevepearce139@gmail.com.

Appendix 1

Lewes Planning Group

The current steering group and management team for Lewes Planning Group comprise representatives from local community groups that are active in planning and conservation issues, town councillors, and individuals with professional backgrounds in planning and development. Membership is open to anyone in the town interested in planning and development.

The Steering Group meet monthly to coordinate action on each of the steps outlined in this document. Quarterly meetings are held with the membership to review progress and inform strategy. The composition of the LPG Steering Group will be reviewed annually to ensure it continues to meet the needs of the initiative.

LPG Steering Group for 2025/26

Steve Pearce (Chair) – Planning and urban regeneration professional and Cycle Lewes member

Jennifer Chibnall – Lewes Neighbourhood Plan Working Group

Silvia Clausin – Public engagement facilitator for the School for Everyday Democracy facilitator

Stephen Hill – Urban planning and development professional

Imogen Makepeace – Lewes Town Councillor

Kevin Moore – Chair, Lewes Living Streets

Richard Moore – St Anne's Action Group

Juliet Oxborrow – Director, Lewes Climate Hub

Andrew Simpson – Lewes Chamber of Commerce, Lewes Conservation Area Group and planning consultant.

LPG membership as at 1 March 2026

Ros Brewer – Lewes Community Land Trust

Peter Earl – Friends of Lewes

Jane Foot - St Anne's Action Group

William Hardie – Director, Studio Hardie architecture and interior design consultants

Nava Kazemi – Common Cause

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Jean Lawrence – Lewes Access Group
 Edwina Livesey – Lewes Town Council
 Susanna Longley – Save Lewes Bus Station
 Oliver Lowenstein – Making Lewes
 Roger Maskew – Friends of Lewes
 Ian McKay – Sustainable architecture consultant
 Sheila O’ Sullivan – Cycle Lewes
 Adrian Ross – Lewes Town Council
 Kevin Scott – Herbert Scott Financial Planners
 Shane Snow – Transport planning professional, Active Travel England
 Tom Warder – Community-led housing advisor & interim CEO, Action in Rural Sussex
 Susanne Wolff – Save Lewes Bus Station

Appendix 2

Groups represented at the Lewes Masterplan Workshop on 22 October 2025

Active Travel England Belle and Co Chamber of Commerce Charleston Lewes Common Cause Community Land Trust Compass Travel Conservation Area Advisory Group Cycle Lewes East Sussex County Council ESCC - buses ESCC -- LCWIP Foundry Healthcare	Foundry Healthcare - Patient Voice committee Friends of Lewes Landport Food Bank/Community Hub Lewes Area Access Group Lewes Athletic Club Lewes Climate Hub Lewes District Council Lewes Farmers Market Lewes Football Club Lewes Living Streets Lewes Town Council Malling Residents Group	Neighbourhood Plan Group Nevill Residents Association Ovesco Community Energy Pinch Points Priory School Safer C7 Project Group Save the Bus Station South Downs National Park South Downs Society Southover Good Neighbours St Anne's Action Group Safer C7 Project Group Walk, Wheel, Cycle Trust
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Appendix 3

What the words mean:

Local Plan

A statutory, long-term document created by each local planning authority in England (often covering 15–20 years) that sets out the overarching vision, framework, and policies for future development across all of the area it oversees. Each Local Plan guides decisions on planning applications, determining where development should go and what land should be protected. The town of Lewes comes under the South Downs Local Plan as it is in the South Downs National Park; other parts of Lewes District currently have their own Local Plan.

Masterplan

A comprehensive, strategic document, comprising plans, 3D images, and text, that outlines the vision, design principles, and implementation strategy for specific large-scale or complex sites. It guides future development, including land use, infrastructure, and phasing, ensuring a cohesive approach across the whole site over time. Lewes is unusual in seeking to create a full Masterplan for the whole town – not just one specific site. This will be incorporated into a set of special planning policies for Lewes within the legally-binding South Downs Local Plan.

Neighbourhood Plan

Whereas Local Plans are created by local authorities for a district/borough, a Neighbourhood Plan is a community-led document used to guide the development and use of land in a specific neighbourhood, town or parish, under the framework of its region’s Local Plan. It allows local residents to come together to shape where new housing and commercial development is sited, protect green spaces, and set design standards to reflect local needs and wants. Once a Neighbourhood Plan has been drafted (and approved by an independent examiner) a referendum allows local residents to vote on whether it should be adopted.

Regulations 18 & 19

Regulations 18 and 19 refer to stages in the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations for developing a Local Plan. Regulation 18 is the initial, preparatory consultation focusing on scope, issues, and options. Regulation 19 is the final "Pre-Submission" stage, where a draft plan is published for representations on its legal compliance and soundness before submission to the Secretary of State.

Strategic development site

Strategic development sites in Local Plans are specifically identified, large-scale areas designated for significant housing (often 50+ units), employment, and infrastructure growth to meet long-term local needs. Such sites in Lewes identified by the South Downs Local Plan include the North Street/Phoenix Industrial Estate, East Sussex College, County Hall, and The Shelleys Hotel.