

03

SPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR BOROUGH



Location	20
Key facts	24
Challenges	26

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Location

3.1 Tonbridge and Malling Borough is located in the South East region of the country and is one of twelve local councils within the county of Kent.

Character

3.2 Tonbridge and Malling borders the districts of Gravesham, Sevenoaks, Tunbridge Wells, and Maidstone, in addition to the Medway Unitary Authority. Immediately to the east of the borough lies the County town of Maidstone. Sevenoaks lies some 10km to the west and Tunbridge Wells is located to the south, close to Tonbridge.

3.3 The borough is mainly rural in character, set within a context of a variety of beautiful landscapes and townscapes. The attractiveness of these areas includes a rich historic heritage, a working countryside that includes small villages and hamlets supported by agriculture, horticulture and forestry. The countryside includes some of the very best productive agricultural land in the country and other notable features such as the upper reaches of the River Medway, and areas with rich and diverse wildlife habitats.

3.4 The borough stretches to the north to include areas of Walderslade and the Kent Downs National Landscape, to Tonbridge in the south which also includes areas of the High Weald National Landscape. The borough also extends from the historic village of Ightham in the west, to settlements in the Medway Valley in the east, including Aylesford.



Figure 3.1: Tonbridge and Malling and adjacent neighbouring local authorities





Main settlements

3.5 Tonbridge is the borough's principal town, offering a wide range of services and facilities. Other large settlements and urban areas include West Malling, Borough Green, Hadlow, Hildenborough, settlements in the Medway Gap, Snodland, part of Walderslade, and East Peckham. Kings Hill is a recent and comprehensively master planned mixed-use community on the former West Malling Airfield. Kings Hill includes commercial floorspace and dwellings together with shops, schools and other community and recreation facilities.

Transport

3.6 Overall, the borough benefits from proximity to London and the Kent coast. There are four railway lines that pass through the borough: London to Ashford via Maidstone East, London to Dover and Ramsgate via Tonbridge and the Medway Valley Line, with rail services to Hastings and Redhill also available from Tonbridge. Within the borough there are various strategic and prominent local roads, including the A20, M20, A21, A227, A228, M2, A25, A26, A229 and M26 roads. These roads connect the borough to other boroughs, including the M25 motorway and the channel ports.

Recent development

3.7 The longstanding designation of the west of the borough as Metropolitan Green Belt has resulted in much development coming forward outside of the Green Belt. This has resulted in a focus of development to the east of the borough, where many new housing estates have coalesced, particularly along the A20 London Road and through to Maidstone.

The River Medway

3.8 The River Medway and its tributaries pass through the borough and an extensive area of the borough lies within flood zones. The improved [Leigh Barrier and Hildenborough embankment scheme](#) to the west of Tonbridge should be complete by winter 2025/26; these measures help to mitigate flood risk downstream for communities including Hildenborough and Tonbridge.

Geology and landscape

3.9 The geography and landscape of the borough is strongly influenced by the underlying geology with alternating bands of hard and soft rock leading to a strong east-west grain to the landscape. This geological sequence is important in determining the character of the landscape and the historic nature of land use, with predominantly agriculture on the low-lying areas and woodland on the higher ground. The underlying geology has resulted in extensive areas of quarrying in the borough, some still active, whilst others, where mineral working has been restored, providing space for new development of housing and recreation.

Popular and attractive place to live

3.10 Tonbridge and Malling has been a popular place to live for many decades, particularly as accessibility and connectivity has improved. More recently, improved internet speeds and remote working have also contributed to the borough being an attractive place to live. It has increased local spending and demand for local services and has also raised expectations about lifestyle and living spaces.

3.11 The increasing attractiveness of the borough as a place to relocate and live has led to an increase in house prices making it more difficult for people to be able to buy or indeed rent their own home. This is a key challenge that this Local Plan will need to address. Traditional and modern businesses thrive where established and new communities have flourished but the pressures on infrastructure and the diverse natural environment are demanding.





Population

Largely rural borough (557 usual residents per km2, compared to England national average of **438** residents per km2) (data from 2022)

Population – **132,201**
(data from 2021)

Elderly population – **25,306**
people aged 65 or older –
19.1% of the population (data from 2021)



Health

Disability – **15.3%** of people identify as disabled under the Equality Act (**5.9%** are ‘limited a lot’, **9.4%** are ‘limited a little’) (data from 2021)

Access to GPs - **52%** of people have access within a **15-minute walk** / by public transport (DfT data 2019)



Economy

In 2021, **85.4%** of people aged 16-64 are economically active, with **81.7%** in employment, higher than national and regional average.

In 2021, **32.5%** of the borough’s residents aged 16 or over had a Level 4 qualification or above.

In 2021, **15.5%** of the population aged 16 or over had no qualifications.

(Please note that an illustration will be provided for the consultation report version)

The following sectors have a proportionately higher number of workers in comparison to Kent and England.

- Administrative and support service activities **10.7%**, professional, financial and insurance activities **3.6%**,

- Transportation and storage **8.4%**, and

- Repair or motor vehicles and motorcycles **17.6%** (BRES 2023),

Figure 3.2: Key Facts of the borough



Town centres

Knowledge economy jobs in the borough occupy **16.8%** of the workforce in comparison to the Kent average of **13.8%** (BRES 2023).

In 2023 the GVA per head in the borough was **£39,983**, this compares to **£29,379** for the rest of Kent and **£36.632** for the rest of England.

GVA per hour worked - **£45.80** compared to UK average of **£38.10** – data from 2023

The average shop unit vacancy rate in the borough's main centres is **9.6%**

The borough's centres have a relatively low provision of pubs and bars **2.8%** vs **5.8%** for the UK

The borough's centres have a high provision of non-retail services **23.8%** vs **16.1%** for the UK



Housing

There are **53,573** households in the borough

As of March 2023, there are around **8,613** social housing dwellings in the borough

In **2024**, average house prices are over **11.2** times average earnings, this is higher than the national and regional average

Housing need – In **2024**, there were **1,694** households on the housing register



Environment

National Landscape covers **26.84%** of the borough

Green Belt covers **71.1%** of the borough

Ancient woodland – **11%** of the borough (2,621 Ha)

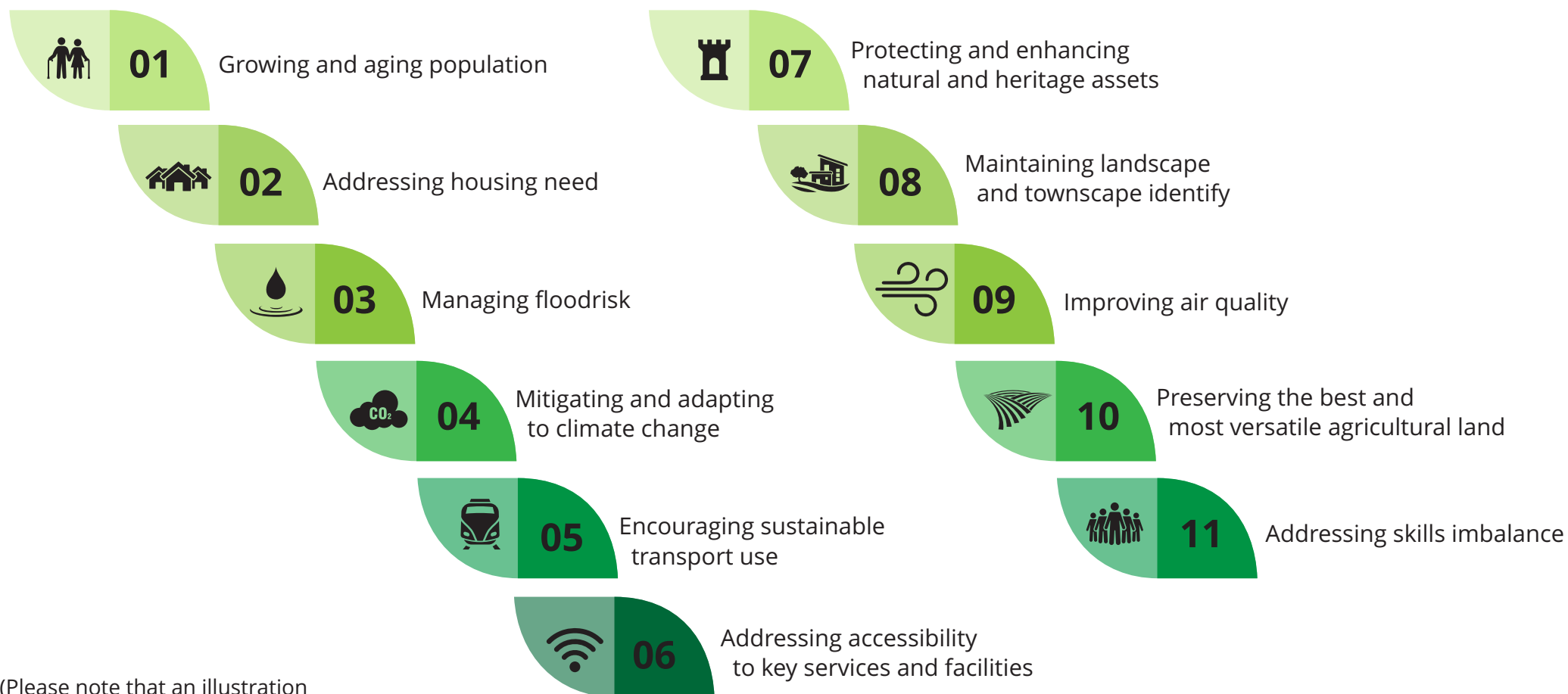
International and national designated sites for biodiversity cover 4.86% of the borough

Conservation Areas – **60**

Listed buildings – **1318**

Scheduled Monuments – **25**

Figure 3.3: Key challenges that we need to address



(Please note that an illustration will be provided for the consultation report version)