

Housing Delivery in Wealden – a 360° perspective

Notes of the event hosted by Wealden Local Strategic Partnership
on 23rd May 2008 at Deans Place, Alfriston, East Sussex

1. Morning session - Exploring the issues

1.1 Summary of the issues identified

Affordable housing

- The lack of confidence in affordable housing suggests a greater focus is needed on awareness-raising.
- Need for better communication between stakeholders on the pepper-potting issue.
- Lack of engagement of developers with RSLs early enough

Pre-application

- Officer availability/resources – Wednesdays only rule
- Time taken to get pre-app meeting
- Need for constructive feedback, not just negative

Application process

- Timescale – delay and difficulty of contacting officers – lack of resources
- 13-week rule/planning targets especially for complex applications/ s106 negotiations – diversionary tactics.

Planning decisions

- A more flexible approach to planning recommendations/decisions would be welcome, rather than one focused on materials, landscaping, ecology. Again better dialogue between stakeholders would be beneficial.
- Decisions at committee that go against officer recommendations lead to appeals and delays. Not the only way lack of consistency is an issue, special interest officer - case officer recommendations can conflict. Advice from one planner can be different from another's.
- Greater understanding of the key issues for developers is needed - particularly by officers and Elected Members.
- Constructive criticism needed. Positive engagement to direct design.
- Uncertainty of how decision will go is negative
- Difference between outline PP and reserved matters
 - risk of Planning Committee getting caught up in detail

Conditions

- Number and complexity of conditions
- Conditions that cause delay
- Conflicting conditions

- Discharge of conditions - lack of feedback

Special interest officers

- Overemphasis on their input, which was seen as overzealous
- Lack of contact – causing delays
- Case officer should lead
- Use of advice as an excuse for rejecting.

Planning policy

- While some felt there was a policy 'vacuum' locally, the Council maintained that the non statutory plan is the only instrument governing planning policy locally at present, and it had been held to be valid.
- Lack of consistent policy from central government
- Potential slippage of LDF

Design

- Shouldn't miss opportunities to use modern design and materials etc. and though this would not necessarily help delivery, consider
 - Sustainability
 - Locally sourcing

Infrastructure

- Fundamental issues around Uckfield, Hailsham and Polegate. Need sign up from providers, notably Highways Agency
- Drainage problems
- Negotiating with utility companies/Highways Agency – delays ... delays

The Economy

- Credit crunch is a serious issue
- Price of sites
- Effect of land values on RSLs

Culture of resistance

- Negative views of development and Nimbyism - particularly around affordable housing - found in local community, Members and officers
- Suggestion to consider Lewes example of
 - Members' tours (Lewes?)
 - Design award / house-builder of the year
- Effect of local members & parishes
 - Engagement as a possible solution
- Parochialism vs broader view

Developer-centred issues

- Time lag between permission granted and executing conditions + negotiating with statutory organisations

- Trading of sites between developers

Other issues

- Finding sites
- Nature of the District
- Reputation of council as being generally difficult
- Difficulty of being a 'district' planning authority
 - Key factors controlled by others e.g. Parish, county, Highways Authority etc.
 - Benefits of unitary approach
- Lack of community engagement
- Lack of co-ordination
- Lack of delivery - no joined up working (statutory agencies)

1.2 What works well?

- Commitment to do something, e.g. today's event
- Housing Officers are proactive
- Emails / phone calls are all answered, if lacking in content
- Planning surgeries
- Good relationship between RSLs and WDC Housing Service
- Conservation and design teams protecting the AONBs (but overzealous)
- Information - housing needs survey
- Proactive agents' forums
- Good website

1.3 What are the bottlenecks?

- Committees
- Specialists - requirements
- Statutory agencies
- Policy vacuum
- Too many conditions
- Clear housing policy
 - On site
 - Off site provision
- Need to consider new design
- Allocation of sites - planning policy process
- Beginning - level of information to be provided
- Complexity of the application process
- Negotiation with infrastructure providers

- Discharge of conditions
- Labour supply in the future
 - Olympics
 - A8 workers

2. Afternoon session - Seeking solutions

Officer group

- Reliance on specialist advice especially for Development Control – will review, including working 'alongside' case officer
- Specialist advisers have a high profile – is WDC culture – will/are reviewing
- Sometimes officers 'used' as an excuse to refuse
- Lack of major development in last 15 years to look at – need a good example to demonstrate what a modern development looks like
- Development team approach would help
- Protocol for pre-application stage – willing to try alternatives
- Policy vacuum - don't agree - a range of policies in place
- Status of non-stat plan - used as an excuse, but it is the current mechanism for planning/development control in the district
- under-resourcing in planning teams - critical - needs to be addressed
- need joined up discussion with Highways Agency & County Highways Authority - real cause of failure in the past.
- open up communications
- manage expectations
- Member role is difficult balancing act between community views and Council policy
- Additional training for members and new members and chairs of committees - complex nature of applications – can't expect professional level of knowledge.

In short term:

- Communicate good news about affordable housing
- Members of District/Parish communities e.g. RSLs + Developers
 - Annual Parish Planning Conference "Spot the Affordable Housing" - not just housing related - link affordable housing in to other solutions more effectively
- Publish cost to taxpayers of Wealden of unsuccessful appeals - hidden cost at present

In medium term:

- Real value if pre-app more formalised - opportunity for different members to hear what said, but not necessarily consistent and later views need to count in process
- Interaction between members and officers - culture change - members to have confidence in officers. Not taking officer advice should be the exception not rule.

Developer group

- Dedicated major project officer
 - Pre-app advice 2 week time frame
 - Responsiveness to emails/calls
- Issues with faulty IT - lack of coherent approach - 'SLA' for pre-app advice - officer to agree together in advance
- No long term policies
- Infrastructure - county; A27 - highways agency
- Community/Councillor resistance
 - Education
 - Culture
 - Simplifying committees
 - show successful schemes outside Wealden
- Complexity causes delays - so SIMPLIFY
- 10 hard copies of plans is expensive - reduce
- Officers to be 'stronger' in approach with Members (not Wealden exclusive)
- Inconsistency in advice
 - show how decisions are arrived at
 - resolve conflict before committee stage
- Conditions
 - Should be decided by professional planning officers, considering e.g. need to align with s106 agreement

Member group

- Take a project team approach for each major site - radical change
 - Developer
 - Member
 - Planner
 - RSL
 - Infrastructure provider
- Pre-application meetings
 - Objectives of site
 - Flag publications
- Common purpose
- Iron out inconsistencies, delays, improve understanding
- Downside: pre-app fees -
 - but saves time and money later on
 - opportunity for council to provide better support
- Some planning policies are subjective - genuine lack of agreement sometimes - down to interpretation
- Member involvement should ease conditions problem

Short term

- Need government intervention to support mortgage applications from ordinary people
- 'players' intervene - e.g. taking to government

- over-reaction to sub-prime issue, an entirely new experience. Question is how long it will last.
- Mustn't confuse long term with short term issues.
- Must move on with cultural change

House builder group & others

- Small sites
 - Easier to deliver
 - Provision of affordable housing
 - On site
 - Or off site contributions
- New Design
- Higher density – more
 - flats and tenancies
 - Semis
 - Town houses
- Control over the type of tenants going into affordable housing
- 50% flats - 50% detached, now
- sustainability
- land prices
- should be bedroom target not per unit

Feedback on solutions

- Development Team approach welcomed
- HMA - promising
- Solution - closer working/more consents

3. Results of the 'top three bottlenecks' analysis

The tables on the following two pages show the bottlenecks delegates identified as being the three most important issues affecting housing delivery in Wealden.

The basic analysis we were able to do on the day, took no account of the balance of participants and showed pre-application issues and the policy 'vacuum' amongst the top bottlenecks. However, we have since been able to add in a weighting which balances out the views from different professional groups. The following table therefore gives the balanced view, with external factors (eg as land availability, economic uncertainty and infrastructure issues), and a culture of resistance to development (amongst communities, Members and Officers) coming top of the bottleneck list. Communication and relationships between the different parties also feature more strongly. The exercise helped to focus discussions during the afternoon, but there is a commitment to find ways of addressing all the issues raised.

Overall issue	Total	Sub-issue 1	Sub-issue 2	Sub-issue 3	Sub-issue 4	Sub-issue 5
External factors	12.8	Land availability 2.2	Economic uncertainty 2.5	Infrastructure - lack/providers not engaging 8.1		
Culture of resistance	12.0	Community 3.7	Community + Members 2.0	Members + Officers 1.2	Members / Devt Committees 3.3	Community + Members + Officers 1.8
Planning policy	10.6	Local/regional plan 'vacuum' 5.4	Guidance on 'approvable' contemporary design 1.2	Other points - govt policy changes; inflexible; affordable threshold; matching RSL & developer 4.1		
General points about the whole planning system – complexity, uncertainty/ confidence, no. of agencies	9.1					
Conditions, S106 and specialists	8.5	All - complex & overzealous 0.6	Conditions. S106 - number, stringency, lack of guidance on discharge 4.5	3rd party/internal consultants 3.4		
Consistency	8.1	At committee 3.8	Officer recommendations 3.0	Planning process generally 1.2		
Relationships/communication between stakeholders	6.9					
Pre-application issues – no positivity, hard to get a discussion	5.8					
Time delays/resourcing	5.5	Lack of LA resources 3.0	Pre-application delays 2.4			

Other issues	reluctance of planning officers to take a risk with innovative proposals	No incentive/sanctions to deliver outcomes	poor image of social housing among public and members	Developers [other two bottle-necks were planners & Members, but detail meant they fitted above]	Lack of recent large scale exemplar sites showing development's importance to sustainable communities
AONB etc. restrictions	Housing Policy	Members are aware of targets the LA's need to believe, result = failing authority	lack of/patchy community engagement re Affordable Housing office and way forward	Hope value re sales	delay in discharging conditions

4. Feedback and next steps

Responses to the feedback forms show that people strongly agreed that the event was good overall. The introductory presentations had the most room for improvement. However, people strongly agreed that the morning table discussions were useful and interesting, and even more strongly felt that the discussions were frank and open, the venue was good and they were pleased to have talked with others who attended.

Participants suggested they would like to meet again in a year's time to see how things have changed. The Chair of the Local Strategic Partnership was pleased to agree to this request, and the Wealden Housing Partnership will assist the LSP during the year by encouraging partners to make changes which will improve housing delivery in the District.