

Report of Wealden Local Strategic Partnership event: Homes in Wealden - the long term perspective 27 May 2009: Deans Place, Alfriston

1. Background

The event had been arranged, with the help of funding from *Progress through Partnership*, as a follow up to the LSP event held in May 2008 on housing delivery. That event had brought together the different players in the housing arena to help them understand each other's interests, concerns, constraints and perceptions - and ultimately to improve housing delivery in Wealden. All who came to that event agreed that a future meeting should be held to review progress and work further to extend cooperation. This event had been organised to review the discussions and issues raised 12 months on and also to consider the longer term in light of the current recession, the recent adoption of the South East Plan and the emerging Local Development Framework Core Strategy.

A list of those attending and the programme for the day are set out at Annex A.

2. Summary

Discussions opened with presentations setting out some key issues from the previous meeting; achievements and progress on those issues; changes in the housing market over the last 12 months; the current state of the market; and an outline of the current position on the Local Development Framework. This was followed by table discussions and a plenary on what progress had been made over the last year, particularly in relation to the working relationships between those present. The remainder of the meeting focused on the likely housing distribution options that would be included in consultation on the LDF Core Strategy, due later this summer. There were presentations on the options under consideration, table discussions and a plenary. The day ended with a presentation from *openreach* on the provision of broadband. The points raised from each session are set out below.

3. Points raised in table discussions and plenary

The first round of table discussions and plenary focused on the changes seen in response to the points made at the event in May 2008. This largely related to the planning process and relations with Wealden District Council. Key issues mentioned were as follow:

- It is now easier to get pre-application meetings and these reflect a more flexible approach being adopted by the Council.
- But still not clear that high level commitment to change is filtering throughout the organisation and manifesting at case officer level.
- Staff turnover can have a dramatic impact on process - change of officer can lead to inconsistent approach/contradictory views. There were signs that the 'development team' approach was helping to tackle this.
- Wealden remains one of the more difficult LA's to deal with.

- Internal Council 'consultees' on planning applications often seem to adopt a more beligerent, hardline approach than planning officers. This can stifle schemes. (Case officers do, however, consider the range of views received and should not give undue weight to internal objections.)
- There are indications that Councillors are taking a more holistic approach to development, moving away from the perceived views criticised in May 2008.
- WDC now seems more proactive and beginning to change its culture.
- Rural housing protocol worked well and need to build on this.
- Still need clearer strategic guidance and to further simplify and clarify WDC policies.
- Need to consider extent to which e.g. environmental impact assessments can be delayed to lessen burden/cost to developers. (Pre-application meetings are key to addressing such issues)
- It remains too easy for Councils to take a precautionary approach and always require surveys - common sense/flexibility would more fruitful/helpful - but this is a national problem, not just peculiar to WDC.
- Improved relationships (e.g. with RSLs) help in delivery of affordable housing - but need more flexibility to continue to improve and maximise affordable housing.
- Crucial role of LA in enabling affordable housing/mix of tenure.
- Infrastructure provision - education/transport - remains problematic, particularly difficult to provide infrastructure to small rural schemes.
- Current Section 106 system not fit for purpose - doesn't really work in present climate, especially with regard to the role of infrastructure providers.

Discussion on Core Strategy housing distribution options

The second round of discussion considered the Local Development Framework housing distribution options that will be put out to public consultation later this summer. These will help form the basis of the LDF Core Strategy. Six options were presented and table discussions and the plenary then addressed the issues each option raised. The key points made were:

Option One - (proportionate growth, based on existing size and therefore a dispersed settlement pattern, does not reflect South East Plan split)

- Need to acknowledge that infrastructure can grow.
- Needs to take account of environmental issues - conservation/landscape
- Village development unsustainable with regard to transport.
- Raises questions about transport and infrastructure.
- May make villages more sustainable.
- May be more preferred from small business perspective.
- More socially sustainable.
- Would be developers preference.
- Does not reflect South East Plan.

Option two - (growth focused at Uckfield and Hailsham, based on South East Plan split (7,000 houses in south:4,000 in north))

- Less of an impact in rural areas than other options.
- Hailsham given new role as focus of district but lack of rail links from Hailsham to Polegate.

- Can market support scale of development in Hailsham.
- More sustainable than option one.

Option three - (growth focused at Uckfield and Polegate, not based on South East Plan split)

- Crowborough has infrastructure to cope.
- Option gives high levels of development to areas where infrastructure is poor.
- Polegate has potential and needs regeneration.
- More sustainable than Option 1.
- Perhaps focussing some development around Polegate South will pressure delivery of road network.
- Fits bill more.

Option four - (limits development in flood risk areas and AONB, reflects affordable housing needs and accessibility issues, based on South East Plan split)

- Can the housing market in Hailsham cope with such large scale development.
- Options needs major improvements to transport links
- Protects rural areas
- Flood risk is materially different from building in AONB - should not group such issues together.

Option five - (Based on settlement classification, 30% of housing allocated to rural Parishes based on hierarchy, remainder to five towns based on affordable housing needs, not based on South East Plan)

- Logical approach - development in areas near rail links.
- Within AONB.
- Layer of general approach after SHLAA analysis - 30% rural distribution may change.
- More sustainable.
- Focuses on larger/better connected villages as hub.
- Similar to option one.
- Quite good spread.

Option six - (Lewes/Uckfield railway line catchment, not based on South East Plan split)

- Risky.
- Opens up access to jobs - Lewes/Brighton.
- Berwick would be better option than Isfield.
- Doesn't meet South East Plan.
- Policy based on 'possible' reopening of rail link (already twice rejected by gov't).
- Good way of stopping development in Wealden.
- But Isfield is near Uckfield rail link and A roads.

Of all the options considered there seemed to be a general consensus to favour option five, closely followed by option one, with the possibility of combining elements of both also proposed.

General issues highlighted by the tables were:

- AONBs should not be automatically excluded - design can be sympathetic.
- Possible tension between objectives of South East Plan and number of houses it proposes - how to balance this?
- Is it realistic to develop employment opportunities in rural areas.
- But no large scale employers and need to move away from concentrations of population dependent upon a few employers.
- Hailsham has limited scope as a main housing market - people move there because it's cheap - poor infrastructure links.
- How much development can the south of Wealden accommodate.
- More housing of itself does not create employment - need additional strategies.
- Need sustainability appraisal for each rural settlement - but not sure whether this will suffice.
- Whether number of houses required to maintain/improve services will be far higher than villages can handle whilst maintaining their character.
- How to help people get to/access services rather than bring services to people (link viable villages together).
- Need to ensure development is in keeping with rural character - key to integration into community.
- Need to/how to ensure 'connectivity' fitting into existing layout street plans village structure and with good pedestrian links - avoid bubbles/offshoots/enclaves.

Particular issues raised in the plenary were:

- Whether the approach will change after SHLAA options are firmed up.
- Some development may *have* to be within AONB.
- Whether the market in Hailsham - and the south of the district in general - can sustain levels of development proposed.
- Option 6 too risky - delivery of rail link is outside LA's control. And if taking that approach why not Berwick as a better option for 'new' settlement.
- Amalgamate options 1+5.
- Option 1 (+5) would increase chance of broadband provision.
- Increased focus on e.g. provision of 'express stores' reduces crude numbers necessary for viability of villages.
- Whether sufficient employment opportunities for implied increase in population - and again especially with regard to the south of the district.
- Need to consider links to plans of neighbouring authorities.
- AONB not automatic constraint.
- Development needs to be carefully integrated into existing settlements.
- Need to 'conform' to South East Plan - extent to which this limits room for manoeuvre.
- Whether Hailsham is better placed than Polegate to accept development.

4. Provision of Broadband

The day ended with a general discussion on the future provision of broadband. Casey Balkham from openreach gave a presentation setting out the broad issues - provision of infrastructure, ownership of equipment, the number of providers and so on. Left solely to market forces most investment would focus on urban areas with

affluent populations able to afford the cost of subscribing to 'next generation' networks. There is little demand from service providers to extend provision into rural areas. However, Casey pointed out that the impending Carter report on 'Digital Britain', due out later this summer, will have a major impact on patterns and levels of future investment.

5. Next steps

Those attending found the meeting useful and agreed it would be worth holding a further event in 2010. Ian Chisnall, Chair of the LSP, also asked that people give careful thought to the impending consultation on the LDF Core Strategy and provide responses to Wealden District Council. He suggested that there may be scope for detailed discussions with particular organisations who wished to take a more active part in the consultation.

Annex A Participants

Name	Organisation	
Tezel Bahcheli	Parker Dann	
Casey Balkham	Open Reach	
Warwick Barnes	Rydon Homes	
Brian Bungay	Open Reach	
Ian Chisnall	Churches in Sussex	
Chris Hough	Sigma Planning Services	
Mike Jones	Rydon Homes	
C.I. Julia Pope	Sussex Police	
John Punyer	Open Reach	
Nicholle Phillips	Crest Nicholson	
Matthew Richardson	MJ Gleeson	
Kevin Saunders	Ellis Building Contractors	
Andrew Shaw	High Weald	
Sue Shoesmith	South Downs CVS	
Ken Stevens	FSB	
Julian Thompson	Joliffe and Flint	
James Turner	Mid Sussex Homes	
Tom Warder	Action in Rural Sussex	
Ivan Western	Homes and Communities Agency	
Chris Wojtulewski	Parker Dann	
Cllr Dick Angel	WDC	
Cllr Roy Galley	WDC	
Cllr David White	WDC	
Cllr Chantal Wilson	WDC	
Charles Lant	WDC	
Nigel Eveleigh	WDC	
Mike Fleming	WDC	
Hayley Frankham	WDC	
Alex White	WDC	
Kelvin Williams	WDC	
Amanda Hodge	WDC	

Annex A

Homes in Wealden - the long term perspective

9:30am - 3:30pm Wednesday 27 May 2009: Dean's Place, Alfriston

9:30	Refreshments on arrival	
10:00	Welcome & introductions	Ian Chisnall
	<p>Setting the scene</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reminder of key issues raised at the '360 degree' discussions in May 2008 ▪ What have we achieved since then? ▪ Where we are now? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Key changes in the housing market over last 12 months ○ The Wealden housing market today - what evidence do we have? Facts, figures and targets ○ Spatial Planning - progress with the Local Development Framework process ▪ Qs & As 	<p>Alex White Mike Fleming</p> <p>(TBC)</p> <p>Hayley Frankham Nigel Eveleigh Ian Chisnall</p>
10:30	<p>Room for improvement?</p> <p>Table discussions: Identifying the issues for the next 12 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What's been working better? ▪ How could other approaches help? 	All
11:00	Plenary and Qs & As	Ian Chisnall & Alex White
11:15	Refreshment break	
11:30	<p>Wealden to 2026 - towards the LDF Core Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Introduction to the evidence base: understanding the constraints and opportunities 	Nigel Eveleigh
11:40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Starting to look at housing distribution options <p>Format: presentation of option (5 mins) followed by facilitated table discussions (10 mins) - for three options</p>	Facilitated table discussions
12:30	Buffet lunch	
13:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More on housing distribution options <p>Format: presentation of option (5 mins) followed by facilitated table discussions (10 mins) - for three further options</p>	Facilitated table discussions
14:15	<p>Reporting back in plenary</p> <p>Qs & As</p>	Ian Chisnall, Alex White
14:30	<p>Future infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Presentation on Next generation Broadband by OpenReach ▪ Qs & As 	Casey Balkham
15:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Summing up & next steps 	Ian Chisnall