

EAST GRINSTEAD TOWN COUNCIL

Notes of a meeting convened by East Grinstead Town Council held in the Meridian Hall, East Grinstead, on Tuesday 1st November 2005 at 8p.m to discuss the East Grinstead Area Action Plan.

Present: Councillor James Baldwin (in the Chair), C J Rolley, (Town Clerk)
Approximately 180 local Councillors and local residents including from the immediately surrounding areas.

Councillor Baldwin opened the meeting by welcoming all present and thanking them for their attendance. He emphasised that this is an important time for the Town with its future being determined.

Councillor Baldwin said that planning should be a democratic process. The Town Council wants the people of the Town to be at the heart of the process, wants them to understand what is being proposed and why and wants them to have their say on the options to be considered for what is their future. He went on to say that the Town Council welcomes the period of reflection now possible following rejection of the draft Area Action Plan by Mid Sussex District Council members. He understood that it was likely to be March at the earliest for any public consultation now to take place and only then provided Mid Sussex District Council approves the next version.

Councillor Baldwin said that the Town has a priceless opportunity to engage constructively in the creation of the draft Plan that will provide a meaningful set of choices and that this meeting is intended to be an important part of that process.

As he said when calling the meeting the Town Council wants the new draft Area Action Plan to reflect the Town's concerns. He emphasised that this meeting is the chance for those present to air those concerns and help Town Councillors in their own consideration of what the new draft Area Action Plan should look like.

He went on to say that this meeting is about what options local people want to be put for consultation in the draft Area Action Plan, not about deciding what options people favour as that comes later. He also emphasised that the meeting is not about discussing the route of the relief road or whether there should be one at all. It is about the options people want to have consultation upon so that there can be a proper and thorough assessment of the effectiveness of various relief road scenarios. Similarly the meeting is not about whether no houses, 2500 houses or 5000 are right or appropriate for the Town, but about the options that the public want consultation upon to ensure a proper debate on the housing levels that are right for East Grinstead. He stressed that these are issues that will most certainly be discussed vigorously by the Town Council, and by the Community at large, when the draft Area Action Plan is finally published for consultation.

Councillor Baldwin went on to explain a number of ground rules for the meeting in order to get real value from it. He stressed that value would come from real clarity about its purpose: shaping the options for the draft Area Action Plan. Accordingly he would strive to keep the meeting on track and asked for help in doing so. He asked for one contribution only from each individual so as to be fair and democratic. He also asked that those contributions should be brief and succinct, that there should be respect for everyone's point of view as everybody present has the town's interests at heart.

The first contribution from the floor came from Tony Lane, of the Post Referendum Campaign. Mr Lane began by reading extracts from a note that he, on behalf of the Post Referendum Campaign, and the Town Clerk had received from Mr John Jory, Chief Executive Officer of Mid Sussex District Council in relation to this meeting. The full content of that note was as follows:

“Earlier today, I received a copy of a number of questions being posed by the Post Referendum Campaign about the proposed strategic housing development at East Grinstead.

First, it is probably worth me making clear the Council’s decision on 19 October 2005. The Council decided to postpone publishing draft proposals for the strategic housing development and relief road options. Instead, it has asked Officers to correct inaccuracies in the documentation presented to them and consult with stakeholders and District Councillors taking into account comments made that night.

In view of that decision, Officers have been reviewing how to proceed with the project. At this stage, the current thinking is that a revised report would be presented to the Full Council sometime in the New Year. That would probably be in January or February. The District Council now has a further opportunity to reflect on how to take this project forward. Part of that opportunity involves listening to what people are telling us. Tonight’s meeting at the Town Council and the questions posed by the Post Referendum Campaign are part of that listening process.

When the Full Council reconsiders the matter sometime in the New Year, and should it decide to proceed, it will be approving a document for consultation. It will provide an opportunity for all the people of East Grinstead to express their views about the merits of the draft action plan proposal and the options contained in it. Those responses will also be taken into account before a final document is promoted.”

Mr Lane went on to welcome the holding of this public meeting. He commented that it was in many respects overdue as the community had been previously told that it was too late to have views known with regard to the proposed Strategic Development notwithstanding the referendum result overwhelmingly opposing house building development of the scale proposed and the petition containing some 10,000 signatures. He did however very much welcome the decision of Mid Sussex District Councillors on 19th October to reject the draft East Grinstead Area Action Plan and he felt that that decision had cleared the way for the public now to have their say in a much greater way than previously on future development proposals. In this he hoped there would be a very close partnership relationship between local Councillors on all authorities and the public. He indicated that he would be moving a resolution at the end of the meeting and asked the meeting to applaud the District Councillors for their actions and clear statement of leadership at Mid Sussex District Council. The meeting complied.

Leonard Oatey said that when he heard initially about the number of houses proposed he had been staggered. He felt that those who had required this element of development in East Grinstead had been disrespectful to local people who had made previously clear their opposition to Strategic Development of the scale proposed. He felt that 19th October was an important date and was the start of the fight back. He too thanked the local District Councillors and said he now has more faith in democracy and in the Councillors. He went on to say that any future proposal must have regard to societal changes particularly in relation to technology and how people will live and work in the future. There must be a thorough

appraisal and detailed independent studies in relation to water supplies, roads and transport and other elements of necessary infrastructure need.

Mr Wade, a resident of 30 years, said that he had been shocked to note from the plans associated with the initial draft Area Action Plan consultation document that his house was due for demolition. His request was to urge that what ever happens in East Grinstead in respect of future development it has a positive effect for East Grinstead overall and not a negative one. The document rejected on 19th October was clearly a “pigs ear”. He felt any road should go south of Forest Row. He also thought that too much housing was being requested of East Grinstead.

Town and District Councillor David Heasman said he and his fellow District Councillors welcomed the positive comments in respect of their role and actions on 19th October. He wished to make it clear that local Councillors had received support from other parts of the district also, which he felt was most encouraging.

John Walter Smith said that he found it difficult to comment in detail, as there is no basic framework option for consideration. He stressed that infrastructure is not just a relief road. There is already an infrastructure deficit and the 41% potential increase in population would need significant investment. He felt the initial Area Action Plan consultation option proposals had been premature and ill founded.

Edward Lightburn said he was concerned to hear that Mid Sussex District Council could be considering revised proposals in January and February 2006. He felt this was premature and the exercise should not be rushed.

Councillor Graham Knight, a Mid Sussex District Council member from Burgess Hill confirmed that the initial papers were flawed. He emphasised that there is no plan on the table at present and that all the options would be in a consultation paper including new options, some of which he earnestly hoped would come from the local community.

Councillor Baldwin interjected at this point to assure the meeting that if any future plan for consultation is put up which is felt to be inadequate in the options proposed then that too would be proposed for rejection by local Mid Sussex District Councillors.

Francis Torrilla observed that there is a need for a road finishing south of Forest Row to be included for public consultation in any future options paper. In this regard District and Town Councillor Starmer, emphasised that that point had been emphasised to West Sussex County Council Officers at a meeting the Town Councillors had held with them on 31st October.

Emma Tindley observed that nobody is listening to the people of East Grinstead. They had clearly said that nobody wants it and there should be a determination to stand up against the developers.

A gentleman, who didn't name himself, said there should be a vote on “No houses, no road.”

Bill Glenister said that Barton Wilmore must extend their range for traffic surveys and that this must include north of Felbridge onto the A22 and south of Forest Row.

Peter Smith who lives on Turners Hill Road, said that the survey of the 3¹/₂ acres that his property sits on showed 400 trees, 42 species of birds present and a large pond well over 100 years old. There needs to be a detailed ecological study. He was aghast that it was proposed

that there would be building on the other side of Turners Hill, which could well impact upon the ecology of the area. He was concerned that Mid Sussex District Council had badly handled this exercise and devolved all responsibility to Barton Willmore. He felt that the public auditor should investigate the way Mid Sussex District Council has handled the whole affair and urged that representations to that effect be made.

Des Smith expressed disappointment and annoyance that the initial options report did not address issues of the impact that the proposals would have on the environment. He also questioned why the need for over 4,000 houses in total. He felt that some of these should be built east of Crawley. He said this must be fundamentally reviewed and the environmental impact on the various options must be produced in any future consultation paper. He also advised the meeting that the South East Plan says that any planning must take account of the environment, and infrastructure needs and preserve areas of outstanding natural beauty. He felt that any road built must go south of Forest Row but must be carefully planned to take account of this valuable environment.

Mary Tindley said that the big problem in all of this is Barton Willmore who own most of the land or have options on it. She felt that the principal authority should put a compulsory purchase order on their land and bring it back to farming use.

Councillor Stephen Barnett, a Town and District Councillor, who in his capacity as a District Councillor had moved the proposal to reject the AAP Options Report on 19th October, stressed that more alternative roads do need to be considered including ensuring the relief road finishes north of Felbridge and south of Forest Row. He said that he believes that the District and County Councils now understand this thoroughly. He also said that the road must comply with the Structure Plan requirements and achieve significant reductions in traffic congestion set against 2004 levels. He said that issues of infrastructure and environment were in the initial document, but were inadequately dealt with, particularly in relation to water; there is a need for decent water supply whether or not we have any new houses. He also said that it is clear in his view that the builders could not now build all 2500 houses on any strategic location by 2016. He said any proposals put forward have to go out to consultation and will eventually go to public enquiry.

Town Councillor Lee Marmara said this issue needs looking at from a legal standpoint and, if necessary, defeated accordingly. The Secretary of State, Mr Prescott, imposed the number of houses on West Sussex and the challenge to this made by West Sussex County Council was thrown out on judicial appeal. The strategic location west or south west of East Grinstead is within the West Sussex Structure Plan and this is what Mid Sussex District Council is now working to. Fortunately he advised there are safe guards built in which had been negotiated by local county councillors. Unless those are fully met then the plan would inevitably fail.

Mr Saunders of Crawley Down, a former resident of Felbridge, said the by-pass dates back, to his knowledge, to 1964. He blamed the Government Office of the South East for the current situation and said that Regional Government must be scrapped. He thought this sort of issue was inevitable whilst the government continues to pursue its policy of “house cramming” in the southeast.

Andrew Williamson said that the Councillors have done nothing so far for East Grinstead. He asked that nothing be done to jeopardise the will of the people. Councillor Baldwin said he was entitled to his view but that it was East Grinstead District Council members who had rejected the initial consultation Options proposals on 19th October.

Dr Vickers congratulated Mid Sussex District Council Members. He regretted the lack of political leadership at Mid Sussex District Council. He felt it had been unfortunate that Judith Hewitt, the Head of Planning Policy, had been rather left to take the criticism of the draft AAP Options report on 19th October. He commented that Councillors Baldwin and Mrs Collins amongst others had been through this before drawing attention to previous attempts to build significant numbers of houses in the area in 1988 and 1991. He felt that the developers and Mid Sussex District Council had taken a real risk in respect of the impact of the development on the AONB and particularly so in respect of the road which would drive through it. He said that there is legislation to protect an AONB; similar protection exists for a national park. Only roads of national importance can be considered in such areas and as everyone knows this is to be a local relief road. In this regard he gave some further information regarding the Countryside and Rights of Way Act. The second point he made related to housing and housing numbers. He said that the Structure Plan makes provision for each district and allocates the numbers for those districts with the District Councils determining site locations. He said this is the third time we have been through this “tragedy” and he felt it was unfortunate we had to go through it again.

Fiona Torrilla said she has serious concerns about Barton Willmore and their ability to undertake fairly and impartially the various surveys required, including environmental, given that they stand to benefit from the outcome. She asked why Mid Sussex District Council officials are so comfortable with this arrangement.

Sidney Brown said that the process still isn’t much clearer to him. He asked whether it could be laid out clearly so that the public can understand what is going on. He felt it would be helpful for there to be liaison with local newspapers setting out the precise facts of the situation to aid the public in this. He fully accepted that the Town Council and others are on the side of the public and his problems and concerns rest with Mid Sussex District Council and West Sussex County Council. He felt some serious lobbying effort was still needed. He welcomed opportunities to work closely with the Town’s MP.

David Middleton a local resident said he also acted as a trustee for a farmer who owns the east of Crawley site. He said that they had had problems with Mid Sussex District Council over the past three to four years. The Planning Officer previously referred to during the meeting had, Mr Middleton alleged, said at a meeting that Mid Sussex District Council Members would never support developments between Copthorne and Crawley. She had also allegedly suggested that that site would be ideal for a gypsy encampment.

Roger Richards asked why the proposals couldn’t be rejected outright when 10,000 East Grinstead residents had said no at a referendum. He was told this is not legally binding on other authorities.

Ian Pierce of Crawley Down said that the village would be significantly affected. In his view local village councillors need to work closely with their communities also. He said previous significant development proposals for the area had been rejected on grounds that Crawley Down would coalesce with East Grinstead. He also alleged that Barton Wilmore are trying to acquire more land at Crawley Down to build yet more houses to meet the increasing costs of the infrastructure enhancements that are needed.

Serena Tierney, a former Parliamentary Candidate for Mid Sussex, said that it is important for everybody to work closely with elected members. She thought a number of important points had come from the meeting to date and summarised them. Firstly she felt that consultation needs to be effective, information needs to be available and there needs to be

enhanced and accurate traffic survey data. She reiterated that this data must prove that options produce less traffic in East Grinstead town centre after the housing has been built than in 2004 when the plan was produced. Secondly she drew attention to the need to ensure that the road option meets the A22 north of Felbridge and the A22 south of Forest Row. Thirdly she said that the east of Crawley site should be included in any consultation document. Fourthly she said there should be no additional housing without infrastructure and that this must be transparent and must address the existing infrastructure deficiencies. Fifthly she shared Peter Smith's view regarding the need for a public audit. Sixthly she said any agreement must be drawn up by external lawyers not by Mid Sussex District Council in-house lawyers who are unlikely to have the experience necessary to negotiate effectively with those from the private sector who have considerable experience in these matters. Seventhly she felt there should be clearly laid out bilateral obligations to ensure that everything is guaranteed in law.

Edwin Jeffers said that he would commend Mr Soames for everything he has done to support the local community to date. He also said that he would like to move to total public consultation.

Mr Marcus Allen said that there is an "elephant in the room" called John Prescott. In his view no matter what the community thinks and wants he will decide based on what he wants. He said that the Deputy Prime Minister has already made clear his intention to build more houses in the south east and in West Sussex in particular. Mr Allen considered that there is nowhere for the relief road to go that will effectively reduce traffic. He mentioned that Onslow Martell are trying to develop 400 units of accommodation, 400 parking spaces and a large supermarket on the Queens Walk site. There will be more changes facilitated by Thornfield. In addition he mentioned Bluebell Railway, which has some 250,000 visitors annually to their attraction. He didn't think the current proposals were properly thought through and that there is a need for holistic thinking.

Mr Barnaby reminded members that Mid Sussex District Council is the Planning Authority. They have got to provide 6,900 houses but it is up to them decide where they go. They are meant to be planning and solving problems and not devolving to Barton Wilmore. He was concerned that Barton Wilmore are preparing the landscape, traffic and environmental plans and undertaking the master planning. He also felt that Thornfield Properties PLC is calling the shots. He noted that Councillor Mrs Field, Leader of Mid Sussex District Council, is now chairman of SEERA. He hoped she could use her influence to persuade government that we do not need, and cannot take, so many houses. He expressed concern that few of the new jobs created will go to East Grinstead and that most will go to Crawley. As a consequence he felt that East Grinstead would increasingly become a dormitory town for Crawley/Gatwick.

Nick Beal said it is important to see indicative pricing in any future consultation options proposal. It is important to know what the costs of specific elements of the infrastructure package are such as the link near the Dukes Head and the junction improvements at the A264/M23.

Norman Keen said he came to the town in 1959. In his experience Chichester and Haywards Heath do not have a real care for East Grinstead. He said that most investment has been in other parts of the county and district. He noted that some Burgess Hill people were at the Countryside Alliance march saying no more houses. He felt that there has been a disparity between spending afforded to Haywards Heath and Burgess Hill than that invested in East Grinstead. He recognised that there is a need for some new houses but not of the number contemplated.

Lady Irene Blount said that she hadn't been shown the plans before receiving letters from the developers regarding access to her land. She has sold no land to developers nor given them any options for purchase. Her land is clearly affected in a major way by the proposals and yet no one from Mid Sussex District Council had discussed this with her. She said that what is proposed would destroy most valuable countryside and devastate the Tilkhurst Estate. She felt it would have been a common courtesy to discuss this with her as a major landowner.

Tony Lane on behalf of the PRC then moved a draft resolution that was formally proposed by Dr Vickers and seconded by Mr Glenister. This was carried **unanimously**, details as follows:

- 1 All thanks are due to the Town Council for convening this meeting, following the rejection of the draft East Grinstead Area Action Plan by the Mid Sussex District Council on 19 October 2005. The meeting congratulates the town's District Councillors for unanimously rejecting that Plan, thereby securing rejection by the whole Council of a plan that would have: —
 - (a) brought expansion of 40%+ in ten years;
 - (b) denied meaningful traffic relief;
 - (c) caused avoidable environmental damage in the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- 2 The meeting calls upon the town's District Councillors to insist on fundamentally different options, identified through a fundamentally more open and interactive process, under much closer supervision by Councillors themselves. These options must : —
 - (a) be dictated more explicitly by East Grinstead's own needs, character and separate identity as a historic town;
 - (b) provide for a much lower scale of house-building in East Grinstead, for comparison with the option of 40%+ growth;
 - (c) provide significant house building closer to the relevant employment opportunities;
 - (d) deliver wider benefits to the town, including affordable homes, regeneration, employment and infrastructure, while restoring the trust and confidence of the town's people in the planning process.
- 3 The meeting calls on Councillors not to accept strategic house building without effective traffic relief. Options for consultation must reduce traffic in the town as a whole significantly below current levels. They must also : —
 - (a) include tested improvements of existing roads in and around the town;
 - (b) avoid strategic gaps and avoidable intrusion in the AONB;
 - (c) fully test all potential to aggravate "rat runs", for example through Ashurst Wood village;
 - (d) and also include tested options north of Felbridge and south of Forest Row.
- 4 The Town Council are asked to reconvene the meeting at intervals to receive reports on progress towards these objectives.

Following approval of the resolution Town Councillor Belsey said that it was important to note that Mr Soames has been working extremely hard in conjunction with the principal authorities, government departments and other bodies in order to represent effectively local views and opinions. He would have liked to be present at the meeting but was currently hospitalised with pneumonia.

At the end of the meeting Councillor Baldwin summed up and thanked everybody for their attendance. He said it was clear that the infrastructure elements of the Plan contained within the draft Options report, now rejected, were both flawed and inadequate. It was clear also that there should be an option south of Forest Row and north of Felbridge. The meeting had made clear they would like to see fewer houses and other locations considered. The report needs to be more comprehensible and detailed. It is important also that this addresses issues relating to the ecology of the area, the impact and legality of the issues in respect of the AONB, and that it recognises the detailed requirements for reducing congestion as set out within the Structure Plan.

Councillor Baldwin also said that it is important for Mid Sussex District Council to recognise the “will of the people”. The draft Options Report must also include indicative pricing of the by-pass and make clear the housing numbers proposed and how they have been arrived at. It must be holistic and address other issues in the town including the Thornfield Properties PLC master planning proposals for East Grinstead town centre.

The meeting concluded at 9.31pm.