

## **HOUSES: COUNCIL PROMISES FURTHER CONSULTATION AND BETTER COMMUNICATION**

Since its election two months ago, the new Town Council has been the focus of a passionate debate about the rights and wrongs of the County Council Structure Plan proposal for 2500 houses to be built in the Town. The debate led up to June's referendum on the issue, and the 'no' vote.

It is now time for the new Town Council to outline its position on the immediate way forward. Nearly half its members took no part in the formulation of the current policy on the houses. They now want the opportunity, with the Council as a whole, to listen to the public debate and review and test all aspects of this complex issue as the Council plays a full part in the forthcoming consultation on the draft County Structure Plan changes, which it is understood will include the proposed 2500 houses.

The Town Council has never asked for these houses. All Councillors, like the public, recognise the difficulty in accommodating so many new houses within the existing settlement area. It is for precisely that reason that the existing approved policy only gave an in-principle support, strictly conditional upon major enhancements to the existing infrastructure

The Council has been very disappointed that this key aspect of its policy has been obscured, and distorted, by much of the debate so far. It has also been appalled at the level of personal abuse directed at past and present Members who are trying to do no more, or less, than serve the Town to the best of their abilities. They have no wider agenda. The Council exists purely for the good of the Town and seeks only to deliver policy to serve that good.

Serving that good means delivering solutions to the Town's acknowledged problems, such as traffic congestion and the prohibitive cost of housing for young people. Any proposed housing development must provide a relief road and the road must be effective and sustainable. The Council position is clear and unambiguous: without the

right relief road it will not support the houses. Furthermore, any proposed development must have 30% allocated to affordable housing and there must be legally binding obligations to ensure continued affordability beyond the first occupier. If achieved, this will make a real difference to who can afford to live in the Town.

The Council will react constructively to that message from the referendum that some parts of the Town felt strongly they were not being heard. It recognises it was elected to represent those views as well as the views of those who did not vote on this particular referendum question and those who see the houses of benefit to the Town's economic structure.

The Council wants to improve its communication with the Town and address directly the fears of many that the housing proposal would damage the character of the Town. The Council wants to work with local groups to discuss those fears as part of its consultation process: East Grinstead is a special place and the Town Council is committed to keeping it that way:

The consultation process will lead up to a Special Council meeting during October to finalise the Town Council's responses on the various issues arising from the second deposit draft consultation on the Structure Plan. The Council hopes that everyone will have a full and open opportunity to contribute to a positive and constructive debate on creating a vision for our Town, and what needs to be done to achieve it.

James Baldwin

Leader, East Grinstead Town Council