

THE HOUSES: EIGHT QUESTIONS FROM EAST GRINSTEAD

1. Who chose East Grinstead for 2500 houses?

The Government is concerned about what it sees as a shortage of houses in the South East. It set an overall target of 4 million houses to be built between 2001 and 2016 and allocated 46,500 of these to West Sussex County Council. The County Council allocated 10,500 houses to Mid Sussex, who proposed East Grinstead as a Site for about 2500 houses.

2. Why East Grinstead - and why not Burgess Hill or near to Crawley?

East Grinstead has had no major housing development for over 20 years because it lacks the right infrastructure, particularly as regards roads. Over that period Burgess Hill and Haywards Heath have had significant housing and Crawley some 15,000 houses.

In fact, the Structure Plan acknowledges that 2700 new houses may be built north east of Crawley depending on the outcome of the current consultation into airport requirements and suggests that 2500 should be built west of Crawley adjacent to Ifield neighbourhood.

As was the case in Burgess Hill (with its relief road and Triangle Leisure Centre), a large housing development offers the opportunity of significant investment in infrastructure as a condition for its approval, perhaps £80million in the case of East Grinstead. The County and District Councils believe this investment is worth pursuing as a means of not only dealing with the needs of the new houses but also improving the life of the Town as a whole, for example by funding a relief road. Burgess Hill and Crawley don't have the same pressing need for this investment.

3. Won't the houses ruin our environment by threatening the AONB and strategic gap?

There will need to be a great deal of care taken in the planning of any development to minimise damage to the environment. We can't judge how successful this has been until the final and detailed plans - which we hope to influence - are complete - it will all be part of the final assessment of the proposal. Likewise, it will be important to safeguard the Town's separate identity and a character as a country town. This is something that has been successfully achieved over the last fifty years as the Town's population has increased from 10,942 in 1951 to 26,384 in 2001. The plans must be based on a continuance of this success.

4. Won't these houses just be for people working in Crawley?

There is no doubt that many people will be working in Crawley who buy these houses, but that reflects the current employment pattern of the Town. It will be part of the challenge of the development to ensure that our new residents use the Town and Town Centre in particular, bringing new vitality and spending power to the local economy and local community activities.

It's also vital that these houses are affordable. The Structure Plan states that 30% of them will be affordable, which will allow young people into the housing market: something not possible in the Town currently. This will make the Town a more attractive place to employers, who are then more likely to relocate and take up our empty offices.

5. What can be done to make sure the Town copes with the extra people and cars?

This will be a matter for detailed planning and evaluation. The broad ideas are already in place: a first class public transport system and an effective relief road. There will also need to be a new vision for our Town Centre to reflect the additional use we hope it will enjoy. But these houses will not all arrive at once - perhaps 250 a year over 10 years. This would allow plenty of time for the necessary planning and development to take place.

6. What are the chances of a proper by pass?

The by pass is key to whether we get the houses or not. The road must deliver proper relief, be affordable for the developer and follow a route that enjoys local support. The issue is complicated by the current lack of co-operation from East Sussex and Surrey. These are all major issues which require significant more working before we can judge whether the road really meets the Town's objectives.

7. Who will decide on whether we get the houses or not - and when?

It's a long process, but rightly so because of the importance and complexity of the issue. The County Council has issued a Draft Structure Plan with the houses allocated to East Grinstead. That was endorsed by an independent Inspector earlier this year after hearing evidence at the Examination in Public last December. Following the County Council's deliberations and decisions concerning the Inspector's report in July, a new Draft is being prepared for further consultation in late Summer. The final Plan will be released late this year. This will drive the District's Local Plan. If the houses are still allocated to the Town, the Local Plan will define in some detail the planning constraints - environmental and infrastructure needs - around the development. The District will then assess any firm proposals against those constraints as it grants Planning permission or not. This may happen around 2005 or 2006.

8. What happens to the Town if no houses are built?

The Town will have piecemeal housing growth, rather like now, and perhaps some small-scale estate development. This will preserve the south and western approaches to the Town, but this housing will provide no infrastructure investment. This will mean the Town's congestion will get worse as there is no alternative funding for a relief road. There will be little, if any, affordable housing built: the Town's population profile will continue to age - young people will leave and not be replaced due to the cost of housing. The cost of housing will also impact on the local economy due to shortages in skills and services from a lack of a balanced work force, with knock on effects to the health of the Town's retail sector.

James Baldwin
June 4th 2003