

Briefing note on CPRE Sussex's case to Stage 1 of the public examination hearings into Mid Sussex District Council's draft District Plan 2021 – 2039 (22 – 30 October 2024)

What is CPRE Sussex campaigning for at these hearings?

CPRE Sussex will be arguing for the development of a Low Weald preservation and development strategy that recognises the multiple valuable roles that it performs, so that it does not just become a dumping ground for Mid Sussex's surplus housing.

Until that strategy exists, and development there can be demonstrated to be sustainable, it would be seriously irresponsible to pre-empt, and potentially, forestall it by allocating large scale new development settlements in the rural Low Weald, as the Council's new Local Plan proposes to do.

What's the issue?

Mid Sussex District Council (MSDC), in drawing up their new strategic Local Plan, propose to use the Low Weald, a wonderful rural backwater part of the District as the location for large scale new housing development over the next 20 years. CPRE Sussex is campaigning to stop that from happening.

Why does MSDC want to do that?

The Council is updating its current Local Plan, as it is required to do. The Plan will, amongst other things, set a target for the level of new housing and commercial development required to be built within Mid Sussex between now and 2040, and identify locations where that development should occur; also where it should be limited.

The Council faces two main challenges in this exercise: firstly, the minimum level of new housing imposed on local planning authorities by Central Government. In the case of Mid Sussex and other Sussex councils that figure is considerably higher than the councils themselves believe is needed in order to meet their locally assessed new housing needs. So MSDC is going to be required to set a new housebuilding target that is greater than we need locally.

Secondly, half of Mid Sussex District lies within the High Weald and adjacent to Ashdown Forest. These are nationally (and in the case of Ashdown Forest) internationally designated areas on account of their very special landscape and natural features. As a result, the level of new housing allowed in those parts of the district is, quite properly, limited. But the Government-imposed housing target makes no allowance for that fact. The consequence being that most of the already excessive number of new homes will have to be squeezed into half of the District's land area.

So where does the Council aim to put them?

The draft new Plan proposes three new large housing sites in rural parts of the Low Weald area in the southern half of the District: one for 1,350 homes on the west side of Burgess Hill north of Hurstpierpoint; one at Crabbet Park, west of Copthorne, that would eventually provide 2,000 homes; and a third, also for 2,000 homes on various open country plots around Sayers Common and Albourne. This last proposed allocation is of particular concern to CPRE Sussex. So too is an open planning application on an unallocated site for a 1,450 housing estate on agricultural land that would join Cuckfield up to Ansty.

What's CPRE Sussex's position on these proposals?

CPRE Sussex is opposed to these allocations, and especially the one at Sayers Common which the Council is seeking to sell on the wholly false prospectus that they can create there a “self-sustaining 20 minute neighbourhood”. Properly planned, they can work well in high density, urban environments. But you simply cannot build a self-sustaining community with its own services, facilities and jobs from 2,000 low density housing in the middle of the countryside.

But does the Council have any choice?

Yes it does. The Council has not developed a proper land use spatial strategy for the District; and in particular not for its rural undesignated southern half. The Low Weald is a special, ecologically important, place in its own right. It is under pressure to deliver a whole range of services to us: housing, agriculture and rural employment, carbon capture, wildlife habitat, flood abatement, renewable energy resource, open space for our wellbeing and wilderness etc. These purposes compete with each other. As we cannot grow more land to accommodate them all, CPRE Sussex says that it vital to establish a holistic strategy to address how to prioritise these competing services within the Low Weald. It will be too late if the developers’ bulldozers have been and gone.

No such land use strategy exists at present. It needs to be a priority for the Council to develop one, ideally working with neighbouring councils that share the Low Weald with Mid Sussex.

Until a comprehensive Low Weald strategic plan exists it would be seriously irresponsible to pre-empt, and potentially, forestall it by supporting large scale new development settlements there, least of all ones that, like Sayers Common, will not be sustainable in their own right.

What does CPRE Sussex see as the way forward?

CPRE Sussex argues for focussing the majority of new development in and around the District’s main urban centres in preference to isolated, car dependant, rural settlements. Whilst it may not be universally popular, that means densification of development, and providing many more affordable homes, within the larger towns. With local facilities and services on tap, that is much the most sustainable housing strategy, and far preferable to the Council’s proposed rural Low Weald allocations. The Council has opted to take the easy solution of concreting over (a lot of) green fields rather than exploring what urban densification is achievable.

Take Burgess Hill: Could Burgess Hill support a 20 minute neighbourhood, for example? And why couldn’t the Martlets Centre in Burgess Hill - the largest brownfield site in the District and an area in urgent need of imaginative regeneration - become the centre piece for such a community? We are particularly disappointed that the Council has approved a building there that will provide a block of flats intended only for private rental, with not a single affordable home or any new infrastructure contribution. How is this of benefit to the local community? What is it contributing to focussing new housing, especially affordable housing, within an urban environment?

We need a District Plan from the Council that is much more ambitious and imaginative. It must be a Plan that sets a housing target based on a more appropriate spatial strategy than is currently envisaged and that is deliverable in sustainable locations.

Anything else?

The other main change to the Plan that we will be calling for in due course is an increase in the requirement for affordable and social housing. We have more of an affordability crisis than a housing crisis in this part of the country, and the Plan is not offering enough to tackle that urgent priority.