

Kevin Benton Independent Councillor for Heathfield South Ward.

The First 90 Days and the Truth on housing development in Wealden



On May 4th 2023 there was a major shift in Wealden local politics. The Conservatives Lost control for the first time in 25 years. In what can only be described as a rout. The results below show that voters of Wealden clearly wanted change.

Party	Liberal Democrat	Green	Independent	Conservative	Labour
Wards	13	11	10	9	2

This meant that there was no overall control, however the Lib Dems and Greens entered into discussions and formed a controlling alliance.

I received huge support from the residents in Heathfield South ward. Thank you;

I intend to honour this by listening to your views and representing them at Council. Independent colleague Mike Gadd was elected to represent residents in Heathfield North. With 10 elected Independents across the district, we now have a significant voice

An "Independents" group has been formed, this is led by independent councillor for Hellingly; David White, David is a very experienced councillor with several terms representing residents.

Doctors

One issue very near the top of most peoples' list of concerns is doctor and GP availability. Mike had a meeting with Heathfield High Street doctors' surgery recently. Unfortunately, I was away and unable to attend but Mike represented us all from Heathfield and surrounding areas. There were far reaching discussions especially on the subject of appointment availability and resources. As a result, Mike and I will be joining the surgery patients' group so that we are able to represent the wishes and concerns of residents. I will be attending the next meeting in August with the practise manager.

Pot Holes

At full council meeting on 24th May this year our Independents' group pressed for the council to write to East Sussex County Council requesting increased funding for road repairs. Consent was agreed and appropriate communications entered into. Points raised in the debate centred on the shocking condition of our roads and lack of timely repairs to an acceptable standard. It was resolved that Council asks the Leader and Chief Executive of ESCC for urgent resolution to the matter

I recently made contact and representation to East Sussex Councillor Chris Dowling about a highly dangerous collapsed deep ditch and drain in Brown's Lane. This resulted in a swift repair and I am delighted to report that the works are most satisfactorily completed.

Independents will continue raising awareness of the state of the roads and will push to get the much needed improvements to the road surfaces and to deliver roads free of potholes.

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Development in Wealden

Many Heathfield residents ask “Why is there so much development in Wealden?” They expressed anger that the statements from politicians, claiming reduced housing targets are not visible.

At Full Council Meeting on 19 July this year, I asked of the Councils Planning Portfolio holder a series of questions relating specifically to and seeking clarity on the exact position the council finds themselves on the question of central government housing numbers.

Councillor Tysh responded that there is no reduction in housing numbers demanded by central government in Wealden (*despite the statements made by National and local Conservatives*). Independents will continue to apply pressure for clarity and action of the statements being made. Councillor Tysh confirms the number remains very high at 1210 PA.

Current law and the tragic lack of a local plan dilutes my efforts to protect this area from speculative development. The demand of the housing target and lack of a Five-Year Housing Land Supply are major obstacles. Nearly 9000 permissions have been granted, which still have not been built. Unfortunately, this means, currently, they do not count for Wealden’s Delivery Test and will not help reduce the current central government-imposed target. In my view, they should. I will be advancing representation on this topic hoping to achieve a necessary change.

Soon after the May election I was appointed to sit on Planning committees South and North. To date several major development applications have been refused by the planning committees. This represents a significant change of position bought about by the change in the political construction of the council.

I believe that we need more housing, but to meet genuine local needs. We need the right housing in the right places (with adequate infrastructure and easy access to amenities).

Fresh Water Supply and Sewage Removal.

Another important aspect is the water supply and sewage removal and treatment. Under pressure the water companies have privately acknowledged that there can be no more houses supplied or attached to the system. Other Councils have declared that this means no more development can be approved. I intend to push for a similar action in Wealden.

Water Supply

Our Independent group took the initiative to call an emergency meeting of the full council on 28th June. The initiative was proposed by Independent Councillor David White, I immediately seconded and gained support by from Mike Gadd and 6 other councillors. The motion asked that WDC write to South East Water enquiring;

- a. *full explanation of the causes of the recent failures;*
- b. *full details of actions taken to address them and to mitigate the effects to local residents including details of when the company first became aware of the problems and the timing of its response;*
- c. *confirmation of steps being taken to ensure that there is no recurrence of the failures. I will publish details as soon as a detailed response is received.*

The motion received unanimous support and has been actioned.

The way forward.

As your Independent district councillor, I will continue to represent your concerns at the council as will my Independent colleagues.

Mike and I propose to hold a monthly drop-in session for Ward members to bring their concerns and queries to us. This will increase our understanding of the main issues that affect you.

At any time, we can be contacted at the following email addresses;

Cllr.kevin.benton@wealden.gov.uk Cllr.mike.gadd@wealden.gov.uk