



Wealden Local Plan Direction Of Travel Consultation, November 2020
Response of Wealden Liberal Democrats
January 2021

This Local Consultation paper issued by Wealden District Council includes many commendable statements, but shows insufficient focus in key areas.

The dilemma at its heart is: how to accommodate the Government's demand for thousands of new houses without destroying the very things which (as the paper emphasises) make Wealden a unique place to live and visit and are therefore vital to its future?

HOUSING NUMBERS: Currently highly unrealistic housing numbers are imposed by central government that are against the wishes of the vast majority of local people. The Liberal Democrats oppose this centralised control by algorithm and want a full, realistic assessment of actual housing need, with a build plan to meet those requirements.

How many should be built and what kind should they be? How many do we need to support our local communities and businesses, both now and for future generations? These questions need to be asked first and Wealden District Council must be able to answer.

Many Neighbourhood Plan teams and Community Land Trusts are already working on this topic, and the council should actively consult with and take notice of them. If one or two bedroomed properties are what local people need, then these are what should be built. Top down housing targets created by central government with no consideration of local community requirements are not the answer and this approach should be challenged.

The council should put pressure on developers who receive permission to build houses but then fail to build them - 8000 houses at the present time - as this currently in turn puts political pressure on the council to approve further applications due to the flawed 5 year land supply calculation.

Developments should be Community led and not Developer led.

SUSTAINABILITY: All new properties must be environmentally sustainable and carbon neutral, future-proofed against flooding and other climate risks, and have appropriate electric car charging points and realistic transport options provided. Wealden District Council declared a climate emergency in July 2019, but there is little of note in this Direction of Travel document that addresses it with any urgency. Why would we build properties today that will require retrofitting or replacing in the near future when stricter climate change legislation will inevitably come into force?

We should be planning sustainable communities with a supporting Transport Plan that bolsters local public transport and includes cycling provision. We should not be building in areas at risk of flood, and any flood risk assessment should consider up to date climate change predictions.

We should consider the option of a new sustainable settlement in Wealden with future proofed infrastructure and transport links.

We should be fighting climate change and actively promoting sustainable development.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING: This must be a top priority. We know that our local communities need more housing, especially for young and single people, for smaller families and for downsizers. We need properties that have fewer bedrooms and are cheaper than those currently being built by developers. We should be building smaller dwellings, both for sale and for rent, including low rise apartments that use less land.

WDC has set up a housing company to build affordable homes and this venture should be expanded and at speed. There is a shortage of affordable rental properties and council-owned housing with security of tenure for local people is urgently required. The council should set ambitious targets to build a substantial number of social houses each year.

Lastly, the percentage of affordable housing that a developer must build as part of a significant housing development should increase from 35% to 40%, and the affordable housing exemption for smaller developments should be dropped.

The % of dwellings built with one or two bedrooms should increase dramatically.

INFRASTRUCTURE IN ADVANCE: Too often houses are being built in places where the schools are already oversubscribed, where there are no local amenities such as shops, public transport or GP services, and where utility provisions such as broadband internet, mobile coverage, water and sewage are woefully inadequate.

It should be mandatory for infrastructure to be in place before housing developments are built and this should be a condition of planning approval.

NEIGHBOURING AUTHORITIES: We are economically dependent on larger neighbouring towns such as Tunbridge Wells and Eastbourne and we should cooperate with them to develop a joint strategic plan for our shared region to create attractive communities in areas where work and transport hubs are available. This will provide a stronger basis from which to challenge the government's top down and flawed housing targets and offer a realistic and superior alternative planning vision.

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING: We should promote the health and well-being of all our residents, and as part of this must preserve for the future the wildlife and biodiversity of the beautiful countryside that we are privileged to live in. This means not permitting encroachment into the High Weald, Ashdown Forest, Pevensey Levels and other precious green spaces, and retaining the rural character of Wealden.

We reject the idea that developments 'might' have to be built in designated Areas of Natural Beauty. In view of climate change, biodiversity, urgent nature conservation needs, and the increasing mental health needs of our communities, we should not allow this to happen.

SUMMARY: We agree that more houses need to be built in Wealden, both for local people and to support our neighbouring towns, but take issue with the out of date figures and central government algorithm currently being used to calculate numbers. We believe that houses should be built where they are needed - lower volumes to buy and rent in local villages for local people, and larger volumes in towns (provided the infrastructure is already in place) where '15 minute' communities could be created - i.e. 15 mins to walk to a doctor, to shops and to trains or buses.

In conclusion, while this document makes some commendable points, many of these are simply not reflected in the way that the council behaves, and nothing has been suggested to address this. In the past year, the WDC has approved developments that would have been rejected had they followed the principles laid out in this document. The council should not just pay lip service to climate change, biodiversity and well-being - these principles should be at the centre of all planning decisions, current and future.

Let's build the Right Houses in the Right Places and at the Right Price.



James Partridge
Chair, Wealden Liberal Democrats