

End top-down development targets

A letter to the Herald, March 2009

Sir -

The consultative session held by Alton Town Partnership (ATP) on 28 February saw a lively debate about future house-building in Alton. It was well-publicised, well-attended, and well-run. Mike Heelis's presentation brought alive the various options for development locations and stimulated well-informed comment. In Mike's letter to the *Herald* last week, he says the key thing is that the public are informed and consulted. That is quite right, and ATP did it admirably.

In such an exercise, you have to base the debate on some scenarios. To get people thinking about tough choices, it is useful to present, among other scenarios, the biggest-scale case. So, one of the scenarios considered was the theoretical possibility of Alton getting a disproportionate amount of the 5,200 new homes, over and above the Bordon re-development, that the government has said must be built in East Hampshire between 2006 and 2026.

ATP were right to deal in terms of what the current government is dictating to East Hants, and the various possible ways this could be divvied up within the district. In the previous week's paper, Cllr Andrew Joy was also correct in pointing out that the numbers might not be quite so high.

But there is a bigger question: whether there should be such development requirements handed down from Central Planning at all.

The first key argument against Labour's top-down approach is that it hasn't worked. In England in 2007 there were almost twice as many households classed as homeless as in 1997. Even before the slump, Labour's house-building targets were missed again and again and again. Believe it or not, less social housing has been built each year under the Labour government than under either John Major or Mrs Thatcher.

The second argument is that it is inefficient. Because it suited John Prescott, politically, to drive a big proportion of the building target to the south east, this region's already creaking infrastructure would get further overloaded. Meanwhile there are large areas of the urban midlands and north that would actually benefit from a population inflow.

The third argument is that it isn't necessary. The discussion at the ATP public engagement session was not centred on people saying they wanted no houses at all to be built. Indeed, a number of people spoke of the need for more affordable homes for local young people – both social rented and for-purchase. There was a recognition that some population growth can be important for a town's vibrancy and economic health.

But many people in East Hampshire and elsewhere do, understandably, resent being told that an additional x number of houses must be built in our area, just because someone in London said so.

If there is a change of government, the top-down planning system will be scrapped. Conservatives do want more homes to be built, but we believe that is better achieved via local democracy. Rather than a stick we prefer a carrot. We've pledged to change the funding formula so that Council Tax from each new home built here would be kept by East Hampshire. That way, local services could be further improved or Council Tax reduced, so people get something more in return when homes are

built. It will then be up to local people to decide, through their elected representatives, how much building is desirable in the district.

This key change would form one part of a devolution of powers and a re-invigoration of local democracy. There would as a result, I am sure, be even more lively exchanges on the Herald letters page in the years ahead. And I hope we will see, too, many more opportunities for public debate such as the excellent one organised by ATP – focusing on the total scale, as well as the distribution, of development in the area.

Yours

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