

COMMENT BY MAYFIELD MARKET TOWNS

Mayfield director puts the case for a new town

Company director argues that the controversial proposal for a new market town actually offers an effective way to ease the district's housing issues

COMMENT

By PETER FREEMAN
Director, Mayfield Market Towns
www.mayfieldtowns.co.uk

It's the shooting season. The guns are out and sitting ducks are fair game in Westminster.

The two Nicks blast at Mayfields with both barrels. First Nick Soames, MP for Mid Sussex, lets fly and a moment later, Nick Herbert, MP for Arundel and South Downs, also fires. Mayfields is a high flying bird, a proposed New Market Town capable of solving the housing crisis in their constituencies so why are they so forcefully representing some of their constituents' views that a New Market Town is unwell-

come? The four directors of Mayfields believe, as do the leaders of all three parties, that substantial master-planned new communities - Garden Cit-

ies or New Market Towns - can make an important contribution to meeting housing needs, to promoting a better quality of life, to sustainability, to economic growth and - yes - to the enjoyment of the countryside we all cherish. We also support localism. Let me take each in turn:

HOUSING NEEDED

Despite a five year economic downturn, house prices have never been higher in absolute or real terms or as a multiple of average wages. The average property in Sussex now costs £280,000. The average wage in West Sussex is £27,000, rising to £31,000 in Horsham and Mid Sussex. The multiple is 9. It compares with a long run average multiple of 4 nationally. The pricing demonstrates beyond anything else that demand for housing, a fundamental social good, a human right, far exceeds supply. As the leader of Horsham District Council wrote in a public letter: "Where are all our children going to live?" Mayfields propose 10,000 new homes to help meet demand in this area. Mayfields' proposals have been

worked up alongside Affinity Sutton, one of England's largest and most respected Housing Associations. If Mayfields obtains consent, 3,000 of the homes will be developed by Affinity Sutton to meet the needs of local people. Affinity Sutton know these needs well. They already manage over 10,000 homes in Sussex, including the new award-winning Graylingwell Hospital scheme in Chichester.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Quality of life is intimately connected with the design of homes and their relationship to jobs and services. Local critics portray Mayfields as an arid dormitory suburb with no amenities, no jobs and no railway station. This is not true. Mayfields will have a wide High Street modelled on, for example, Marlborough in Wiltshire. Marlborough may no longer have a sheep market but the High Street is a delightful centre. Home to regular market stalls, book fairs, music festivals and an annual fun fair. Market towns are places to come to - housing estates are places to escape from. Mayfields is also designed to be large enough to provide full secondary education. At the moment the nearest secondary school is too far away from people living in this area to get there easily without cars.

Let me take each in turn:

SUSTAINABILITY-TRANSPORT-LOCAL EMPLOYMENT

Opponents claim that Mayfields cannot be sustainable because it is not on a railway station. We disagree. Rail transport is perceived as green. However, all that railways can achieve are some rapid journeys from the congested centre of one town to the congested centre of another. At most one in fifty of all journeys made in England are made on surface trains. The rest are made on foot, by bike, by car and by bus. At most 12% of the workforce in Mid Sussex actually get on the Brighton to London mainline between 7am and 9am each morning. So the real advances in trans-



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port sustainability must come from enabling more and more people to make more journeys by foot, by bike or bus. The use of a car should be a choice, not a necessity for most journeys. But that is not the case now with so many areas where village shops and primary schools have closed and the employment is so remote from rural housing. The aim in masterplanning new mixed use communities is to ensure that all regular needs, including schools, shops and doctors' surgeries, are so close that walking or cycling are realistic options and any car journey is mercifully short. Going beyond the shortest journeys, a town of 25,000 people can justify proper bus services, park and ride and other innovative transport ideas like car clubs to give people the real benefits of easy transport at lower cost to the environment and themselves. Mayfields will in overall transport terms be more sustainable than a housing estate fitted on the edge of a railway town like Burgess Hill, Haywards Heath or East Grinstead.

MAYFIELDS' DIRECTORS

Mayfields is not a pipe dream, nor is it a racing certainty. It is put forward by four people with exceptional experience taken together of politics, planning and practical development. One of them, Lord Matthew Taylor, has been repeatedly criticized by Nick Herbert for his conflict of interest in becoming a director of Mayfields. The Planning Minister has confirmed that Lord Taylor's interest was fully declared and that there is no conflict. I would go further. There is a natural alignment between Lord Taylor's views

expressed in his widely regarded Rural Housing Review for the last Government (written three years before Mayfields was formed) and his work on Planning Guidance for the Coalition which was well advanced before we met him. It was his belief in vibrant, mixed use communities as an antidote to the countryside becoming a dormitory for city workers that brought him together with myself and the other two founders of Mayfields. In helping us with his insights and knowledge of rural planning and housing issues, he is merely trying to make a reality of the policies he has already articulated at the request of the previous Labour Government and the Coalition.

LOCALISM AND THE DUTY TO COOPERATE

Mayfields applauds the spirit of the Localism Act 2012. However, the question the Act fails to address is "How local is local?" Are we talking about a street, a village, a neighbourhood, a town, a District Council or even perhaps a sub-region? The Localism Act imposes a duty on each Local Authority to cooperate with nearby Authorities in assessing and meeting needs for housing and employment. Fewer than 100 homes are immediately affected by the proposed location of Mayfields. How does one balance the concerns of their residents with those of all the people in the Coast to Capital (Croydon to Brighton) Local Enterprise Partnership which is the newly invented Government sub-region in which they live? Or, closer to home, the interests of the 200,000 people who live in Horsham and Crawley and are concerned at other housing proposals, such as 3,000 new homes in North Horsham, which will lead to the converged City of Crawsham? So how do we proceed from here? We are trying to enter into a productive dialogue with locally interested people so that they can truthfully assess what Mayfields has to offer. The answer to finding the optimum solution, whether or not it is the Mayfields solution, is a proper dialogue between all parties and a system which encourages at an early stage a full range of options to be put forward and considered.

