

## COMMENT BY CPRE TRUSTEE, SUSSEX BRANCH

## Why new market town scheme is a bad idea

*Michael Brown, Trustee, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Sussex Branch, argues that Mayfield Market Towns' plans are not sustainable.*

## FEATURE

BY MICHAEL BROWN  
www.cpre.sussex.org.uk

**Y**our newspaper recently published an extensive commentary written by Peter Freeman, a director of a development company, Mayfield, that would like to get planning permission to build what he chooses to call a new market town for 25,000 people in the heart of the Low Weald countryside between Henfield and Sayers Common centred on Wineham.

The new development would straddle Horsham and Mid Sussex planning districts. Mayfield's scheme would involve building a new town nearly as big as Haywards Heath: concreting over 1,200 acres of precious farmland and countryside that is remote from any existing transport, utility, services or communication infrastructure, and absorbing the villages of Twineham, Wineham and Albourne. Oh, and it's in the middle of a flood plain.

Mr Freeman's article has the look of a free newspaper advertisement for a pipe dream. He seeks to beguile us with the supposed virtues of Mayfield's scheme. But Mayfield is a development company that is selling castles in the sand. Its case crumbles to nothing on closer examination of the facts.

## WHY THERE IS NO NEED FOR A MARKET TOWN

Mr Freeman's first argument is that both Horsham and Mid Sussex face a housing shortage crisis that only his Mayfield's scheme can solve. Not so. Both Councils are at an advanced stage of developing their long term strategic plans for their districts; in the course of which they have had to undertake an objective assessment of their Districts' future housing needs and capacity will be

until 2031. The simple fact is that neither Council has assessed a 10,000 home market town as being required to meet their future housing targets, and have rejected the Mayfield concept. Mayfield's scheme is not needed. The soundness of the Councils' Plans will have to undergo public examinations before Government appointed Planning Inspectors before they can be adopted. Mayfield (along with other developers) will be trying to

undermine their evidence of housing need. Mayfield, being a developer, wants to see nearly twice as many houses built as our elected councils think necessary (in Mid

Sussex they aim for 19,620 houses compared with the Council's target of 10,600). Their case depends on the success of their self-serving argument. Mayfield's tactics have been described by local MPs Nicholas Soames and Nick Herbert as 'unacceptably undermining the District Councils in the discharge of their legal responsibility to determine the correct level of housing for their areas'. Nor is there any truth in the rumour that Brighton & Hove Council is secretly backing the Mayfield's scheme as a solution to its own housing challenges. The Council leader is on record as confirming that his Council 'is not supporting directly or indirectly the Mayfield Market Towns' proposals'.

## WHY IT WOULD NOT HELP TO REDUCE HOUSE PRICES

Mr Freeman next implies that a Mayfield market town will help to resolve the problem of the spiraling cost of buying a home. Nonsense. Like any developer Mr Freeman is in it for the profit he can make, and would doubtless be looking to sell his company's new homes for as much as he could persuade people to pay. A recent independent survey by Lloyds Bank shows that, on average, homes in market towns are 11 per cent more expensive than elsewhere and that a



'Mayfield's scheme is not needed'

**Michael Brown**  
CPRE Sussex

out of the 10 most expensive market towns are here in southern England. So much for Mayfield's scheme helping to reduce house prices! You would pay more to live there.

## WHY MAYFIELD'S PLAN IS UNSUSTAINABLE

Supposing that even more houses are needed than our planning authorities believe, would a new town in the middle of the Low Weald countryside be the right answer and in the right place? Mr Freeman inevitably claims that the location is sustainable; and that building 10,000 homes and associated services there will miraculously 'contribute to the enjoyment of the countryside that we all cherish'. These are ludicrous claims. Detailing all the many reasons why this rural location is unsustainable would require an article of its own. There are no road or rail links, or any other infrastructure. How are 25,000 new people supposed to get about to work, to amuse themselves? Mayfield talks airily of bussing people from a giant park and ride area at Hickstead to Burgess Hill, Brighton and London. But who thinks that Burgess Hill Station, and the London to Brighton line, can cope with such an additional influx? And clearly Mr Freeman hasn't a clue how long it would take to drive by coach from Sayers Common to London! There is also the inconvenient fact that the proposed

new town would straddle the tidal upper reaches of the river Adur. The land is all low-lying and flat. It floods regularly throughout the year.

Are we really going to allow a huge new development that will be exposed to major flooding risk after the country's recent experience? Then there is the matter of the loss of so much open countryside, its wildlife and biodiversity. We, our children and the creatures we share this patch of Earth with all have a right to a natural environment. Look northwards today from the top of Devils Dyke and you see Weald stretching out open before you, with Horsham barely visible in the distance. Do we really want to replace that with townscapes all the way from Mayfield New Town northwards through Horsham, Crawley and London's suburbs beyond? Where will our green and pleasant land be then?

## WHY IT IS SO UNPOPULAR

Mr Freeman next claims that fewer than 100 homes would be directly affected by his scheme, as though it will have little impact on people's lives. Rubbish. I don't know what he means by 'directly affected': knocked down? Everyone living or working between Henfield and Hurstpierpoint will be directly affected! Local residents are already finding that the prospect of their selling their homes is blighted by the existence of Mayfield's unwelcome scheme. Investment will be sucked out of the surrounding area: just ask yourself, for example, what will happen to the shops in Henfield or Hassocks if a new supermarket or shopping centre is opened as part of the new town. And we will all lose a large swathe of natural countryside that we all owe as a legacy to our children and grandchildren, not to mention the wildlife to which it is home.

The Mayfield's scheme is facing unprecedented opposition from within the local community and local parish councils as well as the areas' two MPs and District Councils. Residents working alongside CPRE have established a really impressive

action group, Locals against Mayfield's Business Sprawl (LAMBS - www.lambs.org.uk), which has been very successful in galvanising awareness of the implications of Mayfield's scheme, and which ultimately expects to show that Mayfield has bitten off more than it can chew. If the Government's localism agenda is to have any substance, it cannot mean overriding such united opposition.





Locals against Mayfield Building Sprawl (LAMBS - [www.lambs.org.uk](http://www.lambs.org.uk)) have been galvanising awareness of the implications of Mayfield's scheme. Pictured here are Nick Herbert and Nicholas Soames at a public meeting in Hassocks

**LORD TAYLOR'S CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

Lastly, Mr Freeman tries to face down the justified criticism of our local MPs Nicholas Soames and Nick Herbert that fellow Mayfield director/investor, Lord Matthew Taylor, has a conflict of interest. That conflict arises, because at the same time as he owns a stake in Mayfield's success he is leading the advice to the Government on changes to its planning regime with the avowed

Government aim of making it easier for developers and others to secure planning permission. Mr Freeman's answer that Lord Taylor has fully declared his interest misses the point. Mere disclosure does not resolve the conflict, which exists because of the potential for Lord Taylor to benefit financially if Mayfield were then to get planning permission following a relaxation of the planning rules on which Lord Taylor is advising the

Government. It is extraordinary that this patent conflict is being permitted to continue.

**WHY IT ISN'T AN OPTION FOR HORSHAM**

Within Horsham District Mayfield has, for obvious self-serving reasons, been stoking up opposition to the District Council's plan to concentrate future development to the north of the town by circulating leaflets expounding the merits of its

new town scheme. Whilst local concern at what some are calling the risk of creating a new 'Crawsham' is understandable – no-one should be afraid of being called a NIMBY as every development is in someone's back yard – it would not be logical to adopt an "anywhere but here is better" approach. Horsham's plan already proposes an unrealistic level of new home building, but Mayfield's idea would involve even more

houses, and in a totally unsustainable location. Mr Freeman's company has impressively regenerated on old industrial sites behind Kings Cross and in central Birmingham. But the Low Weald is golden countryside which does not require regeneration via a misconceived scheme that is not needed, not sustainable and not wanted. Mr Freeman should go and build his sandcastles on firmer ground elsewhere.



Who thinks that Burgess Hill Station [pictured], and the London to Brighton line, can cope with such an additional influx.



The proposed new town would straddle the tidal upper reaches of the river Adur. This photo shows floods at Wineham.