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David Incoll
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9th February 2010

Dear Mr Incoll

I am writing to alert you to the deep feeling of discontent in many towns and parishes of the South Hams about the Forward Plans for housing being proposed by Community Regeneration. During the last week I attended four town and village meetings about the plans and in each case there was a hostile reception of the proposals. I know that Robin Hogg of the CPRE has also written to the same effect about other towns and villages.

The root of the problem seems to be that the timescales fixed by the Council have not permitted communities to be adequately involved in drawing up the proposals. Local community involvement is required by Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 12. Even the completed proposals have not been explained to the communities in easily understood language, for example, in the local press. Although the planning process has been available on the SHDC website this is not sufficient to communicate them effectively to the community at large.

Many residents in the South Hams do not have computers or are not sufficiently familiar with them to navigate through the 3 or 4 levels of menus necessary to follow the process. And if they finally get to see the process, it is so fenced around with acronyms and jargon it is not easily understood. Only local action has made the communities aware of the proposals and the date for comments prior to publication is now so near many residents feel that the planners have "pulled a fast one" and are angry that the vast developments planned should be forced on them.

The planners seem to have devoted more time to the larger towns in the District where they use some brown-field sites. But there is a strong feeling that in the smaller settlements, the local centres and villages, the planners have used a single modus operandi to achieve the targets for housing they believe they have to implement - that of siting large housing estates on green-field sites at the perimeter of towns and village. Even in the larger towns large perimeter housing estates are proposed. Presumably they hope that by doing this they will be able to interest large developers and negotiate with them to provide the numbers of affordable houses the Council believes necessary.

Recent experience has shown that in the current financial climate only about 25% of the total number of houses will be affordable. So the proposals create large numbers of additional houses which are not needed and many will be second homes. These housing estates will erode our beautiful countryside and are against Government policy of using brown-field sites first. The results would scar and impoverish our District for ever.

The Council advertises it's priority as providing affordable houses. Most residents, the South Hams Society and the CPRE agree that more affordable houses and employment opportunities are necessary. But there are many other ways which the planners could have met this objective. The use of small sites built by local builders can make over a period of time substantial contributions to the target as well as to the local economy. Small sites have lower overheads because the infrastructure already exists, the allocation of the houses can be dealt with more regard for local circumstances and they integrate into the community easily.

Robin Hogg has mentioned that no use has been made of Village Plans to generate Rural Exception Sites (RES) and suggested the idea of Village Exception Sites. We know of cases, for example West Alvington, where land has been available at no cost, residents have agreed a small development of 12 affordable houses and informed the planners only to find their suggestions ignored and a proposal for 50 houses on a green-field site on the village boundary. Yet it can be done, for in Malborough an RES for 17 affordable houses has been set up and is applying for planning approval while no proposal for other development has been made.

Again in Salcombe the Council own a car park near the town centre which is eminently suitable for development to provide car parking under a deck and housing above. It would make a contribution of at least 20 affordable house as well as down-sized houses for the elderly which would free up more housing in the town. But this option is being ignored in favour of a green-field site bordering the harbour which is a county wildlife site, the habitat of 2 protected species, slopes at 1 in 3 and has only single track road access.

In Modbury the town council wrote last year to the planners asking that housing should be built on infill sites which they proposed in the town. The planners ignored this letter (not even acknowledging it) and proposed another green-field site for 80 houses on the town periphery.

In a similar way The South Hams Society wrote to the Prince's Foundation and the planners in October last year expressing our concerns over the draft proposals. We got no reply or even acknowledgement.

We can only conclude that in the attempt to make plans for the whole district in an unnecessarily short timescale set by the Council, your planners could not cope with the level of detail required for a smaller scale, incremental approach. Even worse they employed a consultancy, the Prince's Foundation, who had no knowledge of local conditions and an even shorter time in which to make recommendations.

The planners did not even have time to complete the requirements of relevant PPS - for example, there has been little or no work on Strategic Infra-structure Delivery and biodiversity requirements have been missed. In fact there have been so many omissions, defects and inconsistencies in the planning process as to make it very vulnerable to legal challenge and likely to be rejected at the inspection stage.

If the planners had a longer time scale and had come to the community earlier and discussed the targets and how they were to be met they would have received much help and local information of great value to them. For it is a mistake to think that communities cannot contribute and are not sympathetic to planning. They have great resources of expertise as well as knowledge. These sentiments were expressed by Matthew Taylor MP, author of a report on rural housing commissioned by the Prime Minister. But he also warned that if plans are imposed on a community then they will find a barrister to oppose them. And in the South Hams residents are already talking of this as the head of forward planning will confirm.

It is clear that the planning process has gone badly wrong. The attempt to plan for the whole district in too short a timescale and with too few resources and too little community involvement has produced proposals which are not only clumsy and insensitive but will do lasting damage to the District Council, its communities and the countryside. There is still time for the Council to remedy this by changing its timescale, opening its planning process to the community and harnessing the contribution it can make. It can only enhance the reputation of local government.

Yours sincerely

John Chalmers

cc.
G Streeter MP
A Steen MP

Councillors R J Tucker, P Coulson, D O'Callaghan, R Gilbert, M Howarth, J Brazil

Lee Bray

R Hogg CPRE