

RSS EXAMINATION IN PUBLIC SOUTH EAST

STATEMENT BY CPRE KENT: PARTICIPANT 7150

MATTER 8Dii – EAST KENT AND ASHFORD: ASHFORD

8Dii.1 Does the level of housing provision proposed at Ashford post 2016 take appropriate account of its growth area status, local constraints and opportunities, and current build rates (Policy EKA1)?

Growth at Ashford has been set at 30,000 new homes over the 30 year period (2001-2031). Some 22,400 new dwellings are identified for Ashford in Policy EKA 1 over the 20 year period 2006-2026. This roughly equates with 20,000 over 20 years as set out as Growth Area status, since housing completions have been on target in Ashford since 2001. But, as quoted in a recent report commissioned by DCLG,¹ ‘The houses are the easy bit, it’s the 28,000 jobs that are difficult’

Both the Greater Ashford Development Framework (GADF), Ashford’s masterplan, and the LDF Core Strategy Submission Document (October 2006) are aware of the local constraints surrounding growth. CPRE Kent believes that Ashford has the potential, and indeed a duty, to become an exemplar of the way in which we can build truly sustainable communities for the 21st century. The DCLG report² comments further; ‘There is little point in getting the [housing] numbers if the quality is poor, and it will not encourage others to embrace growth’. Ashford should be the easiest of the Growth Areas to plan and to deliver; there is just one region and one administrative district. But CPRE Kent has major concerns, regarding the critical balance between infrastructure, jobs and housing and the environmental impact of these.

CPRE Kent seeks the creation of a thriving, energetic town, not a commuter dormitory which relies on the job markets of London and beyond. Each year the increase in the number of Ashford’s jobs is falling far short of the growth in its homes. The jobs that are being created focus heavily on the retail sector, rather than the high-skill, high-value professions that Ashford needs to create a balanced economy.

The recent abandoning of the iconic Discovery Centre is a symptom of the increasing gap between aspiration and achievement. Regular reviews of progress at Ashford, must take place, and the figures set in EKA 1 revised accordingly. These reviews must be independent, thorough, wide ranging and objective.

CPRE Kent remains unconvinced that sufficient funding will be forthcoming for all the major infrastructure projects that are needed to correct Ashford’s existing deficiencies and facilitate the significant growth of the town. CPRE Kent believes there is more to be done to give confidence to Ashford’s people that the plans for the

¹ Ashford’s Future: The Review. Graeme Bell Consultants Ltd for DCLG (September 2006)

² *Ibid*

future will not be hollow promises. We only have one chance to build a sustainable community in Ashford, which we must grasp now.

8Dii.2 Is the level of 30% affordable housing justified and capable of being implemented (Policy EAK3)?

The provision of affordable housing stated in policy EKA 2 contrasts slightly with the level of 35% affordable housing that has been factored in to the Core Strategy of Ashford's LDF. CPRE Kent welcomes the challenging target for the provision of affordable housing. However, we would like to see the provision of affordable housing decoupled from that of open market homes.

There is a very real need for affordable homes; the fact that these look likely to be delivered only through the potential over-provision of market housing is regrettable. Affordable housing must remain available in perpetuity for those in need.

Ashford's housing market is heavily influenced by London and commuting, but set in a resolutely low wage economy with only a modest growth in local jobs. No doubt the growth of Ashford is diverting housing pressure off more sensitive parts of Kent, but the travel implications are unsustainable.

Although Ashford has a superficially very low rate of unemployment, analysis of the local jobs on offer shows that they are predominantly in the service sector. A significant proportion of these are also part time and temporary. This provides a low level of disposable income, which has implications for the type of homes, shops and facilities that Ashford can support.

8Dii.3 How valid is the concept of reducing housing numbers particularly at Ashford in the event of delays in the provision of infrastructure, services and employment (Policy EKA1) and how would this be applied?

CPRE Kent is anxious to avoid compounding the existing problems. Therefore a reduction in the housing target numbers is a vital precaution while the funding and delivery of the required infrastructure remains so uncertain.

CPRE Kent strongly suggests that housing figures should be re-based now to reflect the existing shortfall in actual job creation. Ashford has created only 400 jobs³ in the period 2001-2004. This is 14% of the target of 2,800 set out in the GADF over the same period. The Core Strategy submission document (October 2006) talks of 'a robust estimate of 800 net new jobs' over the period 2001-2006 against a target of 2,950 set out in RPG 9 with the explanation that 'it is reasonable to expect job growth to follow residential development and to accelerate as new investment follows key infrastructure improvements such as the commencement of CTRL domestic rail services in 2009'. This statement contradicts previous assurances that housing would follow jobs and infrastructure. CPRE Kent does not accept this pleading.

³ KCC Strategic Planning Intelligence Group ABI 1995-2004 data

CPRE Kent cautions against placing too much faith in the CTRL to deliver local jobs and a balanced sub-regional economy. The physical seating capacity of the high speed trains (242 seats per six car train) is a severe constraint. The service is only scheduled to provide two services to London per hour at peak times. We note a worrying similarity with the over-optimistic expectations for Eurostar in the early 1990s. After stopping at eleven up-line stations, the remaining daily seating capacity on the new 'bullet trains' available at Ashford is likely to be counted in hundreds, not thousands.

Ashford's Core Strategy mentions many time lags. In relation to affordable housing 'during the next five years, planning permissions granted prior to the revised policy coming into effect will be completed and these will necessarily yield lower numbers of affordable housing units'; in relation to transport 'there is no capital funding available at present for SMARTLINK during the 2006-2011 period in the Local Transport Plan'; and in relation to water 'Ashford's wastewater infrastructure is already at capacity'. CPRE Kent finds this emerging scenario deeply worrying.

Ashford Borough Council has already granted many residential planning permissions, on large greenfield sites. This guarantees housing completions for approximately the next five years, as already stated in the Core Strategy. As job growth and infrastructure provision is diverging from the housing completion rate, then granting of further residential planning permissions should either be halted now, or limited with immediate effect.