

Localism Flounders in Sussex

The Government's much criticised Localism Act could be about to stumble at its first hurdle in Sussex.

Mid Sussex District Council faced what was described as a "Kangaroo court" as it tried to defend its District Plan at an Examination in Public last week (Nov 12). The Council was giving evidence on a technicality called the 'Duty to Cooperate' which is a new requirement under the Localism Act.

The Localism Act was introduced to give local people a greater say on housing, yet among those grilling the Council were representatives from 12 property companies, all of which have a vested interest in the plan's failure. The Inspector is now considering the evidence before giving his verdict within the next few weeks. If he rejects it then it will have to be redrawn, allowing developers a window of opportunity to build on unprotected Greenfield sites in the area, and burdening local tax payers with the extra cost of producing a new plan.

Dr Roger Smith from the Campaign to Protect Rural England who watched the proceedings said the council faced some "hostile questioning";

"From the start of the hearing there appeared to be a presumption on the part of the Inspector that MSDC had not complied fully with the duty to co-operate.

"At one point the Inspector reminded participants that the hearing was about duty to co-operate, not housing targets, and then allowed the developers' representatives to continue to comment on and interrogate MSDC's Claire Tester on MSDC's housing target. This was more like a kangaroo court than a Hearing.

"The Hearing and the Inspector's stated and implied views indicate that the planning system is a shambles. Although the Government wants house targets to be set on a sub-regional basis and has stipulated the requirement to collaborate in the NPPF, it has not provided the means, (including finance) or the time to enable councils to meet the Government's requirements as stipulated by NPPF. This is Mission Impossible- every which way councils will lose."

The hearing was also watched by a crowd of more than 100 local residents, many of whom had to listen to the proceedings via a video link, because there was not enough room in the Council Chamber.

Among them was Anthony Watts Williams, founder of LAMBS, which is campaigning against proposals by Mayfield Market Towns to build a 10,000 home new town on rural land just north of the South Downs. The scheme is among those not included in the District Plan; he says local people are furious;

“Feelings are growing stronger and stronger- the whole process seems to have been hijacked by the developers, rather than the council and the proper people who were democratically elected to deal with it.

“Developers have an interest to overturn the District Plan- they are using the duty to cooperate to do that.”

Leader of Mid Sussex District Council, Garry Wall agreed that the council’s planning officers were given a tough time at the hearing, but said he was confident that the plan would not be rejected.

“With all the plans coming forward there is always going to be a proper test as to whether they do deliver not just on behalf of the community they represent, but also looking at economic and associated growth within the plan period.

“Importantly for Mid Sussex, we have a plan, it is robust, it has community support and it delivers the housing needs for Mid Sussex”

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