



ROMSEY & DISTRICT SOCIETY Charity no 269308

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Steve Lees
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Dear Steve

Core Strategy Key Issues Paper

I write on behalf of the Romsey & District Society to comment on the planning issues in the above draft. Dr Robert Page, Chairman of the Society's Natural Environment Committee is responding on environmental matters.

We understand that this paper is a high-level overview of the issues, and is not the place for matters of detail. However we suggest that some issues do need 'bringing out' a bit more.

In para 2.10, a crucial aspect of any proposed allocation of housing development will be the extent to which the villages (for us, those of southern Test Valley) should be allowed to expand. There is an argument that their viability as communities requires more housing (including affordables, of course). This paper should highlight that question as a key issue, rather than leaving it half-hidden in the draft wording about a 'settlement hierarchy'.

In para 2.13, we find the draft wording about Romsey's future role as a market town serving its own and the neighbouring population unduly tentative. For us, the issue is not whether but how the town can maintain and develop this role, and enhance its character. It cannot stand still: it must continue to be the primary focus for people's shopping, their social and sporting and cultural activities, their participation in communal life, their recreation, their visits to pubs/cafes/restaurants, etc. All the more so if the villages are to grow as above: Romsey will need to attract their new residents.

All this is likely to require a fairly strong plan, with perhaps radical solutions for such issues as access to the town centre, parking, traffic flow, pedestrianisation, retail development, and employment. Indeed the future of the market place should be considered a key issue in itself.

Para 4.5, about tourism, is also too tentative. Tourism is one of our strong points, and we should be strengthening it. The draft rightly identifies it as "an important component of the local economy", but then defines the issue as "whether [the Borough] wants to develop as a significant tourist destination, and if so how that can be achieved while maintaining and enhancing its existing qualities". This seems to imply that there is necessarily some trade-off between increased tourism and the town's character. The truth is surely the opposite: if we do not develop tourism the town's economy, character and qualities will deteriorate. The issue

should be expressed more positively, for example: “A key issue for the Borough is how to grow this significant economic activity in order to maintain the town’s character, attractiveness and vibrancy”.*

We suggest there are two other key issues that should be included at this stage.

First, infrastructure development in line with, and to support, the increased housing. The Core Strategy will have to ensure that the very significant infrastructure investment necessary to support the given level of new housebuilding is embedded in the Plan as an absolute pre-requisite. This is a key issue that should appear in this paper: a disastrous outcome would be to have the new housing without the infrastructure.

Infrastructure, in the above sense, must be taken to include roads, rail and other public transport; water, sewage, waste disposal, and flood prevention measures; schools and medical centres, and other community facilities; environmental protection measures and the designation of countryside, recreation and other ‘green’ spaces adjacent to the new housebuilding areas.

Second, design. In our view a significant blight on Romsey’s development in the last thirty years or so has been mediocrity in design. The town’s new housing has too often been bland and uninteresting, and this has not helped to provide it with the vibrant image it needs. A really big effort will be needed to secure the place of good design throughout the emerging Local Development Framework, and we would like to see it clearly identified as a key issue in this paper.

Yours sincerely

Chris Amery
Chairman, Planning Committee

* As an example of how expressing the issue like that could lead to low-cost investment that would enhance both tourism and the town’s character, consider river walks. Romsey’s key tourist asset, after the Abbey, is surely its river and streams. One major attraction of a river is walking beside it. Yet our river walks are fragmented, not clearly signed, not well maintained (e.g. the stretch from Mainstone to Saddler’s Mill), and in one particularly unfortunate case blocked (the locked gate between Rivermead Close and Millstream Rise).