



ROMSEY & DISTRICT SOCIETY

Comments on District-level Housebuilding Targets in the South East Plan

1 Introduction

This is the response of the Romsey & District Society (R&DS) to ‘*Where shall we live?*’ – the consultation paper on the District-level housebuilding targets to be included in the South East Plan.

R&DS is a civic society serving Romsey and its surrounding parishes for over thirty years. We have about 1,000 members and take an active interest in planning, environment, countryside and social issues affecting the area.

Romsey is an historic market town on the Test dating back to a seventh century settlement. Our traditions are based on the Abbey and its 12th century Abbey church, on milling (with at one time nearly a dozen mills powered by the river), fly-fishing, and more recently on brewing. Broadlands, the home of Lord Palmerston and later of Lord Louis Mountbatten, lies on the southern edge of the town. Romsey acts as a centre, and literally as a market, for the surrounding villages of Braishfield, Ampfield, North Baddesley, Nursling, Wellow, Awbridge, Michelmersh, Timsbury, Kings Somborne, Lockerley, Mottisfont, Houghton, Broughton, and East & West Tytherley.

The R&DS is not, and never has been, opposed to all development in and around Romsey, but we have always striven to ensure that such development should preserve what is best about its essential character as a market town. Like all market towns today, our individuality is both extremely precious to us and at the same time under threat from the many pressures towards uniformity in modern life.

We therefore approached the South East Plan and these District-level targets, as we have approached successive County Structure Plans and Borough Local Plans: in a positive frame of mind, recognising society’s needs overall and looking for opportunities to promote our vision of Romsey as a proud, historic, prosperous, distinctive, and dynamic community based on solid and continuing values that have been built up over centuries.

1.1 Structure of our comments

The background to our comments is our response to the draft South East Plan dated April 2005, and we therefore start by summarising that in section 2.

We then consider the District housebuilding targets and the proposed allocation in the light of that background (section 3).

We end with our overall conclusions.

2 Our views on the South East Plan as a whole

2.1 Summary of our original comments

We accepted most of the drivers of the overall Plan, and in particular its basic assumption that the region as a whole should generate good economic growth throughout the plan period. We recognised also that the cities of Portsmouth and Southampton, together with Fareham and Gosport, have both a need and a capability for growth rates higher than the regional average. We agreed with many of the focus-points of the plan, for example its dependency on infrastructure investment such as improved transport links, its greatly increased emphasis on affordable housing, and its determination to exploit brownfield sites for housing wherever possible.

But we had three serious reservations:

- There was a disappointing omission that seems to us crucial for Romsey specifically: the seeming lack of recognition of its status as an historic market town.
- Arising from that, we vigorously questioned one of the plan's assumptions: the inclusion of Romsey in the South Hampshire Sub-region.
- There also seemed to us a basic flaw in the Plan's overall approach: the 'top-down' imposition of growth, infrastructure, housing and other targets on the region and its constituent parts without a proper consideration of the capacity to absorb them, or the consequences that would follow. Unlike the first two points above, this was not specific to Romsey.

For more detail on these reservations please refer to our full original response, attached as annex A.

2.2 The situation now

Our representations against Romsey's inclusion in the South Hampshire sub-region have fallen upon deaf ears – the momentum behind the existing sub-region boundary was simply too great. But the stark fact remains that we are indeed at the very extreme north-western edge of the sub-region, and the implications and logic of that are, we believe, compelling when considering detailed housebuilding allocations.

3 District-level housebuilding targets

We can express our views quite briefly.

We accept the target figure of 80,000 new homes in the sub-region over the next 20 years – though it is important to recognise that the main drivers for that number are the economic regeneration needs of Portsmouth, Gosport, Fareham and Southampton.

We accept that there is no realistic way of achieving that target without the two proposed Strategic Development Areas – in Fareham Borough and to the north and north-east of Hedge End.

We accept the targets of 11,000 homes on previously earmarked sites, and of 38,000 on brownfield sites. Indeed we favour such sites.

But our major concern is on the proposals for building 12,500 homes on greenfield sites in the sub-region. We want to maintain Romsey's unique character as an independent and vibrant market town. That means above all

keeping its geographical expansion to an absolute minimum and preserving clear southern and eastern boundaries. That way we best preserve its character and its traditions, and its attractiveness as a centre for all the neighbouring villages.

The lowest of the three options (option C) for southern Test Valley proposes 2,500 homes on greenfield sites. We find it extremely difficult to see how 2,500 houses could be accommodated, and absolutely impossible to envisage any more than that. There are both positive and negative reasons.

The main positive reasons are that there are clearly better places elsewhere in the sub-region: since the main rationale for the total of 80,000 homes is to meet the needs of the large cities and towns, it makes most sense to build the homes as near to those cities as possible – that is the way to create more meaningful communities, and to minimise the requirement for new transport, education, health, water and waste infrastructures. All this can be quite legitimately summarised by the saying ‘build the homes where the jobs are’ – ideally homes and jobs should be created both at the same time and in (or close to) the same place.

The main negative reasons are that Romsey and the smaller communities in southern Test Valley simply cannot cope with more greenfield building. The narrowness of existing countryside gaps is absolutely critical: any further encroachment on them would threaten our very existence as a discrete market town. Our roads are already too crowded, and even if new investment were available to improve them or build new ones, we see no acceptable way to do so. Our water and waste capabilities are already fully stretched.

4 Conclusion

The South East Plan does not address Romsey’s needs, or its capacity. It tries to impose a grand design over a sub-region that is in reality far from homogeneous.

If Portsmouth, Gosport, Fareham and Southampton want or need to grow their economy faster than the regional average, we have no wish to stand in their way, but Romsey and the rest of southern Test Valley should not be changed out of all recognition by becoming a dormitory for them.

Our formal response is that option C (2,500 homes on greenfield sites) is the only remotely acceptable one of the three, but that even that figure could be reduced to everyone’s benefit by a clear focus on the ‘positive’ lines of argument given above. “Build the homes where the jobs are!”

Romsey, 18 October 2005

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