

COMMUNITIES ACROSS CHICHESTER

VOICE THEIR ANGER

By
Libby Alexander

In a highly unusual move, representatives from more than a dozen villages stretching from Emsworth to Oving and Pagham and across the Manhood Peninsula came together on 17 May in a zoom meeting organised by SOSCA (Save our South Coast Alliance).

The villages are all being inundated with housing applications from large building companies, doubling the size of many of them and destroying their character, economy and environment, attendees claimed. The situation has arisen because of the difficulty faced by Chichester District Council in completing its Local Plan, due to an unrealistic government housing quota for a district with significant geographical and infrastructure constraints.

In a crowded southern England, Chichester's stunning coastal hinterland boasts an irreplicable collection of internationally designated wetlands. As a result, the area attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, including migratory birds and other species and tourists from all over the country, and the world. The area is also blessed with a high proportion of Grade 1 and Grade 2 agricultural land and a thriving fishing sector. It is no coincidence that the area's principal economies of tourism and food production are based on its environment.

However, this unique environment and thriving economy will be irrevocably harmed by densely packed suburban housing, most of which will be unaffordable for local people.

Representatives at the SOSCA meeting, including parish councillors and residents working on neighbourhood plans, described how their villages would increase in size dramatically, several more than doubling. Oving, for example, a rural village of some 800 homes could expand by up to 2000 new homes; East Wittering, one of the last small villages on the south coast, has seen applications for hundreds of new homes in the last few weeks, Emsworth, Bosham, Chidham and Hambrook, Birdham, Fishbourne, Donnington, Oving, Pagham, East Wittering, Bracklesham, and other villages are facing a similar influx of planning applications. Southbourne has completed a neighbourhood plan accepting some 1300 homes because it's parish council felt it was the only way to get some say in its future, its representative noted. Selsey Town has already doubled in size with its medical centre built to support 6,000 now having to accommodate 30,000 during the summer months.

Lack of democratic accountability was one of the biggest criticisms levelled at the meeting. New housing is being planned and designed by large building groups, allowing for little or no input from local people, and all before the area's existing infrastructure deficits have been fixed. The speakers pointed out that Sewage and Water Treatment Plants, and intermediary pumping stations, are already operating at capacity. They shared cases of residents experiencing toilets backing up and tankers regularly having to empty the main drains of new housing estates.

Transport infrastructure is also not fit for purpose with no train service on the Manhood Peninsula and the main local roads of the A259, A286 and B2145 operating beyond capacity.

No viable long-term solution has yet been put forward by Highways England for the A27. CDC's proposed Stockbridge Link Road from the Fishbourne roundabout to the A286 and other A27 junction changes will be disastrous for locals, the parish representatives agreed.

Meanwhile, the low-lying nature of the whole area makes it extremely vulnerable to climate change. Flood risk zones have been altered when challenged by developers but the fact that the EA has warned that flood zones will be subject to continual change in the future, which may put new housing back into flood zones, is not being taken into account.

All the village representatives at the meeting called on CDC, the government, and Gillian Keegan MP to help before it is too late for the area. Residents believe that truly affordable and sustainable housing for local people can be built that will enhance the area's incredible environment, its unique sense of place, its thriving economy, and its resilience to climate change. Planning in Chichester's coastal plain should focus on the creation of housing for local need in the same way that it is done in areas like the South Downs National Park, they argue. Relying on market housing to provide affordable housing in an area where outside demand for holiday and retirement homes will always exceed local demand is not a sustainable long-term solution.

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