

I'm afraid brevity isn't my strongest point, but I promise I do my best, and so for brevity I will speak only on the issue that is particularly close to my heart; namely, affordable housing and SP23.

Affordable housing is the cornerstone of progress for Thanet. We are in desperate need of affordable housing; and it isn't just our area that is struggling.

There are many areas that currently struggle with what is considered to be "low land value", and Thanet is one of them. What we see as a result of this is a continuing struggle to provide affordable housing, as we are not funded sufficiently by central government to do so at the level required, and have to rely on private development to deliver levels anywhere near our actual need. We are, in effect, forced by central government and central legislation to rely on private development to help deliver essential infrastructure and services, and sufficient affordable housing; the problem being, that private developers are not required to consider residents needs and Councils needs above the overall picture in terms of financial viability.

I have been in several Planning meetings now where the issue of proportion in terms of affordable housing has arisen. Each time I have become more and more frustrated, and more and more angry at the strictures of central governmental legislation and systems that insist that Councils have control, whilst knowing full well that ultimate control in terms of funding, reliance on private developers, and the ability of Councils to provide infrastructure lies centrally.

In the current system, where we are not given sufficient central funding to build social and affordable housing sufficient for our need and are therefore required to rely on private developers to deliver it, the 30% delivery of affordable housing under SP23 is vitally important; just as important is the type of housing delivered. Thanet desperately needs affordable rent; but currently financial viability determines even the delivery of that, as of the types of affordable housing affordable rent is the least profitable for developers. I have a fundamental issue with this, and it's why I struggle with any system that combines profit with care or essential service; because when situations like this arise, the two are incompatible.

Right now we are effectively held over a barrel. Those of us who have worked with Housing know just how difficult the situation is. We have to provide affordable housing. We are not given sufficient central funding to do so. And so time and time again we are faced with the dilemma of financial viability issues, told that we need to accept ten or fifteen per cent, rather than the required thirty, or residents go without. And we are left with that choice. To provide for some, even though it is nowhere near the amount sufficient to deal with our need, or to reject, and accept that those families will remain in need for the immediate future, and hope that either the development changes, or that another comes in its place that fulfils our needs as an area.

I wrote to Robert Jenrick MP last month to add my voice to the numbers of Councils expressing just this problem. As I have not had a reply as yet, my concerns still stand.

Central legislation requires us to have a local plan. It requires us to adhere to planning algorithms. It requires us to rely on private development to deliver essential housing and services, because in spite of our knowledge of our area and our needs as a council, we are

not given the direct funding to build ourselves. And when we are faced, yet again, with those circumstances forcing us to accept or reject a drop in our essential affordable housing requirement, we are forced to choose between providing for some, or providing for none; when we should be able to provide for all.

If affordable housing is an afterthought, and unaffordable, then central government needs to step up and address those funding gaps. If Councils cannot afford essential infrastructure and services, even after relying on private development, then central government needs to address that.

We are here to decide on individual planning cases; but it is impossible to do so effectively without considering the larger picture when issues like this continually come to the surface, and we are doing the system as a whole a disservice when we do not speak on these issues, and we do our community a disservice in not explaining the complexities and difficulties of these systems.

Planning does not exist in isolation. It exists as a function of central government, delegated to local councils, who then struggle to explain just how thoroughly their hands are tied even within that delegated authority.

We are here, as a Council, to provide; we should be able to do that ourselves, via central funding, as we have the local knowledge and understanding to build well and sympathetically. But if we cannot, and we have to rely on private development to deliver what is needed, then what is needed has to be the main priority, and central government has to support us in the delivery of essential services to our communities; and if recognition of that has to begin in Council chambers across the country, then that is what will happen.

In Thanet we face some of the most difficult social and financial challenges in the UK every day; we have done for all of my lifetime. But we do so because as an area, we accept that our lives are intrinsically linked with those of others. Regardless of how difficult it is, we do not step away, and we serve our community.

As a community we do not accept that we can provide for no one. We do not accept that we can only provide for some. We provide for all. And although I acknowledge the review measures, and the efforts of Planning, to my mind if SP23 is to function for this area it has to function to its capacity, and that requires all levels of government, including this committee, looking at how Planning functions for all of us.