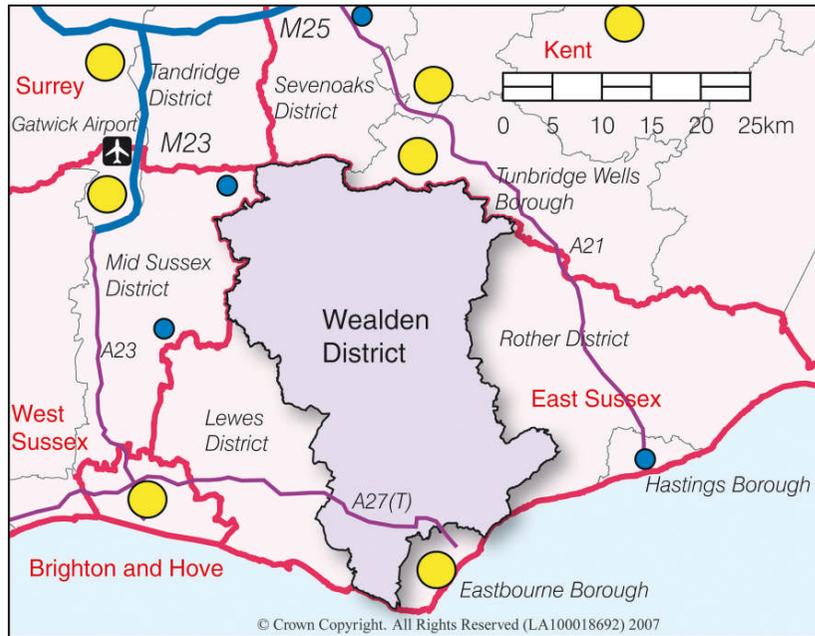


CHAPTER 8: Wealden



The largest of the East Sussex districts and boroughs with 28% of the total population and 324 square miles of extremely attractive countryside, Wealden is classified as one of the most rural districts in England (DEFRA). The population of just over 143,000 people comprise 62,700 households. Half live in the five small market towns, Crowborough, Hailsham, Heathfield, Polegate and Uckfield which range in size from 7,500 to 20,000. The rest live in the many villages and hamlets nestling under the South Downs or hugging the contours of the High and Low Weald. Some are 'chocolate box' beauties such as Alfriston and Mayfield, others have links with stars like Winnie the Pooh, Sherlock Holmes and the Bloomsbury Group.

Wealden has a comparatively small black and minority ethnic population - over 96% of residents describe themselves as White. The balance comprises small numbers of people of Asian, Caribbean and Black African backgrounds. The small numbers mean it is important to engage with our black and minority ethnic community using voluntary and community groups wherever possible.

There is evidence of health inequalities across the district however these are often masked by the façade of wealth across the district. For example life expectancy at birth averaged 87.7 in Crowborough North and 77.3 in Hailsham East in 2003-2005. In 2001 31% of Wealden households contained one or more persons with a limiting long term illness.

In South East terms, Wealden has average levels of young people up to the age of 14, significantly fewer residents in the 15 – 44 age range, and a significantly above average population of pensionable age. Population density is low - just 167 per km² compared with the 421 per km² average for East Sussex as a whole.

By 2011, Wealden's population will increase to around 148,000, and its make-up will change. There will be fewer school age children, and more young people aged between 16 and 29. The elderly population (65+) will have grown by over 4000, mostly in the 65-74 age group. The number of households will also increase to around 66,500, with more single person households.

Despite an outward appearance of affluence, Wealden faces a number of challenges, not least the hidden nature of deprivation in the District which is not effectively identified by tools which focus on the density of multiple deprivation. Individual experiences of hardship are no less dramatic, and often more difficult to target in such a rural area. There is a severe shortage of affordable housing exacerbated by high house prices and low local wages. Market towns have identified needs for regeneration, and the rural villages face issues of economic and social sustainability, including access to services for those without their own transport.

The countryside environment is key to understanding Wealden with 93% of the district classified as rural. Ashdown forest is the largest area of land that has never been ploughed in the South East and the High and Low Weald, South Downs and the internationally recognised wetlands of the Pevensey Levels create a uniquely distinctive and varied character.

61% of the District falls within the boundaries of the High Weald or South Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and Wealden also has the highest proportion of ancient woodland of all English districts. Flooding also shapes the area environmentally and socially, curtailing opportunities for development. There are 29 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, 301 sites of archaeological importance, 18 historic parks and gardens including several by Gertrude Jekyll, and 102 scheduled ancient monuments. This richness and diversity of landscape and heritage are significant factors in making Wealden such a desirable place to live.

The Gross Value Added contribution to the economy of businesses and employees in Wealden for 2007 is estimated at £1,267million, set to grow by 2.3% for 2008. Around 44,000 people work in the District, most, about 74%, in the service sector. Small and micro businesses form a fundamental part of the Wealden economy – around 90% employ fewer than 10 people – and increasing numbers of people work from home. 75% of these small businesses are farm-based, and the diversified agricultural sector therefore makes a significant impact on the area both in terms of economy and shaping the landscape. Northern parts of the district have strong rail links with London and there is significant commuting to the capital with its higher salaries and career opportunities.

The Wealden vision

- a healthy, rich and diverse environment based on sustainable principles for everybody in Wealden
- reduce health inequalities, provide appropriate information and advice and access to health and social care services in order to maximise the potential for good health and well-being
- enough decent, affordable homes to meet the needs of everyone who lives in or needs to live in the District
- access to lifelong learning, education and skills training to allow Wealden residents to fulfil their potential

- a broad range of opportunities to improve quality of life, health and well-being, including sport, leisure, recreation and the arts
- a prosperous and sustainable local economy that is dynamic, flexible and maintains the environmental qualities of the area
- residents and visitors to Wealden are confident of their safety and free from the fear of crime
- improved accessibility for all and reduce the impact of traffic on people and places.

Wealden issues

ENVIRONMENT

A clean and healthy environment was top of the list of priorities in making somewhere a good place to live and most residents were happy with this aspect of life in Wealden. Concern about the environment recognised the need to protect what is already here, but action for improvement is also an important factor. The beauty and tranquillity of the area is what people said they valued most about living in Wealden. The importance of protecting the environment was equally important to all age groups.

Priorities

- Recognise and adapt to climate change and its impact on Wealden, including management of CO2 emissions, the demand for water and the provision of adequate water resources, including new resources where there is environmental capacity
- Support flood risk assessments and appropriate plans to reduce flood risk and make space for water; and providing of a network of green spaces to buffer the effects of climate change on wildlife
- Strive for the provision of adequate environmental infrastructure to be in place before more houses are built
- Encourage sustainable design through the introduction of a Supplementary Planning Document which includes energy efficiency, greater use of renewables and sustainable transport
- Protect, maintain and enhance both rural and urban environments
- Encourage support for farmers, other landowners and managers who maintain the landscape and contribute to the quality and visual attractiveness of rural environments
- Encourage the sale of local food and non-food products including bio-diesel
- Support efforts to ensure that proposed new development takes account of the appearance and unique character of the area
- Encourage improved facilities for pedestrians and adequate provision of high quality, accessible open space, to include facilities for children's recreation in safe, central locations with minimal nuisance to neighbours, a safe and comprehensive network of footpaths, bridleways, and rationalised signage and street furniture

- Maintain and improve public open space for people and wildlife, to include the general tidiness, maintenance of verges, removal of litter, tree planting and maintenance of existing trees and planting schemes
- Strengthen policies for dealing with waste and encourage waste reduction and more recycling by providing additional opportunities, and their inclusion as standard in new developments
- Address the issues of litter, fly-tipping, abandoned cars, dog litter and graffiti

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The people we asked said that social and healthcare services were one of the top three aspects in making somewhere a good place to live - only the environment and safety from crime were seen as more important. 23% of residents identified health and social care as something which needed to be improved. Many concerns focused around difficulties in getting to services rather than the level of care received. The Healthy Wealden Partnership works to improve health and social care services in Wealden, helping to make Wealden a healthier place to live.

Priorities

- Encourage cohesive and flexible partnership working to provide good access to health and social care services, with particular consideration for areas where provider boundaries do not match, and transport issues when considering change
- Support existing outreach projects, and the exploration with relevant partners of opportunities to maximise the use of existing facilities to offer a range of health care services locally
- Increase levels of community engagement around service improvement and the implementation of change, recognising concerns about the pace and frequency of change, and their need for clear information about proposed changes and their implications
- Promote direct links between local frontline health and social care staff and voluntary and community sector workers, exploring ways to optimise the use of existing facilities and community buildings through partnership
- Support social inclusion, especially in rural areas, and seek to promote innovative ways of addressing exclusion and health inequalities
- Promote five key areas of health improvement: reducing the number of people who smoke; tackling obesity; improving sexual health; improving

mental health and well-being; and reducing harm and encouraging sensible drinking.

- Maintain support for the use and development of volunteers in the delivery of local community healthcare services, for example, care and support for the elderly, children and the disabled
- Continue to strengthen partnership working with wider partners, including voluntary and community groups, parish, town and district councils, and healthcare service providers to identify areas for service improvement and innovative solutions to access issues

HOUSING

Our consultation demonstrated that affordable homes for local people was the top priority for improving housing opportunities. The results highlight a certain amount of conflict however, as many residents did not want to see new housing development. It will be important to balance the requirements of the South East Plan with local needs and views. The Wealden Local Development Framework is the key planning mechanism which will help deliver what people in Wealden want and need over the next twenty years.

Priorities

- Lobby for an increase in the percentage of affordable housing in developments, an extension of the requirement to include smaller schemes, and encourage affordable provision in all settlements
- Encourage initiatives to promote the green agenda, working towards a reduction in carbon emissions, and the 'eco-homes' standards in the provision of both social and private sector housing
- Encourage greater provision of specialist adaptation of accommodation, eg for older people and those with special needs, in the social and private housing sectors
- Support the Local Development Framework Core Strategy and Wealden Design Guide to set standards and provide a means to strengthen the case for good design which is in keeping with local character. The Guide should address issues around sustainability, quality of life and the flexibility to encourage and allow new patterns of working
- Encourage planning authorities to secure benefits from developers to contribute to adequate infrastructure in line with housing development including water, energy, transport and the provision of new jobs and services that provide for the needs of an ageing population

- Support and encourage mixed development comprising both houses and employment sites
- Influence the Local Development Framework to allow villages to expand in order to provide small scale developments, and allow higher density dwellings (eg terraced houses) in rural areas providing the design and layout is appropriate and includes suitable provision for open space and parking
- Build on partnerships and networks with private landlords to encourage best practice and access to lettings initiatives
- Contribute to the progress of the 'HOPE' affordable housing project
- Promote initiatives to address the 'Respect' agenda and activities to combat anti-social behaviour

LEARNING

Most residents said they are satisfied with the standard of education in Wealden and that this is an important factor in making the area a good place to live. A few thought that there should be more opportunities for lifelong learning. A vibrant economy depends on a skilled workforce which aspires to success, so we must ensure that learning opportunities are available so that local people develop the skills required by local employers.

Priorities

- Focus on the need to provide skills for employment as a means of supporting business to encourage a thriving sector with small, clean, highly skilled businesses with minimal transport needs
- Concentrate skills training around the five main Wealden towns
- Link with existing colleges and universities through the provision of outreach centres and business centres attached to Colleges.
- Support appropriate training in order to grow the local economy and provide businesses with the skills they need, for example, the Wealden Skills Centre (Uckfield) is an ideal opportunity to develop this and similar initiatives should be actively encouraged
- Identify the skills relevant to the small, clean, high-skill, low transport-requirement, knowledge-based businesses to be attracted to Wealden and support training and apprenticeships which will allow local people to develop as appropriately skilled employees

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES, SPORT AND LEISURE

Cultural and sporting activities can play a key role in addressing a range of issues that affect quality of life, including mental and physical health, community safety and prosperity. High quality leisure opportunities are also an important factor in attracting visitors to the area.

Priorities

- Promote, support and increase community participation in a wide range of sport, leisure and cultural activities in the Wealden District, through partnership working including that of the Wealden Community Sports and Leisure Network (CSN)
- Explore, enhance and encourage opportunities for the development and marketing of green spaces and play opportunities
- Explore, enhance and encourage opportunities for the development and marketing of green tourism and address potential conflicts of interest between visitors and residents
- Encourage recognition that leisure and tourism are inherently linked as leisure facilities for local people are also attractive to visitors
- Explore how attractive, well equipped, multi-purpose community facilities, such as village halls, can be put to a wider variety of uses
- Encourage closer co-ordination and partnership working to provide more opportunities for sustainable tourism in Wealden and promote it more effectively

PROSPERITY

86% of people felt that links between business and education was the most important element in improving the prosperity of the District. A number of residents are concerned about declining services in villages and the need to improve facilities in Wealden towns. Tourism plays an important role in improving the local economy as visitors spend an estimated £248 million in the area every year. The consultation also identified a need for support and advice to agriculture and other business sectors in the area.

Priorities

- Support existing and emerging businesses in order to encourage a thriving range of sectors which will provide more employment opportunities as a prerequisite for enhancing quality of life in Wealden
- Encourage small, clean, high-skill businesses with minimal transport needs, e.g. the knowledge-based sector
- Encourage a balanced approach between residential use and new or existing business sites, for example, by encouraging a more sympathetic approach to the conversion of redundant farm buildings for alternative business uses
- Support efforts to ensure that adequate employment opportunities are in place or under development where more houses are to be built
- Ensure that appropriate support and infrastructure is available for the small and micro businesses which tend to predominate in the area
- Encourage partners to ensure the five core towns are attractive as local retail and service centres
- Encourage business links with existing colleges and universities through the provision of outreach and business centres attached to those institutions, for example to develop more apprenticeship opportunities locally
- Improve links between business and the local community for example, by encouraging local businesses to employ local people, encouraging and supporting flexible working patterns and measures to include people with disabilities
- Develop use of broadband, particularly for electronic communication and websites, and encourage more active networking amongst local businesses
- Establish a mechanism to lead, in partnership, the Eastbourne / Hailsham Triangle in a single co-ordinated approach, to ensure that it is not simply a growth area for residential development but contributes to the economic growth of the region

COMMUNITY SAFETY

Residents of Wealden identified 'safety from crime' as the second most important aspect in making somewhere a good place to live. Although levels of crime are low in the area as a whole, 41% said 'safety from crime' needed improving. The Wealden LSP believes that safety can best be improved

through partnership working and by tackling people's fear of crime because this can have a big impact on the quality of life even when levels of crime are relatively low. Resources will be targeted to address problems in any areas where higher than average levels of crime are identified.

Priorities

- Encourage design for, and enforcement, of appropriate speeds through villages and on new estates including traffic calming and pedestrian safety.
- Educate drivers to encourage better driving behaviours
- Encourage a more visible police presence where there is an identified need, for example through the use of PCSOs and Neighbourhood Watch Schemes
- Encourage members of the community to work more closely with the police and other agencies to tackle crime through Local Action Teams
- Influence the Local Development Framework to ensure that the design of housing and communal facilities enhances community cohesion and the feeling of well-being
- Promote community safety and the reduction of the fear of crime as a high priority for public, private and voluntary sector services
- Encourage members of the community to become active in the collective identification of community safety priorities and in the active communal resolution of those issues
- Promote the need for tolerance, respect and understanding for all diverse sections of the community and emphasise that a balance has to be found between individual choice and freedom, and the greater needs and well-being of the community

TRANSPORT AND ACCESS

Wealden people identified getting to places easily and safely as being important in making somewhere a good place to live. It was also seen as the highest priority for improvement. The survey also highlighted concerns about the volume and speed of traffic, congestion and the lack of public transport. The LSP recognises that dealing with transport in a rural area requires a balance between ensuring people can get about easily and reducing the impact of traffic on people and places.

Priorities

- Address safety and congestion issues generated by the 'school run', for example by encouraging a greater proportion of school journeys on foot or by bike
- Encourage early consideration of traffic flow and parking issues when new facilities are being planned
- Lobby for and encourage more integrated public transport to allow interchange wherever possible between rail, bus, community transport, shared cars, cycling and walking, with appropriate facilities to promote their safe use
- Promote and lobby for the reinstatement of the Uckfield to Lewes railway line
- Lobby for further improvements to train services and better station facilities to encourage their use: this includes additional carriages to reduce overcrowding, extra trains later into the evening for leisure purposes, and a simplification of the fare structure to encourage increased use
- Encourage improved access to rail stations by all modes of transport, including provision of adequate parking facilities
- Raise the profile for further improvements along the A27.

For further detail please access the Wealden Community Strategy at www.wealdencommunitystrategy.co.uk.