

The CLA Surrey debate 2019:

Housing in Surrey – How can we squeeze it in?



The CLA's Surrey Debate 2019 focused on the pressing issue of housing and how to meet need, or demand, in a geographically small and biodiversity-rich county.

The lively discussion was supported by Smith & Williamson and chaired by its tax partner Luke West, with a welcome from Hugo Black, chairman of the CLA's Business and Rural Economy Committee.

Landowner, planner and environmental voices all featured on the panel at the second Surrey Debate, held in Seasons Café at Guildford Cathedral. Land value capture, the Green Belt

and the size of development projects were among the topics opinions differed on.

With AONBs, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Nature Reserves, Biodiversity Opportunity Areas and other valued landscapes dominating, how can new developments be delivered in a sustainable and environmentally responsible way?

A summary of the presentations given by the speaker panel and of the questions raised during the debate follow. Copies of the presentation slides are available on the CLA website.

Andrew Shirley, Chief Surveyor at the CLA

- Historically landowners have been house builders in the community, but have increasingly become residential landlords. Can/should the role of house builder be revitalised?
- The CLA's recent Sustainable Villages report found that 2,000 villages are being over-looked for any homes because they lack facilities such as a pub or school. Innovative solutions are required, as well as doing things differently, such as using alternative building materials.
- The founding purpose of The Green Belt was good 70 years ago, but is it still fit for purpose? Remembering that it is a planning policy, not an environmental designation.
- We need to provide housing for the young, middle aged and elderly, building the right houses in the right locations.
- Further land value capture is not the solution, a significant proportion is already captured through planning obligations and Community Infrastructure Levy. Adding further costs will not encourage more land to come forward.

Sarah Jane Chimbwandira, CEO of Surrey Wildlife Trust

- With high levels of protection and designation in Surrey, land must have multi purposes. We need to create sustainable places for now and for future generations, to benefit the economy, our health and the environment.
- Biodiversity net gain – the requirement for developers to ensure wildlife habitats are enhanced and left in a measurably better state than they were pre-development – offers great opportunities for wildlife groups, developers and businesses.
- Case study: a site at Priest Hill in Ewell has been transformed from concrete into grassland restoration, grazing areas and housing, doubling its biodiversity units with a rise in small blue butter-

fly and skylarks. A site on the edge of London is now ‘buzzing with wildlife’, which highlights what can be achieved by working together and embracing innovative solutions.

- A long-term strategic master plan is needed, taking into account changes to how people will work and live in the future.

Tom Fyans, deputy chief executive of CPRE

- While Surrey is 70% Green Belt and the most heavily wooded county in England, it must still address its housing needs – but not demand.
- The planning system has lost the trust of communities because it is not about place-making, with high and unrealistic housing targets and a lack of affordable housing creating big challenges.
- More small-scale developments are needed in appropriate locations in villages, to help keep them alive, while not enough social housing is being delivered.
- Using brownfield sites should be a priority, with more funding needed for rural social housing as well as land value reform to address a systemic issue which is driving much of the problem.



David Lock, founder and strategic planning adviser, David Lock Associates

- The Green Belt has grown to become a green blanket up to 35 miles deep, swamping Surrey and the South East to leave very few areas for big developments to go.
- It is better to focus on a few larger development sites and do them well, rather than ‘smearing everywhere’ with small infill schemes with no facilities or infrastructure contributions.
- We need to house our population, and joint public/private ventures often offer the best solution to delivering housing by landowners and local authorities working together.
- There is not enough Surrey to go round to those who want to be in the county, so it is about rationing the scarce resource of space. Alternative housing solutions should be looked at, from self-build flats to shared ownership.
- Planning at the strategic scale needs to be re-invented so we know where an area is headed over the medium to long term, and why.

Debate discussions

- If development can be delivered in an environmentally responsible way, should we do it, and where?
- Should land value capture help fund developments?
- How does meeting housing need fit in with tackling climate change?
- Is there a lack of low cost housing, and why?
- How many brownfield sites exist, and what are the hurdles to getting planning approval?

Debate dates

The CLA South East team is hosting further debates over the coming months, in Hampshire on the future of farming on November 6, and on the Isle of Wight on “food versus the environment” on January 29.

For more information, and to give feedback/suggestions

Call the CLA’s South East office on 01264 313434, email southeast@cla.org.uk, visit www.cla.org.uk or follow us on Twitter @CLASouthEast.