

Planned to death? Homogeneity and housing in Crawley

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Despite a history reaching back a thousand years, Crawley owes its current development and identity largely to its designation as one of Britain's first post-war new towns. 'Crawley New Town' was planned in the late 1940s and developed from the 1950s on a residential district pattern with separate industrial areas to the north and north-east and a modern, purpose built town centre.

Each neighbourhood was built as a self-contained community with shops, a pub, school, church, and community centre. However, this pattern in recent years appears to be breaking down, with many local schools for example closing due to the town's ageing population.

Today, Crawley is a commercially prosperous, growing town. Deprivation levels in Crawley are comparatively low, although they are rising steadily, from the 193rd most deprived local authority in England in 2004, to the 170th by 2010²⁵.

The town reached its designed population of 60,000 in 1970. It currently has a population of 107,000, and it has been predicted that this will grow to 120-150,000 within the next 20 years²⁶.

Although it makes up only 2% of the land mass of West Sussex, Crawley represents 39% of the County's economy. Whilst Crawley has a low level of unemployment (the current employment rate of 76.3%²⁷), thanks in part to local industry (in particular



Figure 6: Queen's Square: the heart of Crawley new town centre



Figure 7: Tilgate neighbourhood shopping parade, Crawley

²⁵ West Sussex County Council. 2011. Indices of Deprivation Report 2010: Results and Analysis <http://www.chichester.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=12980&p=0>

²⁶ Centre for the Cities Crawley Factsheet 2014

²⁷ Ibid

the ongoing expansion of the nearby Gatwick Airport) wages are fairly low, with an average £588.85 weekly earnings²⁸.

Alongside this, house prices have been rising at an astronomical rate. In 2014, house prices in Crawley rose by a staggering 22.4%, the biggest price increase anywhere in the UK outside of London²⁹.

There is significant emphasis on retaining green space in Crawley, partly because it was one of the initial planning aims when creating the New Town. However, as revealed in the findings of this report, this is coming under pressure due to a need to build more housing and services to cater for a growing population.

It is worth noting that resistance to development is not new to the town. Crawley's development as a New Town was in fact delayed by a year because local concerns were brought to Parliament's attention and they ordered a public enquiry before allowing the town to be developed³⁰.

This research explored the housing concerns of long-term Crawley residents, and particularly their fears for younger generations as house prices and rents continue to rise, meaning that much of the housing stock in Crawley is stretching beyond the reach of younger Crawleyites. We were particularly interested in the ways in which the homogeneity of the housing stock in the town has caused problems for younger generations of Crawley residents. Crawley was developed in a post-war era and designed with young families in mind; hence, a large proportion of the housing stock consists of three bedroom family accommodation, with very little in the way of smaller properties. As the population of Crawley ages, and modern family structures change, is the housing stock still suitable for the population?

Figure 8: Small Meads, West Green



Methodology

Two main methods were adopted in this research. Firstly, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with local residents and people working in or alongside Crawley's housing sector. We conducted eight interviews in total: five were long-term local residents of Crawley (all had lived in the town for 20-60 years); two

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ BBC.2014. 'House prices 'rose by 8.5%' in 2014, Halifax reports'. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/30610781>

³⁰ Gwynne, Peter (1990). *A History of Crawley*. Chichester: Phillimore & Company.

were housing charity project workers (one working jointly with the local authority); and we also interviewed the Crawley Borough Council Housing Lead.

The second research method consisted of running a focus group. Through a partnership with Crawley Age UK, we ran a focus group with eighteen elderly local residents, the majority of whom were women. Most of the focus group participants were homeowners who had exercised their Right to Buy predominately during the 1980s.

We were particularly interested in understanding how affordable residents felt the town was, and whether or not they thought accommodation tended to be suitable and of high enough quality.

Through the interviews with the two project workers and the local authority housing lead, we sought to understand how the homogeneity of Crawley's housing stock in light of the town's changing demographic structure, and the town's sharply rising house prices have affected the ability to provide affordable and suitable accommodation to Crawley residents.

Findings

Insufficient affordable housing

There is a shortage of affordable housing in Crawley across all tenure types. This research found that there are a number of growing concerns among residents, the local authority and local third sector organisations alike around availability and affordability of housing in Crawley. However, issues around housing appear to be relatively new to the town. Virtually all of the long-term residents who participated in the research said that when they had first arrived in Crawley during the first twenty to thirty years or so of its development as a New Town, it had been well planned and was well suited to their housing needs.

Participants felt that people coming to the town for nearly 30 years had had no problem in finding rented property; indeed one participant, Edna, remarked that she had been *"offered a choice of properties in several areas of the new town"*. In fact so good was the availability of existing or planned housing stock that virtually all of those coming to Crawley from the mid-1950s until approximately the early 1970s were given a 'pledge' that there would not only be housing for them, but for their children and their children's children.

The local housing lead at Crawley Council confirmed this anecdotal evidence, suggesting that *"this promise of decent housing was important ... it was a combination of job offers and housing availability in a green environment that drove the rapid development of the new town"*.

However, Crawley's housing heyday appears to be well and truly in the past. The majority of participants, particularly those who still had family in the area,

expressed great concern that growing barriers regarding access to, and affordability of, housing in Crawley have become insurmountable. Participants identified the main problems as rising house prices and subsequently high rents, and a lack of available social rented housing.

The fact that Crawley is growing but, by and large, wages are low has created significant differentials between average wages and average rents. This was an issue that the project workers we interviewed were particularly concerned about, with one commenting that *“one of the main reasons the level of private rents in Crawley are very high exceeding LHA [Local Housing Allowance] rates by far is in part because property values were set in 2009 and do not reflect the current economic situation.”* Up to date information on this issue has proved difficult to find but an analysis prepared by Shelter in 2011 of local rent levels gives some indication of the level of this problem (see figure 9)³¹:

	Room	1 Bedroom	2 Bedrooms	3 Bedrooms	4+ Bedrooms
Mean	£389	£639	£792	£939	£1,257
Median	£395	£650	£795	£900	£1,295

Figure 9: Average private rents per month in Crawley, Shelter

There have been significant rises in house prices in Crawley in recent years, with recent data from the Halifax³² suggesting that in November 2013 the average house price in Crawley was £218,844, but that by November 2014 this price had increased to £267,925 – a rise of 22.4%. This has made the possibility of homeownership for those wishing to move from rented to owner occupied accommodation all the more unrealistic.

Affordability and accessibility of social housing in Crawley has fared no better. Crawley Borough Council currently has some 3,000 people on its housing register³³. However, in total there are only 10,500 social rented properties³⁴, approximately 350 of which become available each year³⁵. Building affordable housing has been placed under a dual pressure; firstly the recession has meant that private sector development, which usually makes up two-thirds of affordable house-building, has slowed dramatically. Secondly, as the Council housing lead informed us, Crawley’s expanding population has led to estimates from Crawley Borough Council that the town needs at least 8,000 new homes a year but can in reality build a maximum of

³¹ Shelter. 2011. 'Analysis of local rent levels and affordability' Shelter Private Rent Watch Report'

³² Lloyds Banking Group. 2015. *Halifax House Price Index*.

<http://www.lloydsbankinggroup.com/media/economic-insight/halifax-house-price-index/>

³³ Crawley Borough Council. 2015. Affordable housing in Crawley.

http://www.crawley.gov.uk/pw/Homes_and_Housing_Services/Strategic_Housing_Service/INT180343

³⁴ Crawley Borough Council. 2015. The Housing Register.

http://www.crawley.gov.uk/pw/Homes_and_Housing_Services/Finding_and_Moving_Home/Housing_Register_and_Property_Search/The_Housing_Register/index.htm

³⁵ Ibid

only 5,000 due to there being no further substantial areas of land available for development.

Homogeneity of housing stock

Homogenous housing stock no longer meets Crawley's needs. Although there is some attempt to address the problem in new builds, the homogeneity of the available housing stock in Crawley remains another significant problem. The majority of houses built by the New Town Commission in the post-war years were predominantly three-bedroomed houses. There is therefore a severe lack of both one and two bedroom accommodation available, as well as a lack of accommodation with four or more bedrooms. This is problematic in Crawley, as nearly one third of homes in the town are one person households³⁶.

As was pointed out by one of the long-term residents interviewed, Mabel, the issues of homogeneity have been exacerbated by the fact that *"during its biggest growth phase perhaps 50% of those moving to Crawley were under 16... Since many of them have stayed in the town there are a significant number of older single people ... living in three bedroom houses because they are settled and would not want to move from a neighbourhood in which they have lived for perhaps 50 years"*.

She and other participants suggested, however, that they and other elderly widows and widowers might be willing to downsize to one bedroom dwellings if there were any available in their local area. The recent closure of a number of nursing homes and a shortage of sheltered accommodation is also causing suitability problems for Crawley's elderly population.

Conclusion

Crawley's population looks set to continue to grow in the coming years, making it all the more important that issues around affordability and suitability of the town's housing stock are addressed. Solutions to Crawley's complex and ever-growing housing problems are by no means going to be simple ones. Rapidly increasing house prices on the open market are near impossible to control, and problems with the suitability of Crawley's housing stock are literally built into the town in the form of post-war planning lacking in foresight.

It seems unlikely that improvements in affordability and suitability will be able to keep pace with demand without more greenfield development taking place. This is certainly a potential solution for Crawley; there are a reasonable number of small areas of green space integrated into the existing neighbourhoods which Crawley Borough Council believe could (at least in theory) be used for new housing. However, existing communities have repeatedly blocked such developments because they feel strongly about the amenity these areas have and continue to provide over a long period, alongside a fear of increased density of housing

³⁶ Crawley Borough Council. 2011. *Crawley 2011 Census: Housing*.

damaging the character of the town. Nevertheless the Local Authority's policy of pursuing this type of development will in all likelihood be a necessary one. After all, if opposition to development had been heeded in its entirety in the post-war period, then Crawley would not have developed as a New Town at all.

Perhaps a partial solution to the issue of building housing on green space lies in the redevelopment of empty office accommodation, of which there is a relatively high number in the centre of town, into smaller one and two bedroom flats. However, this too will need to be carefully managed so as to ensure that the likelihood of new employers moving into the town is not decreased³⁷.

These developments will hopefully also address Crawley's second predominant housing issue; that of homogeneity in the stock. Certainly, there is evidence that the issue is being at least partially addressed in current housing development projects that are focusing on building a greater mix of housing type, although there is a concern that these properties will be so high in price that they will remain out of reach for most locals.

Suitability of housing for the older residents is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed. A solution to this issue could perhaps lie in the implementation of a scheme such as one recently introduced in the London Borough of Enfield³⁸, whereby older people in need of care lease their house to the Local Authority to pay for their care costs.

Issues around the affordability and suitability of Crawley's housing stock are complex and far from easily solved. However, we hope that this research will help to consolidate some of these issues, and provide a starting point for constructive solutions.

³⁷ As in the case of holiday accommodation in Blackpool, conversion of business premises to homes risks having an adverse effect on local authority funds based on the current rules.

³⁸ Enfield Council. 2014. *The Keeping House Scheme*