

Prosperity for Dover at half the price

DOVER is on the brink of building up to 14,000 new houses as part of a regeneration programme that is sure to be controversial and invasive. Tory Parliamentary hopeful CHARLIE ELPHICKE argues that tackling a culture of worklessness in a 'broken society' could lead to fewer new homes being needed...

EVERYWHERE I go, people invariably talk about money.

They tell me there is too little money and there needs to be more regeneration. Jobs are harder to get than they should be and a lot of people are out of work. There is frustration that we are so well placed in terms of location, but too often relegated to watching UK Plc trundle through our streets, for too little benefit.

These concerns are right. There needs to be more jobs and prosperity in our community. One person in four locally is out of work. That's 13,000 people. 8,000 of these could work but do not. Wages, at £378 per week, are lower than the Kent average. So, quite rightly, Dover District Council has been advancing plans for regeneration.

The path to increased prosperity for the Dover district is not going to be a bed of roses. Change never is. The difficult choices it involves have been seen in these pages in recent weeks.

A plan for up to 14,000 new homes in the Dover district is a key element of the council's regeneration plan. This allocation was unanimously voted through by all three political parties, business representatives and parish council representatives.

Many in Dover town are wondering

when all the often promised regeneration will happen. Others, especially residents of Whitfield, fear for the future of their communities. Still more residents worry how the infrastructure will cope.

At this point, politicians generally get nervous and head for the hills. Yet Cliff Paul Watkins, the Leader of Dover District Council, has a clear vision and has stuck to his guns: Full credit to him for that.

In the midst of this happy cross-party consensus I must sound a discordant note. I think that 14,000 houses is too many. It will have a serious impact on the district and cause a lot of pain in some communities. I know Dover council will apply for special Government money, yet I worry that all the needed infrastructure will not get built.

Dover council can also be relied on to obtain all that it can in planning gain money and this will help. Yet the current Government has a record of slashing and burning when it comes to infrastructure investment in east Kent. Some 10 years ago, the much needed A2 dualling was knocked out of the programme by John Prescott, and Buckland hospital is under threat.

How sure are we that the Government is going to provide its part of the infrastructure needed for 14,000 homes? I

am clear in my own mind that if I were the Member of Parliament I would be making the passionate case for a proper hospital for the increased population, duelling the A2, upgrading the A20 and the proper planning of other public services not covered by the planning gain money.

And why do they say we need 14,000 new homes anyway?

Two reasons: More people will be needed in the district to man the jobs created by the regeneration and family breakdown in our 'broken society' leading to more people living alone. My hope is that we can get change.

If I were the Member of Parliament, I would support all steps to get the 8,000 workless who are already living in our community into work, so they can realise their potential. We would not then need people to come from elsewhere. I would support steps to help families stay together.

Getting the workless to work will take time. Changing the broken society even longer. The house building plan is for the period to 2025. I hope that in two years' time, we will be able to tackle worklessness and start fixing the broken society. If we can, we will not need all those extra houses. I want to see fewer new homes, with affordable housing priority for our children and grandchildren.

Imagine what it would be like if we can achieve our heart's desire for prosperity, while building no more than 8,000 homes, enable our kids to stay in our community and enjoy the beauty that makes us love our community so much. Success in this enterprise would be a prize indeed.

