

EXPERT OPINION: STEVE NEOCLEOUS



STEVE NEOCLEOUS is Director and Owner of SMN Planning & Development Support, a Sussex-based stakeholder, community and political engagement consultancy that helps planning teams and house builders find support for new homes and regeneration projects.

A former Cabinet Member for Regeneration & Strategic Planning at Adur District Council, he has overseen major developments including Shoreham's Western Harbour Arm and now works with architects, developers and local authorities to build consensus around complex schemes. A lifelong Lancing resident and both District and Parish Councillor, Steve brings the dual perspective of practitioner and public servant; equally at home in the committee chamber or the village hall.

**ENGAGE EARLY;
PLAN BETTER: HOW
SUSSEX CAN BUILD
MORE HOMES
WITHOUT LOSING
LOGICAL TRUST**

The state we're in

Planning in Sussex is complicated; under-resourced; and, frankly, poorly understood. As both a professional adviser and an elected councillor, I see it from every angle. Developers are trying to deliver, officers are stretched, and residents feel shut out. Add local government reorganisation and the coming mayoral spatial plan, and even seasoned professionals are struggling to keep up.

We talk about a housing crisis; but we've also got a communication crisis. Most people aren't anti-development; they're anti-not-being-told. They don't want to be surprised by a crane on the horizon. When engagement happens too late, trust evaporates. When local knowledge is ignored, we end up fixing the same problems on every site. If Sussex wants to meet housing demand while preserving what makes it special, we need a reset — one that starts with early engagement, plain-English communication and a culture of collaboration.

Lessons from Shoreham

The Western Harbour Arm in Shoreham, West Sussex is often held up as a success story, and in planning terms, it is. The local plan committed to 1,100 homes; it's on course to deliver around double that. Over half are affordable, well above the district's 30 per cent target. But numbers don't tell the whole story.

For many residents, the development has been hard to accept. High-rise blocks on the A259 were a shock to a community used to low-rise terraces and sea views. The scale and density felt alien. Concerns about parking, pollution, school places and flood resilience were legitimate.

Developers were under pressure too: dealing with contaminated land, contributing to flood defences and surrendering riverside land for a cycle path. None of it was simple.

Some developers did the right thing; engaging early, holding open sessions, showing residents what was planned.

Others treated consultation as a tick-box exercise, sticking a few boards up in a hall on a bank holiday and calling it a day. Unsurprisingly, those who communicated properly built more trust. The lesson is clear: speak to people before you draw the plans, not after. Explain the constraints and costs, rather than glossing over them. You might not win everyone over, but you'll win respect, and that's half the battle.

How we got here

Our current system is built on layers that even insiders find baffling. In Adur and Worthing, for instance, there are parish councils in Lancing and Sompting but not in Shoreham or Southwick. That means parts of the district have a hyper-local democratic voice; others don't. Residents often assume "the council" is one thing, but there are three layers - parish, district and county - each with different remits. If someone complains about potholes, I have to remind them that's not my patch.

The case for reorganisation is strong; the current system is too confusing. But we have to be realistic about what comes next. When Adur District Council disappears in 2028, the parishes that remain will likely take on new responsibilities: maintaining parks, managing assets, running local events - yet without extra funding and staff, that's not sustainable.

Some towns are talking about new "neighbourhood committees" to fill the democratic gap. The big risk is that we end up cutting one layer only to rebuild it piecemeal later, losing time and money in the process.

Planning reform: people before policy

National government says it wants 1.5 million new homes (actually the same number the previous government promised). The ambition is fine, but the reality is that every local planning team in the country is short-staffed. You can't speed up decisions if there's no one left to make them.

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SIX THINGS A NEW MAYOR SHOULD DO FIRST

1

Publish a 100-day draft spatial strategy

Residents deserve to see where homes, roads and services are planned, who's delivering them, and how they'll be funded. Transparency builds trust; silence breeds suspicion.

2

Create a Sussex engagement code

Make early and consistent consultation a non-negotiable part of every major project. Two rounds of public input, ward briefings before submission, and a "you said / we did" summary should be the baseline.

3

Resource the planners before the projects

Establish a ring-fenced Sussex Planning Fund to backfill vacancies, bring in specialists and speed up decision-making. Skilled officers are the foundation of a functioning system.

4

Convene a Sussex Infrastructure & Housing Board

Bring together planners, utilities, developers and colleges to align housing with infrastructure and skills. Meet monthly, in public, and publish progress reports.

5

Invest in Sussex skills

Use devolved powers to fund training and apprenticeships directly linked to live housing and infrastructure projects: bricklaying, retrofit, civils, and planning technology.

6

Be a visible convener

A mayor must show up. Hold open forums in every district; visit parish halls; explain decisions in person. You can't lead a county from behind a desk.

Before rewriting the rulebook, ministers should fund planning departments properly and insist that statutory consultees like Southern Water and Highways England respond to consultations with clear, site-specific evidence rather than stock phrases. The process is bogged down not because local officers are lazy, but because the system is slow, fragmented and underpowered.

At the same time, councillors should not fear engagement. Too often, members avoid pre-application conversations in case it's seen as "pre-determination." That's a misreading of the law. Talking to a developer doesn't mean signing off the project — it means helping to shape it before it's too late. Early dialogue doesn't weaken democracy; it strengthens it.

The coming mayor: clarity, capacity, communication

Sussex will soon have a strategic mayor with the power to publish a county-wide spatial plan. That's new, and it could be transformative. For the first time, we'll have a single framework linking housing, transport, energy, and employment across East and West Sussex and Brighton & Hove. But there's a trade-off. The further decisions move from the parish hall to the county level, the harder it becomes for residents to feel they have a voice.

Done right, a mayor could give the region a clear sense of direction: identifying growth corridors, aligning infrastructure, and attracting inward investment. Done badly, it could alienate the very communities it's meant to serve. We need to make sure local engagement isn't swallowed by bureaucracy, and that consultation is meaningful, not symbolic.

The prize

Sussex could show the rest of the country what grown-up planning looks like. We can build faster and fairer, while protecting the landscapes that make this place unique. We can deliver homes that people can afford and infrastructure that actually works. But it will only happen if we treat planning as a conversation, not a battle.

Politics has become too tribal; local government too cautious. It doesn't have to be that way. We can disagree and still collaborate; we can listen and still lead. The next phase of Sussex's growth will test whether we've learned that lesson.

If we do, we'll not only get the homes and jobs we need; we'll also rebuild the trust that's been missing from planning for far too long.

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