

Is Kirklees plan for 35,000 new jobs just pie in the sky?

The newly released Local Development Framework states that Kirklees will need to create 35,000 new jobs by 2028 and to achieve this will need to use 270 hectares of land, mostly in the green belt. This is a huge number of new jobs and begs the question of just where they are going to come from?

One of the sites selected for this industrial expansion is in the small village of Clayton West, which serves as an example of Kirklees planning department's flawed thinking. Clayton West along with the neighbouring villages of Scissett, Skelmanthorpe and Denby Dale have all been targeted for substantial housing development too, with the new LDF proposing 1200 new homes for these villages. This represents an overall growth of well over 25%.

Clayton West has been allocated 18 hectares of industrial development on greenland, with the aim of attracting employers to the area. This is a huge development for such a small village and presumably the planners expect jobs to be created for the occupants of the 1200 new homes to be spread across the other local villages. But what are the chances of this happening?

Jobs lost from declining industries have never been replaced.

All four villages developed around the textile and coal mining industries. Forty years ago there were several local mills employing hundreds of people and a substantial mining industry. These industries were supported by a number of ancillary industries, such as light engineering. Most of the people had local employment.

Over the last thirty years both industries have declined to the point where they have almost disappeared and the supporting industries have largely gone with them. There is very little in the way of local employment in any of the villages today and most people commute to work elsewhere.

Over that thirty-year period no major employer has moved into the area to take up the pool of labour left by the decline of these industries. The empty mills and pitheads have become small business units or retail outlets, employing a few people each. Many mills have units available for businesses to move into and although a substantial number of new industrial units have been built, many are still unoccupied.

If no substantial employers have moved into the area over the past 30 years, why is Kirklees so confident that they will do so in the next 17 years?

The planners of Kirklees fail to recognise that the world has changed. Huddersfield and Dewsbury have also lost their textile and engineering industries, which were the basis for employment in the towns. Over the past thirty years they too have not seen an influx of large businesses employing hundreds of people. There has been nothing comparable to the textile industry that has disappeared, and if 35000 jobs are to be created it will surely

require new employers who employ thousands of people rather than a handful each.

If Kirklees has failed to attract major industries, even during one of the longest sustained economic booms in British history, why will it suddenly do so in future? What will change to attract employers here? Where will these 35000 jobs come from?

Manufacturing is unlikely to provide the new jobs required.

Its unlikely they will come from manufacturing, as these industries continue to shed people and only 30,000 people have full or part time jobs in this sector within Kirklees out of a total workforce of 188,000. Covering the countryside with 270 acres of industrial development hardly seems a good plan, when its very unlikely large scale manufacturing of any kind will return to the area.

The biggest area of growth is the service sector where 111,000 people (73.9% of the workforce) are employed within Kirklees. These jobs range from hotel and catering to transport, education and public services. Most employers in this sector, other than public services, are relatively small businesses employing small numbers of people. Crucially, most of them are based in the major towns. If there are to be more jobs it's likely this is the sector they will come from, but many are likely to be part time.

Public services employ 25% of the workforce in Kirklees.

It would be interesting to know how many full time jobs have been created in Kirklees in the past 17 years. Have we managed to create 35000 new jobs during the good times? Who have been the employers showing the greatest growth over that period? I suspect Kirklees Council has been one of them and the University is probably another, since the statistics show 41,700 people are employed in public services in Kirklees, easily the biggest single employers. Neither is likely to continue to grow in future given the economic situation, so the new jobs are unlikely to come from here.

What happens if the jobs aren't created?

So if the jobs aren't created but Kirklees persists in building 26000 new homes what will be the result? Kirklees will certainly profit from the increased Council tax, but at what cost? 26000 homes means an influx of some 50,000 people. There will be a need to upgrade the already inadequate roads, to provide more parking places, more places in schools for the new arrivals, more care for an even larger number of elderly people in future, new sewage systems, more refuse collection, more medical care and so on.

If the jobs don't come there will be an ever-growing unemployment bill, as the new arrivals are added to the 17,500 people currently unemployed in Kirklees. If we can't create jobs for the 17,500 unemployed we already have how will we create jobs for thousands more?

More development adds to Kirklees problems.

If anyone cares to do the maths they will see the numbers don't stack up, it will cost Kirklees Council more than it can possibly gain in increased income, so why do they want

to do it? Even worse it will mean even more competition for the few jobs there are and an ever-greater army of people commuting to work elsewhere.

One thing is certain, if the houses are built the people will come, attracted to our area by the lower costs of living here rather than in Leeds or Manchester. Kirklees will get the costs but few of the benefits of a rising population. For the people who live in Kirklees it will be a nightmare of congestion and the quality of life will be ruined forever. Only the developers will profit.

Who says we have to grow? Not growing could be an option.

Perhaps its time for a radical rethink? If we don't build more houses there won't be an influx of another 50000 people. There won't be a need to try to create 35000 new jobs; people will relocate to the places where there are jobs for them. Kirklees won't need to spend millions attracting businesses or supporting a growing army of people. It could then focus on trying to get its decaying infrastructure up to scratch to cope with the people who are already here.

Perhaps we could focus on finding jobs for the 17,500 people currently unemployed before we make the problem bigger.

Perhaps we can focus on building affordable houses for local young people who can't afford to get their foot on the property ladder, rather than five bedroom homes for commuters. Perhaps too we can start to build homes more suited to a growing number of elderly people. These are the homes the developers never want to build and despite promises always seem to manage to avoid building.

Bigger does not mean better.

Bigger does not mean better, in most cases it means worse, at least for the people who live here. The task of trying to supply all that is needed for the existing population is already defeating the Council and the planned job cuts will make matters worse. Where is the evidence that making Kirklees even bigger will improve things for the people who live here?

So before we concrete over the countryside how about spending some time checking out the assumptions on which the plans are based? We might find they are wide of the mark of what is really needed.

Richard Graham 21 January 2011