

Britain's happiest haven of health and wealth is braced for the bulldozers

By Patrick Sawyer

IT DOES well on almost every conceivable measure from health and life expectancy to economic prosperity and even the amount of sunshine it enjoys.

The result is that for the fifth year in a row, Hart, in Hampshire, has been chosen as the place with the best quality of life in the UK.

But that could all be threatened by controversial proposals to build a new town in the area.

Opponents say plans for as many as 5,000 homes and two new schools on a greenfield site in the village of Winchfield could rid the area of its appeal.

Local groups have described proposals, contained in Hart district council's corporate plan for 2016-18, as "hopeless". One local resident, barrister Peter Village QC, has submitted an 18-page rebuttal of the scheme.

Mr Village said: "We are confident that a proper public consultation... would result in a different housing strategy on a brownfield development for the benefit of us all."

Edward Dawson, of the local Campaign to Protect Rural England branch, said: "There are no sites in our district large enough to take a new town, and this would be the most divisive of all the options."

The council said it was open to consultation with residents and that its aim was to make sure Hart "remained an attractive place to live and work", while at the same time planning for future housing needs and ensuring continuing economic prosperity.

According to the latest Office for National Statistics survey on personal well-being, adults in Hart rated themselves to be among the happiest, most satisfied and least anxious in the UK.

A study by the Halifax bank concluded that the 85,700 residents are among the fittest in the country, with over 97 per cent reporting themselves to be in good health.

Women in the district, which comprises the towns and villages of Blackwater, Hook, Yateley and Fleet, have an average life expectancy of 86.6 years, while for men it is 82.4 years.

Hart also has a high employment rate and average full-time gross weekly earnings of £865 - 37 per cent above the national average of £630.



STEPHEN HIRD

Under threat from the planners: Hart district in Hampshire

'It's safe – and friendlier than anywhere else in the country'

By Guy Kelly

IT'S shortly after lunchtime in Hartley Wintney, in north Hampshire, and all is calm. Children scatter bread in a duckpond. Shoppers trundle along the high street. No one appears to have a care in the world.

Why would we? As residents of Hart, officially the best place to live in the UK for the fifth year running, we are among the safest, healthiest, most solvent and least anxious people in the land. Statistically, this is utopia.

"It isn't surprising we've won again," former estate agent Judith Watson tells me. "We've got everything you could need. The countryside is beautiful, it's well-connected, there's plenty of shops, happy people of all ages and types - everybody gets on... It's an ideal location, don't you think?"

Butcher David Stanton, 52, agrees. "It's quiet around here, and people like that. There's a sense of community, so everyone looks out for each other. I see that here in the shop."

Hart is made up of the villages and hamlets around Fleet, the district's unexciting administrative headquarters. Split by the M3 and a direct train line to London, it's a commuter's paradise: enough countryside to fool yourself into feeling isolated, but connected

enough to be able to get to coast or city in little more than an hour.

So what nudges this quiet corner so consistently ahead of its rivals? At the Cricketers, one of three pubs in Hartley Wintney, landlord Bekim Murtezaj, 44, says: "I think it's the crime rates." Indeed, the figures show 9.5 burglaries per 10,000 people each year in Hart (the national average is 29.6). "It's so safe, and that's because the community spirit is there. Everyone knows each other and acknowledges it. It's friendlier than anywhere else in the country."

Back on the high street, a figure waves at me from a passing Volvo. It's either proof of the area's friendliness or the woman used to teach me piano - I can't quite tell.

The district council's plans for the development of a "new town" of 5,000 homes in the hamlet of Winchfield, as well as at least two schools and a clutch of shops, may imperil the area. Local resistance has been fierce, spearheaded by farmer Andrew Renshaw.

"The main attribute of Hart is its variety of small towns and villages surrounded by countryside. Sadly, the council is hell-bent on destroying it," he says. It is a warning unlikely to be heeded by those holding the power in Fleet. "We are fighting to maintain the character that makes Hart so special."