Should village now officially be a town?

By Georgina Townshend

WITH planning applications galore and a population of more than 10,000, Cranleigh looks as if it now ticks the boxes for what makes a town.

Cranleigh Parish Council has confirmed that it has 'never discussed' the change.

The Knowle Park Initiative (KPI) application to build 265 homes and Crown Hill Estates Ltd's applications to build 75 homes are both recommended to be approved at a planning meeting on Wednesday next week.

Berkley Homes now has permission for 425 homes, adding to the approved Ashlets Lane and Horsham Road applications and Cranleigh has already gained more than 800 future homes in the past two years.

The question has been asked as to whether it can still call itself a village, albeit the largest in the UK.

According to government documents, the distinction between a village and a town is not based on the population size or the number of homes, but the density.

A document titled 'The 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Small Area Geographies explores when a village becomes a town.' It states: "The distinction between a 'village' and a 'town' is based on settlement form rather than population size.

"Where a dwelling forms part of a town there must be at least 500 other dwellings within 800 metres. Where property forms part of a village, there need only be another 35 dwellings within 800 metres."

If the KPI application and Crownhill Estates application, adjacent to the Berkeley Homes site, are approved next week, there will be a total of 765 new homes in the area behind the High Street, between Aldford Road and Knowle Lane.

A spokesman for Cranleigh Chamber of Commerce said: "Whether Cranleigh is officially defined as a village, town or city makes no difference to its unique and special character."

"Being known as the largest village in England, despite several other claims to be the same, is a nice brand message but not fundamental to our identity."

"What makes Cranleigh special are the factors that would remain unchanged even if we became a town."

In 2011 in England 43.7 million people (82.4% of the population) lived in "urban areas" - which are settlements of more than 10,000 people.

Waverley Borough Council describes Cranleigh in its draft local plan as one of the "four main principle urban settlements of varying size" - with a population of around 11,000.

For Cranleigh to officially become a town, it would take a decision by the parish council.

The Local Government Act 1972 states: "The council of a parish which is not grouped with any other parish may resolve that the parish shall have the status of a town and the council of the parish shall bear the name of the council of the town; the chairman and vice-chairman of the council shall be respectively entitled to the style of town mayor and deputy town mayor."

The main difference, were Cranleigh to become a town, would be that it could have a mayor.

MP Anne Milton said: "Cranleigh will stay a village in my mind. It is a community in a rural location."

"I think one of the concerns and planning issues in the village is that the people do not want it to become an urban sprawl. Local people are keen to keep its particular identity. They don't want it to be spoiled."

"However, some people feel that these needs to be more affordable homes for people who work locally, and keep the high street viable."

Mrs Milton said the Berkeley Homes decision was 'very disappointing' and that she has concerns about flooding and infrastructure. "With the Berkeley Homes application, there is a feeling that it opens the door for a lot more homes," she said.

"In my mind, Cranleigh remains a village, with its unique character, thriving high street and a very strong sense of community."

"What matters to people is that they keep that."

Count Councillor Alan Young said: "Cranleigh is certainly a large village and has grown significantly at various times in its history. But being a village is not just about size, it is about the look and feel of a place and its community spirit."

"In that sense, Cranleigh will always be one of the loveliest and most welcoming villages in Surrey."

For more on the latest applications recommended for approval, turn to p2.