



HELEN WHATELY MP
Member of Parliament for Faversham and Mid Kent

HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Robert Mellor
Planning Inspector
c/o PO Services
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HW/AE/JW

17 January 2017

Dear Mr. Mellor,

I have seen a copy of your interim findings on the Maidstone Borough Local Plan.

I welcome your recommendation to reduce the overall housing target for Lenham. This particular village was going to see a 110% growth in dwellings and many of my constituents were very concerned about the impact this would have on the character and surrounding landscape. I'm also pleased that you have emphasised the neighbourhood planning process as the tool for deciding where individual allocations should go, giving local people much more control over the growth.

I'm disappointed that the level of engagement, particularly with parish councils, has been found to be satisfactory, as this was consistently raised with me as a concern. Not only were meetings notes incomplete, but information was not made available until late in the process – for instance the amended housing target – and consultation periods were shorter than agreed with parish partners.

I am also disappointed to learn that you have asked for consideration to be given to retain Woodcut Farm as a site suitable for office development pending a recovery of office development values. Woodcut Farm has previously been refused planning permission because of the impact on the landscape. The site is detached from the built-up area – most of the new housing is planned for the villages on the south side of the borough, meaning employees would likely access it by car, adding to congestion. In addition, any industrial development there would blight the approach to Leeds Castle, a national heritage asset attracting half a million visitors a year. I would prefer to have seen in your report a greater emphasis on the need to seek alternatives to this site.

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I'm concerned that the cumulative adverse effects of the proposed housing on transport numbers and congestion, the already overstretched sewerage system and the loss of greenfield land has not been sufficiently addressed. These very real constraints can and should be given regard in the setting of viable and sustainable housing targets.

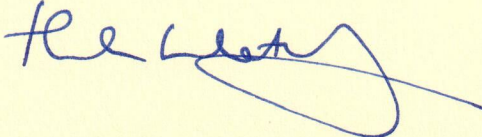
Equally, on the landscape point, it's perplexing that despite evidence, for instance MBC's own evidence base, previous Inspector decisions and submissions from Lenham, CPRE and Kent AONB stating the setting of the AONB to the east of Lenham has low capacity to absorb housing, this point was considered not to carry sufficient weight to disallow development to the east, including Tanyard Farm North.

On transport, I am very concerned about the lack of proposals to alleviate growing congestion. There is little local support for a bus lane and great scepticism that this would be effective. A material investment in the road network, such as the potential relief road to the south of Maidstone, should surely be a priority. In the absence of proposals to mitigate congestion, I cannot believe this local plan is 'sound'.

Your interim report does not touch on the issue of gypsy and traveller sites. This is a point I raised in my submission and I remain concerned that insufficient pitches have been set out in the Local Plan. The continued uncertainty this poses about where travellers will be accommodated is unacceptable to many of my constituents.

On the housing target itself, while the figure has fallen slightly, many representors felt Maidstone Borough's rate of housing growth, which has far exceeded the rest of Kent in recent years, should be scaled back to bring it more into line with other areas. I'm concerned that the objectively assessed housing target is essentially based on a 'spike' and does not in itself appear to be objective.

I hope that your final report will elaborate on these points and look forward to receiving it.

Yours sincerely, 

Helen Whately MP
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