



HELEN WHATELY MP  
Member of Parliament for Faversham and Mid Kent

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP  
Department for Communities and Local Government  
Fry Building  
2 Marsham Street  
London, SW1P 4DF

HW/AE

4 September 2017

*Dear Sajid,*

I am writing to raise my concerns about the emerging Maidstone Local Plan and to request that you issue a holding direction so that you may personally decide whether to use your formal powers to “call in” the plan for your approval.

Maidstone’s latest Local Plan has been in development for some years and has now reached the stage where it has been examined and the Examiner’s Report has been published. This report is due to be discussed at a full council meeting on 27 September with a view to deciding whether to ‘make’ the Plan.

Throughout the development of the Plan, I have raised concerns with Maidstone Borough Council about the content and process. Many of my constituents including parish councils have also raised concerns, but these do not appear to have been heard or reflected in the drafts of the plan.

I would like to make you aware that Maidstone’s Local Plan includes proposals to the detriment of one of our finest national heritage sites, Leeds Castle. The Castle dates back to 1100s and was the principal dwelling of King Henry VIII and his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. It is carefully maintained and extraordinarily beautiful. It attracts over 500,000 visitors each year, both from within the UK and international tourists, as well as being well used by locals. I think it is critical you are aware that this nationally important site will be affected by this local plan.

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If you would like to find out more about what I am doing in Faversham and Mid Kent, please do sign up to my newsletter on my website.

All personal information will be treated as confidential, but the MP may allow access to it by authorised staff, and may pass it on to official agencies where it will help your case. The MP may contact you from time to time to keep you informed. Please let her know if you have any problems with these arrangements.



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The specific issue is the inclusion in the plan of an industrial employment site at Woodcut Farm, a rural location near to Junction 8 of the M20, and on the approach to the Castle. The Examiner supports the inclusion of this site despite numerous objections from the community and local and national organisations. Developing this site would have far-reaching ramifications for the countryside and local heritage assets. In 2010 it was the subject of a planning application (Kent International Gateway). In 2015 a nearby site was also proposed for development (Waterside Park). Both of these were refused on heritage and landscape grounds.

On landscape, the site is located in attractive open countryside within the setting of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Previous Examiners found the site to be unsuitable for employment use because of the visual impact development would have on the rural character and the enjoyment of the countryside here by those using it. I find it extremely concerning to note that the emerging Maidstone Local Plan has deleted the land itself from the AONB, in which it previously sat, which I find pre-emptive of this allocation.

On heritage, previous examinations have found the site unsuitable as employment land because of its impact on a series of listed buildings near to the site. This includes the impact on Leeds Castle and its grounds; the development site can be clearly be seen from the Park. Notably, the Inspector in the July 2015 case concluded that the environmental harm would be greater than the identified economic advantages and the adverse impacts would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits.

I am unconvinced that the Plan has fully considered alternative sites that may be more suited to employment with fewer negative impacts. Little is mentioned in the Plan about the "duty to co-operate" and there is considerable evidence of alternative sites, as stated by Kent County Council at both previous inquiries, especially in Ashford, Swale and Medway. Surely Maidstone Borough Council should have gone the extra mile to explore these options rather than develop such a precious greenfield site.

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In addition to this primary concern, there are a number of other issues that I would like to raise about the Plan.

I am concerned that the Plan does not include sufficient investment in the local transport network, particularly local roads, to support the scale of development to the South/South East of Maidstone. Many thousands of houses are being built in this area, without meaningful development of roads (or any alternative to car transport) – when congestion is already affecting the ability of residents to travel to and from work or access services in and around Maidstone.

I received a letter on 3 August from Alok Sharma stating that the cumulative impact of development and need for infrastructure is a material consideration in planning, yet I do not believe the impacts of development in Maidstone borough have been considered in this way. This view is shared by the Highways Agency, Kent County Council, which has formally submitted objections about this throughout the development of the Plan.

Currently, plans to develop badly needed new schools to meet the growing number of school places required in the area are at risk because of concerns about access and traffic. I believe that further development must be dependent on investment in infrastructure.

Maidstone Borough Council has not made use of flexibilities set out in the National Planning Policy Framework which would enable it to review the housing need for the area in light of the delivery constraints I have mentioned above. This is resulting in the massive expansion of small villages including Lenham (+110% growth), Harrietsham (+28%) and Headcorn (+27%). Understandably, residents are seriously worried about the impact that this quantity of housing will have on the character and identity of these villages as well as the surrounding landscape.

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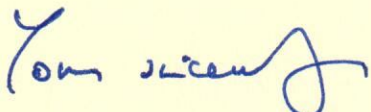

I am aware of the urgent need for homes, particularly affordable homes, to address the overall housing shortage, homelessness and overcrowding. I therefore support development, but I want to be assured that this is undertaken with more care and consideration and in a way that complements our existing towns, villages, countryside and heritage assets.

I share the concerns of local residents and I strongly question whether these locations can be deemed sustainable for this level of housing.

Finally, we have a number of parishes (such as Lenham and Headcorn) working actively on their Neighbourhood Development Plans – as you will know these aim to place communities at the heart of the planning system so that they can shape development in their area that reflects both their community needs (including housing needs) and aspirations.

Time and time again, I have been approached by those working on Neighbourhood Plans saying that their emerging plans are being ignored, despite them collecting clear and robust evidence. The emerging Local Plan is unhelpful in this respect as it sets out all housing allocation policies, including affordable housing, as strategic, thus denying parishes and local communities the right to shape sustainable development at the very local level. I am concerned that this approach is in conflict with the purpose of neighbourhood plans.

Bearing in mind the points I have outlined above, I would be grateful if you would take a personal look at Maidstone's Local Plan.

Helen Whately MP  
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