



HELEN WHATELY MP
Member of Parliament for Faversham and Mid Kent

HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Ms Alison Broom, Chief Executive
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18 December 2020

By email: ldf@maidstone.gov.uk

Dear Ms Broom

Local Plan Review: Regulation 18B Preferred Approach (December 2020)

As one of the Members of Parliament for the Borough of Maidstone, I would like to contribute to the Local Plan Review: Regulation 18B Preferred Approach Consultation.

I am only too well aware of the balance that residents expect the Council to strike between protecting the countryside and providing housing. On an almost daily basis, I receive letters from constituents who are struggling to find homes – both to rent and buy – at an affordable price in this area. Often this can lead to families, many of whom have lived here their whole lives, being forced to move further afield, which can lead to difficulties in maintaining employment and, in particular, continuity for children in full time education. And I similarly receive letters daily expressing concerns about the level of development taking place, and the impact that has or may have on the countryside, transport and public services, and the character of where we live.

It would be wrong to oppose all house building, but at the same time we must make sure our area does not take more than our fair share, to protect our countryside, and to make sure we have the infrastructure needed to support population growth.

It is vital that Maidstone Borough Council takes this opportunity not only to allocate future housing but also to plan for infrastructure to support the growing population. For too long residents have had to suffer from an infrastructure deficit and the Revised Local Plan must be used to put this right.

I appreciate that as one of the Members of Parliament that represents the Maidstone Borough, I do not have a formal role in planning decisions at the local level. I fully respect that the Revised Local Plan is the domain of locally elected Borough Councillors. As an elected representative I do have a duty to represent the thousands of people that write to me about housing, planning and infrastructure on a regular basis; to make sure their voices are heard and ask you to take note of what they are saying.

In particular, I have grave concerns about the proposed Heathlands Garden Village. It is totally against most local residents' wishes. In a survey that my Office conducted last year, of the

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more than 1,000 people who responded, 96% were against the development, with only 2% expressing support.

I have the following points to make in response to the proposals in the plan:

- **SP1 Maidstone Town Centre:** Although it is not in my constituency, I recognise the need for the continued renewal of Maidstone Town Centre, as a major town that serves my constituents. I welcome plans to improve accessibility into and around the town centre.
- **SP2 Maidstone Urban Area:** I strongly support the proposals for regenerating the Shepway area in my constituency. Residents will benefit from improved quality green spaces, health services, equal access to education and training opportunities, and job creation through improvements in public transport and active travel.
- **SP4(a) Heathlands Garden Settlement:** I strongly disagree with the Council's assessment that Heathlands has many of the preconditions for a strategically located development for the following reasons:
 - Building on open countryside: This development will be built on open countryside away from any sizeable communities with little infrastructure to support it.
 - Impact on existing local settlements: the existing area is farmland with a community made up of hamlets and scattered groups of cottages. It is very much in keeping with the typical rural character of the county of Kent which will be utterly destroyed by this development.
 - Lack of Infrastructure: Heathlands lacks transport Infrastructure and accessibility to employment areas making the new development a commuter village rather than one that meets local housing needs. The main road supporting the proposed development is the A20 - a single carriageway that traverses villages such as Harrietsham where pedestrians need to cross the road. It is also an important link road for people north of the A20 in villages such as Stalisfield, Doddington, and Wormshill. The A20 does not have capacity for a development of this size. When the M20 is closed or slow-moving, the A20 gets overwhelmed with traffic – add the traffic from a development of this scale, and the problem will be even worse.
 - Distance from centres of employment: the closest employment centres are Maidstone and Ashford, but Lenham Heath is not easily accessible to either forcing more people onto the roads which are mainly narrow country lanes not designed for this volume of traffic.
 - Affordable housing and poor access to amenities: I recognise the need for more affordable housing in the Borough but this location is not close enough to the support services that people on lower incomes depend on, unless it is supported by a good public transport network. Even then, public transport from a rural location into local town centres is a cost which people on low incomes struggle to afford.
 - Local opposition: this development is completely against local residents' wishes. People chose to live in and around Lenham Heath for its rural character and the countryside. This development will completely change the place in which people have chosen to live.



- **SP4 (b) Development north of M2/Lidsing:** Residents in the Walderslade and Lordswood area of the Boxley ward in my constituency are strongly opposed to the Lidsing Garden Village proposal which is a small hamlet with no obvious way to grow with the current road infrastructure. The development would decimate the gap between Maidstone and Medway and deprive the area of a valuable, irreplaceable "lung" for the surrounding urban area. Given its location the distinct identities of Lordswood, Hempstead and Wigmore are in danger of merging into one large urban conurbation, completely altering the rural nature of the area.

Traffic from Walderslade, Hempstead and Bredhurst will feed on to Lidsing Road down through Boxley which is already horrendously congested in the mornings and evenings and there is no feasible way of making the roads any wider to accommodate the traffic. There are also issues of flooding. Residents additionally make the case that other infrastructure such as schools and health facilities are struggling to cope with current demand, and they would be forced to use Medway's facilities. There is infrequent public transport to Maidstone and new residents would be car-dependent.

- **SP5 (a) Potential Development in the Leeds-Langley Corridor:** I am disappointed to see that little progress has been made on developing the options for a Leeds-Langley relief road. Kent County Council has advised that a relief road would have to involve some local development to help make the scheme financially viable. Until there is a more substantial proposition from Maidstone Borough Council it is hard to see how progress will be made, especially as it is impossible for people to come to a firm view on the pros versus cons until there is clarity on the scale of development involved and the impact on the area. I would encourage Maidstone Borough Council to work with Kent County Council to explore all possible options including a joint bid for central government funding.
- **SP5(c) - Lenham broad location for housing growth:** If the council is going to go ahead with the Heathlands Garden Village, then it would not be appropriate to pursue any more development in the Lenham area. This level of development around one historic village would have a substantial impact on its character.
- **SP6 Rural Service Centres:** It is important that any development in these areas is supported by infrastructure and that their rural characteristics are maintained.
- **SP10(b) Affordable Housing:** I appreciate the case that rural areas are more viable for affordable housing than urban locations. However, I have heard from constituents living in affordable housing (especially social rented) in rural villages who have been 'placed' there against their wishes because of a shortage of urban affordable housing. While it is right to provide affordable housing to meet local need in villages, it does not make sense to make people move out of urban centres to these locations when they don't wish to do so, particularly if there is there difficulty accessing town centre amenities - such as employment, schools and support services including Job Centre Plus. I would urge MBC to make sure sufficient affordable housing is developed in or near the town centre to meet the local need.



What I would like to see in the next iteration of the Local Plan

The Local Plan Review needs to build the homes that local people need. People tell me there is an excess of executive (four to five bedroom) homes in parts of the Borough, and a shortage of affordable homes as starter and family homes. Affordable homes need to be built in sustainable locations near family and community support networks, as well as transport links and other facilities.

I would like to see a greater focus on retirement housing. Building more retirement accommodation not only encourages older people to live in more suitable accommodation that is often less isolated, cheaper to heat, and with fewer hazards that can cause falls- but it also frees up much needed family homes.

In the interests of balanced communities, new developments need to contain a mix of all types of homes. Within this mix Gypsy and Traveller sites and pitches should not be concentrated in isolated locations such as Headcorn and Ulcombe.

The Local Plan Review is an excellent opportunity for Maidstone Borough Council to take a holistic approach to planning in partnership with the local community to build a district of the future. It would be good to see the plan include the following themes as major planning considerations:

- integrated, strong local communities
- health and wellbeing
- sustainability
- enhancement of the natural environment

The Local Plan Review is a critical opportunity for Maidstone Borough Council to provide infrastructure support and build housing that meets the social and economic needs of existing and new residents. I urge the council to take this chance to involve as many residents as possible in its design so that our new Local Plan is one that the whole community can support.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Whately MP

Member of Parliament serving Faversham and Mid Kent