



HELEN WHATELY MP  
Member of Parliament for Faversham and Mid Kent

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Planning Inspectorate

By email

24 August 2022

Dear Sir/Madam

As one of the Members of Parliament for the Borough of Maidstone, I would like you to take into account my views on the local plan, which draw on the views of constituents who regularly contact me about planning concerns.

### **Protecting the historic character of our rural villages and natural environment**

I fully support the Council's ambition to protect the historic character of our rural villages and natural environment and ensuring that all new development is built to a high standard of sustainable design and construction. Every new development should be built to align with the UK's ambitions for sustainability including net zero emissions, while also meeting residents' expectations of high-quality construction and design. Many constituents are rightly proud of where they live and want to conserve and further improve our environment.

### **Improving air quality and mitigating against flooding**

I am pleased to see measures in the plan to improve air quality. Maidstone residents have suffered from poor air quality for many years which we know is detrimental to health. I welcome the plan to tackle this; as we shift to electric vehicles and cleaner energy we have the opportunity to dramatically improve air quality in and around the town. More and more people are also contacting me about localised flooding problems and it is vital that we have the infrastructure necessary for current and future housing, and I am also pleased to see this in the Local Plan.

### **Infrastructure**

I welcome the ambition to correct Maidstone's infrastructure deficit and provide better infrastructure for residents in future. Infrastructure must be delivered alongside development and must be sufficient to meet the increased pressures on roads and services of a growing population.

A case in point is the Leeds-Langley Relief Road, which has been called for over many years yet not taken forwards, despite significant levels of development in the Langley area. I welcome the inclusion of the Leeds-Langley protected corridor in this local plan. I look forward to supporting the Council in future infrastructure funding bids to Government, building on recent successes including funding through the Active Travel Fund and investment to upgrade J7 of the M20.

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### **Regenerating Shepway, redressing the low wage economy and delivering affordable housing**

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.

I also fully support the Council's ambition to redress the low wage economy by expanding the employment skills base to target employment opportunities. There is material deprivation in parts of Maidstone where residents are caught in low wage jobs without the skills needed to progress to higher paid employment. I welcome the Council's commitment to work in partnership with other agencies and local education providers to help raise skills. I am sure this will include Maidstone's Job Centre Plus where staff are doing great work to help those seeking work gain skills and jobs.

Delivering affordable housing is essential. I hear from constituents every day who are struggling to find homes – both to rent and buy – at an affordable price in this area. This can often 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.

That said, I must stress that although rural areas are more viable for affordable housing than urban locations, I do hear 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. It is essential to make sure there is sufficient affordable housing developed in or near the town centre to meet the local need. Although not in my constituency, I would like to question the removal of affordable housing from the barracks site, given the proximity and accessibility of that site to jobs and services.

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.

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In the interests of balanced communities, new developments need to contain a mix of all types of homes. Within this mix Gypsy and Traveller accommodation may be needed but sites and pitches should not be concentrated in a single ward, such as Headcorn. I would also like to see a greater focus on retirement housing and housing for people who need care. This enables older people and those of working age with disabilities to live independently in accommodation that meets their needs and frees up much-needed family homes.

### **Heathlands and Lidsing Garden Villages**

Turning to the two proposed garden settlements, Heathlands and Lidsing, in my constituency. Heathlands Garden Settlement involves building on a tract of greenfield land. Currently there are several small hamlets and scattered groups of cottages and farms in the area. The area will be totally changed if the settlement is built.

The Council is rightly committed to a sustainable transport strategy. As I set out in my previous response, I am concerned that the new settlement may not have access to public transport requiring all residents to have cars and use unsuitable narrow country lanes and the A20. I understand the council plans to improve the road infrastructure as part of the design. A new settlement of this scale must be served by public transport and roads with the capacity to support expected traffic.

I know discussions are in progress between the Council and Network Rail about locating a station in the new village. This would improve accessibility and sustainability, but I am not aware that any commitment has been made to the construction of this station or frequency of train services. I would like to see a binding commitment to the station and funding secured for its construction before any final decision is made on the development. Clearly, this must not be to the detriment of the existing Lenham Station which is important to the village of Lenham and residents living nearby.

The site proposed is a significant distance from local centres of employment, Ashford and Maidstone. This means many residents will have to travel some distance to work, and significant transport costs for those on lower incomes. The inclusion of employment sites within the proposal is an important mitigation, though not everyone who lives in the new settlement will work at those locations.

The Borough needs more affordable housing, but the distance from employment sites and services would make this a questionable location. Although not in my constituency, I would like to question the removal of affordable housing from the barracks site, given the proximity and accessibility of that site to jobs and services.

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The development north of M2/Lidsing also involves building on greenfield land, turning greatly valued countryside into housing. The development would plug the gap between Maidstone and Medway, currently a valuable 'green lung' between urban areas. The distinct identities of Lordswood, Hempstead and Wigmore are at risk of merging into one large urban conurbation.

The settlement will be reliant on road transport, but the area is already congested. I know the Council plans a new spur road from the M2, but I still have concerns about traffic from Walderslade, Hempstead and Bredhurst feeding on to the Lidsing Road down through Boxley where there is heavy traffic in the mornings and evenings.

There is infrequent public transport to Maidstone and the roads are narrow for buses, hampering the accessibility and sustainability of the location. Any settlement here should have a transport plan which will reduce rather than increase the traffic on the existing road network.

Residents also tell me that other infrastructure such as schools and health facilities are struggling to cope with current demand. If the development goes ahead there must be sufficient additional school places and GP provision to meet the increased demand. My particular concern with this development is the cumulative impact if both this Garden Village and the Gibraltar Farm development in Medway both go ahead.

There is strong local opposition to both developments with residents currently living in both areas adamantly opposed to these proposals.

#### **Final comments**

I would like to take this opportunity to put on record my thanks to Maidstone Borough Council, both elected councillors and officers, for the hard work they have put into this Local Plan process. I know it is not easy to meet the challenge of accommodating the Borough's increased housing need. I fully support the decision to proceed with a Local Plan to avoid the consequences of unplanned and speculative development. For too long residents have had to suffer from an infrastructure deficit which is why I welcome the opportunity of the revised Local Plan to help put this right.

I am grateful for the opportunity to express the views of my constituents to the Planning Inspectorate so you can take them into account during this examination process.

Yours faithfully

**Helen Whately MP**

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