



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities
Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities
Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Reference No. HW56408

18 August 2023

Dear Michael,

Re: National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) review / Faversham and Mid Kent Survey

Housebuilding in Faversham and Mid Kent is a hugely contentious issue. Many new homes have been built over the last decade, but still my constituency is largely rural with beautiful countryside, historic towns and small villages full of character. My constituents cherish this and fear the impact of further development.

At the same time, we know there's a need for more homes, with waiting lists for social housing, rising rents and young people living with their parents for longer. People want rents they can afford to pay, and the chance to own their own home someday. The need for homes is a fact recognised by all the major parties, including in their 2019 manifestos.

Earlier this year I sent a survey to several wards in my constituency to gather data on what people want. I received over 2,000 replies and I've summarised the findings briefly below and at greater length on the following pages.

The concerns of my constituents split into two main areas: protecting the local environment, and the availability of local services and infrastructure.

Meeting our housing need with local support means building the right housing in the right area. The support for retirement homes, eco-homes and brownfield sites far exceeds that for larger homes built on productive agricultural land.

I'm in no doubt that Labour's policy to build over the greenbelt isn't the way forward. It would mean a green light for development on any green space, and we need to find a way to meet housing need which responds to the very real concerns of constituents like mine.

Kent MPs have been campaigning about this for years, and we were hugely grateful to hear about your plan to review the National Planning Policy Framework. As you take forwards this review, please can I ask you to take the views of my constituents into account.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Helen Whately', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Helen Whately MP
Member of Parliament for Faversham and Mid Kent

Faversham and Mid Kent / 2023 Housing Survey Results

Protecting the environment

There's a reason Kent is known as the Garden of England. It's blessed with some of the loveliest countryside you could hope to find, and for centuries has produced crops like hops and apples in abundance. It's a huge reason why people choose to live here.

That's why the government's plan to remove mandatory housing targets in areas like ours was supported by over 80% of people – something which I have long called for and am grateful has been listened to.

It's also why, when asked which of the five secondary objectives of the government's consultation were most important to them, respondents overwhelmingly opted for protecting high quality farmland - across every age group. In fact, just 3% of respondents said that the local environment wasn't a concern to them.

However, support for scrapping mandatory housing targets fell amongst younger age groups – with the most marked difference coming between home owners and those in private rented accommodation. Renters were three times as likely to be strongly opposed to these plans, which makes sense when looking at the data on affordability. Only 14% of homeowners were currently finding it difficult to afford their accommodation, versus 57% of renters - with over two-thirds feeling their current housing needs weren't being met.

This points to the need to deliver housing for future generations, while also protecting our natural environment and rural characteristics.

Environmental improvements

One way we could do that is by making sure the development comes hand in hand with nature improvement and restoration – a policy supported by more than 4 out of 5 respondents.

Even in the Garden of England we have areas which could do with some reinvigorating – like patches of wasteland in or on the edge of urban areas. This way we could deliver the accessible green space which so many people want.

The design of properties themselves also offers an opportunity for improvement. A large number of respondents raised concerns about the aesthetic of homes currently being built, and there would be much greater support for homes that were “likely to look beautiful in a hundred years”.

There was also lots of support for houses with their own energy sources like solar panels or heat pumps, as well as mandatory systems for catching and reusing water.

Water quality and availability was raised in huge numbers. Kent residents have had

enough of hosepipe bans and sewage discharges. These issues have both been exacerbated by local development, and while there's some fantastic work underway to make water companies clean up their act, we need to make sure we're planning for the future.

Last year I called for water companies to be given a bigger role in the planning process and given the same importance as other considerations like road safety. I'm reiterating that call today.

Services and infrastructure

When new housing is built it's crucial that it comes with a proportionate boost in local services. People won't support development if it makes it harder for them to see a doctor or a dentist, and that's exactly what the data we collected shows. When asked to choose the most important of the 5 main objectives in the consultation, the impact on services was ranked the highest in every single age group.

91% of respondents felt that development hadn't come with the necessary improvements in the past – rising to 94% for over 60s (the demographic most opposed to local development). This is exactly why I called in Maidstone Borough Council's local plan for review in 2017.

What should development come with?

When asked what services were important to them, 92% of respondents said health, 69% roads and 59% schools.

As a government, we are working to boost the number of GP and dentist appointments across the country, but making sure we marry these up with where development is taking place would help ease these concerns.

People also called for improvements to public transport, more community spaces, and better walking and cycleways.

When asked about how development could support the local economy, 77% wanted better transport links, and there was also lots of support for an expansion of local childcare options (especially among people aged 25-45). People also discussed the rejuvenation of local high streets (supported by lower business rates), more local skills training infrastructure, and after school clubs.

I also asked people how development could help make them feel safer, with nearly half of respondents talking about having more police locally. I'm proud that we hit our target of 20,000 more officers on the streets earlier this year, and I would expect record numbers here in Kent to start making a real difference.

Over a quarter of people also mentioned having better CCTV, and nearly a fifth better street lighting (although there were some concerns about light pollution in rural

areas).

And development would also be more supported if it came with improvements to local road surfaces, as well as better maintained footpaths and pavements for active travel.

Type and location of housing

The survey results show that a big part of the solution might be found in the type of housing that we build, and where we put it.

When asked where new housing should ideally be situated, only 2% of respondents thought building in rural areas was a good idea. That likely reflects both of the issues above - namely that it's away from local services and undermines the county's rural characteristics.

By far and away the most popular options were to spread development evenly around the borough, and place in existing urban areas through increased housing density. There was also huge support for using brownfield sites where possible, and regenerating run-down areas – a policy which won't answer all our needs but could make a very useful dent in the overall figures.

When asked what type of housing would be most preferred, there was lots of support for both first and social housing, demonstrating a thread running through a large number of the responses. While older generations worried about development's impact on the environment and local services, they also often wrote about their concern for young people unable to get on the ladder – especially local families.

The opportunity for retirement housing

Nearly 1 in 8 of all homeowners surveyed said they were actively looking to downsize but there weren't enough properties available. Hundreds of people requested a combination of solo living spaces, bungalows, and retirement communities – allowing them to live with company nearby, and easy access to care and local services.

Delivering these homes would help them and free up family homes which would then no longer need to be built – and perhaps give a local family the chance to buy a home in the area.

Alongside a lack of these properties, many also cited the high cost of moving putting them off. I expect this refers to both the moving costs themselves, but also the tax implications – namely SDLT and the Residence Nil Rate Band for Inheritance Tax.

Notes

Summary of 2,172 survey responses from residents of Faversham, Bearsted, Hollingbourne, and Swale East county division – distributed in spring 2023.