



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Alison Broom, Chief Executive
Maidstone Borough Council
Maidstone House
King St
Maidstone
ME15 6JQ

Reference No. HW43880

13 November 2023

Dear Alison

Schedule of Proposed Main Modifications to the Regulation 19 Maidstone Local Plan Review

As one of the Members of Parliament for the Borough of Maidstone, I am writing to comment on the Proposed Main Modifications to the Regulation 19 Maidstone Local Plan Review. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Maidstone Borough Council, both elected councillors and officers, for the hard work you are continuing to put into this local plan process.

I would also like to build on the comments I made in my response to the Draft Plan for Submission (Regulation 19) in December 2021 about the two proposed garden villages in my constituency. As I said then I understand the pressure the Council is under to deliver housing. I receive correspondence from constituents struggling to rent or buy homes they can afford, and correspondence expressing concerns about the level of development taking place.

I know the Council is finding the current housing need challenging to meet. I think it is worth noting again that due to the housing crisis all the major political parties stood on election manifestos at the last General Election committed to building more homes. This continues to be the position of the Conservative Government, as well as the Labour Party under Kier Starmer, who pledged that a Labour government would build one and a half million new homes across the country within five years.

I strongly believe it is important to strike the right balance between housebuilding and protecting the countryside. That's why, together with other Kent MPs, I have made the case to colleagues in Government that Kent should not take on more than our fair share of development. This has resulted in Government reforms that include making calculated housing need advisory rather than mandatory and increasing the focus on brownfield development in urban areas such as Kings Cross in London.

Residents of the Borough of Maidstone are already suffering from an infrastructure deficit. I must therefore stress that infrastructure has to be built before homes, particularly roads. Locally, there are too many traffic black-spots including Bluebell Hill and Willington Street, and rural lanes are being used excessively as cut throughs by cars and HGVs.

New developments must include affordable homes for local people, as well as homes that are suitable for people with disabilities and enable older people to live independently. They must also be served by public transport, which is accessible, affordable and environmentally sustainable.

While the Borough seeks to meet housing need it is essential that: any loss of natural habitats is mitigated; pollution of water courses is avoided; provision is made for sewage and water infrastructure; and that we see an environmental net gain from development.

I recognise that the new settlements planning approach has the potential to deliver infrastructure alongside new housing. However, that is dependent on the infrastructure being included in plans and delivered.

I know the council faces a challenge in finding appropriate locations for new settlements. The Local Plan proposes two new settlements in my constituency: Heathlands and Lidsing. I set out my concerns about these sites in my submission to Regulation 19 in December 2021. I have set out my comments about the proposed modifications for both garden villages below.

Heathlands Garden Village

The Heathlands Garden Village involves building on a tract of 'greenfield' farmland. It will also encompass several small hamlets, totally changing their character.

In December 2021 I set out my concerns that the new settlement may not have access to public transport, requiring residents to have cars and use unsuitable narrow country lanes whilst adding to traffic on the already busy A20. I feel strongly that any new settlement of this scale must be served by public transport and roads with the capacity to support anticipated traffic.

Like Lenham Parish Council, I am not convinced that the road network in the wider local area can satisfactorily accommodate the extra traffic from 5,000 additional homes and 5,000 jobs.

I am also concerned that the transport infrastructure planned for the development itself is insufficient. I note the inclusion of a railway station in the plans, but I see no guarantee that this will be built.

I understand that several years ago the station to the south, Charing, was threatened with closure and only saved by a vigorous local campaign. Residents there, and my constituents who use the existing station at Lenham, would be extremely unhappy if a new Heathlands station turned out to be at the expense of either of those stations. That is not a solution I could support.

Given the pressure to improve journey times to London and the cost of building a new station I am far from confident that we would see both a new station serving Heathlands and the existing neighbouring stations maintained. Earlier this year the new 'Thanet Parkway' station was opened near Ramsgate, the first new station in the county for eight years, funded by the New Stations Fund, SELEP, Kent County Council, the Government's Getting Building Fund, and Thanet District Council. The business case is worth a read to see what it takes to secure funding for a new station. I note that Ramsgate has over a million entries and exits (Office of Rail and Road (ORR), 2021-22) and, with no nearby station closures, the forecasted number of passengers per annum for Thanet Parkway in 2031 ranges between 114k and 133k. According to the ORR, Lenham station had 87,854 entries and exits in 2021-22. In the absence of secured funding and a robust business case, I do not see how any material weight can be put on references in the proposals to a future railway station.

In any event, a railway station will only serve some of the transport needs of the community because train tickets are expensive for people on low incomes, trains may well be infrequent, and many destinations are not close to railway stations. This

seems the wrong answer for transport, compared to development in a location that is well served by buses and close enough to existing urban centres for some residents to be able to walk or cycle to access amenities.

Without transport options that are low cost and accessible, I am concerned about the suitability of the development to meet the need for affordable housing, and for accessible housing for older people and people with disabilities.

There is also serious concern locally about the impact of the development on the River Stour – as raised in the consultation by Fish Legal. They say that the plans present a material risk of environmental harm to fish and protected species and habitats, and that these risks are not being sufficiently considered.

Lidsing Garden Village

In December 2021 I pointed out that this development involved building on greatly valued countryside and will plug the gap between Maidstone and Medway. This risks merging distinct villages into one large urban conurbation. I share Boxley Parish Council's reservations that, despite modifications to enhance the Capstone Valley natural environment, this will be challenging given the scale of this proposed development.

People write to me every day about the inadequate local road infrastructure. It is essential that our road network is improved by this proposed development for both new and existing residents. I therefore support Boxley Parish Council's view that the Transport Assessment needs to be completed before the development is added to the Local Plan, and that must include the early completion of the M2 J4 spur.

Likewise, all other supporting infrastructure such as schools (including a new secondary school in the North of the borough), medical centres and employment opportunities should be built in time to support new residents to meet increased demand. I am not convinced the local road network will be able to cope with the new development, even with the sustainability plans and modifications to improve the highways.

In summary, I recognise the need to find locations for housing to meet the Borough's housing need, and I know that there are few, if any, sites which do not have drawbacks. I have set out concerns which my constituents have raised with me about the proposed new garden villages. It is essential that every effort is made to ensure development is carried out in a way that enhances the area, protects our natural environment and improves the quality of life of residents.

I would be grateful if you could pass my comments on to the Inspector so they can be taken into account.

Yours sincerely



Helen Whately MP
Member of Parliament for Faversham and Mid Kent