HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

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By email: ldf@maidstone.gov.uk

Reference No. HW43880 11 December 2021

Dear Alison

Local Plan Review: Draft Plan for Submission (Regulation 19)

As one of the Members of Parliament for the Borough of Maidstone, I am writing to contribute to the Local Plan Review: Draft Plan for Submission (Regulation 19).

I would like to thank Maidstone Borough Council, both elected councillors and officers, for the hard work you 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 would like to build on the comments I made in the Regulation 18B Preferred Approach last year and emphasise the following in particular:

Maintenance of the distinct character and identity of villages and the urban area

We must protect the historic character of our rural villages and countryside for future generations to enjoy.

Protection of the built and natural heritage, including the Kent Downs AONB and its setting, the setting of the High Weald AONB and areas of local landscape value

Local people are rightly proud of the natural environment in which we live and it's good to see the Council committed to conserving and enhancing our natural environment.

Ensuring that development adequately mitigates and adapts to climate change, whilst addressing the issues of flooding and water supply and the need for dependable infrastructure for the removal sewerage and wastewater.

More and more people are contacting me about localised flooding problems and it is vital that we have the infrastructure necessary for current and future housing.

Provision of strategic and local infrastructure to support new development and growth including a sustainable integrated transport strategy, adequate water supply, sustainable waste and minerals management, energy infrastructure, and social infrastructure such as health, schools, and other educational facilities.

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.

Improve the quality of air within the Air Quality Management Area (AQMA)

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.

Renewal of Maidstone Urban Area with particular focus on Maidstone Town Centre and areas of social and environment deprivation

As I said in my submission last year to Regulation 18B:

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.

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.

Redressing the low wage economy by expanding the employment skills base to target employment opportunities.

I fully support this ambition. 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.

Meeting housing needs by delivering affordable housing, local needs housing, accommodation for the elderly, accommodation to meet Gypsy and Traveller needs, and accommodation to meet rural housing needs. Again, as I said in my submission last year to Regulation 18B:

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.

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.

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.

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.

Ensuring that all new development is built to a high standard of sustainable design and construction

I fully support this commitment. 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.

Garden Settlements

I appreciate the pressure the Council is under to deliver housing. As I have said before, I receive letters from constituents struggling to rent or buy homes they can afford, and letters expressing concerns about the level of development taking place. I know that the Council is finding the current housing need challenging to meet. I think it worth noting 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.

That said, it is important to strike the right balance between housebuilding and protecting the countryside around Maidstone.

I have made the case to colleagues in Government that Kent should not take on more than our fair share of development. This has already had an impact. Following lobbying by Kent MPs the Government decided to leave in place the Local Housing Need method created in 2017 and is now looking again at planning reforms. I will keep making the case to Ministers to achieve a fair distribution of housing numbers.

In the meantime, I am keen to see the council focus development on brownfield sites, support the re-purposing of buildings no longer needed for commercial or other non-residential uses into housing, and make the most of space above shops and other single-storey buildings in town centre. Regeneration also provides an opportunity to improve accommodation and meet a share of the housing need.

I recognise the opportunity in the new settlements planning approach to make sure housing and infrastructure go hand in hand, and in principle support this approach. The challenge is finding the right locations for new settlements.

This 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 18B last year, but I will briefly reiterate them here.

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.

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.

Finally, there is strong local opposition to this development. Residents currently living in the area are adamantly opposed.

Development north of M2/Lidsing. This development involves building on greenfield land, turning greatly valued countryside into bousing**.** 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 onto 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.

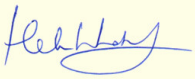
Residents also tell me that other infrastructure such as schools and health facilities are struggling to cope with current demand. If the development goes ahead there must be sufficient additional school places and GP provision to meet the increased demand.

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.

In summary, I recognise that the Council needs to find locations for housing to meet the Borough's housing need, and that there are few, if any, sites which do not have drawbacks. I have set out concerns my constituents have raised with me about proposed sites for large scale development and would like to be assured that the Council is listening them and will make every effort to make sure development is carried out in a way that enhances the area and the quality of life of residents.

I hope the Council will use the opportunity of this latest consultation to listen to residents across the borough and deliver a Local Plan that provides sustainable homes for tomorrow while addressing infrastructure needs today.

Yours sincerely



Helen Whately MP
Member of Parliament serving Faversham and Mid Kent