

**Maidstone Local Plan hearing:
Matter 12 (Transport and Infrastructure)
Oral submission by Helen Grant MP - Thursday 17th November**

(1) Good morning everyone.

As Member of Parliament for Maidstone & The Weald

I speak on behalf of thousands of my Constituents who will be affected by the local plan.

My seat currently covers the majority of the Borough of Maidstone and will increase significantly under the proposed Westminster boundary changes if they take effect at the 2020 General Election.

I believe you are in possession of my letter to the Chief executive of MBC Alison Broom dated 7th June this year and my letter to you dated 12th October 2016.

My submission today is about the human impact of this local plan.

It is not a technical presentation full of facts and stats, it is about the lives of the people in my constituency;

- People who, (I am sorry to say), have lost all confidence in their local planning process;
- People who feel that policy makers and others in authority are failing to listen or intervene;

- People who tell me that already they can't get to work, do the school run or get to the shops and back without undue stress or anxiety;
- and people who say their quality of life has reduced so much that with the prospect of further burden from future development, it's time to leave Maidstone.

(2) The core of my concern about this Plan relates to increased traffic, in an already congested County Town,

that will arise from the 18,560 new houses being built and proposed and with little or no new infrastructure to mitigate the extra vehicles.

Most towns have their traffic problems

but in Maidstone congestion is the rule rather than the exception.

The town is already at breaking point with jams and delays

I want to mention certain areas that are persistently problematic.

My listing will sound laborious, but it is factual

and comes from personal experience, from constituents, traders and bus operators who are struggling to provide a reliable service;

(i) Firstly the town centre's gyratory system has long been a reason why people choose not to visit Maidstone to shop.

Its inefficiencies create long tailbacks on all of the inbound arterial roads including the A229, the A249, the A20, and the A26.

There are problems well out of the centre too, some of them all day long.

(ii) By way of example, to the South of the Borough

- we have major problems on the A229 and the A274 approaching the Wheatsheaf junction from all directions, often all day.
- Further South the A229 Cripple St junction at The Swan pub in Loose is equally congested from all directions
- as is Linton Corner from all four directions at both peak periods;

(iii) In the North of the borough

- the approach to Penenden Heath from Boxley is jammed most mornings
- so is the A229 all the way from the M2 down into Maidstone Town Centre,
- and the A20 London Road Junction 5 of the M20 right down to Queens Road.

(iv) In the West

- the A26 Tonbridge Road from the Bull Inn at Barming to the junction with Fountain lane is very slow throughout the day.
- Hermitage Lane southbound in the mornings, and northbound all day, is a no go zone
- and both of these hotspots impact ambulances and patients trying to get to and from Maidstone Hospital which is also located in Hermitage lane.

(v) To the East of the borough

- Willington St northbound to the A20 junction has long tailbacks during the morning peak.
- New Cut Road northbound all the way from Maidstone TV studios to Junction 7 is just as choked,
- Bearsted Rd near the Hilton Hotel at Junction 7 is packed eastbound most evenings

(vi) Then there's our Medway bridges at East Farleigh, Teston and

Yalding where jams often paralyse localities

spilling back to the main trunk routes causing delay and sometimes

chaos.

(vii) Mr Mellor, I chair a local bus transport committee involving bus

operators, school heads, parish councilors and service users.

The minutes of a meeting last Friday show that the bus operators have had to change school bus departure times to earlier in the mornings, to try and deliver the children to school on time, in the face of ever increasing congestion.

They have had to do this before but there is a limit to how early the service can start before it becomes impractical for parents and students, and that limit has pretty much been reached.

(3) My next point is about a real and present danger to public health.

Maidstone has already been declared an 'Air Quality Management Area' for exceeding Nitrogen Dioxide levels.

The health of our people is paramount. But road traffic emissions are increasing, and will continue to do so with increased housing, with no counter-measures yet in place.

And MBC's Low Emissions Strategy, as set out at clause 5.17 of the Integrated Transport Strategy, is still only at development stage which questions whether the urgency of the situation is really appreciated.

This week DEFRA Minister Therese Coffey reminded MBC of its obligations to reduce emissions in a letter that was formally copied to me.

The European Commission has already launched infraction proceedings against the UK for breach of NO² limits

and I think MBC should also be reminded that that the Government has discretionary power to require 'responsible authorities' to pay all, or part, of an infraction fine – which could be very substantial indeed.

(4) Constraints / Reviews / Mitigation

Having painted a picture of the current state of things I want to raise my concerns that MBC have failed to use the traffic issue as a constraint to housing numbers in the Local Plan.

In August 2015 I wrote to the housing minister Brandon Lewis about this point and to clarify the difference between 'housing need' and 'housing requirement'.

His letter in response was categorical that the 18,600 homes identified in MBC's Strategic Housing Market Assessment were the 'Housing Need' figure and just the start of the process.

He went on to state, and I quote:

'only when constraints are taken into account can the Council decide on how many homes it can plan for. It is against this figure, the 'Housing Requirement', that the five year supply of land is calculated'.

The National Planning Policy requires the Local Highway Authority to produce evidence if they consider the impact of a plan or an application upon traffic congestion to be severe.

And so, in 2015, KCC and MBC jointly commissioned a study to demonstrate the impact of the Local Plan on traffic.

The study showed that, without highway improvements, delays in the town would increase by nearly 40%.

The forecast was described by the consultants as amongst the worst in the country.

Despite this evidence, MBC have subsequently allocated further housing sites in areas of highest sensitivity to increased traffic,

based on their own strategy,

ignoring the findings of the joint study,

and failing to listen to the legitimate concerns of KCC, parish councils, community groups and local MPs.

Given that the evidence was available in the jointly commissioned report to show the Local Plan would have an unacceptably severe impact on the highway network,

I am at a loss to understand why MBC chose not to refer to Highway capacity as a constraint to be applied to growth.

Mr Mellor

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak today.

I conclude by asking that Maidstone Borough Council be directed to fully address our serious highway capacity problem by;

- A. reducing their housing requirement figure through application of constraints, and
- B. the urgent implementation of a strictly timetabled and legally compliant emissions reduction plan

in the hope that these actions will result in a Local Plan that provides the homes we need,
in the right places,
in the right numbers,
with the right infrastructure
and with the necessary safeguards to public health.

Thank you.

ENDS – CHECK ON DELIVERY