

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**STRATEGIC PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE**

**18 NOVEMBER 2020**

**REFERENCE FROM COUNCIL**

**PETITION – HOUSEBUILDING TARGETS AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

At the meeting of the Council held on 30 September 2020, Mr Steve Heeley presented a petition in the following terms on behalf of the Save Our Heathlands Action Group (SOHAG):

*We the undersigned request our elected representatives in Maidstone Borough to:*

- *Challenge and campaign against national Government's housebuilding targets.*
- *Rethink the building of Garden Communities. They are not an appropriate planning policy for the Borough of Maidstone, especially in places like Lenham Heath, Marden and Langley as perfect examples.*
- *Not accept new housebuilding levels that are unsustainable for the Borough of Maidstone.*
- *Complete a full infrastructure assessment before the Local Plan Review and ensure all historical infrastructure issues are rectified across the Borough before projects commence.*
- *Be transparent and engage Parish Councils and local communities before any final decisions are made with regards to planning and new developments in the area.*

In presenting the petition, Mr Heeley said that:

- *The petition had been signed by thousands of Maidstone residents calling upon the Council to rethink its plans on housebuilding.*
- *The SOHAG was opposed to the Council's proposed Garden Community at Lenham. However, through its work, the Group was finding that there was a lot of opposition to the overall planning approach in the Borough.*
- *Many of the people the Group had spoken to appeared resigned to the fact that the Council would carry on with its growth strategy without properly seeking the views of residents. The petitioners were calling upon Members to hear and listen to the voices of Maidstone residents who were saying "Enough is Enough".*
- *The petition was specifically asking Members to challenge and campaign against national Government's housebuilding targets and to rethink the building of Garden Communities as this was not considered to be a suitable planning policy approach for the Borough. The petitioners did not expect the Council to accept new housebuilding levels that are*

*unsustainable for Maidstone and were asking the Council to be transparent and engage with Parish Councils and local communities before any final decisions are made regarding where new development goes.*

- In terms of housebuilding targets, the petitioners were well aware that the Council had made attempts to challenge the targets imposed already but were underwhelmed by the action taken to date which had constituted a few letters to the Secretary of State and a meeting with Civil Servants. Instead they wanted loud and clear voices against national targets and were calling upon the Council to join forces with MPs across Kent and further afield and the Kent Association of Local Councils to amplify the opposition to these targets.*
- In terms of Garden Communities, the petitioners were calling upon the Council to listen to the many residents who are opposed to this form of growth. Maidstone residents did not want new towns built in the countryside at the expense of hundreds of acres of greenfield land miles away from the main conurbations. Garden Communities were the right solution in the right place but were not the right solution for Maidstone. Existing Garden Communities such as Ebbsfleet in north Kent and Kingshill, West Malling were sites which had former uses and were being regenerated. Unfortunately, Maidstone did not have these types of sites. Instead, the Council seemed intent on building over the countryside and green space around existing rural villages such as Marden and Lenham. This was not what residents wanted.*
- In recent weeks, the petitioners had seen and heard Members protecting their own backyards as part of the Local Plan review. It was not good enough to have such a blinkered approach.*
- The Council had made decades of poor decisions regarding the provision of the necessary infrastructure to deal with the growth of Maidstone town centre in a sustainable way. The solution was not to flood rural villages with houses just to get the numbers required. Rural centres like Lenham were already taking their fair share of new homes; over 1,000 in the next ten years almost doubling the size of the village. Urban and suburban parts of the Borough had got to do their fair share too and the Council needed to be serious about its infrastructure strategy to properly unlock growth.*
- The opposition to so many new homes across the Borough was because roads cannot cope with existing traffic. The town centre was congested, and this was exacerbated by the lack of a serious and credible transport strategy and ambition.*
- Finally, the petition was calling on the Council to be more transparent and properly engaged with Parish Councils and local communities. The petitioners understood the difficult decisions faced by the Council in agreeing a spatial strategy but considered that the current proposed solutions were not the answer. The petitioners were calling upon the Council to think again, particularly about the building of Garden Communities. Maidstone residents were saying "Enough is Enough" and it was hoped that Members would listen to and act upon these concerns.*

The Council's Constitution states that a petition, having been debated by the Council, will be referred, together with the views expressed in the debate, to the appropriate decision-making body.

The views expressed in the debate are set out below:

Residents are angry and that is understandable, but the Council is not the Highway Authority. Attacking the Borough Council for decisions taken on transport and road infrastructure is perhaps not hitting the right target.

The Council does not have a strategy for growth. The housing numbers have been imposed on this and all other Councils across the country by the Government. The issue should not really be who is to blame for this but what Members as politicians across the board in Maidstone and in other local authority areas do about it. The Council has been working with MPs and most MPs in Kent have made strong representations against the proposed changes in the Government's planning policy. The Council has been trying to work with them.

Turning to the details of the Local Plan, contrary to what has been asserted, the Council has not made decisions on Garden Communities or any other site allocations yet. The Council as land promoter/developer has a view on a particular proposal but that is not a proposal that has been adopted by the Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Committee at this time.

The debate has not closed, decisions have not been made. The Council has not closed off discussions with Parish Councils or with the public and is still engaged in them. The decisions will be made in the public arena; fully, clearly and transparently.

Fully support the petition on behalf of the people of Maidstone.

Fully support the petition which has arisen out of the frustration felt by residents all over the Borough about housing development without the supporting infrastructure. There is concern that the houses being built are unaffordable and do not reflect the needs/changing requirements of real family situations. For example, in Harrietsham, Lenham and other areas almost all of the houses being built at the moment are larger properties, but starter homes and properties suitable for downsizing are required and they need to be built near to the services that will support the people who will be living there. The petition reflected residents' view that these larger properties and Garden Communities are not the answer. The Council is being over-reliant on Garden Communities in its strategic planning.

Residents' groups and Parish Councils are combining and united in their

opposition. The petition is not about “nimbyism” – it represents collective disquiet about the whole process. There is a need for community engagement and transparency, to share information and to listen to Parish Councils and local residents.

Under recent changes to the planning laws sent out for consultation, the Government is proposing changes to the standard methodology used to calculate housing need resulting in a new national total of 337,000 homes a year. Under the current methodology the Council is required to build 1,214 houses per year. Under the new methodology proposed by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which is presently subject to consultation and might change, this number increases to 1,569 houses per year. Together with others, the Council is challenging the existing and proposed new Government imposed housebuilding requirements, but the Government is being very firm.

The Council is also in the process of amending the timeline for its current Local Plan Review in an attempt to avoid increased housing requirements for the maximum time.

As part of the Council’s Call for Sites exercise, there was a prospectus dedicated to the submission of proposals from landowners/developers for a Garden Community and various proposals were put forward which were considered.

It is now necessary for everyone to work together towards the various stages of the Local Plan Review process and to ensure the delivery of houses supported by the necessary infrastructure.

The Local Plan is more than just housing, it is also about the infrastructure required to support it including medical facilities, open space, libraries and employment. A holistic approach is required.

Whilst Parish Councils are very welcome to contact Members, a lot of Members represent Wards in the urban area of the Borough which do not have the benefit of Parish Councils and, possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, do not have such active residents’ groups. There is a need to ensure that urban views do not go unheard.

There is also a need to consider the other changes the Government is considering to the current planning system.

No decisions have been made yet. Garden Communities are currently being assessed. It is necessary to go through the process to provide the evidence to demonstrate a sound Plan whilst at the same time lobbying the Government for a reduction in the housebuilding targets.

We are all defending our areas and certainly looking at the evidence in

relation to the sites coming forward. Ebbsfleet was a development where the whole planning process was taken away from Dartford Borough Council.

There will be an opportunity to engage with residents through Regulation 18b of the current Local Plan Review. If the Council moved straight to Regulation 19, it would be for the Inspector to go through evidence that he/she may not necessarily be familiar with as a potentially non-resident.

In my view, the Council is probably not competent to deliver the supposed benefits of a Garden Community without all the obvious adverse impacts and I have always objected to the way the Council approaches these matters, but I must object to the statement that the urban and suburban areas need to take their fair share.

That is not what the petition says, and it is not what people have signed up to. It ignores the fact that urban and suburban Maidstone have taken the lion's share of development for years. I do not wish to see the countryside needlessly churned up and we do need to be pushing back on the Government's targets, but, to be clear, the town is literally choking and should not be used as an easy solution. We have done our bit in the town. Most of the brownfield sites have been used because we have borne the brunt for twenty years; so no more please.

I have every sympathy with the petitioners, but there is no more space left in the urban/suburban areas to build. Infrastructure is needed to support new development and people to support that infrastructure. People think that signing the petition will make a difference, but if the Council does not comply with the requirements, there will be an Inspector who does it for us.

As far as I am aware all national parties acknowledge the same level of housebuilding. The alternative which I think the petition is asking us to consider is this Council will not accept the new housebuilding levels because we do not think it is right for our Borough. However, it is necessary to weigh up the consequences and the consequences are that it will not stop development. It will come; it will be developer-led, market-led, approved by an Inspector piecemeal. We have to decide whether it would be appropriate to respond to what the residents are saying across the Borough, but what a price would be paid. I would welcome another petition asking residents whether they want the Council to let the market take over or try and keep some sort of control of the process locally.

A copy of the briefing note which was prepared to assist Members in their consideration of the petition is attached as Appendix A.

**RECOMMENDED:** That the Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Committee consider the petition relating to Housebuilding Targets and Infrastructure together with the views expressed during the debate at the Council meeting.