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Strategic Planning
Maidstone Borough Council
Maidstone House, King Street
Maidstone, Kent
ME15 6JQ

10 December 2021

Dear Sirs

Re: Representations opposing the Maidstone Borough Council Policy SP4(b) contained within the Maidstone Local Plan Review, a proposal to construct a new Garden Settlement of up to 2,400 homes at Lidsing on the borders of my constituency of Gillingham and Rainham.

I am writing to you as the Member of Parliament for Gillingham and Rainham in order to stress my complete and total opposition to Maidstone Borough Council's continued support for a new garden settlement at Lidsing. This proposal amounts to up to 2,400 homes on the borders of my constituency and remains undiminished further to the Regulation 18b consultation of 2020/21 and the publication of your draft proposals ahead of the ongoing Regulation 19 consultation.

As I advised you in my letter of 15th December 2020 as part of your Regulation 18b consultation I consider this proposal to be completely and utterly unacceptable. That was the view that had been shared with me by many constituents at that time, it was the view of Cllr Rodney Chambers OBE and Cllr Diane Chambers who represent Hempstead and Wigmore on Medway Council, the most negatively impacted ward in my constituency by these proposals and it was the view of many other local councillors. It was also the view of 10 local councillors who signed my petition opposing this development that I submitted on the floor of the House of Commons on 9th December 2020.

It was also the expressed view of large numbers of my constituents who took part in your Regulation 18b consultation 12 months ago, despite not being residents of the Maidstone borough.



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What I find upsetting about this proposal as put forward by Maidstone Borough Council, and in the actions of Maidstone Borough Council over the last twelve months, is that despite almost universal opposition from the immediately neighbouring communities as well as from the residents of Lidsing itself, and the many concerns that they raised and that I myself raised, that Maidstone Borough Council does not appear to have taken into account the objections that we have made loud and clear.

If the public is to have confidence in how Local Government manages the planning system – in this case Maidstone Borough Council, then it must take into account the views, wishes and concerns of the public based upon the merits of the points that they put forward. In my view this, sadly, does not appear to be the case in this instance by Maidstone Borough Council.

I therefore reiterate my concerns below that I raised with you on 15th December 2020, and which are heightened by the fact they don't appear to have been listened to and addressed subsequent to the Regulation 18b consultation that was closed on 8th January 2021.

1. Protecting Local Greenspaces

As I pointed out to you in my representations of 15th December 2020 the constituency of Gillingham and Rainham is the most densely populated constituency in Kent – and part of the Medway Towns which is the largest conurbation in Kent.

The Capstone Valley within the Medway Unitary Authority is one of our most important greenspaces – the emerging Local Plan in Medway most recently published in draft format in September 2021 recognises the importance of the Capstone Valley in not designating any new sites for development in the Hempstead & Wigmore and Lordswood & Capstone wards which share the Capstone Valley between them.

It remains outrageous that not only does Maidstone Borough Council seek to effectively enclose the Capstone Valley by building across it on the Maidstone side of the boundary; it is seeking to create an urban border between the Medway and Maidstone local authorities. This is the antithesis of preventing urban sprawl.



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In an appendix published by Maidstone Borough Council as part of the evidence base, the point is conceded that Lidsing is '*...an urban extension to Medway but delivered within Maidstone along garden community lines.*' In that case, Maidstone Borough Council should not be bringing forward such a proposal.

I also note that the Maidstone Borough spatial strategy, contained within the Adopted Local Plan of Maidstone Borough Council, includes the following clause:

'13. In other locations, protection will be given to the rural character of the borough avoiding coalescence between settlements, including Maidstone and surrounding villages, and Maidstone and the Medway Gap/Medway Towns conurbation.'

In any case, a strategic gap should be maintained between the urban areas of Medway and Maidstone by agreement of both the Medway Unitary Authority and the Maidstone Borough, which, I understand has been endorsed on the part of the Medway Unitary Authority for some time and which as I highlight in the above clause from Maidstone Borough Council's spatial strategy that they appear to support this policy as well.

2. Disproportionate scale of the proposal

I find it to be deeply concerning that in the intervening time since the Regulation 18b Consultation Maidstone Borough Council has not sought to address concerns in conjoining a new settlement to the borders of the Medway Unitary Authority when it does not have a mandate from Medway Residents to do so.

In the Autumn of 2020 Maidstone Borough Council was proposing to construct *approximately 2,000 homes* at Lidsing prior to the Regulation 18b consultation and this point for *approximately 2,000 homes* has been further reiterated in these consultations. However, the evidence base published by Maidstone Borough Council further to their proposals, state in appendices that the proposal is for up to 2,400 homes. I find this inconsistency in and lack of clarity to be completely unacceptable.



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The scale of opposition from Medway residents including myself as the Member of Parliament for Gillingham & Rainham, Local Councillors and the Unitary Authority is overwhelming, yet Maidstone Borough Council is not being upfront on just how many homes they wish to build. If Maidstone Borough Council is seeking 2,400 homes in Lidsing then local residents deserve to know this.

As I advised in my representations of 15th December 2020, this proposal would lead to the conjoining of the settlements in Medway of Hempstead in my constituency and Lordswood in Chatham & Aylesford and change the very nature of their towns. Without the clear support and consent of both communities you should not move ahead with this proposal and it is clear, given the level of opposition from local communities, that such support and consent is not, and will not be, forthcoming.

3. Local Transport Infrastructure

Due to the wholly inappropriate siting of this proposal in the strategic gap between Medway and Maidstone it is situated on a local road network mostly comprised of B-roads and not close to any railway lines supporting either the Medway Towns or Maidstone, as I raised in my previous representations.

I note that Maidstone Borough Council maintains its previous proposal to provide for a new connection to the M2 at Junction 4 – this is not going to help with inevitable heavy local traffic into the Medway Towns putting additional pressure onto local services here, or likewise for that matter, into Maidstone. The M2 runs east/west through the strategic gap bypassing both population centres and passing in between them, Medway and Maidstone are conversely north and south of Lidsing and not east and west.

A solitary orbital bus route taking in Hempstead, Lordswood and Lidsing would do little to alleviate the traffic situation as Lordswood and Hempstead by their nature are suburbs outside of the main retail and commercial centres within Medway. Residents of Lidsing in seeking to access services in Medway would need to travel further and deeper in many cases than this bus route would provide for and may therefore chose to drive.



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I am advised by a constituent that there is already significant traffic in the local area in HGVs travelling to and from the Bredhurst Business Park just outside of my constituency. Maidstone Borough Council therefore in putting forward these proposals and in continuing to not provide sustainable solutions to address the inevitable increased usage of existing roads in my constituency brought about by thousands of new residents at new homes in Lidsing and businesses from new industrial sites will lead to significant congestion.

It would therefore lead to increased journey times and increased air pollution in Gillingham & Rainham through no fault of local residents or that of Medway Council.

4. Healthcare Provision

I note that revised proposals this year include for a health centre to be provided as part of this development, however no details have been provided to substantiate what services and what scale of service this centre would provide for. This lack of clarity on such a vital aspect of these plans is thoroughly unwelcome and further demonstrates how little regard has been paid to the need of existing local residents and in my constituency.

Likewise, the point has been made within documents passed to Councillors at Maidstone Borough Council earlier this year that increasing capacity at Medway Maritime Hospital in my constituency is under consideration as part of this proposal – *‘Medway Maritime Hospital – New hospital ward capacity and diagnostic services.’* I take this as an acknowledgement from Maidstone Borough Council that they anticipate the daily flow of residents from Lidsing will disproportionately gravitate towards my constituency within Medway rather than to Maidstone.

It is wholly unfair that Medway Maritime Hospital, as managed by the Medway NHS Foundation Trust which is in place to support the residents of Medway and Sittingbourne, is being co-opted by Maidstone Borough Council to support its own housing ambitions at Lidsing rather than those of your own health authorities.



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This proposal does not clarify any further details on the scale of the additional capacity to be provided at Medway Maritime Hospital, but I must stress that in supporting the needs of existing residents the hospital is already under exceptional challenges. Further to meetings with the Chief Executive earlier in the Autumn, myself and other Local MPs whose constituents are supported by Medway Maritime Hospital wrote to the Minister of State for Health on 5th November 2021 advising that tens of millions of pounds are required to upgrade existing services, and moving the hospital to a larger site or building a second hospital are required to support the health needs and address existing health challenges amongst the existing population and from additional population growth in the coming years.

It is exceptionally unfair in these circumstances for the hospital to be asked to find additional capacity on behalf of a neighbouring local authority operating under a different trust when it may find improvements easier to secure within its own boundaries in the Maidstone area.

5. Schools

Your proposals to provide school places for children living in the proposed settlement appears to be unchanged which is extraordinary given the concerns I and many other residents raised with you last year.

In September, I was delighted to attend the opening of the Leigh Academy Rainham, the first entirely new secondary school in my constituency for many years, a school which was built to address a shortage of secondary school places in my constituency and across Medway.

Likewise, a second entirely new secondary school is presently being planned within the Rochester and Strood constituency and atop this many other secondary schools across the three constituencies of Medway have had to expand their premises and increase their cohorts due to significant growth in the 11-18 population in Medway over recent years in order to



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ensure that we can provide enough school places to all of our children.

I note that the *Maidstone Garden Communities: Deliverability and Viability Assessment* published in 2020 advises with reference to secondary school provision at Lidsing that:

'Secondary: Exact provision not identified: Secondary places are proposed to be provided on a 2-ha site to the north of the boundary if the site is appropriate. If not, a different form of offsite provision would be proposed.'

I am concerned by a lack of clarity on this issue, and with reference to the meaning of *'north of the boundary.'* If Maidstone Borough Council is seeking to build a secondary school north of Lidsing and therefore within the Medway Unitary Authority then this is completely and utterly unacceptable and this point must be fully clarified and addressed.

Considering the de-facto acknowledgement from Maidstone Borough Council that Lidsing residents would travel north into Medway for hospital services rather than travel into Maidstone then you can presume they will do the same in seeking both primary and secondary school places at schools in Medway. Due to the very significant pressure on school places in Medway, it is completely unfair on local residents that potentially thousands of residents outside of the Unitary Authority living in a town built on behalf of another local authority will be looking to compete for those same under-pressure places at Medway primary and secondary schools.

It is abundantly clear to me further to the Regulation 18b Consultation, to residents across Gillingham and Rainham and wider afield across Medway that Maidstone Borough Council has scant regard for the concerns of residents in Gillingham & Rainham and across Medway despite the very heavy burden of this development falling upon ourselves and not on Maidstone residents.

I would hope that through this Regulation 19 Consultation that you will take into account our very substantial and multifaceted concerns that this development is not fit for purpose and far too little consideration has been given to the impact it



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will place upon local services, infrastructure, availability of greenspaces, competition for school places, GP places and also employment in a neighbouring authority where residents do not have representation on Maidstone Borough Council and its officials who are endorsing and putting forward this proposal.

In consideration of all of these issues, Maidstone Borough Council should drop its proposal at Lidsing completely.

I wrote to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on 8th October 2021 raising my concerns regarding a number of unacceptable large-scale developments being simultaneously proposed in a disjointed way in my constituency or on the borders of it, including Maidstone Borough Council's proposal for a new settlement at Lidsing, and how these must be opposed.

I will continue to fight this unacceptable proposal at each and every stage and with every means as a Member of Parliament on behalf of all my constituents and in these efforts I can assure you I will continue to be joined by my local constituents, by campaigners and by councillors.

Yours sincerely

Rehman Chishti MP