

REHMAN CHISHTI MP - PUMP LANE PLANNING INSPECTORATE ORAL STATEMENT – TUESDAY 16TH FEBRUARY 2021 (CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)

Madam - Good morning and thank you for the opportunity today to give evidence to this inquiry with regards to the Pump Lane development in my constituency of Gillingham & Rainham.

At the very outset, my view is clear – I have consistently and strongly opposed this development from the very outset in 2019, taking into account local knowledge of the area, residents' views and I fully support Medway Council's position and arguments in opposition to the development.

It is a real privilege and an honour to represent my hometowns of Gillingham & Rainham as its Member of Parliament since 2010.

My family and I have lived in the towns since 1984, now over 36 years, since I moved here aged 6, and you can say that I know the area pretty well.

The Riverside Country Park and the surrounding area is an area in which I regularly visit to go for a walk or a run, I know it very well.

During my time as an MP, I have always fought for my constituents' best interests across the spectrum.

Planning developments are one of the issues that is raised most regularly with me by constituents.

This planning development for 1,250 houses at Pump Lane is one of the largest single developments that has been proposed in my constituency whilst I have been the local MP.

I wrote to the Head of Planning at Medway Council on 12th July 2019 setting out a clear case for why the development should be rejected – a copy of which I shared in my written submission to the Planning Inspectorate.

I am here to represent the views of the thousands of constituents who have expressed their total opposition to this development.

In fact, all the email correspondence I have received on this issue from constituents has been in opposition to it. The only correspondence I have received in support is from the developer.

My main argument today is that the proposed development is unsustainable for my local community and any potential positives of the development are outweighed by its negative impact on our local area.

For me, housing and planning developers of a strategic scale, as this proposal is, need to go through a Local Plan, put together by local authorities and in consultation with local residents, in which a number of different proposals and strategies are considered. This site has not been identified by the local authority in any way, shape, or form for planning development. Therefore, it would be wrong in principle to grant this application contrary to that very basic principle.

I accept that Medway Council's track record on finalising a Local Plan has faced many challenges and the situation is not ideal.

I would like to make it clear from the outset that I fully accept the need to increase housing provision in Medway.

The Government's current methodology means that Medway needs to build 1,662 dwellings per year. In terms of the Council's Local Plan this means building 28,300 homes by 2037.

Medway Council will be meeting its required housing need through the plan-led process, which allows for the merits of alternative strategies (and alternative strategic sites) for meeting that need to be assessed and for the necessary infrastructure to be provided in an integrated manner.

I support new housing where it can be sustainably built, ideally on brownfield sites, and with the views of the local community taken into account. With regards to houses being built on green spaces, of course one needs to look at that when the need is required, however, where we are considering sites of such a strategic scale it needs to go through a Local Plan procedure and with full public consultation.

I have worked closely with Medway Council advocating for the delivery of appropriate new housing and the necessary supporting infrastructure they require.

Many hundreds of houses have been built in my constituency in the last decade, such as apartment blocks on the waterfront on Gillingham Pier where I myself used to live, and in 2017, Medway Council opened Centenary Way, the second

phase of a 58 home development, the largest council bungalow site in the country being built at the time.

Additionally, I lobbied and had meetings with the Communities Secretary in supporting the ultimately successful Housing Infrastructure Fund bid of Medway Council.

This will mean £170m of funding in Medway to provide over 12,000 new homes on the Hoo Peninsula.

As stated in my opening, my first objection is that this is too large scale a development on that specific site and a site which has not been identified by the local authority for housing.

I'll now set out four key objections which local residents have raised with me.

First, this development is an unacceptable intrusion and attack on valued green spaces in Gillingham & Rainham.

The land on which this development is proposed is rural and mainly comprised of high-quality farmland, which I understand surveys have confirmed to be rated in Grade 1 and Grade 2.

There are also leisure facilities available to the public such as bridle paths, and several small country roads.

If this development goes ahead, over one hundred acres of high-quality land will be lost forever, and the green and rural environment of the site itself but also the surrounding area of Lower Rainham will be badly damaged.

The development would also have a harmful impact on our local heritage, with many heritage sites nearby which would be negatively impacted.

For example, there are several listed buildings, in close proximity including the Grade II Pump Farmhouse, as well as two Conservation Areas at Lower Tywdall and Lower Rainham.

The Council has stated that the development would be contrary to the Local Plan and the supposed benefits of the development would not outweigh the harm to the heritage sites, nor the harm to the landscape.

Furthermore, during the Local Plan process the Council undertook a call for sites and a Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA) which identified what sites were considered to be suitable, available and deliverable and this went to Cabinet in December 2019. This did not show the Pump Lane site as meeting that criteria.

The proposed development would have a significant long-term negative impact on the landscape, which so many residents, including myself as I regularly run in the area, enjoy.

In my view, new housing should be built primarily on brownfield sites, with appropriate supporting infrastructure. Where greenfield development is necessary, this should only be where the environmental impacts can be adequately addressed and taking into account the views of the community.

I have made this point repeatedly during my time as an MP, for example, in my representations to Medway Council regarding the new Local Plan on 31st March 2017 and 25th June 2018.

My constituency contains some of the most densely populated wards in the Medway Unitary Authority, such as Twydall, directly to the south of this development.

At 1,250 homes on little more than 126 acres, the new development would be more densely populated than Twydall already is.

I accept that with good urban planning a densely populated area can be well supported.

But this relies on significant further resources to ensure extra school places, GPs, public transport links and road capacity are readily available.

This leads me on to my second point with regards to the educational provision for local children, with the addition of an extra 1,250 homes being proposed, something which has also been raised with me by local residents.

The development proposes the construction of a primary school, however local primary schools are already at capacity.

I understand that the development will make financial contributions to secondary schools, but no physical provision is being made for secondary school provision, putting the existing schools under additional strain.

Thirdly, I'd like to move on to the serious impact this development will have on GP and healthcare services, which are already under strain in the local area.

As an MP, I have worked tirelessly to improve public services in Gillingham & Rainham, regularly making representations to national and local Government for the additional resources our local healthcare system needs.

Our local hospital, Medway Maritime Hospital, already covers half a million people and is already overstretched. Further housing development would put extra pressure on the hospital.

I understand that the Kent & Medway NHS Clinical Commissioning Group and the developer have reached an agreement to fund the creation of additional facilities away from the site of the development.

This will simply not solve the issue. The Section 106 agreement will not provide additional GPs, which is what our local area needs.

Finally, I'd like to address the fourth issue; the impact that this development will have on local transport infrastructure.

Despite its large scale, there is no provision for any reasonable improvement in local infrastructure or additional public transport.

As somebody who lives very near to the proposed development and walks and runs through the Lower Rainham Road, both in the morning and evening and travelling throughout the constituency in the day, I see the real pressures already on the existing roads.

The new development will lead to a significant increase in the number of vehicles on the local road network, which is already highly congested, such as the A2 through Rainham which is already overcapacity.

This would lead to longer journey times for residents and concerns about increased air pollution.

Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, the proposal to provide additional healthcare facilities away from the development site would create even more pressure on the local road network, as residents are forced to travel further to access these services.

In conclusion, I hope I have set out briefly why I and the overwhelming majority of my constituents who have contacted me are against this unsustainable, unacceptable development and I would urge you to reject it.

The evidence the Inspectorate would have read from local residents and community groups, along with my previous written submissions and Medway Council's evidence, clearly show that the development is unsustainable.

It would have serious negative consequences for my constituents, who have also strongly expressed their opposition to it

Thank you again for giving me the opportunity to present my evidence today. I am happy to take questions, if there are any.