

Firstly, I must point out that the Member of Parliament, whilst having the chance to make a submission during the consultation period, does not have a formal vote, or ability to alter the Local Plan. Nor is this a partisan political issue, as Canterbury City Council's Local Plan Working Group is made up of members of all the political parties currently occupying the seats on the Council (Labour, Conservatives, Greens, and Liberal Democrats) all of whom unanimously voted for this version of the Local Plan 2040, written in conjunction with the Council's Planning team. This is a matter of record, available to view, so any attempt by one or more of those political parties to pretend otherwise for political gain would be a highly dishonest and cynical distortion of democracy, particularly in the period leading up to a General Election.

This is of course mostly a local issue, but there are many crossover policy issues that stem from recent and historic national approaches to land use, housing targets, environmental and planning policies, as well as several other current social and political issues such as the right to affordable and safe homes for all.

I have received many emails, comments, letters and have read all the submissions from local groups and interested parties. I have met and discussed this with elected members of Canterbury City Council and Kent County Council and protesters opposed to various parts of the Local Plan. Groups such as Save The Blean, Conserve Adisham's Rural Environment, groups concerned with the proposed new school development in Church Street, the increase of housing numbers in Chestfield and representatives of local parish councils.

These are not necessarily people used to waving placards, nor individuals or groups intent on disruptive protest or objecting to all new developments for the sake of it. These are largely groups concerned with the potential dramatic changes to our local and historic environment, our landscape, our precious green spaces, and our shared community assets.

I know that Canterbury City Councillors, faced with an extremely difficult legacy, strived to undo the highly unpopular plan put forward by the previous administration. The controversial '15 minute city' with 'zones' was ill thought-through, ridiculed in the national press, and ultimately changed the political make-up of the City Council.

In an effort to reverse many of those decisions, the new political coalition has sought to prioritise alternatives to car travel, putting buses, cycling and walking at the heart of the Local Plan. The proposed sites they removed from previous plans were green-field, prime agricultural land, and there appeared to have been priority given to road building and car travel, with not nearly enough priority given to biodiversity or the building of sustainable net zero homes.

These are issues that have been a key part of my work as a Member of Parliament of a largely rural part of the 'Garden of England' and that I know to be extremely important to very many of my constituents.

So, while this latest Local Plan has proved controversial and has sparked much debate and high feeling, the positives must also be recognised, such as the 20% biodiversity gain, net zero homes, and the 'bus first' strategy.

I want to highlight just a couple of the proposals here. This by no means indicates a lack of interest or engagement in the other parts of the plan raised with me.

During my seven years as a Member of Parliament, more distraught parents and carers with children who have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have come to see me in my surgeries than any other group of constituents. Children who have been failed throughout their education journey and who are often sent out of our area due to lack of adequate specialist provision here in East Kent. The requirement for a modern, well-equipped specialist facility to meet their needs here, removing the need for hours of travel, is now desperate. I welcome the proposal that Kent County Council uses land already belonging to them (such as the site at Church Street) as it would cut out so many hurdles and allow the school to be built relatively quickly. The local group of residents, dog walkers and those who enjoy the area have done extensive research and presented thoughtful and detailed reports suggesting alternative sites, exploring the issues of access, impact of increased traffic and the loss of a rare green space. However, it was clear from my recent meeting with Kent County Council that they have ruled out every suggested alternative site, and that they now consider this the only option for this school.

If re-elected, I am intent on continuing those constructive conversations with residents and KCC, but in my view, the need to address the dire situation with SEND provision in our part of Kent is of paramount importance.

The Save the Blean campaign has brought together so many residents across a large section of the Canterbury constituency. The proposed sale of the University of Kent land to use for thousands of homes is extremely unpopular and has caused a great deal of distress to many. It is personal to me and my family as I am not just a local politician, but also a resident and I feel it is important that I am clear about this in my submission.

But primarily, as the local Member of Parliament, regardless of any personal views, or party-political affiliations, I consider it my absolute duty to represent all those constituents who have put a great deal of work, time, effort, and energy into coming together as a community. There is such strong opposition to a development which would effectively change the landscape so dramatically and have a huge impact on many people's daily lives and enjoyment of our surroundings, putting huge strain on our infrastructure and, I believe, the mental and physical health of residents. This would effectively create a new conurbation in place of a much-cherished green gap. The beloved and historic Crab and Winkle Way is a site of great importance that must be preserved, and Blean Church, possibly dating back in origin to the sixth century, must not lose its uniquely rural setting.

In my view, the reason the relatively new Canterbury City Council groups have been put in such a seemingly impossible position is due to several factors. Not least of which is the imposition of unreasonable and unrealistic housing targets by the current UK Government. I recently exposed that they are using population projection figures from 2014 which are now in no way relevant to our housing requirements in Canterbury.<sup>1</sup>

Of course it is hugely important for us to provide affordable, sustainable housing for all who need it, but not all of it in areas such as ours in the South-East of England. In comparison to other areas of the UK, we have very little green space, houses are crammed together, and land and building prices remain at a premium. Currently we have around three thousand people on the Housing list, waiting long-term and desperate for a safe, secure home. New expensive 'executive' style houses are not remotely affordable to those who need them most, leading to our Council having sent those waiting out to other parts of Kent for several years, effectively creating a social cleansing policy rather than addressing the need to build suitable homes. Thankfully, this

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<sup>1</sup> <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2024-04-23/23262>

Council has already addressed this by acquiring a number of homes to be made available to those most in need.

Another big factor in this Plan is the University of Kent's decision, purely based on financial need, and their serious ongoing multiple problems. Part of the pressure on our Council is the knowledge that UKC have every intention of pushing the sale of this land – and if the currently proposed unpopular site plan is rejected, what will they put in its place? If UKC is to be persuaded to keep the land for public use and enjoyment, as well as a vital environmentally significant space, they will need direct financial help from the Government which has so far not been forthcoming.

In conclusion, although there is so much more I would like to add, other parts of the Plan that I feel warrant further consideration (Brooklands Farm, for example), I am of course hampered by both time and the forthcoming General Election. Canterbury City Council has my full support in their valiant aims to minimise the effects of outdated and unnecessary Government housing targets that are unsuitable for this area. But I am also committed to representing the strength of feeling from community groups and individuals within my constituency and have every intention of helping to facilitate dialogue with a view to achieving compromise wherever possible.