

## **Canterbury City Council Local Plan**

### **Community Response from Womenswold Parish Action Group**

To the proposal to build a minimum of 420 homes on the agricultural land adjacent to Spinney Lane in Aylesham South (R20) and Adisham New Town at Cooting's Farm (R1).

Womenswold is a small rural parish on the very edge of Canterbury City Council's jurisdiction, abutted up to the boundary with Dover District Council. It is comprised of three hamlets – Woolage Green, Woolage Village and Womenswold village, each with its own unique history and character - and a mobile home site at Ropersole. In total, there are approximately 200 residences. In terms of infrastructure, there is a church (Womenswold), a pub (Woolage Green) and a bus which passes through Woolage Village three times a week on route to and from Sandwich (Thursdays) and Canterbury (Wednesdays and Saturdays), though these routes may be at risk of withdrawal in the near future. The nearest service centre, for schools, grocery shopping, doctor's surgery and transport (both trains and buses) is Aylesham.

Although each of the villages is distinct and separate, with a strong sense of its own community, the residents are united by a shared concern for the sustainability, viability and deliverability of the proposed developments right on their doorsteps. Their concerns fall into five broad categories:

- **The Rural and Historic Character of the Area.**
- **Infrastructure**
- **Public Transport and Increased Traffic**
- **Water Supply**
- **Sewage**

#### **The Rural and Historic Character of the Area.**

Womenswold Parish sits in a rural area, a farming district which makes a significant contribution to food production locally and nationally. The proposed sites (R1 and R20) are both prime productive fertile agricultural land. At a time when the NFU is warning that we are 'sleepwalking' into food insecurity, and advocating that the UK aim for more self-sufficiency in food production, we believe it is completely inappropriate to be targeting agricultural land for housing development. The development of Greenfield sites such as this should be put on hold and Brownfield sites utilised for urban development, reusing land that has been previously developed.

We would ask CCC to review the number of existing planning permissions granted in the district that have not yet been taken up. We understand that CCC have included in the current draft of the plan only existing planning permissions that may be acted upon over the next five years. However, it would appear that there are permissions for hundreds of units which it is anticipated will be delivered after five years. If this is correct, and since the current plan extends to 2045, we would ask that these permissions (those with more than five years anticipated delivery) be included in this plan since this would negate the necessity for policy R20, altogether.

The proposed site at Aylesham South is adjacent to Ackholt Wood, which is an ancient woodland - a haven for a wide variety of wildlife, both flora and fauna, and a vital ecosystem, already at risk from the climate emergency and extreme weather events, such as Storm Eunice and the record high temperatures of the Summer of 2022. We believe that ancient woodland must be protected at all costs.

The UK is known to be the most wildlife depleted country in Europe, with many of our native species on the Red List. In the last fifty years, Kent in particular has lost 60% of its insect population, insects being vital not only as pollinators for food production but also as the bed rock of the food chain for all other species, including humans. Central Government have recently introduced a Rewilding Policy to protect wildlife habitats, especially in rural areas. The addition of 3,200 (R1) and 420 min (R20) homes would have a devastating effect on this type of conservation.

These proposals are also directly contrary to the conclusions and recommendations in CCC's own 'Landscape Character Assessment & Biodiversity Appraisal' of October 2020, which states that new and existing valued open spaces enjoyed by the district's residents must be protected for future generations, ensuring continued access beyond the period of the plan.

The land at both Cooting's Farm and Womenswold share similar characteristics to the adjacent AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) nationally designated on the basis that the landscape is equivalent in quality to that of a national park. If R1 were to proceed, it would end any possibility of the AONB boundary being extended East to the A256 (or atleast to the railway line) and South to the B2046, at the AONB boundary review.

The proposed plan includes a designated country park in the south and east of the R20 site and the construction of a minimum of 420 houses and other facilities. It is difficult to see how the AONB would not be spoiled by this. The mature woodland and the wildlife therein would be adversely impacted by the close proximity of the houses, during and after the construction phase, as would an ancient hedgerow and a very special wild flower meadow which, subject to a covenant, has remained uncultivated for many years, with just an annual cut. The meadow supports a wide variety of rare plants, including the bee orchid.

We do not believe that the proposed country park will provide enhanced ecological connections or maintain separation between Aylesham and Womenswold. The proposed development of 420 homes (minimum) will have a huge visual impact on the landscape of Womenswold which has many Grades I and II listed 18th century houses and an old wall, no street lights, and a single-track road, with no safe place for pedestrians. The inevitable increase in traffic through this area would be dangerous and devastating to the historic buildings at the heart of Womenswold, which is in a conservation area, and spoil its character which is much admired by visitors from around the world as they walk the Via Francigena, visit the 12th Century church and enjoy the historic village.

Womenswold Parish is also part of a Dark Skies zone. There is currently no street lighting in Woolage Green or Womenswold and only minimal, downward-facing, orange street lighting in Woolage Village, in accordance with Dark Sky protocols. Any development of this land (R1) (R20) for housing will cause light pollution from domestic lighting, street lighting and outdoor lighting, negatively impacting the Dark Skies status of the area. As well as affecting the view of the sky at night, which is exceptional here, this will disturb wildlife, especially bats, song birds and migrating birds, who are confused by urban lighting.

## **Infrastructure**

Aylesham has already expanded to double its original size and, with houses currently under construction, is well on the way to doubling in size again. However, over the last ten years since the expansion began, there has been little or no improvements to local infrastructure. This has placed increased stress on local amenities, including primary schools, the GP surgery and even the local Co-op, which frequently runs out of staple foods and cannot restock quickly enough to cope with the increased demand. Since the new houses were built and occupied, it has been significantly more difficult to get a doctor's appointment. There is a minimum three week wait even for a telephone appointment and even longer for a face-to-face consultation. This situation dates back to before March 2020, well before the Pandemic.

## **Public Transport and Increased Traffic**

Public transport in the area is very poor, with only one bus an hour into Canterbury from Aylesham and no direct bus service to Dover. The last bus from Canterbury to Aylesham leaves at 7 pm. The stations at Snowdown, Aylesham and Adisham do not have disabled access and trains to Canterbury and Dover are only one an hour during the day. Consequently, local people are heavily dependent on the use of cars. Every new home is potentially adding two or more cars to the local environment. The DDC Aylesham North development has already significantly increased the volume of traffic on the B2046, between Aylesham and the A2, making it virtually impossible to turn right at the beacon, towards Wingham, during busy times, with queues frequently stretching all the way to Spinney Lane and beyond, and causing serious traffic congestion at the junction with Wingham High Street (A257). There have already been a number of accidents at the junctions with Snowdown Road and Spinney Lane and the road is considered too dangerous for buses to stop along its length. The Cootings Farm development would be totally reliant on the B2046 for access to the A2 and the A257 and beyond.

DDC has already discounted further development of Aylesham North because of the potential increase in traffic on the B2046. The proposed CCC Aylesham South development will also access to the B2046 and the A2, via narrow, winding rural roads, including Spinney Lane, Aylesham Road, Holt Street, Snowdown Road, Forstal Road, Firs Road and Wick Lane. The unsuitability of these roads for high-density traffic is graphically demonstrated whenever there is a blockage or hold-up on the A2 and traffic is diverted onto these country lanes. It causes chaos. Snowdown Road, in particular, is very prone to Black Ice in the Winter and can remain frozen for weeks in places as it shaded from direct sunlight. These narrow lanes are lined with ancient hedgerows and mature trees so any proposal to widen or straighten them would entail the destruction of these essential habitats, which goes against the Council's declared commitment to the preservation of wildlife corridors in the area.

## **Water Supply**

East Kent is already a water stressed area, due to over-emphasis on the South East region for house building. Some residents of Woolage Village have noticed a significant drop in water pressure to their homes since the new houses were built in Aylesham. Local water companies have failed to invest in the development of new water sources, leaving the area hugely dependent on underground aquifers - a finite resource - which feed the River Stour, an extremely rare Chalk Stream (one of only around 200 in the world) as it flows through the Kent Downs. Our river habitats are placed under extreme stress when water is diverted from their sources and courses for domestic consumption and the risk of pollution of the North Downs

aquifer, which lies under the site, during construction of the new builds, is very high, potentially leaving a large area of East Kent dependant on bottled water until a new water source can be found and brought on stream.

### **Sewage**

Southern Water has made the national news headlines repeatedly over the last few years due to its frequent discharge of raw sewage into our rivers and coastal waters, even when there are no extreme weather events to even remotely justify such an act. The sewage system in the area clearly cannot cope with the current volume of sewage, without adding to it with even more house-building in the East Kent.

### **Conclusions**

The residents of Womenswold Parish have enjoyed the benefits of a very stable community for many years. Many of the current residents have lived here all their lives and those who have moved to the area did so for a desired lifestyle - peace and tranquillity and a strong sense of community. However, we have already suffered negative effects due to the huge amount of housing development that has taken place in Aylesham over the last decade. The sense of community and local identity in Aylesham itself is hanging by a thread.

The fear is that any further expansion will be the final nail in the coffin for this close-knit former mining community and all the surrounding villages, as they are over-whelmed by a deluge of new-builds. Even assuming that the type of housing being built meets the needs and aspirations of local people, a large percentage of those homes already built have gone to people with no previous connections to the area, many having moved here from London during the Pandemic, to enjoy a more rural lifestyle. This has resulted in inflated local property prices, putting most of these planned homes well beyond the reach of local people, especially as the statutory 30% Social or Affordable housing cannot be guaranteed by the CCC.

Womenswold Parish Action Group

