

A comment, sent by email to consultationsATcanterbury.gov.uk, on the current Canterbury City Council Draft Local Plan (closing date 21st October 2025), with special reference to development of the area referred to as ‘Land at Merton Park’ (including Ridlands Farm: Policy C6)

My wife and I, with two small children, moved to Canterbury 27 years ago. It soon became apparent that South Canterbury has almost no public open space. However, five minutes away was Ridlands Farm and ‘Merton Park’ – the arable land, orchards and ‘bull field’ stretching from the rugby ground in the east, to Wincheap primary school in the west – just over a mile of mostly privately owned farmed open space, crossed by a network of accessible footpaths. Standing near the centre of it, with hardly a housing estate in sight, the sensation was almost like being in a rural landscape. The value of this for local resident wellbeing became truly apparent during the covid ‘lockdown’ – on many days, the paths were so thronged with local residents that, at times, keeping a ‘safe distance apart’ was a challenge.

I appreciate that the centrally-imposed housing targets of successive Conservative and Labour national governments, over the past 15 years or so, are a massive constraint under which any local administration must act. In addition, there are always very long delays in realisation of major projects. I first became aware of the 4000 homes scheme initially known as Mountfield Park (now South Canterbury Development, Policy CF1) in 2012; in the intervening 13 years not a single brick has been laid. Boris Johnson’s promise of a new hospital for Canterbury, made six years ago (<https://www.kentonline.co.uk/canterbury/news/boris-johnson-says-kent-will-get-new-hospital-213260/>) was contemporary with Quinn estates offer of building a new hospital ‘shell’ on Ridlands Farm – in return, so it was claimed, for permission to develop 2000 houses in the area – which must have been more or less the same area of ‘Merton Park’ now at issue. Now the target appears to be 2250 dwellings, with the plan also including *ca* 6 hectares for a hospital extension (good), and the return of the locally much despised sports hub and football ground proposal (having spent innumerable hours in the past opposing two earlier iterations of such a scheme, I will say nothing more here).

A driving force for these mega-schemes was, so it was said, to generate enough money for improvements to the A2 junction at Bridge (and presumably Wincheap), all related to upgrading the A2 from Dover to the new Lower Thames Crossing near Chalk. All pre-Brexit schemes, but still being enacted. How do these schemes serve local residents’ housing needs? I am always surprised how long it takes for houses in South Canterbury, when put up for sale, to be sold. Where is the huge, local, affordable demand that these mega-schemes are to fulfil? Presumably they will require immigration of thousands of relatively wealthy people from elsewhere in Kent – or even beyond? Are these the people who need housing, in the form of swathes of stand-alone villas and semis? What we really need is social housing, mostly built for rent, with a significant element of low-rise, three or four storey blocks, like the Vauban development in Freiburg (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vauban,_Freiburg),

and related schemes across Germany (<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2022/07/germany-mietshauser-syndikat-property-housing>).

However, in the specific context of Merton Park, **here I want to focus on biodiversity** – other people will surely discuss the challenging issues of road access, road development, water supply, sewerage, air pollution, noise pollution, light pollution, schools (and school teachers), health services (and staff), traffic congestion and employment.

The Council's adopted *Tree, Woodland and Hedgerow Strategy* (February 2024 – <https://www.canterbury.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-04/Canterbury%20District%20Tree%2C%20Woodland%20and%20Hedgerow%20Strategy%202024.pdf>) reminds us that the present City Council “declared a Biodiversity Emergency on 19 October 2023”. In support of this we can reflect on another CCC document, the *Biodiversity Report: First Consideration* (November 2024) (<https://www.canterbury.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/Biodiversity%20Duty%20First%20Consideration.pdf>). In this, the need for *connectivity* between sites managed or noted for their biodiversity is mentioned repeatedly as a crucial factor. I offer here two examples concerning native butterflies where the Merton Park area has very likely played a key role in facilitating the movement of species through southern Canterbury.

On 16 and 17 July 2021 two Heath Fritillaries were observed in the garden of a house on South Canterbury Road (Wheatley *et al.*, 2021). The Heath Fritillary is an endangered Priority Species under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework. Its local stronghold has been, and remains the Blean Woods NNR, to which it was locally restricted in East Kent for many years. However, in 2021, following major growth of the Blean Woods population, brought about by dedicated management, it was observed as far away as Crundale. In the past it occurred at Harbledown. In retrospect, it seems very likely that the existing Merton Park green space facilitated its spread from Blean to South Canterbury, as a link in a series of ‘stepping stones’ through Rough Common, Harbledown, Hambook/Whitehall Meadows (Tonford), Thanington Recreation Ground/Wincheap Water Meadows, and Thanington (an area also under threat of housing development). Merton Park is contiguous with Thanington, only separated by the A2 roadway. The open space of Ridlands Farm is no more than 300 m from the South Canterbury Road garden where the Heath Fritillary was found. While this is speculative, the ability of this butterfly, which in the past has always been regarded as highly sedentary, to reach South Canterbury, is almost impossible to conceive without the existence of this existing ‘green corridor’ that connects the areas in question – within which the land at Merton Park is potentially a crucial element.

The second example concerns the Marbled White (*Melanargia galathea*) – a mostly chalk downland species. Unlike the Heath Fritillary, it is not considered to be of conservation concern, and has been increasing in recent years. However, it is not a ubiquitous species, being found in numerous small and scattered colonies, but only where conditions suitable for its apparently exacting requirements occur (Vane-Wright, 2025, in press). The only places that I have seen it in the immediate area, in my 27 years living in Canterbury, are Whitehall Meadows (one individual – dispersing?), a good colony in an open space within Whitehill Wood (Lower Hardres) – and in the lower part of the ‘bull field’ adjacent to Stuppington Lane – in the grass and scrub along the old railway line. Again, adequate

connectivity seems the only plausible explanation for its seemingly recent arrival in South Canterbury.

At a public meeting held on 17th October 2025 (it was not clear if any city councillors were present), hosted by a Wincheap mothers group, it was made clear that while deeply concerned local residents are aghast at the prospect of extensive development of the Merton Park area, they do recognise a need for housing. They speculated that, if the scheme could not be withdrawn altogether, perhaps a lesser scheme for 500 or so houses could be adopted. While I personally consider that any development of the Merton Park area for housing, sports facilities, roads, a park & ride terminus, etc., would be hugely damaging to the area as an informal recreational area – so important for mental health and wellbeing, as ‘lockdown’ made apparent, from a biodiversity perspective, I think a smaller scheme on the more level farmland at the eastern end of the site, adjacent to the rugby football ground, would cause the least loss to local biodiversity – and to connectivity – but only so long as connectivity was assured with a green corridor extending beyond, from the Jubilee Close area (‘northern’ Ridlands Farm) and behind the hospital, and then south-eastwards through the southern half of the South Canterbury Development scheme, towards Bridge and Nackington – perhaps picking up the line of the old railway that ran through the whole area.

Overall, I find the Local Plan disappointing in this regard, and wish to register my disapproval – despite there being some good things within (e.g. some proposals concerning open spaces). For me, the plan does not seem to put *the real needs of the existing population* at its core. Protection of *our landscapes* (‘cultural’ as well as ‘natural’) needs to be far more strongly emphasized. Plans for truly necessary expansion (not just numbers from Whitehall) need to be tempered by a far more realistic appraisal of what is sustainable – in terms of natural resources (e.g. water supply), the needs for significant improvements to infrastructure (e.g. sewerage), and services (notably social care, healthcare, and primary and secondary education). Housing estates are antiquated. Yes, in the case of Merton Park, Draft Policy C6 is full of promises about schools, open spaces, water treatment etc. etc. – but bitter experience suggests that commercial developers will wriggle out of most of these, as the years unfold and circumstances change. Our planning procedures remain desperately weak and uncertain. Unfit for purpose. Is it too late to think again?

References

Wheatley, S., Perkins, P., Walter, M. & Vane-Wright, [R.I.]. 2021. Thoughts on Heath Fritillaries in a South Canterbury garden. *The Adonis* (Butterfly Conservation Kent & South East London Branch Newsletter) (95): 17–23.
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