

Land East of Rayleigh Rd Appeal – Tim Copsey, Ward Councillor and Resident of Daws Heath

I would like to thank you inspector for the opportunity to speak at this appeal.

I am a ward councillor for St Michael's, which is where these 68.92 acres of beautiful green belt land East of Rayleigh Rd are situated. It is no exaggeration to say that residents right across the borough of Castle Point are distressed by even the possibility of this gigantic housing development being allowed to proceed. I hope my comments will illuminate some of the concerns of the 900+ people that have objected to development on this piece of land.

This much valued green belt land is a very special and unique part of Castle Point which acts like a green lung in a densely populated borough. It is part of a network of green spaces known as the Living Landscape. It might be thought to be a landscape of no value by external experts. However, the residents and myself would disagree strongly. Not only are these meadows, hedgerow and trees appreciated visually by the public who walk past them and those drivers sitting in our chronic traffic congestion, but also, they provide wonderful habitat for our local wildlife. There are badgers and their 13 setts on this land, along with bats, nesting birds, reptiles and other creatures. This land borders the Little Havens Childrens Hospice and the historic landscape and ancient woodland of the Little Havens Nature Reserve. Home of the extremely rare Heath Fritillary Butterfly and the Southern Wood Ant which is the only place anywhere, that this species survives.

To destroy the agricultural land in this place by allowing inappropriate development, would be to inflict irreversible harm to this countryside and the public amenity that goes with it. Residents currently enjoy the views as they walk along the pathways beside the fields and enjoy listening to the birdsong which is a relief from the noise of the urban environment elsewhere.

Another huge concern for the residents of the whole of Castle Point and in particular those that live surrounding this land is traffic congestion. Nobody expects a new development to solve existing chronic problems but they do not expect approval to be given to developments that will make matters worse to the point of causing gridlock on our road network. This development would be located right next to one of the main entrances to the borough, the Rayleigh Weir roundabout and one of the busiest junctions, The Woodmans mini roundabouts on the A129. This part of the road network is notorious for traffic problems. Daily rush hours and Saturday mornings are particularly bad. No doubt so called experts will claim that the impact of building a vast housing development in this location with the resulting increases of car journeys can easily be mitigated against. Let me suggest the real experts are the people who live in the area and it is insulting to them when suggestions are put forward such as "all occupants of the new development will leave their cars on their drive and walk, cycle or bus everywhere, because they have read a leaflet advising them to do so". Similarly, when residents hear that the A129 will be improved to handle existing congestion and increased traffic flows, they know there physically is not the space to solve this highways problem. This is all the stuff of someone's wishful thinking and not a good basis to plan an enormous housing development.

There is an existing concern for air quality in the area, however the green space with its hedges and trees help absorbs the traffic pollution from the A129, A127 and nearby roads. Were this development to go ahead this vital function would be lost and the increased traffic would make the problem worse.

In Castle Point we have ongoing problems with basic utilities such as water supply and sewage processing. I would suggest that extra capacity would need to be created before adding the demands of another 455 dwellings on the networks. I would suggest the local sewage plants do not have the processing capacity to handle the current quantity of sewage which is evidenced by the regular pumping of sewage into our rivers. Similar we have regular burst pipes from the water network and incidences of low water pressure. It is noted that the companies providing these services did not respond to the original planning application.

We have a crisis locally with a lack of capacity at our GP Surgeries who can not cope with their existing numbers of patients, let alone taking on the residents from a 455 dwelling development. Mitigation for this such as a payment to the NHS and providing land for a healthcare facility will not actually solve the issue in the real world. For local healthcare to function a community needs a fully built GP Surgery staffed with health care professionals.

Castle Point residents are very mindful of flooding due to the widespread flooding that occurred across the borough in Sept 2021. Following that there was a report issued in 2022 by the Lead Local Flood Authority which recommended the Local Flood Risk Management Plan should be updated. Acknowledging that extreme weather events due to Climate change are more frequent now it would seem reckless to allow development on this scale without all the appropriate data being available from an updated plan when available.

This piece of land is Green Belt and to me demonstrates all the purposes of green belt extremely well. I see it as a classic example of green belt preventing urban sprawl, stopping communities merging, it safeguards the Daws Heath countryside from encroachment and it preserves the unique character of the Daws Heath area. This green belt contributes very substantially to the openness and sense of space in the area. It gives relief between the built areas beyond it.

I believe the Local Plan process is the correct place for strategic allocation of appropriate land where development should take place. Speculative planning applications and planning by Appeal is far from ideal. The last couple of years has seen the beginning of a transformation of the council and I do commend the council for making such positive progress on the new community led Castle Point Plan as that should be the mechanism for planning the type and location of housing in the borough.

The final point I would like to make refers to housing need and central government's views. Yes there is housing need in Castle Point but the Standard Methodology formula exaggerates the quantity of that need. We frequently hear statements from the highest levels of government minister reminding us that green belt will be protected and enhanced. Obviously, I hope that policy is seen in action in respect of this excellent piece of green belt land. As there is a balance to be found between housing need and green belt protection, I would like to draw attention to the governments stated position. In this government response to the local housing need proposals in "Changes to the current planning system", as published on the government official website it states "we heard suggestions in the consultation that in some places the numbers produced by the standard method pose a risk to protected landscapes and Green Belt. We should be clear that meeting housing need is never a reason to cause unacceptable harm to such places.

I appreciate the importance of your deliberations and on behalf of my community my sincere plea to you is to ask that you would reject this appeal and uphold the protection of this specific green belt land.

Thankyou