

Representation 6735 on Section 2 - Publication Draft Colchester Borough Local Plan by West Mersea Town Council (Mrs Petra Palfreyman)

Support / Object:	OBJECT
Document Link:	Section 2 - Publication Draft Colchester Borough Local Plan - Mersea Island, Policy SS12a: West Mersea
Representation:	West Mersea is a unique community within the Colchester Borough. WMTC contends that the areas shown for development in the DLP are unsuitable. We would urge CBC to consult further with WMTC and to take into full consideration the heart felt views of the community. Res the Neighbourhood Plan consultations will be of considerable use in helping to formulate policy. WMTC will be pleased to work with CBC solutions that protect this unique environment here in Mersea and that provide a self-build / community led housing scheme that would be housing affordable to the local population.
Change to plan:	Removal of the two development sites under this policy. Introduction of support for a community led, self-build scheme.
Is Legally Compliant?	Yes
Is Sound?	No
Complies with the duty to Cooperate?	No
Failed soundness tests:	i. Positively prepared ii. Justified iii. Effective iv. Consistent with national policy
At examination:	Appearance at the Examination

Original submission

West Mersea Town Council's (WMTC) response to the June 2017 Draft Local Plan is very similar to that of our response to the earlier preferred options plan in September 2017. At that time WMTC had just consulted the island community on the 1st September with approx. 500 residents turning up to an open meeting held in the MICA; this is approx 10% of the island population, and 10% of the voting population. The response to CBC plan for 350 dwellings was an overwhelming NO from an estimated 95% of the attendance.

Since that time there has been two important developments, firstly, the CBC has, in its Draft Plan June 2017, reduced the suggested houses for West Mersea to 200 and, secondly, WMTC, in conjunction with a Neighbourhood Plan Team, has begun the process of establishing a Neighbourhood Plan for West Mersea. The process is gathering momentum with a Housing Needs Survey currently being circulated and a General Community Survey to follow very shortly. A Sports and Recreational Survey has also been circulated to interested parties and a Business Survey will also be issued very soon.

The results of the Housing Needs Survey will not be known for some 8 weeks so WMTC cannot say, at this stage, what the feelings of the wider population will be towards housing development in West Mersea per se or what, in detail, they would like to see in respect of specific housing types. What does appear to be clear from very recent surveys in East Anglia is that by 2035 1.1 million people of age 65 and over will be looking to downsize (48% of that age group). If this is confirmed by the results of the Housing Needs Survey (certainly the data submitted so far does comply) then, given the demographic in West Mersea, a considerable proportion of the Island population will be looking for housing that does not currently exist in West Mersea. We therefore appreciate that a failure to provide low rise housing (bungalows) may mean older people remaining in their properties, thus not freeing up the housing chain from starter homes to larger family properties.

However, the relatively high market price of new and existing properties on Mersea effectively eliminates the possibility of younger families being in a financial position to buy to start on the housing ladder. For older folk hoping to downsize the possibilities are wider as they will most likely already have equity in the property they are moving from.

Regardless, WMTC holds the view that any proposed development areas in the plan can only be considered once the following concerns have been addressed:

Areas to be considered:

1. The safety of the island community and emergency services
2. Caravan parks and houseboats must be considered in population numbers
3. Infrastructure including the proposed access to the new sites
4. Public transport
5. Health
6. Improvements to local educational system including school and playgroups
7. Utilities
8. Possible new Bradwell power station
9. The Strood
10. Employment
11. Sustainability of the community

We would urge Colchester Borough Council to take the comments of West Mersea Town Council to REPRESENT the vast majority of the island which is approx. 7800 people excluding caravans. It should not be considered as a single comment.

Island Safety and Wellbeing

The safety of the island community is paramount and with the proposed development of up to a maximum of 200 houses would affect this in the following ways:

i. Increased road traffic

As you are aware Mersea Island only has one access road which divides at the end of the Strood to East and West Mersea. If the Strood or the B1025 gets blocked it brings the island to a standstill. If the main road into West gets blocked and the traffic gets diverted to Dawes Lane it also causes major tail backs. Dawes Lane is not designed for major traffic.

ii. Possible new Nuclear Power station

Has an up to date Island evacuation plan been agreed to take account of an increased population and the possibility of Bradwell B?

iii. Health.

The island doctors are already struggling to support the community as it stands so any sizeable increase in population could be a serious problem.

Caravan parks and house boats

The Local plan does not fully take into consideration the permanent residents in the caravan sites or the House Boats. This population must be considered and not left out. Increase the island population by approx. 2000 all year round and during the holidays the population of the island can be as high as 22,000 people.

Infrastructure including the proposed access to the new sites

The majority of the existing roads and pavements on the Island are in a poor state of repair and are in need of attention. A lot of the footpaths are unusable for people in wheelchairs, push chairs or electric buggies. Our roads have more coloured lines and pot holes on them than should be acceptable.

Access to the proposed sites appears to be ill thought out and we believe would cause traffic chaos. East Road and the junction with Queens Corner are already badly congested so additional traffic would make matters considerably worse. Dawes Lane which is the intended access point for one of the proposed developments could be widened and relieve East Road but would require high expenditure.

Roads and Transport

The 2008/9 Village Appraisal stated: 'Under the Housing Employment and Development (Section 3) strong views were expressed that there should be improvements to the infrastructure before further development is allowed and much of this would relate to traffic and parking'. In 2017 little has changed. Access/egress traffic for West Mersea is Mill Road/Colchester Road going west, and going east via Dawes Lane. The two proposed developments would have to use East Road and Dawes Lane and neither of them would be suitable for further hundreds of cars on a daily basis.

The fork for east or west on the southern end of the Strood would become an even greater bottleneck for vehicles trying to leave from the east since, priority is for vehicles going east or off to the west. A roundabout would be the only cure.

The current bus routes are not user friendly taking too long around the villages and even turning off to Lethe Grove on the outskirts of Colchester. To get to the General Hospital takes an hour and requires passengers to walk from Turner Road into the hospital and on the return to change buses in Town.

If you happen to arrive back during high water spring tides, you are dropped off at The Peldon Rose public house, two miles from the Town! Moreover, there is very limited parking for car owners wishing to switch to the bus in West Mersea.

Parking has already become almost impossible in the Town with one small car park and a couple of spaces in front of some of the shops. Add to this the massive weight of holiday traffic and the caravan sites and it is fair to say we are at capacity now.

Then there are the high water spring tides when queues can stretch up both hills on the Island, and as far as Abberton on the mainland.

With the confirmation that part of the Middlewick Ranges are to have a substantial numbers of new housing exacerbates the increasing congestion on the Mersea Road.

Public Transport

The suggested sites are serviced by a bus service running along East road which takes 35-40 minutes each way. Monday to Saturday they run hourly from approx. 0645-2300hrs, on a Sunday they run 2-hourly between 0840-2240hrs. Due to The Strood flooding at high tide many buses terminate at Peldon, leaving the whole Island unserved by buses for up to 4hrs. In some months up to 45% of days are affected by at least one bus cancellation. Not only would this mean at best a 3 mile walk on dangerous country roads with no footpath, including 60mph stretches, but for an hour the road is flooded and completely impassable to pedestrians.

Health and Wellbeing

The current Surgery opened in 1979 for a population of 3,000 and now it is well over double that, plus residents in the caravan sites with 11 months continual occupation (and even that is not policed). It is more than at capacity and had been singled out as one of the four urgently in need of replacement as far back as 2006. It is still the surgery despite many attempts to build a replacement and currently patients are being removed from the local list. Getting on for 1/3rd of the population is retired and nursing services are stretched to meet the demand.

To visit the doctor at the Mersea practice requires telephoning from 8:00am sharp to obtain 10 minute slot. This can take up to half an hour of repeated attempts to even get a line. Alternatively patients go to the surgery at 7.30am and queue to make a booking at 8:00am which is not much of an option if ill. For a longer visit to see a specific doctor requires a booking of up to three weeks in advance.

There is a pressing need now for highly trained practice nurses to take the weight off the island doctors but space for them is a problem.

Without a new surgery major development on Mersea Island the lives and wellbeing of residents would be put at risk.

There is also the problem of emergency services and 999 calls: should they occur during high water springs the choices are limited to the Air Ambulance service (and that be in two places at once), or the Lifeboat. For this reason Mersea has a brilliant team of First Responders, but they are an entirely volunteer force.

Education

Improvements to local education system including school and playgroups

Mersea Island School currently has 430 pupils on the roll aged 4-11, and a nursery for up to 52 children aged 2-4.

Although the school is expected to have some capacity as the school roll is predicted by Essex CC to fall below 400 in the next 3-5 years any substantial increase in hours would mean extra classrooms being built on what is becoming a limited site. However, any expansion of the school should not be at the expense of the highly valued open spaces. This would necessitate relocating the nursery to more suitable (purpose-built?) accommodation and consider development of classrooms and facilities in a two-story building.

Whilst the school is well served by having 2 halls with the main hall being bigger than those in many primary school halls. However, there are a lack of other facilities and specialist areas, which are required regardless of whether the school needs to expand: changing rooms, computer suite, art room, music room, smaller rooms for teaching groups, parents' / community room, improved office space etc. As mentioned above, the school wants to explore options for developing new accommodation for the nursery the only pre-school provision on the island for 2-year olds and would need to expand further in capacity, age range and flexibility of child care offer, were demand for child and pre-school provision to rise.

If numbers increase at the school, which they will if there are extra houses built, it will add to the number of cars around the school area, which is often dangerous as it is. The parking within the school is not sufficient so many parents park in surrounding roads, often causing chaos. With the potential increase in traffic, it will present a greater safety issue. Parking is a serious concern and any new housing planning needs to consider sustainable travel to the school and other island amenities.

Looking ahead, the students from Mersea School feed into two main secondary schools, Thomas, Lord Audley, at Monkwick and Thurstable School in Tiptree. With further, larger housing plans being put forward that will affect these areas, there is going to be a great strain put on the secondary schools. Secondary school provision is a significant issue for south Colchester already and both TLA and Thurstable have been full / over-subscribed for the last couple of years. What will this mean for Mersea children moving to secondary school?

With Mersea's schooling facilities already overstretched, any increase in numbers to those facilities will have a detrimental effect. Serious consideration must be given to the current situation in order to ensure a viable future for the education of this and any new generations. Development would, indeed, require expansion and enhancement of school buildings and facilities.

Utilities

Electricity - The current supply covers both commercial and domestic premises. Upgrades to the infrastructure would be needed to provide additional sub-stations and an assessment would be carried out to establish whether the existing cabling onto the Island would be robust enough to handle the increase needed.

Gas - Not all domestic properties have gas supplies and with the requirement to reduce the use of fossil fuels investment in infrastructure will be limited potentially precluding a substantial increase in new homes from having a gas supply. Being an island with a single point of supply presents unique issues of maintaining sufficient pressure.

Water - The Island water supply is delivered through one piping system. Any new developments will reduce the pressure further than the statutory requirement which has frequently not been achieved.

Telephone - The current telephone network provision in the location of both proposed developments utilises copper wire. The likelihood of the future provision would be fibre optic (FTTC) and therefore the copper connections to the properties. An ideal would be to provide fibre directly to all properties which will be in line with imminent requirements. The Exchange in Kingsland Road was built well before the newer technologies were imagined and will need substantial upgrading.

Sewerage - Unlike the other utilities, the sewage works is actually on the island. Whilst, when it was built, it would have had spare capacity, now, both with the new developments at Wellhouse Green, (in immediate proximity to the proposed new developments), the connection to main sewer of the nearby caravan parks and the increase in rainfall it simply cannot cope. This results in flooding adjacent to the sewage works onto the Bridle Path next to the Seaview Holiday Park. This can be up to waist deep and is contaminated. As a result, the bathing water and shellfish water quality are, at least, threatened, in reality this could destroy key elements of the local economy. Problems in Kingsland Road are on-going with regular call-outs to clear blockages.

Sewage laden flooding also regularly occurs at the bottom of Coast Road. This is known by Anglian Water because it is they who are called out to disinfect the road and foreshore. This mainly transpires in the summer months when the Island's population is at its highest.

Bradwell New Build

The Government is in negotiations with Beijing regarding a new Chinese built and owned Nuclear Power Station at Bradwell, two miles across the Blackwater Estuary from Mersea Island.

If this becomes an actuality, it will have serious implications for the population of Mersea. In the event of even a minor nuclear incident or the worst case scenario, a meltdown of 7,500 residents of Mersea, plus, during the summer increased by large numbers of holidaymakers (e.g. we have 1,400 static caravans) would need to evacuate. There is only one route off the island, the B1025 which leads to the mainland via a causeway over the Pyefleet channel: this causeway floods on a monthly basis, (according to the phases of the moon), when it becomes increasingly impossible to get to and from the island at high water.

At this moment in time we are unaware, what restrictions the Government may impose on the number of dwellings allowed to be built in such proximity to Bradwell B. When Bradwell 1 was in service there was a moratorium on the amount of housing but this was no longer required once the plant was decommissioned. However, the new Chinese plant, which will be much larger than Bradwell, has yet to publish safety requirements for the immediate area.

Moreover, it would seem impractical to consider further island development until such time as the decision on the new Power Station is resolved. In view of the above circumstances any further increases in the island's population will only compound these issues. The current issues, as a legacy of the decommissioning, mean we now have high level nuclear waste remaining in the old reactor chambers which would normally be dealt with at Sellafield and the new Intermediate Level Waste (ILW) store which will receive waste from Sizewell and Dungeness.

Employment and Retail Provision

The majority of people on the island have to commute to their places of work which once again puts huge pressure on the roads which are already in poor repair. The local businesses need to be supported to allow expansion on the island. We need to encourage additional or improved areas of employment to promote employment. The local supermarkets especially during the holiday season regularly run out of essentials like milk etc.

Sustainable Community

A sustainable community is one that is economically, environmentally, and socially healthy and resilient. It meets challenges through integrated solutions rather than through fragmented approaches that meet one of those goals at the expense of the others. And it takes a long-term perspective - one that's focused on both the present and future, beyond the next budget or election cycle.

Success depends upon its members' commitment and involvement through active, organized, and informed residents, responsible, caring, and healthy community institutions, services, and businesses.

As a result, a sustainable community manages its human, natural, and financial resources to meet current needs while ensuring that adequate resources are equitably available for future generations. It seeks a better quality of life for the whole community without compromising the wellbeing of other communities. It needs to be active, informed, organized, and responsive.

It is essential we protect and enhance the local ecosystems and biological diversity of this beautiful small Island of Mersea. This MUST include water/ sewage supply, land, energy, and non-renewable resources, utilization of prevention strategies and appropriate information about proposed Bradwell power station expansion, indeed minimise pollution of the waters and land if this went ahead. What happens if the station fails and emergency evacuation of the Island is required?

The demand for more housing is a national problem with an ever increasing population. It could be said each area has to help and take its fair share. People resist change places of natural beauty have to be protected or enhanced. If Mersea Island has to suffer some development let us only consider the type of infrastructure/ buildings to protect the community such as two bedroom bungalows with gardens, smaller homes for local younger families. We have a plentiful stock of large homes making it almost impossible for the younger generations to stay on the island unless they are members of the wealthy community.

Mersea Island is unique and should be protected, for the benefit of future generations.

Summary

West Mersea is a proud and unique community within the Colchester Borough, and whilst WMTC appreciates that Colchester has an obligation to build additional dwellings to house a growing national population. WMTC contends that the areas shown for development in your Local Plan are unsuitable for additional dwellings. We would urge CB to consult further with WMTC and to take into full consideration the heart felt views of the local community. The results of the Neighbourhood Plan consultations will, hopefully, have considerable use in helping to formulate policy. WMTC would be pleased to work with CBC to find solutions that protect this unique environment here in Mersea and that go some way, to provide a self build / community led housing scheme that would make housing affordable to the local population to meet the growing and changing needs of the population.



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