

SYNOPSIS OF EVIDENCE FOR THE INSPECTOR FROM MARK FRANCOIS MP

TRAVELLERS SITE

Local Context: The Travellers Site at Dale Farm, which achieved national prominence when it was cleared by Basildon Borough Council last year, is only a few miles from Rayleigh, in the neighbouring constituency of Basildon and Billericay. Travellers issues therefore resonate strongly in South Essex and most of the 100 or so representations which I have received directly from constituents in the past few weeks have referred to the Travellers site as a particular source of concern.

My understanding is that Rochford District Council (RDC) intends to create one municipally run Travellers site at Michelin's Farm, which would have pitches for some 15 families and which would likely not commence operation much before 2018. I still have concerns about this but, if it is to go ahead, then it is important that the site is very tightly regulated, ideally with some form of warden control, to reassure local residents and to ensure that those people occupying the site do not cause disruption to the settled community.

With regards to location, if we are to have such a site in the District, then Michelin's Farm, out by the Fairglen Interchange and adjacent to the junction of the A127 and A1245 is close to major transport routes and is near enough to health, educational and shopping facilities, in accordance with planning directives, but is also strategically located to avoid conflict between the settled and Travelling communities.

I understand that one alternative site which has previously been put forward is on the land close to Swallow Aquatics, on the London Road. I would be strongly opposed to this counter-proposal. The site in question is much closer to the settled community in Rayleigh. In addition, this site is overhung by high voltage power lines, which I understand would normally debar it from consideration from any kind of new residential use.

HOUSING IN RAYLEIGH AND HULLBRIDGE & RELATED INFRASTRUCTURE

Several years ago, I objected to an earlier iteration of Rochford District Council's housing proposals, which then envisaged some 1,800 new houses for the town of Rayleigh. RDC subsequently revised its proposed distribution of housing, with some 550 properties now proposed for land to the North of London Road (SER1), scheduled for 2015 – 2020 and a potential further 222 units on the current Rawreth Lane Industrial Estate, post 2021.

Rochford District Council's proposals are clearly a welcome reduction from the original 1,800 but, if the proposed new housing is to go ahead, then there are several issues which would need to be addressed before new development could proceed. I have listed a number of these issues in turn below.

Highways. Site SER1 is between Rawreth Lane and London road, an area I know well as I live in the Rawreth Lane area. Rawreth Lane, which runs parallel to the A127, can become an extremely busy road during peak periods, when it is not unknown for traffic to stretch virtually its whole length, from Bedloes Corner on the A1245 (at the western end) to the junction with Hullbridge Road and Hambro Hill (eastern end). This problem is exacerbated by the mini roundabout at the latter junction, which can be approached from three directions and at which right of way is not always obvious, particularly for drivers who are unfamiliar with the local area.

In practical terms, this means that navigating the mini-roundabout (which I do myself, several times a week) often takes longer than for similar junctions, as drivers often effectively seek eye contact with others arriving at the junction around the same time, in order to try and “decide” who is next to cross. Further house building at site SER1 would only exacerbate this problem.

If there is to be further major house building along Rawreth Lane then this junction must be addressed, ideally by being completely redesigned, perhaps by the installation of a larger more traditional roundabout, in order to allow traffic to flow more freely and ease congestion. It would be important to secure significant funding to reconfigure this junction, perhaps by a Section 106 or similar agreement, so that the junction can be improved *before* any new houses are constructed, in either Rayleigh or Hullbridge.

In addition, traffic which turns right at this junction and continues down towards Rayleigh Station or Sweyne Park School (see educational note below) would normally turn right again down Downhall Road in order to proceed. The bottom end of Downhall Road is a junction with London Road, which might also need to be widened if the junction has to take additional traffic from new properties in Hullbridge and Rayleigh.

Flooding/Drainage. Much of South East Essex suffered flash flooding on Saturday 24 August 2013. Rainfall was exceptionally heavy (some estimates were that a month’s rainfall fell in just a few hours) and unfortunately a number of my constituents were flooded as a result. Understandably, there is therefore local concern over the effects of potential new building on local drainage systems. I am in the process of seeking a meeting with the Environment Agency to review drainage/sewage arrangements across my constituency – to see if any lessons can be learnt from what happened last month – but in the meantime I should certainly highlight the general concern of my constituents about this issue to you.

Much of the land in West Rayleigh was originally farmland and many of the fields only benefitted from agricultural drainage ditches, which were not designed to cope with the kind of “run off” generated by modern housing developments (and indeed the ASDA supermarket and associated large car park) which now front onto Rawreth Lane. At the time of the ASDA development several years ago I raised concerns about the ability of the local drainage system to cope with the additional run off it would create and I think it is very important that if house-building is to be permitted at site SER1, then a thorough analysis is undertaken of the potential effect on the local drainage/sewage network and that any improvements which are required are put in place, funded mainly by the developer, *before* any major construction takes place. If this process is not undertaken I think the site should not be released for development.

There is a similar issue regarding the proposed new housing development in Hullbridge (some 250 units for 2015-20 and a further 250 for 2020-25). One of the major roads in the area, Watery Lane, (the clue is in the name) is already prone to flooding and there is also general pressure on the drainage/sewage system in West Hullbridge as well. During some previous periods of heavy rainfall, residents backing onto the proposed development areas have reported flooding in their toilets etc as the local sewage system has unfortunately overflowed.

As per Rayleigh, I do not believe that further development should be permitted in Hullbridge unless and until a thorough analysis is undertaken of the potential effect on the local drainage/sewage network and that any improvements which are required are put in place, funded mainly by the developer, *before* any major construction takes place. Similarly, if this process is not undertaken I think the sites there should not be released for development.

Educational provision. Thought must be given to providing sufficient additional school places for extra children who would live in the proposed new homes. There is currently spare capacity at Riverside Primary in Hullbridge and I understand the proposals envisage a new primary school to accompany the development of site SER1 in Rayleigh. However, thought also needs to be given to providing additional secondary school places at both Sweyne Park School, in West Rayleigh (which traditionally takes many pupils from Hullbridge as well) and potentially also at FitzWimarc school (close to the town centre) as well.

Medical Facilities. A number of GP surgeries in the constituency are already under pressure and it will be important to make sure that any developer makes an appropriate contribution to expanding, if necessary, the number of GP places available to local residents. The new Castle Point and Rochford Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and NHS England (Essex Area) should, in my view, be consulted and fully involved in the development of proposals.

SUMMARY

In summary, I have received around 100 direct representations from constituents so far over the last few weeks about RDC's proposals, almost all of them mentioning the proposed Travellers site and many raising questions about the proposed new housing developments in Rayleigh and in some cases Hullbridge, as well.

If we are to have a Travellers site in the District, then I believe the site by the Fairglen Interchange at Michelin's Farm is clearly preferable to the proposal to put it nearby Swallow Aquatics on the London Road. In addition, I strongly believe that the site should be municipally run and highly regulated - if it is to proceed at all.

I can appreciate that some new housing has to be built somewhere, in order to allow the next generation somewhere to live locally but I would like to highlight to you the important points about local infrastructure, particularly regarding highways and flood protection/drainage but also relating to educational and medical provision as well, which I believe *must* be successfully addressed if these proposed sites are to be released for housing in the future.

Rt Hon Mark Francois

Member of Parliament for Rayleigh and Wickford