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Minister 'deserts' constituents weeks before HS2 decision

Isabel Oakeshott and Gemma Meredith Published: 15 January 2012



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A cabinet minister whose house would have been blighted by the new high speed rail line sold the property less than a month before the government confirmed it would go ahead with the scheme.

Cheryl Gillan, the Welsh secretary, who had been a vociferous critic of the HS2 project, is facing resignation calls after abandoning her Buckinghamshire constituency as voters in the area battle against the £32 billion scheme.

She sold her terraced house in Amersham, close to the proposed rail route, before Christmas. Land Registry documents show the transaction was concluded on December 15, just four days before the

government had been due to announce whether it planned to press ahead with the project.

The transport secretary, Justine Greening, delayed the decision until last week, when she said work would begin in 2016.

Last night Gillan, who once said she was willing to be sacked for opposition to the project, insisted her decision to sell the home was unconnected to HS2. An aide said the cabinet minister's husband, Jack Leeming, was in his eighties and could no longer use the stairs. He added that Gillan, 59, also had mobility problems following a serious illness in 2005.

But constituents are angry. Marilyn Fletcher, a former university lecturer who lives about a mile from the route in the village of Great Missenden, said: "People here are furious and have a deep sense of betrayal. Not that long ago she came to a packed meeting and told us she would defy the party whip over this scheme. She promised so much. But now she is leaving the area. She should resign."

Gillan sold the house for £320,000, about 20% less than the market value. It had been available since summer 2010 and was less than 400 yards from the proposed HS2 route when it was first put up for sale.

Greening has since slightly altered the route, which will now include more tunnelling, but the house, about 700 yards from the new line, would still have been blighted.

To the surprise and fury of her constituents, following the decision to add further tunnelling, Gillan has also indicated that she is happy with the scheme.

There is still bitter resistance to the project, 16 miles of which run through an area of outstanding natural beauty in the Chilterns. Though some of this section will be tunnelled, over a third will cut through open countryside.

According to Gillan's aide, she and her husband have not used the property in Amersham for some time.

He would not say where the couple live, though the MP also owns a property in Epsom, Surrey.

Mark Adams, spokesman for Conserve the Chilterns and Countryside, said: "It's all very well for Cheryl Gillan to sell her house. But as she campaigns for further changes to the line, I hope she will remember those who cannot afford to sell up."