

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Thakeham and South West Cambridge

22 December 2020

What is South West Cambridge?

A West Sussex speculative development company called Thakeham is proposing to create a new town sprawl of 25,000 homes between and encompassing the villages of Shepreth, Melbourn, Meldreth, Whaddon, Bassingbourn, Wimpole, Orwell, Barrington, Foxton and Melbourn. The new town, dubbed 'South West Cambridge,' would be half the size of Cambridge and would profoundly change the hinterland of a multitude of villages and eradicate the rural nature of much of South Cambridgeshire.

Who is Thakeham?

Thakeham is a speculative property development company based in West Sussex. It has developed across South East of England with 50 sites, 5,500 acres and up to 60,000 plots in the pipeline.

Thakeham has missed the deadline for the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan's 'Call for Sites,' in spite of having spent the past two years preparing its scheme. It will have been fully aware of the South Cambridgeshire Planning process.

It is now considering a late submission in the Call for Sites. While it has contacted relevant landowners, it has made no contact with local residents or their elected representatives.

It is very well connected to Government and has made contributions to the Conservative Party of at least £411k between 2017 and 2020.

So what? Companies are allowed to make political contributions...

Indeed they are.

We are concerned that Thakeham is looking to 'short-cut' the Local Plan process or in some way bypass the normal processes that every other development company or landowner must go through. There are several ways that this could happen – eg by forming one of the Development Corporations mentioned by the Chancellor during the 2020 Spring Budget. But whatever short-cut mechanism might be tried would definitely have to have Government and Ministerial support.

I see. So if the Call for sites is over haven't they missed the boat? Why is South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) planning to accept this as part of the Call for Sites which closed in 2019?

By submitting such a speculative proposal Thakeham are avoiding significant fees on pre-planning and planning and it is unfair to all people and companies who submitted within the deadline. SCDC is obliged to take into consideration any submissions at any stage, right up to the final adoption.

There is no choice about this. However, the further we are along the process, the less likely a submission will fit with the adopted strategy.

If SCDC chose not to, there would be a high chance that the Local Plan would be challenged for soundness on the grounds that it had not fully taken into account all options. The consequences of this could be enormous.

However, the information given to SCDC by Thakeham is at best lightweight and would not as it stands constitute a submission that SCDC could consider as it lacks the most basic information and assessment would be impossible.

So is SCDC against this proposal or not?

SCDC has to examine every submission 'fairly and without bias'. It cannot jump stages in the Local Plan process and neither can it prejudge one or more submissions as acceptable or not until the correct stage in the Local Plan process. The best defence against unacceptable development is to ensure a well-formed spatial strategy exists and that requires robust assessments of all submitted sites.

Why does SWCAG think the proposals are inappropriate?

The South Cambridgeshire development hierarchy is structured around its largest population centres at Cambourne and Northstowe, which are served by the A428, the Guided Busway and the planned new Cambourne Station, as well as its new schools and health services.

As set out above we are concerned that there has been no submission to the Local Plan process. The level of development – 25,000 homes plus infrastructure – is equivalent to the entire Local Plan (base scenario). That it would be located without reference to the planned population growth areas of Cambourne and Northstowe not only means starting in an infrastructure vacuum, but creating an alternative large population centre would compete with and undermine the planned towns of Cambourne and Northstowe.

There is little or no information about the required infrastructure; the carbon benefits are deficient; and of course, any development approaching this scale would overwhelm the multitude of villages concerned, whose infrastructure is not equipped to deal with inevitable pressures. The development would eradicate the rural character of a large part of South Cambridgeshire.

What does our MP say about the proposals?

Our MP has emphatically stated his strong opposition to the proposals.

Surely Thakeham has been busy talking to all stakeholders?

No. While it has contacted relevant landowners, it has made no contact with local residents or their elected representatives.

When did SCDC learn about this?

Thakeham's PR consultant approached the SCDC Leader in July 2020; on the advice of officers, she declined to engage. In September Thakeham again approached SCDC; the Leader and Head of Planning had a short meeting and told Thakeham they had to go through the Local Plan process.

Has Thakeham approached the County Council about their proposal?

We have asked and been told no.

How do you know Thakeham has been working on this for two years?

They confirmed as much in the press when the news broke. We are also aware of landowners in and amongst the nine villages who were approached by Thakeham as long ago as February 2018.

What is SWCAG doing to find out if Thakeham's connections to government have created an advantage?

Freedom of Information Requests focusing on communication with Thakeham regarding land in South Cambridgeshire have been lodged with:

- The Treasury
- Cabinet Office
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
- Homes England

Do we know any timelines that Thakeham are proposing?

No. We have asked to meet with them and this will be one of our questions.

Are there any proposals for industry/employment or is it just a vast dormitory estate?

All we know so far is 25,000 homes.

Do we have access to an expert on green economics, as Thakeham seem to be highlighting the sustainability of their proposals?

As yet no, but we are optimistic that experts across a wide range of disciplines will come forward to help.

How does this tie in with East West Rail and the new Cambourne station?

We don't think it does currently.

Is there any connection with East West Rail?

We understand from local landowners who have been approached by Thakeham that there may be a connection between Thakeham and the earlier East West Rail consideration of the Bassingbourn route proposal.

Is there any connection between Thakeham and the large development in Shepreth proposed by Scott Properties?

Not that we are aware.

Is there a connection with the Station Fields proposal between Barrington, Shepreth and Foxton?

Not that we are aware.

Is land at Bassingbourn Barracks included?

We don't know yet. We have had to extrapolate the map from the list of villages mentioned by SCDC.

What contact has there been about these proposals with the National Trust and similar organisations?

SWCAG understands the National Trust, CPRE, Cambridge Past Present & Future, the Wildlife Trust were all informed about the proposal the day the press release from Thakeham was published.

Who is this 'We'?

As soon as the news was released about South West Cambridge an action group was formed to see these proposals off: South West Cambridge Action Group or SWCAG for short. This is now a group of parish, district and county councillors, plus residents from across the nine villages and those in their hinterland.

Who are the Councillors leading SWCAG?

Initially launched by County Councillors Susan van de Ven, Sebastian Kindersley and Peter McDonald, who together represent the nine villages named by SCDC, the group is also supported by District Councillors Jose Hales representing Melbourn, Shepreth, Meldreth and Whaddon, and Aidan Van de Weyer representing Barrington, Orwell and Wimpole. District Councillor Nigel Cathcart representing Bassingbourn-cum-Kneesworth shares SWCAG's concerns for the future of our villages and our residents' best interests; in order to protect his ability to vote on the Local Plan he will not formally join the Group (see next question). District Councillor Deborah Roberts representing Foxton has said she cannot at this stage have herself down as for or against (see next question).

How are local Councillors affected if they campaign against this?

The District Council is the local Planning Authority and District Councillors have a vote on the Local Plan. Therefore, District Councillors who take a firm position on the Thakeham proposals are advised not to vote on the Local Plan when it comes to Councillors to debate. This is to avoid prejudicing the Plan from legal challenge. It is a personal decision whether to join SWCAG or not.

What is the role of the Parish Councils?

Parish Councils are key in local government. They reflect the aspirations and concerns of their residents and so they are integral to this campaign and as set out above we are hoping they will join the team to manage and direct our campaign. Parish Councils of the nine directly impacted villages

have now been formally invited to nominate a PC representative to join a Steering Group of elected councillors.

Is the current reaction to Thakeham out of proportion to the current status of the proposal?

Any campaign to see off such a proposal takes a great deal of time and effort so the sooner we get started the better.

How can I contribute?

Thank you for reading! Offers of help, comments, questions – any input!! – can be emailed to info@swcag.org.uk.

This is an immense task and we are anxious that as many people as want to can help.

We need people with planning, legal, environmental, transport, fundraising, IT, and government lobbying expertise – and anything else you think might be important.

And we need people to print and deliver information leaflets in the villages.

Residents need to engage with their Parish Councils to ensure PCs know how they feel, and we would be very grateful for letters and messages to our MP so he has no doubt how his electorate feel.

What are the timelines for SWCAG?

An initial public meeting by Zoom took place on 16 December 2020 at 6pm. Residents were asked to talk with their parishes and we plan to reconvene on 20 January 2021 to plan an overall strategy and next steps.

- SWCAG has asked to meet Thakeham in early January.
- SWCAG has asked to meet our MP Anthony Browne in early January.
- Freedom of Information request results are expected in January.

Keeping everyone updated and informed

You can get updates on our Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/southwestcambridgeactiongroup>

and our website:

www.swcag.org.uk

We are very aware that not everyone has internet access and so we will be leafleting when and where we can to make sure everyone in our community has the opportunity to learn more about this blight now hanging over us.

Good point. What IS the area blighted by this proposal?

Based on what Thakeham has said we envisage this sort of area as shown by the locally drawn map below – it's not from SCDC or the developers so not official.



Wow.

Yes indeed. Please join our campaign. Thank you!