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Mr Anthony Browne MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

23 February 2021

Dear Anthony,

Thank you for your letter concerning the proposals by Thakeham for new development in South Cambridgeshire. I note that you say that you were not contacted about the proposals. I have now had confirmation from Thakeham that, on the same day they briefed us, they also phoned, emailed and texted you. Quite why you were not able to pick this up I do not know.

Additionally, when I met with Thakeham's advisors in December, immediately before they announced their ambitions, they made it very clear to Mr Kelly, Joint Director of Planning, and myself that they were intending to engage with you as part of their "launch."

With regards to your public commitment to 'protecting South Cambridgeshire from overdevelopment and unsustainable levels of housebuilding', I also note your comments, but would suggest that this really needs to be taken up with government ministers and in particular with Chris Pincher who is leading on the OxCam Arc. As I am sure you understand, it is the government that is leading the growth agenda throughout all of the OxCam Arc. With the recent launch of the Spatial Framework process for the Arc, I hope that we can work together to ensure that any additional growth that our district is expected to take is of the right type and in the right places and most critically that we, as the planning authority, have a key role to play in the decision making.

You will also, I am sure, be aware that government's proposed planning reforms will further reduce our powers to control unwanted development and in particular risks sucking the heart out of our villages with changes to NPPF that will undoubtedly result in the loss of many shops, pubs and restaurants.

To add to all of this the government has also committed to East West Rail which will no doubt be associated with additional housing. We also have to contend with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Devolution Deal which commits the County and Peterborough to 100,000 additional homes and on top of that the government's Housing Infrastructure Fund grant for the relocation of the Cambridge Waste Water Treatment Plant.

These government backed projects all contain, explicitly or implicitly, obligations on local bodies to increase the housing numbers in the district.

Your letter asks for my comments in respect of several matters:

Firstly, I agree with you that responsibility for the consideration of the planning proposals contained in the Thakeham project should rest entirely with the Local Planning Authority, firstly through this local plan process (as it is not an allocated site in the current plan) and secondly, in the event of a planning



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

application being submitted, through its role as the Local Planning Authority for the area. However, there are national designations which can either take planning matters out of the hands of SCDC or create material planning considerations that SCDC would need to have regard to. I am clearly not in a position to give you any reassurances about what the government might do as the Secretary of State has the power to “call-in” any planning application.

You will also be well aware that the government has suggested it wishes to explore opportunities for a new town at Cambridge though I have had no indication from them as to the location of such a proposal or how it will be delivered. The OxCam Arc announcement last week included references to ‘Opportunity Areas’ which adds further confusion.

Secondly, you must by now appreciate that it would be entirely wrong for me to form a view on any one specific proposal in the forthcoming local plan, without following the proper process and considerations set out both through the Planning Acts and associated regulations. Under the rules set out by government, to do so would risk a finding of pre-determination on our part by a government Planning Inspector, which would put the whole Local Plan into jeopardy, which is unacceptable. The Council is committed to following the lawful statutory process for determining planning applications or site selections which relies on evidence, Local Plan policies and National Planning Policy Framework

Third, you are seeking assurance about the sharing of information across parties in the event of proposals of a similar nature in future. As part of the programme for the development of the Joint Local Plan, a cross party “advisory group” has already been established with representation from both Councils, including opposition members. The process for deepening our understanding of the wide range of community views more recently has included a series of stakeholder workshops with a range of interests, including developers and community representatives, as well as with Councillors. We will continue to review the effectiveness of this engagement as we move forward in developing the Local Plan. You and I already meet regularly to discuss matters of common interest and the shared planning service director meets monthly with the leader of the opposition in SCDC.

Alongside the recent publication of our evidence base (which I am pleased you have been able to view) I believe that these current arrangements do demonstrate our commitment to engage as many interests as possible in the production of the joint local plan.

Fourth, you have asked me about meetings concerning potential development. Clearly, in my daily work as Leader of the Council, I am contacted regularly by small- and large-scale developers (and homeowners and businesses), as I imagine are you, about their ambitions for development – from a single house or extension to a range of commercial and other projects of varying scale. In addition, through my role representing the interests of everyone in my district, I also meet with a range of employers and institutions in SCDC and Greater Cambridge, as do you I am sure, some of whom are currently promoting sites through the Local Plan process. Like you, it is essential to my role that I connect with and engage with all groups across the District so that I can understand what the Council can do to make their lives better.

A great many sites suitable for major developments have been submitted in the Call for Sites. In the interest of full disclosure all of this information is in the public domain. I would recommend that you consult the Greater Cambridge Planning Service website for more information. I know that officers would be only too happy to respond to queries you might have on these suggested sites. I cannot immediately think of any major development proposals that are not in the Call for Sites.

In respect of large-scale strategic proposals, announcements by the government in respect of East West Rail and the OxCam Arc have previously made clear the government’s ambitions for additional growth at Cambourne and a number of the other station points along the proposed railway. Officers from MHCLG are therefore meeting with leaders, including me, and senior officers from across the Arc to explore the opportunities that government sees being unlocked by these significant infrastructure projects. In light of the latest announcements on the next stage of the project, I am expecting a need for further dialogue based upon a more certain alignment and growth ambitions. The programme is however being run by the Government, not SCDC.

Finally, your letter asks about the next stages of the Local Plan. Having published last year, some of the early findings from the evidence base alongside details of the call for sites submissions, the next stage of the plan will involve the publication of a "preferred option" for consultation before the end of the year. This version of the plan will detail the preferred growth strategy and key policy headlines (including the planned growth levels) for the greater Cambridge area, and will include officers' conclusions on the assessment and contribution that any strategic scale site submissions may play in the plan. Given the pre-election period in Spring 2021, the committee stages of this work will not take place until the autumn with consultation expected over the winter.

Our excellent website includes a whole page entitled "About the Greater Cambridge Local Plan" which should help you as we move forward with the Local Plan process. However, in light of your question, perhaps I could reiterate the invitation to a briefing with our Cabinet Member for Planning Policy and Delivery together with officers on the Local Plan process.

My administration and I are likewise keen to have a constructive relationship with you and would urge you to take up the opportunity to meet and speak with me and my Cabinet colleagues on matters that you have concerns about and how these are dealt with in the context of effective local government. This will go a long way to ensuring we are pulling in the same direction for residents of South Cambridgeshire.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bridget Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Cllr Bridget Smith
The Leader, South Cambridgeshire District Council (Liberal Democrat)