

VIA EMAIL on 6 October 2019

Dear Sue,

I am writing to you as a fellow councillor and citizen of Oxfordshire ahead of the important decision you will be taking next week, because this decision will have a significant impact not just on South Oxfordshire but on the city of Oxford and residents and businesses across the county.

The decision on whether or not to continue with the existing South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2034 process is of course yours to make along with your fellow SODC councillors. However, you shouldn't be surprised about the level of interest and concern here in Oxford, in the other Districts and, in particular, in the Vale of White Horse about that decision because of its wider impact.

You will have seen the letters from [Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, Secretary of State at MHCLG and the department's director general, Tom Walker](#), that made clear that £218 million of investment from the Government's Housing Infrastructure Fund for much-needed new road and cycle infrastructure to relieve traffic congestion in and around Didcot is dependent on the local plan proceeding. The Minister also made clear that a decision to withdraw your local plan would leave the Government less inclined to provide other local infrastructure funding to Oxfordshire, both now and in the future.

All six Oxfordshire councils supported the Didcot proposal as the first choice for funding and in doing so chose to place it ahead of bids which would provide benefit more directly in other districts.

You will also be aware that [Cllr Emily Smith, Leader of Vale of White Horse District Council](#) made an impassioned plea that you weigh up the consequences for your neighbouring authority if you withdraw your local plan. Without the improved transport infrastructure around Didcot, some of Vale's housing developments won't be able to proceed, eroding its 5 year land supply. That would open the door to more speculative, unplanned and unwanted housing developments.

I appreciate that some councillors in SODC find themselves in a difficulty, feeling that they were elected to oppose some aspects of the SODC local plan. However, I do think that being responsible for rejecting millions of pounds of much needed infrastructure for Oxfordshire (and Didcot in particular) in order to fulfil this pledge is unwise to put it mildly. You might have preferred not to start from this point, but the responsibilities of the council have to take into account the complexities of the planning process, the reality of interdependency and how infrastructure funds can be secured.

Your Cabinet has highlighted a number of concerns about the local plan in terms of overall housing numbers and location and is proposing to withdraw the plan. But the choice isn't binary – there are ways of addressing these concerns within the current inspection process. You may take some comfort from the questions issued by the inspector, that he is wanting to review and challenge some of the very same issues that your Cabinet might wish to review. The opportunities to change the local plan will be greater with this process than running the very real risk of having the whole planning process taken out of your hands.

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The inspection process will provide an opportunity to debate and achieve some tangible movement on these issues within only a few months. This is a quicker and more pragmatic route to being able to address these issues. Increasing public focus on the inspection process and highlighting alignment with the Inspector over some of the fundamental areas of concern would demonstrate purpose and effectiveness by your council to residents and stakeholders. Shortly thereafter the council would be able to bring forward supplementary planning guidance to reinforce its chosen policies.

This would seem significantly quicker and surer than returning to earlier stages in the plan process. It is highly likely that if you were to start again on your local plan many aspects would still end up in a not dissimilar place. If you were to use the local plan inspection process to your advantage, this would allow SODC to continue to engage with neighbouring authorities in a way that allows us to work together as partners, with the opportunities that this brings for more funding and for more powers.

It would also demonstrate to central Government that we are delivering on the issues that we have already agreed with them, such as the Growth Deal and its associated funding for more affordable housing and further transport infrastructure improvements – including measures important locally in South Oxfordshire like the Watlington and Benson relief roads, Didcot Jubilee roundabout improvements and Thame to Haddenham cycle route. Withdrawal of the local plan could also put these schemes and affordable housing projects in South Oxfordshire in jeopardy.

There have been no major infrastructure funds available for Oxfordshire for some decades. Now, through cooperation among all the councils, we have money to make infrastructure improvements in the south of the county that will be welcomed by many residents and businesses in South Oxfordshire and beyond. I understand that a number of Parish and business representatives spoke in favour of retaining the Local Plan at SODC Cabinet meeting.

I believe it would be nothing short of a tragedy if the people of Oxfordshire were to lose out on hundreds of millions of pounds of potential future funding as well as the current funding as a result of such a decision by SODC. It doesn't have to be like that; an effective use of the local plan inspection process offers a different outcome.

The decision to stick with the existing plan may seem the more difficult one to make at the moment, but the short term satisfaction of being able to say that the plan is withdrawn and that you are starting again is likely to be just that, short term. The full consequences will be longer term but I think more impactful. These are the withdrawal of promised infrastructure funding, the impact on relationships with us, your neighbouring councils and our ability to work together in the common interest, our collective relationship with government which has recently enabled us to secure this sort of infrastructure funding to support housing, the impact on your ability to deliver a planning service and influence any new local plan and perhaps worst of all, the impact on the Vale of White Horse who will be in a situation where they will be subject to speculative development.

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I know that some of you to whom I am sending this email are already committed to voting to keep your local plan and use the planning process to get through the changes you would like to see. I would like to thank you and I hope that there are enough of you to ensure that this potentially very damaging recommendation from the SODC cabinet is not carried.

We want Didcot to get this funding, but the only way to secure it is to proceed with your local plan.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss any of the points I have raised. My email is cllrsbrown@oxford.gov.uk and my mobile number is

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Best wishes

Susan

Councillor Susan Brown
Leader of Oxford City Council
Councillor for Churchill Ward