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Agenda Item 5

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Councillor Sue Cooper
Leader
South Oxfordshire District Council

8th August 2019

SENT VIA EMAIL

Dear Sue

Thank you for the recent letter from your officers updating us on the position with your Local Plan following your Cabinet meeting on 18 July.

One of the things I have valued since becoming Leader of the City Council is the much improved partnership working in local government in Oxfordshire. This has not only meant better personal relationships and resulted in productive collective projects, but has also led directly to us securing £500m of government investment in Oxfordshire. I am greatly concerned that were SODC to withdraw its Local Plan, this would not only put an end to these good working relationships but also, as a result, we would see the loss of this and future government investment in Oxfordshire.

In recent years we have seen in Cambridgeshire, Greater Manchester, the West Midlands and here in Oxfordshire that it is only when authorities collaborate with their neighbours that their voices get heard in government. The government's interest in developing the Oxford-Cambridge Arc is that strategy writ large.

Until recently that was not the case in Oxfordshire. Our ability in recent times to attract investment to Oxfordshire to support our priorities for infrastructure, public and sustainable forms of transport and affordable housing has come about only as a direct result of us working together to build a shared agenda, prioritising our investment needs and agreeing to work together on long term strategic planning. This means each authority recognising that we cannot individually get everything we need or want, but that investment in Oxfordshire benefits us all.

We know that the new Government is interested in further investment in the Arc – the new Secretary of State for Local Government, Robert Jenrick, led on this project in his role at the Treasury. As clear evidence of this, officers from the Oxfordshire authorities have already been invited to put forward a collective list of funding asks as part of an Arc-wide proposition for the spending review. Our asks will focus on our priorities of public transport, cycling infrastructure and environmental projects. Our ability to benefit from this opportunity depends on their confidence in our partnership in Oxfordshire. At a minimum, that means delivering on the commitments we have already collectively made, one of which is to deliver our local plans to a specified timescale which is not negotiable. If the actions of an individual authority undermine that, it will severely damage the trust that underpins our partnership and our prospects for attracting future investment.

I therefore really welcome the fact that your Cabinet opted not to withdraw your plan at this stage but instead is taking the time to understand and consider the options for addressing your members' concerns.

I understand SODC will want to secure the infrastructure funding through the HIF. We in Oxford City have always taken the view (which I think is shared across local government) that upfront investment in infrastructure is critical to creating good quality environments and improvements for local communities.

The collaborative approach that the Oxfordshire authorities took to planning and prioritising investment in infrastructure was a critical factor in securing the HIF bid for Didcot and was very much aligned to the negotiations on the Housing and Growth Deal.

When we came to collectively prioritise the bids for HIF, all the Oxfordshire local councils backed the HIF bid for Didcot as the first priority for the county area, over the other competing priorities. Like HIF, the Housing and Growth Deal secured upfront investment of £215 million in the infrastructure priorities across the County. The priority given to different bids at different times is a practical decision in terms of what needs to be done first, what delivers the most housing, what is ready to go and is also a political decision. These funding streams mean significant investment in improvements to public transport which will benefit residents of the City and Districts, with investment to take forward rail projects, improvements to bus routes, cycling and pedestrian access, all of which are critical to reducing car use, tackling congestion and improving air quality.

I know we also share an interest in building more affordable housing. This is a serious issue for all the councils in Oxfordshire and particularly the City, where house prices are among the least affordable in the country and we have over 3,000 households on our housing waiting list. This issue is fundamental to the entrenched deprivation and inequality that blights our local communities. It leads to recruitment and retention problems that not only affect local businesses but threaten our public services as schools and healthcare providers struggle to attract staff. It is therefore central to the work we have discussed on driving forward an inclusive economy. The £60 million for affordable housing in Oxfordshire that we secured through the Housing and Growth Deal is a significant opportunity for us to build more affordable housing.

We have always recognised that successful delivery of our commitments under the Deal would put us in a strong position for further investment. You will understand therefore that in our view, it is vital to protect both the investment we have secured already through the Deal as well as future funding such as HIF. The decision you take on your Local Plan could impact on this investment which is helping to address long-standing needs in Oxfordshire and losing this investment would be a serious setback for the whole county.

I am really pleased that your administration at SODC shares Oxford City Council's priorities about tackling climate change. We have made sure that our Local Plan includes environmental policies, including those to address climate change, though these are not without challenge and we will need to defend them through the examination process. However, since we submitted our draft local Plan in April, we have passed a motion recognising the climate emergency and have now put in train a programme of work designed to set out how we will tackle it. This includes significant research into where our action and policies could have biggest effect and a Citizen's Assembly planned for the Autumn to get clear public engagement in that process. We anticipate that this will potentially make recommendations that relate to planning, in which case we would look to how these might be reflected in the joint Oxfordshire Plan 2050 which we are collectively working on and in future updates to our Local Plan if needs be. A similar approach in SODC could offer a

means of addressing your concerns on this front without the withdrawal of your plan. The use of supplementary guidance notes post the local plan process is another way of emphasising a new approach in this area.

I do understand that some of your members have concerns about housing numbers and the level of Oxford's unmet need. These are matters that have been interrogated in detail by neighbouring planning authorities and through numerous local plan examinations. It has taken several years to achieve alignment between the Oxfordshire partners on this and the hearings on the Oxford Local Plan expected in the autumn will provide clarity on the Planning Inspector's view of Oxford's unmet need. If that process does not confirm the assessment of unmet need it is likely you would be given the opportunity to suspend your plan in order to make changes. This would provide a means of protecting the HIF and Deal investment. as if it were to happen, it would be a government appointed inspector changing the previously determined level of need rather than one council. This would also prompt an Oxfordshire wide approach to any change in numbers, since all the other Districts would be affected. A collaborative approach would be more cost and time efficient for all our authorities and avoid reputational damage with local stakeholder and Government which Oxfordshire has suffered in the past.

I know there will be concerns about the timescales of such an approach, but perhaps we could investigate whether our Inspector will be making interim conclusions on Oxford's Local Plan housing needs ahead of the final report and rough timescales for this. I understand that interim conclusions are not unusual – the Vale Inspector did this and our Inspector (Jonathan Bore) has done this elsewhere in the country.

I appreciate that you are working really hard to find a way through these very difficult matters which have significant implications for all of Oxfordshire's residents. I am very happy to discuss them further with you.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Susan Brown', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Councillor Susan Brown
Leader