

Open letter to Alicia Kearns, MP  
Copied to:  
Rutland County Councillors and CEO  
Rutland Times

May 4, 2021

Dear Alicia

We are writing concerning your comments in your column in the Rutland Times of April 22. The risk of 'uncontrolled development' was an argument frequently put forward by RCC's previous portfolio holder of Planning, Councillor Gordon Brown, as a reason why the £30m HIF grant and the Local Plan must be accepted. However, we do not agree with this singular view and you may not be aware of some of the history relating to the proposed development at St George's Barracks (SGB) which starts long before your time as our MP.

In 2015 work was started on a new Local Plan which resulted in a draft Plan which was issued for public consultation in July 2017, entitled "Local Plan Review". That Plan continued the previous policy of meeting housing targets by organic growth in our two existing towns and the larger villages. Enough sites were identified to meet our housing obligations and the Plan received a high degree of acceptance.

Unbeknownst to anyone at the time, two Councillors (Tony Matthias, Leader, and Oliver Hemsley, Deputy Leader) and the Chief Executive of RCC (Helen Briggs) were already secretly engaged with the MoD to jointly develop SGB, following the announcement by the MoD in 2016 that SGB was to be closed. An MoU was signed by Helen Briggs which remained unknown to the other Councillors for a year. Helen Briggs and Tony Matthias have since departed and Councillor Hemsley is now Leader.

Following the initially secret MoU, a "Master Plan" for SGB was developed and this led to the "Specific Consultation considering the Implications of potential development of St. George's within the Local Plan" published as a Regulation 18 consultation in July 2018. The 2017 Local Plan Review had been radically changed to include a large part of Rutland's future housing development being situated at SGB. Over 1700 residents responded to the 2018 Specific Consultation 95% objecting. Similarly, last autumn when the final and somewhat arcane consultation on the Local Plan was carried out (under Regulation 19, considering its 'soundness' and legality), over 1000 residents responded, again very much against the Plan. Thus, on the two occasions when the Local Plan with SGB at its heart has been put to residents, a large number have objected.

We hope the current Chief Executive and Leader will use the "Future Rutland Conversation" launched last month to confirm what the public have said hitherto about SGB and use the results to inform any revision to the Local Plan.

We all want to preserve our unique rural heritage in Rutland. We also agree we have an obligation for the provision of housing. But are you aware that we are providing 40% more housing than our Government target? The best way to preserve our rural heritage is to

reduce housing provision to the target figure. The numbers are being driven by SGB: the 2315 dwellings planned are the minimum that the MoD would consider. This is nothing to do with what Rutland needs or the residents want. The 2017 Local Plan Review demonstrated that housing needs (and Government targets) could be met in Rutland without any development at SGB. Since the 2315 housing development at SGB was announced, the evidence has been found to support it. (Completely contrary to National Planning Policy). A 25% buffer has been introduced, an increase to the Government target, on flimsy logic about choice and affordability. Even more shamefully, RCC 'gifted' 650 dwellings at Quarry Farm (5 years' housing supply for Rutland) to neighbouring South Kesteven. This was done in total secrecy with no Council debate. The powers to do this were designed to allow co-operation between authorities in densely populated urban areas where physical space for housing is at a premium. To pretend that one small rural county has to gift to a much larger rural county, because the latter cannot find space to meet its housing targets, is ludicrous.

There is a substantial body of opinion which does not want our new housing, particularly 'affordable housing', directed away from our existing communities. The recently published Uppingham Neighbourhood Plan development proposals indicate the potential for more housing in Uppingham than is allocated in the Local Plan submitted to the Inspector. The Oakham business community does not want commercial activity directed to Stamford, which is likely to benefit more from SGB. At a Parish Council Forum meeting with the CEO, there were far more voices raised against the scale of SGB than were in favour. Many parishes have voiced the view that development in their community sustains local infrastructure.

The arguments about uncontrolled developments are complicated and it is wrong to state it as inevitable as Councillor Brown has done, and which you have implied in your column. It is also a bit rich of him to advance such arguments when he was the architect of gifting five years' supply to SKDC.

Following the rejection of the HIF grant, the CEO has stated that a report will be presented to a special open meeting of the Council in early May, which will cover the options for the Local Plan, which can be expected to address the potential risk of uncontrolled development.

We recognise that the MoD has an obligation to achieve best value for the SGB site. Essentially, the MoD is a landowner seeking to develop a large site. They should be governed by the same rules that apply to other landowners when seeking planning consent. CPRE Rutland sought the advice of their national planning policy team, who advised that of all the redundant military sites, large scale development of SGB was the one most clearly without justification and easiest to oppose. Its isolated rural situation offends almost every sustainability criteria. The Council's own consultants used to produce the Local Plan were forced to conclude that of all the options considered SGB was the least sustainable. The submitted Regulation 19 Local Plan is a plan driven by the MOD. It is in no sense a Community led Local Plan.

When options for the Local Plan are presented to the Council this month, this should include the option of reverting to the 2017 Local Plan Review policies of development at the two main towns and larger villages. A smaller development at SGB (350-500 houses) would be supported by existing infrastructure and likely be acceptable to the local population.

If an attempt were made to increase the number of houses at SGB (as has been suggested by the MoD's advisers in a Regulation 19 response) to make it more viable for developers, hopefully RCC would resist this; local residents certainly would.

The SGB development has been driven by a small group of Councillors led by the recently resigned portfolio holder Councillor Brown. Wider Council involvement has been kept to a minimum: political machinery was used to obviate discussion; lip service paid to governance, for example referring over a thousand pages of documentation to a Scrutiny committee at a week's notice for a meeting very early in January. Not surprisingly the Scrutiny meeting was soon over with no comments raised.

The commitment of the Chief Executive for a public meeting of the full Council with all the options disclosed and debated is a welcome change. We hope we do not see precipitate action to allow the status quo before that meeting takes place.

Please recognise that replacing the £30m HIF grant with £30m from another Government source is not the only solution to the Local Plan or indeed to preventing uncontrolled development in Rutland.

Yours sincerely

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Julie Gray, Edith Weston  
John Hodgkinson, South Luffenham  
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