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<https://www.ecological-owlthorpe.org>

Open letter to Clive Betts MP Date: 22nd March 2023
Dear Clive,

Thank you for your letter Dated: March 2023.

I was somewhat shocked to receive your letter which was sent to all residents in the catchment area.

In your letter you state that all sites in Owlthorpe are now secure. I still feel that plot F is under threat of development.

I say this because at the last Sheffield South East Committee meeting both Councillors and members of the planning department did show support to designate plot C and D as Wildlife Sanctuary. LibDem Councillor, Kurtis Crossland asked a very important question: "Basically, what protection will the site have, can the decision be reversed at a later date?" Plot (F) was removed from the original plan to build 500 properties because Sheffield City Council were receiving government funds under the Natural England Higher Level Stewardship Agreement.

Under the freedom of information act, I have received from the rural payment's agency maps and the payment structure, showing what is involved. The payment structure explains that Sheffield (LPA) received payments from 2013. Although the payment structure is still live Sheffield (LPA) stopped taking payments in 2020. Is this because Sheffield (LPA) wanted to develop plot F?

<https://www.ecological-owlthorpe.org/HigherLevelStewardshipAgreementMap.pdf>

At the last Sheffield South East Committee, Simon Vincent, Sheffield Council's strategic planning service manager now explains Plot F has been reintroduced in the new draft Local Plan, with a proposal to build 150 New Homes. This is the first I have heard of this and I made my objections directly to Simon Vincent.

History of events regarding building in Owlthorpe:

I have attended many planning meetings and I have heard you say that you were housing minister in Tony Blair's government.

You say that land in Owlthorpe was purchased by Sheffield (PLA) for the purpose of building.

At the Planning and Highways Committee meeting, 2nd June 2020, you did object to the plans to build on plot E. However, your objection was not against building on plot E but for more houses to be built. In your complaint you stated that “the density does not meet the housing policy: More affordable homes, more social housing; Density is Key; More social homes. If we allow this scheme to go through at low density and no affordable housing is on site, we would be setting a very bad precedent for any other scheme that may come forward.”

In comparison to your suggestion, in our campaign to preserve the Owlthorpe oasis, we have been grateful for the involvement of Sheffield University students studying Landscape and Architecture under the guidance of Dr Nicola Dempsey. Her students took an in-depth look at the proposal to build in Owlthorpe by reviewing the local objections. They also studied the interpretation boards that show the extent of environmental work carried out in 2012 under the guidance of Natural England.

While many concluded that the oasis should remain intact, as requested, they produced alternative plans to control the environmental impact, in case permission for the proposed development was granted. One suggestion was that the maximum number of properties on plot E should be not be 72, but 36.

As an alternative to this scheme, and if government pronouncements about preference being given to brownfield sites are serious, housing developments could be built on the disused aerodrome at Norton, which is brownfield land by definition and boasts many derelict buildings in need of redevelopment.

In my endeavours to preserve Owlthorpe Heritage & Nature Trail I have researched information from many government departments often using the freedom of information Act. Questions and answers can be seen here:

<https://www.ecological-owlthorpe.org/letters.htm>

I also took part in the Inquiry by O S Woodward BA(Hons.) MA MRTPI an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State Held on 12-15, 19, and 21 January 2021 Site visit made on 20 January 2021. I presented Twenty-One reports that can be seen here:

<https://www.ecological-owlthorpe.org/publicinquiry.htm>

Prior to the inquiry I explained to Holy Dutton of Planning Inspectorate that I had followed government guidelines and requested the Secretary of State call in the application made by Avant Homes. In my opinion the planning application made by Avant Homes to build on Owlthorpe in Sheffield does not comply with Government directive concerning upstream flood defences and climate change policy.

I thought my request should take precedent over O S Woodward's Inquiry. I also requested that O S Woodward contact the Secretary of State. He said speaking with the Secretary of State is above his pay grade and continued with his enquiry.

We all remember the flooding that took place in Beighton and Fishlake. 23rd February 2020: In this <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbYXEDczL-U> Sophie Ridge interview George Eustace explains the government's response to UK floods. An extra £4 Billion to be spent on flood defences. In Yorkshire, upstream nature-based solutions are to be supported. 23rd January 2020: Environmental bodies set joint vision to tackle climate change: Environment

Agency, Forestry Commission, and Natural England outline a shared vision to use nature-based solutions to tackle the climate emergency. I personally think it was a dereliction of your duties as our MP, not to tap into the £4 Billion offered by George Eustace MP.

At the hustings that took place at Rainbow forge all candidates wishing to become MP for Sheffield South East showed their green credentials explaining if they were elected they would keep the open spaces we have and plant more trees. I asked the question as to whether Owlthorpe should be kept as an upstream nature-based solutions protecting the environment from downstream flooding. In your reply you stated that the logging high up in the Pennines was the cause of the flooding. I somewhat agree with this as I have seen the logging that took place round Lady Bower Reservoir. Never the less, the river from Lady Bower is the Derwent that caused flooding in Derbyshire and then meets up with the River Trent and this caused flooding in Nottinghamshire, not Sheffield.

The rivers that caused flooding in Beighton are the River Rother and the Ochre Dyke. When the mines were open they had to be pumped out to stop miners from drowning. That is what gave the Ochre Dyke its name. After the flood waters receded a farmer in Beighton explained that his land was full of a brown substance, that is Ochre that had washed out of the flooded mines in Owlthorpe. Cadmium deposits were also found downstream across the landscape in Fishlake.

At the hustings I personally thanked you for helping provide the barrier that protected the east of Sheffield unfortunately this was the main cause of flooding in Fishlake. The levies around Fishlake were overwhelmed with the volume and speed of water coming down the river Don.

Mining research

I found that several of the pits worked under Owlthorpe, were prone to flooding the same as Dent Main/Birley Wood Pit and Moorhole. There were several accidents resulting in loss of life due to collapse. I wanted to understand how safe the mines are that run under Owlthorpe.

It has not been easy to obtain information from the Coal Authority **Question 3: With regard to flooding, what effect does flooding have on the timber props that hold the roofs up in old mine workings?** Coal Authority Answer: We do not hold information on timber props used in old mine workings or the effect that flooding may have on them.

Many old mines are in a state of constant flood. In flood conditions many of them are unable to cope with the volume of water the drains backup and mine water must be released into rivers. When I took this video: <http://ecological-owlthorpe.org/Ochredyke2.mp4> behind Crystal Peaks I also explored where the ochre was coming from. I looked up stream from the culvert opposite Birley Moor Garden Centre down to the playground behind Edenthorpe where the two spurs of the Ochre Dyke meet. The water was crystal clear so this was not runoff water. Workmen were seen working on Moss Way above the Ochre Dyke. All government bodies say the workers were not theirs but do say Sheffield City Council are responsible for dealing with this situation. After re-examining the test boreholes on plot C and D they show heavy underground water.

In the round table event regarding housing supply, I suggested to the inspector that Avant Homes should move their project to the disused Aerodrome at Norton, which is a brownfield site by definition boasting many derelict buildings in need of redevelopment. I explained that

the MOD may be responsible for removing asbestos from the site. Reported in Sheffield Star March 29th 2021 “Demolition finally gets underway at former air base.” Buildings have now been removed, so there is no reason why Avant Homes cannot remove their project to the Aerodrome at Norton.

It is ironic that at the inquiry, Roland Bolton, Strategic Planning Research Unit, Mrs Stephens, Sheffield City Council Mrs Hull, Sheffield City Council all argued that the disused Aerodrome at Norton is greenbelt. Simon Vincent, Sheffield Council's strategic planning service manager now explains it has been included in the new draft Local Plan, with a proposal to build 270 New Homes.

In suggesting to the Planning Inspector, Avant Homes move their project to disused aerodrome at Norton I thought this would be a win win situation for all concerned and would conform with the statement announced by the Secretary of State. Guy Williams Barrister acting for Sheffield City Council thanked me for trying to obtain funding from two separate government funds. I still believe government funds are available for upstream nature-based solutions. Please look at <http://ecological-owlthorpe.org/ochredyke.htm> The Ochre Dyke Corridor Flows from its header waters in Birley Wood down to the River Rother. I still believe the Ochre Dyke Corridor is suitable to receive government funding as an upstream nature-based solution preventing downstream flooding.

The whole area, from Moor Valley down to Moss Way is a natural flood plain and retains millions of gallons of water, as local residents will testify: Stray off the beaten track and you will sink in mud. Take a look at this video: <https://www.ecological-owlthorpe.org/Water.mp4>

Prior to the public inquiry I requested in a number of correspondences to Holly Dutton, Helen Skinner, George Eustace MP and Robert Jenrick MP that the Government review Sheffield City Council's Planning Meeting on 2nd June 2020. I believe that Sheffield (LPA) may have misled the Government with regards to the true outcomes of this meeting.

At the inquiry, I specifically asked the Planning Inspector that he review the meeting 2nd June 2020. He declined. I personally think this was a dereliction of the Inspector's duties as an independent arbitrator in this inquiry.

However, he did allow me to review the said meeting, which was arranged by Guy Williams, Sheffield City Council Barrister, and Lucy Bond, Area Team Manager. I was surprised to find that the video evidence from June 2020 had been removed from Sheffield Council's website. The reference number 19/03143/FUL remained the same throughout all enquiries. I thought that all evidence had to be made available to all parties until the Planning Inspector made his decision.

Cllr Jack Clarkson explained that the site is a wildlife site and would be a massive loss of green space if developed, used by dog walkers etc. Cllr Andrew Sanger asked the question: Why were the sites not sold as one? It seems in deliberation that the council did not want an Ecology Impact Assessment. By selling them off separately they could avoid this type of assessment. Cllr Peter Garbutt said “All three sites should be taken as one site” and asked the question: Does there need to be an Environmental Impact Assessment if they are? He also had concerns about traffic problems

Cllr Chris Rosling- Josephs explained that traffic in the area is horrendous, not only around Crystal Peaks but also in the surrounding area and that a full independent traffic assessment needs to be taken before the council considers any more developments in the area.

The planning Solicitor, Kate, explained procedure and a vote was taken with many of the committee citing traffic impact as the reason for rejecting this application. The result was 10 against with 2 abstentions.

After the decision was taken Colin Walker, Interim Head said **“I think there is a significant risk if you throw Highways impact into this as a reason for refusal and that risk is that you effectively neutralise the site in residential terms.”** Why was Highways impact removed from the legal document and not even considered by inspector O S Woodwasds?

<https://www.ecological-owlthorpe.org/EO-20roundtableeventregardinghousingsupply.pdf>

Inspector O S Woodward wished to sort out legal matters and requested Richard Sager, Barrister acting for Avant Homes to cross examine Guy Williams, Barrister acting for Sheffield City Council. Many matters were resolved, but Avant Homes wanted reassurances that before they started to build on Site (E) that they would be able to build on sites C and D at a later date. This was the only way to make the project viable. Richard Sager asked if they could build two extra Houses at the end of the road that pointed towards Moorthorpe way. Guy Williams explained that Sheffield (LPA) wished to join up the two Moorthorpe ways at a later date, so Avant Homes could not build them. Inspector O S Woodward seemed to think all legal matters had been resolved. I did not.

I have followed government protocol and made my objections to the planning inspectorate and Parliamentary Ombudsman. Evidence can be seen here:

<https://www.ecological-owlthorpe.org/letters.htm>

Protocol requires my MP to present my case to the Parliamentary Ombudsman. I have made a number of requests that you present my case but you have not done so.

I was surprised at a correspondence I received from the complaints department at the Planning inspectorate sometime after the decision to build in Owlthorpe was granted.

[https://www.ecological-owlthorpe.org/3258555%20email%20PCU%20redacted%20\(10\).pdf](https://www.ecological-owlthorpe.org/3258555%20email%20PCU%20redacted%20(10).pdf)

First part Redacted.

“We have a recovery request for an appeal in Sheffield for erection of 74 no. dwellings, formation of access road, associated landscaping works, open space works and flood storage works. The Inquiry is due to open on 12th Jan. The request (for call-in read recovery) comes from Mr Meredith and has been made to DEFRA (no doubt will eventually find its way to us via Despatch Box) but also forwarded to us by Mr Meredith. I’ve enclosed the LPA’s refusal reasons along with LPA and Appellant statements. There is also a Rule 6 party - Owlthorpe Fields Action Group. At application stage there were 330 letters of representation from third parties and objections from Sheffield and Rotherham Wildlife Trust, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Owlthorpe Fields Action Group and Clive Betts MP. Around 100 on appeal including the MP again (but not asking for recovery – see his letter enclosed). I don’t think this would need to be recovered but grateful for your views.”

Clive it seems that you intervened and stopped my request to the Secretary of state? My concerns were legitimate and should have been heard.

As you have requested that I put my complaint to the Parliamentary Ombudsman in bullet points I will do that and supply updated copies to all parties.

Thank you staff at the Parliamentary Ombudsman Department for the help I have received from your office regarding my complaint referenced above. Further to my original letter to you dated 5th May 2021, I have followed the procedure as directed and attached are copies of correspondence with the Planning Inspectorate. This includes their final response.

Kind Regards

Michael Meredith