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From: HOWELL, John <john.howell.mp@parliament.uk>

Subject: Chalgrove

Gentlemen,

Thank you for your letter sent by email about the site proposed for housing at Chalgrove Airfield. Let me say in summary at the outset that there is nothing I am able to do about this site as a strategic housing site of the District Council. For reasons set out below, it is a brownfield site in an area without planning or environmental designations. However, as planning issues come forward I will, of course, discuss them and help to provide clarification. By contrast, transport infrastructure issues can fall under my jurisdiction and I am happy to raise these with Homes England and others subject to my comments below.

Let me deal first with the issue of Harrington. My objection was the strong probability that it would be shoehorned into the Draft Local Plan at the last minute and without the proper site assessment and consultation that other sites had undergone. The attempt to introduce a site which, some claim, is capable of taking in excess of 15,000 houses by the back door was unacceptable. The attempt to include the site in the Draft Local Plan and the suggestions that were made to me that this was backed by officers at SODC was not something which I could accept. This was independent of any reference to Chalgrove.

In this constituency the vast majority of land is covered by designations of AONB or of Green Belt. There is a narrow wedge in the middle which is not covered by either of these designations and in which Chalgrove Airfield lies. In addition, Chalgrove Airfield is, as I have said, a brownfield site. I can fully understand why officers at SODC first raised the issue of whether the MoD would part with the site; the alternative being to take more land out of the Green Belt to build on. Sadly, we are now seeing Green Belt land taken in addition to this site. If Chalgrove Airfield does not proceed I would like to know what sites are proposed instead since these would almost certainly need to be in the Green Belt.

The land and the houses are required to give people the chance of owning a home of their own. The debate about the level of housing need is a crucial one. I do not believe we are overproviding houses generally and am happy to set out my reasons separately. Through my work with the Local Plan Expert Group, which reported to Government, I helped introduce a system for assessing need which saw Oxfordshire's total need reduced by about 1/3rd. This was the base-line to which local councils added additional houses as part of, for example, the Growth Deal.

The identification and promotion of Chalgrove Airfield as a site for housing started with local planning officers at the District Council. It remains in the Draft Local Plan following an Examination-in-Public before an independent Planning Inspector. A Planning Inspector is independent of the Secretary of State and the Secretary of State does not give direction to an Inspector about what he should or should not include in his report. I am not, therefore, in a position to influence anyone in the production of this report. The Inspector will have examined the planning arguments involved with the site.

Finally, turning to your political point, the inclusion of Harrington in the Draft Local Plan would not have followed process and would have been most unwelcome. Chalgrove Airfield is already in the Draft Local Plan and has been for some time.

The issue of transport infrastructure is a separate issue. I have raised many of the points you make in relation to transport already and will continue to do so. I think there are aspects of the proposed transport structure that need to be revised. But let me be clear that I support the edge roads round Benson, Cuxham and Watlington as being required to relieve local transport pressure. They have long been campaigned for. Any suggestion that they will form part of an Expressway road is particularly far-fetched.

For these reasons, there is little I can do about Chalgrove Airfield as a housing site. I have always defended the Oxford Green Belt and will continue to do so. It is not an overspill for Chalgrove Airfield. I will continue to pursue the transport issues. What I will not do is simply stand up and shout about an issue over which I have no control as this is typically a useless and fruitless activity as has already been proved.

I hope you will forward this letter on to the parish councils involved.

John

John Howell OBE MP FSA ACI Arb

Member of Parliament for the Henley Constituency

Chairman Industry and Parliament Trust | Member of the Parliamentary Delegation to the Council of Europe | Treasurer European Conservative/Democratic Alliance Group | Government Neighbourhood Planning Champion | Vice-chairman Conservative Friends of Israel | Member Holocaust Memorial Day Trust

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