

Local Action Groups Condemn North Essex Council Leaders' Positive Spin On Damning Planning Inspector's Letter

Leaders of the four councils proposing 42,000 new homes in three new North Essex Garden Communities have “welcomed” a damning letter from the independent HM Planning Inspectorate, despite it dismissing their plans as unsound, not legally compliant, not financially viable and lacking sufficient evidence to demonstrate that infrastructure and jobs could or would be delivered.

The councils were presented with the letter from Planning Inspector Roger Clews one week before it was released to the public. In a joint statement, the councils stated that their plans were “*praised by the planning inspector for being ambitious and innovative, but require more work before they can be found sound*”.

Malcolm Alsop, a chartered town planner who has been working with SERCLE and six Parish Councils in the vicinity of Braintree District Council’s proposed West of Braintree Garden Community, including at the Examination in Public, said:

“The Inspector’s letter condemns the work done by the councils to date, spending millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money in the process, and effectively stops the Local Plan in its tracks (as it is a joint Part 1 Plan), but the councils don’t appear to have understood that. They are in denial.

“Mr Butland says that “the report shows the innovative partnership approach between the local authorities is fruitful”. I struggle to see how any rational person could reach that conclusion. The approach has failed totally to produce a ‘sound’ plan, setting the councils back months, if not years. The spin machine is in overdrive.

Mr Clews’ letter was in effect a Headteacher’s report on the councils stamped “MUST DO BETTER”. It is a brick-by-brick demolition of the councils’ evidence base, agreeing with many of the points which groups like SERCLE and local Parish Councils have been raising for the last 3 years and at the Examination in Public earlier this year. They didn’t listen to us, and now it seems they aren’t listening to the Inspector.

“In softening the hammer blow to the councils, Mr Clews praises the effort and ambition, but that should not deflect from the fact that this feedback effectively tells the councils to start again and do a better job next time. The Inspector even tells the councils that he expects his feedback to be a disappointment to the authorities, yet the council leaders appear to have interpreted his letter as another green light to proceed. It’s rather like the Black Knight in Monty Python and the Holy Grail who, having had both his arms and both his legs cut off by his opponent, continued to protest “it’s only a flesh wound””

A spokesperson for SERCLE said:

“The comments from the Inspector are clearly less than complimentary with regard to the substance and validity of the proposals. The councils have been found out and are wriggling on the end of a hook, attempting to put a positive spin on the criticism they have so clearly

received. Canute failed with the tide so let's hope that our elected representatives, who are not listening to the wishes of their constituents, wake up and review their ideas before the surge of public opinion washes them away. SERCLE will continue in its endeavours in collaboration with other local groups and will be watching very closely how the councils react beyond the self-congratulatory nonsense we have seen so far"

Martyn Phillips of Rayne Parish Council said *"How will the Council learn from this charade? What changes will both members and officers make and how much is it going to cost Council Tax payers, to persist in trying to deliver something that the vast majority of people do not want!"*

Background for Editors

Planning Inspector Roger Clews last week wrote to Braintree, Colchester, Tendring and Essex councils. In a 32-page assessment of the evidence presented to him, the Inspector concluded: *"It will be evident that I consider that the Garden Community proposals contained in the Plan are not adequately justified and have not been shown to have a reasonable prospect of being viably developed. As submitted, they are therefore unsound."*

Commenting on the councils' process to select sites for development, the Inspector said, *"I consider that in assessing the chosen spatial strategy against alternatives that do not include GCs [Garden Communities], the authors of the SA [Sustainability Assessment] report have generally made optimistic assumptions about the benefits of GCs, and correspondingly negative assumptions about the alternatives, without evidence to support many of those assumptions"*

Regarding employment, which the councils have repeatedly stated they will cover in more detail at a later stage, Mr Clews wrote, *"It is surprising that the GC policies contain no specific figures for the amount of employment land or floorspace to be provided at each of the GCs. If the sites provided do not match the demands of the market, the jobs will not come."*

On the council's transport plans, he said, *"It is by no means clear that adequate allowances for the costs of necessary transport infrastructure have been built into the viability assessment"*.

The harshest words, however, were reserved for the councils' financial viability plan, writing, *"It has not been demonstrated that the GCs proposed in the submitted Plan are financially viable"*

"I would advise that simultaneously bringing forward three GCs on the scale proposed in the submitted Plan is likely to be difficult to justify"

He provided three options for how to bring the Local Plan back on track:

1. Remove the Garden Communities from Section One of the Local Plan and agree to resubmit a new version within 2 or 3 years, whilst pressing on with Approval of Section 2, which covers everything other than the Garden Communities;
2. Rewrite Section One based on improved evidence, including input from a new set of consultants, before submitting Section 2, “substantially” delaying adoption of the Local Plans;
3. Withdraw the entire Local Plan and write a new one based on improved evidence