

Rt Hon Theresa May MP
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

(Note also cc to DCLG)

Dear Prime Minister,

Otterpool Park New Town – Concerns and Requests

We the undersigned are concerned by the behaviour of Shepway District Council (SDC) in relation to the development of a new town (Otterpool Park) on Junction 11 of the M20 – in effect, the second new town on three consecutive junctions of the M20.

SDC is creating the impression that there is community support for this development when this is clearly not the case. We fear that our views and those of the constituents we represent are being both misrepresented and ignored. We are also concerned about process, governance and conflicts of interest associated with SDC's commercial alliance with their partners, Cozumel Estates BVI in developing the new town.

Output from Freedom of Information requests and observations made over the last few years demonstrate the following:

- a) The development of the proposed new town is motivated by profit rather than the needs and wellbeing of the local community/environment.
- b) The major drivers¹ and ultimate beneficiaries of this proposal are the owners of Cozumel Estates, based in the British Virgin Islands, operating within offshore status.
- c) SDC is hugely conflicted as a result of its role as a planning authority.
- d) Insufficient evidence is available regarding the combined impact on infrastructure and the environment of having, as already stated, two new towns on three consecutive junctions of the M20 – Ashford on junction 9 and 10 and Otterpool Park on Junction 11.

A flavour of the Council's lack of willingness to engage meaningfully with the local community over the issue of community support for the project can be demonstrated by the events which occurred at a meeting with the Council leader, Councillor David Monk. The meeting took place on 7th June 2016 at the Council's chamber in Folkestone and 27 parish councillors were present. After listening to the comments across the chamber, the vice Chairman of Monks Horton Parish Meeting, Les Barratt asked, whether, through the chair there could be a show of hands for support for the Otterpool Park garden town development proposed by the Council. SDC Leader, David Monk dismissed the request despite repeated requests from Mr Barratt. In the light of this rejection, Mr Barratt then raised his voice and put the following question to the twenty-seven councillors in the chamber: *'Can we have a show of hands please: Who here, thinks it's a good idea to build a New Town in Otterpool'* Not one hand was raised. Minutes of that meeting were produced the very next day with no mention of the vote taken. Moreover, in a BBC Radio interview, some two months later, on 8th August, David Monk declared that there was unanimous support for the Otterpool Town project from all 27 Parish Councillors present.

¹ Although the proposal is being developed as a 50% joint venture between SDC and the Reuben Brothers via their British Virgin Island registered company, Cozumel Estates Limited, the FOI material shows the Reuben Brothers (through another of its companies Arena Leisure) demanding to lead on the project and clearly doing so in terms of the evolution of the project and the consultants appointed.

Subsequently, information has recently come to light as a result of the output from a Freedom of Information request made by a local resident which shows that SDC's and Cozumel Estates' prime concerns are not the interests of the local community but their ability to maximize profits. Their main preoccupations evidenced by the FOI material are concerns about legal challenges, possible competition from other developers and anything that will jeopardise the planning process. Nowhere is there any evidence of a case for this garden town. It is a speculative development based on Cozumel's desire to maximise profits from the now defunct Folkestone Racecourse which it owns and SDC's desire to coattail on this ambition through buying adjoining land to the racecourse with tax payers' money.

These are our concerns:

- 1) The Council states in arguing its case for development that it is under budgetary pressures and should be allowed to pursue commercial interests but this claim of entitlement to deploy tax payer' funds for commercial interest comes with potential risk. The Council is not qualified in the commercial interests it pursues (in this case, property development), therefore taxpayers are equally open to losses. It certainly cannot be taken for granted that Cozumel's interests are aligned with those of the Council/community.
- 2) There has been a failure to demonstrate community support for the project in line with paragraph 8 of DCLG's publication, *Locally-Led Garden Villages, Towns and Cities, Application Process Guidance*. The aforementioned paragraph specifically calls for the provision of a summary of local community support and further requests that the levels of support from the local community be delineated. Shepway District Council's Expression of Interest for Otterpool Park published, June 2016, makes no mention of community support. The evidence available demonstrates that the support is miniscule.

It is worth noting the sentiments of the Rt Hon Sajid Javid who said: "*Nobody likes indiscriminate, unplanned and unwelcome development. But most of us are willing to welcome new homes if they're well designed, built in the right places, and are planned with the cooperation with the local community.*"

- 3) The council's purchase of land is already influencing the planning process. SDC has weakened the assessment criteria for the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) to accommodate the garden town and is currently changing the Core Strategy to boost target housing numbers since the number of dwellings earmarked for Otterpool Park (12,000) is almost 40% higher than the total existing housing target (8750) for the whole of Shepway for 25 years.
- 4) Shepway's duty to co-operate is extending to Dover District Council rather than the logical neighbour, Ashford Borough Council on housing. This enables Shepway to deflect the irrationality of, environmental damage caused by, having two new towns on three consecutive junctions of the M20 – Ashford on junction 9 and 10 (currently over 120,000 people in the Borough of Ashford, with the population rising rapidly) and Otterpool Park on Junction 11 (next door in the Borough of Shepway with 30,000 people proposed).

Co-operation between Ashford and Shepway on housing could illustrate that Otterpool is not needed, given the very considerable growth of Ashford. Further, any in depth study of environmental matters involving Ashford and Shepway would illustrate far greater adverse consequences than one involving Shepway and Dover.

- 5) There will be adverse impacts on local infrastructure and the environment. In addition to the additional pressure on the M20 there will be, inter alia, considerable pressure on secondary roads, social infrastructure including health and social care (there is already an acute shortage of GPs in the district), and waste management. The population pressure and requirement for additional infrastructure will degrade the environmentally and commercially important area of Romney Marsh (a major undeveloped tourist resource as well as home to grade 1 & 2 agricultural land) and similarly, undermine the North Downs AONB.
- 6) Water Resources. It should be noted that this area of Kent is already severely water stressed. In a recent meeting (23.2.18) with our local water company, Affinity Water (AW), our delegation were surprised to learn that SDC had not been entirely accurate about population projections and future potable water demand. The fact that AW is not a statutory consultee in this, or any other development is absolutely mystifying.

90% of potable water distribution in Shepway is from Groundwater reserves serving small reservoirs to distribute potable water around several areas within the district. Prior to December, AW had major concerns pertaining to over abstraction with groundwater levels at 'notably low'. At the moment, levels are described as 'below average'. We have documented evidence that senior management at AW have major concerns about the increasing population in the area. SDC and KCC are aware of this. Talk of a desalination plant has already been mooted by David Monk to serve the proposed Otterpool Garden Town. This flies in the face of your Governments' claim that any development should have a 'Nett Environmental Gain'.

- 7) The town will be a commuter town for London given the poor local employment prospects.
- 8) The questionable suitability of Shepway District Councillors to adjudicate on this matter: There is an on-going police investigation (police database reference number: ZY/035502/14) into the giving of undisclosed gifts to councillors by Lydd Airport's management ahead of the Council's decision to grant Lydd Airport planning permission for its large scale development in March 2010.

Before this project goes any further we require the following:

- (a) A credible assessment of community support, for example, a local referendum;

- (b) A detailed analysis of the impact of this development on the environment, road infrastructure, water resources and waste facilities - with all assessments being conducted in conjunction with Ashford Borough Council and made public.

Yours sincerely