

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sir

We are living through times when the mightiest bank and its senior people have been brought low. The public disapproves of corporate fat cats and evasive politicians at all levels of government. Their secretive culture is not acceptable. The current controversy over planning at Uttlesford District Council is a local example of corporate organisations acting outside expected standards of behaviour. In Stansted we have just witnessed an example of planning at its worst.

Large swathes of the public seem to have lost trust in the council's attempts to create a 15-year plan for the district. They don't believe what they are being told; and nor do I. The seriousness of this situation for the council, for local democracy and for those of us who love this district, cannot be underestimated.

Since September 2007, when the council was bounced by politics into adopting a new-town strategy for future housing, the council has been living with deception. This has become more corrosive as each month has passed. The decision to adopt a new town at Elsenham/Henham was misguided; but a hole was dug. The responsible councillors now seem to be trying to fill in the hole without losing face.

Another false thread has run through this sorry saga. It was repeatedly claimed by at least one senior councillor that the need for extra homes was no more than a creation of the last government; that with a change of government the need for more homes would evaporate. They even fought elections on this false claim. That is, until we got a new, coalition government that also told the truth like the last one: for many years far too few homes have been built and the social implications of that neglect are unacceptable.

The council wasted four of the past five years planning an inappropriate new town. It wasted our taxes and neglected to plan properly. Instead of coming clean with the public, Uttlesford began a clandestine exercise. It failed to start a totally transparent dialogue with the public to agree new sites for homes based on evidence. A year ago the council began behind the scenes to encourage some specially selected landowners to submit premature planning applications to plug the second hole they had created by their dithering – a short-term supply of housing land.

In Stansted the district council enticed one owner of employment and commercial land on Cambridge Road to apply to build what the developer called "an exclusive enclave" of homes. In so doing, Uttlesford threatened the future vitality of the town centre. It actually destroyed local jobs. Despite desperate attempts by the "planning establishment" to get quick approval for this proposal, the council's own planning committee twice in the past two months rightly threw out the application.

Few of us knew what had been going on behind the scenes to give this landowner favoured treatment. I only found out over time by gleaning snippets of gossip from different people. Parish councillors were also kept in the dark for many months. No one at Uttlesford told the public during two periods of consultation (from January to March and again from June until July) that some sites had already been given at least an amber light for fast-track planning approval. I am also in the dark over how the latest set of proposals for building sites across the district was derived. I was even

threatened with disciplinary action for speaking out in public about this lack of transparency. The culture at Uttlesford is rooted in secrecy and authoritarianism.

So, where should Uttlesford go next? Those in charge could start by being honest and open about what has been going on; admit their mistakes; start to rebuild trust with the people whom they are supposed to represent. Start an evidence-based approach to planning. Only by taking the residents of Uttlesford with them can the council hope to produce a credible and trusted local plan for the next 15 years. Royal Bank of Scotland said last week that it is cleaning-up its past. Will UDC follow RBS's lead?

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