

From: Professor William Brown, CBE

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To: The Editor, Cambridge Independent,

Winship Road, Milton, Cambridge, CB24 6PP

5 December 2018

Dear Sir,

Last month's Raynsford Review sharply criticized the failure of England's planning procedures to reflect the concerns of affected communities. A recent Ministerial intervention in a planning application to place a substantial business park on farmland by Hinxton village feels like such a failure to us. The application was strongly opposed by Hinxton and other nearby parish councils. It was refused on nine different grounds by South Cambridgeshire District Council last March.

Concerns were raised when, in October, the Secretary of State intervened to direct that the appeal by the developers SmithsonHill Ltd would be decided by himself, rather than by the Planning Inspectorate as is normal. The only reason given was that the proposal involved 'significant development within Green Belt'. This is not the case. Only a subordinate detail of the application would encroach on Green Belt. The proposed business park itself would be completely outside it. According to statute the grounds for intervention have to be 'nationally significant', and such an encroachment could not possibly be described as such.

Our dismay grew when we realized the scale of political lobbying in support of SmithsonHill's plans. Also in October, SmithsonHill sponsored a lunch reception in the Palace of Westminster for MPs and business interests that was reported by someone there to be focused on the proposed Hinxton development. No matter how unfounded our concerns about the process, they are increased by the fact that according to the Electoral Commission, a company called Hill Group Services, owned by the company partnered to SmithsonHill, made a donation of £20,000 to the South East Cambridgeshire branch of the Conservative Party. This was the largest donation it had received in many years, and was made in April 2017, just seven months before the planning application was submitted.

There is no suggestion of any illegality, and to their credit Conservatives on the District Council Planning Committee were part of the unanimous decision to refuse SmithsonHill planning permission. But the intervention conflicts with the government's rhetoric of encouraging 'localism'. Parish councils can be forgiven for wondering what they are there for when, after following all due process, and being fully supported by their District Council, unusual events raise doubts about the integrity of that process.

Yours

William Brown

Chair, Hinxton Parish Council