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Dear

Gary

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**Reviewing the Plan for Solihull's Future
Draft Local Plan
Response to the Consultation**

I write as a locally elected Conservative Councillor here in Solihull but I should stress these are my personal views. I commented on the initial Local Plan back in 2010 and again on the 9 January 2017 and I make no apology for repeating some of the messages I highlighted in those two earlier responses. It is astonishing how much has changed during this period but we still have an opportunity to create a blueprint for Solihull that will serve us well for a generation.

VISION

Solihull remains one of the most successful medium sized towns not only in the Midlands but throughout the whole of the United Kingdom. That did not happen by chance. The decision in 1974 to become a Metropolitan Borough Council, rather than be swallowed by Birmingham has proved to be one of the most pivotal decisions in the town's history. It allowed Solihull to grow and flourish. Our Schools have become beacons for excellence. Solihull is still seen as the aspirational destination for many families within the wider West Midlands. The price of houses has grown in the town substantially higher in percentage terms over the last thirty years than any other town in the region. Such success has brought new business, a vibrant town centre and a confident and prosperous work force. The challenge over the next 15 to 30 years is to ensure that the success of the borough continues and that every member of its community can share in the continuing bright future. Just on Saturday 2 February the Daily Telegraph carried a further piece about the vibrancy of the Solihull housing market.

HOUSING

I take the view that Solihull can only grow to a certain size. By the very nature of its location adjacent to the south east Birmingham, only limited future housing can be provided in this particular area. Future developments of the size of Hillfields, Monkspath or Dickens Heath are difficult to envisage given the current green belt. I am delighted to see a number of large

scale sites being identified on the boundaries of existing villages within the Meriden side of the borough. In my earlier submissions I made just such recommendations. That said, such further housing has to be wanted and accepted by local residents, who recognise that it could bring long term benefits to their individual communities. We must not allow such developments to be linked in anyway with our large Birmingham neighbour. They are already complaining that they have little or no building land available to build within their existing boundaries. I take the view that we should tell Birmingham that they do in fact have large available building plots, both brownfield and greenfield sites. They will argue that they cannot build on Sutton Park but at the same time challenge us to make major concessions within the Green belt/Meriden gap.

Our housing has to continue to attract young families to the Borough, who see their long term family future within the community. Sadly, in my twelve years on the Council and especially within St. Alphege, precisely the opposite has actually been happening. The population gets ever older and there is a real danger of the borough becoming purely a home for wealthy retirees. I speak at first hand about this dilemma; still living in a five bedroomed detached house, with only my wife and I resident in the property. As I look out on Welcombe Grove every single one of my near neighbours is retired and still living in their four or five bedroomed detached property. Housing has to be a balance of homes that allow first time-buyers, families to move to larger properties, single people to have appropriate homes and the ever increasing elderly population to have housing facilities that meet their changing circumstances.

The danger with all large scale development in a previously residential setting is that you change the very nature of an area. I believe that process is continuing at an ever increasing pace. We should not be ashamed that within Solihull we have some of the finest and most prestigious dwellings in the West Midlands. As I have previously mentioned it is part of what makes Solihull special. Such top-end housing must be maintained.

Developers continue to see the opportunity to develop within the mature suburbs. Time and time again over the last few years we have seen approaches to the occupiers of houses within specific streets containing large gardens. For considerable sums of money residents are encouraged to sell their rear gardens and then a site has been created which sits entirely on garden land. The rest of the residents in the road who have refused to sell their gardens then form Action Groups to fight the proposed development! St. Alphege has been particularly vulnerable and it is the prestigious streets of Alderbrook Road, Stonor Park Road and Widney Manor Road which have seen the brunt of such development. The Developers are only interested in building four, five and six bedroomed detached properties and their actions only exacerbate the housing problems in less wealthy Wards. The request from developers is always to build top-end dwellings which can command the highest possible prices and strangely I never see an application for affordable housing in St. Alphege!

I do not believe the Planning Department in Solihull have thought through the consequences of allowing such 'garden grabbing' development to continue. It is my St. Alphege experience that Officers continue to recommend every single 'garden grabbing' development that comes forward in the Ward. Whatever the background to the site, its size and scale Officers have never recommended "refusal" for any of the developments, with the recent exception of Stonor Park Road, when on the same site they recommended Refusal on one application and Approval on the second. Though I always argue that such 'garden grabbing' proposals would have a harmful effect on the character and appearance of the surrounding area and is clearly

Contrary to Policy P15 of the Solihull Local Plan, not once has that position in St. Alphege been supported by Officers. I often stress that the developments do nothing to protect and enhance the amenities of existing occupiers and in my view are Contrary to Policy P14 of the Solihull Local Plan. I often mention the lack of good quality design that respects the amenity of existing occupiers and that invariably the proposals have an overbearing and oppressive nature that would harm the local area. These concerns are resisted by Officers and they continue to recommend approval for plans that in my opinion damage and scar one of the finest residential areas in the whole of the Midlands. You can imagine my personal sense of frustration when I often feel I am a lone voice trying to resist inappropriate development and the continuing attack on the mature suburbs of St. Alphege.

I believe it is important to place at the heart of what we are trying to achieve in Solihull, the governments overall position in relation to ‘garden grabbing’, which dates back to 9 June 2010. The government then amended Planning Policy Statement 3 with the following change:

- Private residential gardens are now excluded from the definition of previously developed land in Annex B.

The change emphasised that it is for local authorities and communities to take the decisions that are best for them and decide for themselves, the best locations and types of developments in their areas. The amended policy document sets out the Secretary of States policy on previously developed land and housing density. Local planning authorities and the planning inspectorate are expected to have regard to this new policy position in preparing development plans and where relevant, to take it into account as a material consideration when determining planning applications. I repeat the quote from the then Minister for Decentralisation, Greg Clark MP when he said,

“For years the wishes of local people have been ignored as the character of neighbourhoods and gardens have been destroyed, robbing communities of vital green space. It is ridiculous that gardens have until now been classified in the same group as derelict factories and disused railway sidings, forcing Councils and communities to sit by and watch their neighbourhoods get swallowed up in a concrete jungle. Today I am changing the classification of garden land so councils and communities no longer have their decisions constantly overruled, but have the power to work with industry to shape future development that is appropriate for their area. This is just start of wholesale reform I want to make to the planning system, so Councils and communities are centre stage in a reformed system that works for them and is not just a top down policy.”

I repeat again that I am not against every single piece of ‘garden grabbing’ development that comes forward in St. Alphege. I acknowledge that each individual case must be judged on its merit and that occasionally a site will become available, invariably on a large corner plot, in which an additional house might properly be built. However, I repeat again, Planning Officers must stop taking the stance that every single application must be recommended for Approval, irrespective of the merits of each case. That is a nonsense and a position I will continue to fight against.

SUGGESTED SITES IN ST. ALPHEGE

I was disappointed in the extreme to see that previously refused applications for large sites have been re-introduced into this Consultation document. The land at Sharmans Cross Road

and Widney Manor Road are the two sites to which I specifically refer. Since the large scale planning application at Sharmans Cross Road was refused by the Councils full Planning Committee some seven years ago, this piece of sporting heritage has been allowed to stand empty. I have urged for all of that period that the Council takes back control of all of the land at the site, including the contentious 'block' currently under the ownership of a firm of Property developers. There may come a point in the next thirty years when the Council needs that piece of land re-developed for building houses but in the short term it should be returned to sporting use for the good of the borough, or as a site for a new school, again with appropriate sporting facilities. I appreciate large sums of money are involved but that should not stop us taking the right decision for Solihull. In May last year I returned to the Cabinet with responsibility for the new portfolio of Culture Leisure and Sport. One of my first meetings that I organised was in relation to the site at Sharmans Cross Road. I was dismayed that so little has been done after seven years. I take the view that this site and that of Widney Manor Road goes to the very heart of what we should be trying to achieve in Solihull. We should be protecting our mature green suburbs and looking to develop those available brownfield sites in the town centre. I do acknowledge that my position can sometimes be seen as opposition to all Planning applications within St. Alphege. Nothing could be further from the truth. I accept that certain roads in the Ward, Blossomfield Road being the prime example have been changed over a number of years. Blossomfield Road has numerous blocks of flats along its whole length and I accept further applications will be forthcoming on this particular road. Though requested to by residents I did not object to the demolition of No 32, Blossomfield Road and the building of a replacement block of flats on the site back in 2017. That is the reality of the current situation which I accept.

SOLIHULL TOWN CENTRE

As a Councillor for St. Alphege I am particularly interested in the future for the town centre. With the whole of the retail world suffering as never before we cannot afford to stand still and it is essential that high quality retail outlets continue to be attracted to the whole of the town centre, be that Touchwood, the High Street or Mell Square.

I believe strongly that the town centre has the opportunity to provide for some really new and inspirational living accommodation, based around high quality, luxury apartment living that might suit both a young professional couple and those all important 'high worth' retirees looking to downsize. The elderly do not all want to move into specific retirement villages or assisted living accommodation. I see the Police Station, the Council House, Monkspath Hall Road car-park, Churchill Road car-park and indeed a number of the current Office blocks as ideal pieces of land for just such developments. I believe the potential is for hundreds of additional homes to be built within the immediate area of the town centre and that is where the future lies for large-scale development, not piece meal individual homes on the mature suburbs.

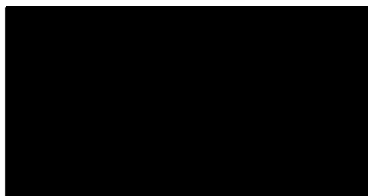
What precisely do we want the town centre retail and night time economy to be? How will that vision effect the future building of many more homes within the town centre? We have no Michelin starred restaurants but have a successful Theatre, Cinema, a lap-dancing club and numerous pubs, bars and clubs. It is a vibrant night-time economy but only for a small proportion of the population of Solihull.

CONCLUSION

All over the country the future of town centres are being debated. Solihull has an opportunity to show the rest of the country what can be achieved with a joined up policy. Let us say very clearly in our new Local Plan our town centre is open to builders prepared to provide high quality, well designed homes, meeting the needs of all age ranges, whatever their price range might be. At the same time as we make this commitment we need to be very clear to our Planning Officers that building in the mature suburbs on 'garden grabbing' sites should never be accepted as the norm. Policies P14 and P15 of the Solihull Local Plan are designed to protect Solihull and its existing residents from inappropriate development. Let that be the message that goes out loud and clear in our new Local Plan.

I hope this short letter is helpful to the work you are carrying out.

Yours sincerely.



Joe Tildesley