

Leader of the Council
Cllr Matthew Barber



Julie Mabberley
Wantage & Grove Campaign Group
5 Parsonage Close
Wantage
OX12 7HP

Cllr Matthew Barber
councillor@matthewbarber.co.uk
Mobile: 07816 481452
Council: 01235 540391

Abbey House, Abbey Close
Abingdon, OX14 3JE

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Dear Julie,

I write in response to your open letter of 6th December 2013. I have held off a full response as many of the matters you raise are still subject to the complex and confidential negotiations for the Section 106 Agreement on the Grove Airfield development. You have, not unreasonably, pushed me to respond sooner, but as you will appreciate, until the Section 106 negotiations are concluded there are some details that I am not at liberty to divulge. If we both share the same ends, as I believe we do, to secure the best infrastructure package for the people of Grove, Wantage and the wider value, then neither of us will want to weaken that position unduly.

The Section 106 agreement will cover the majority of the points you raise, timing of infrastructure versus development, the scale of financial contributions, the scale and nature of affordable housing contributions and the like.

As you will be well aware from your conversations with Cllr Jenny Hannaby, many of the highways issues that you raise are the remit of Oxfordshire County Council as the statutory Highways Authority. Obviously I am not in a position to speak for them in issues you raise over such issues as road maintenance and bus provision. That is not to abrogate our responsibility as the planning authority. The Vale has led the fight for improvements to the A417 at Rowstock and Featherbed Lane, and continue to press the County Council to prioritise cycle improvements along that route. We have also been instrumental in securing significant funding for the Milton Interchange and Chilton Junction. These may seem remote from the matters being discussed at Grove, but as you point out Harwell Oxford and Milton Park are likely to be large employers of those living in these new developments, as well as many who live in Wantage and Grove already, and so improvements to the East will be to the benefit of residents. Similarly I am a firm believer that improvements to cycling provision along the A417 route will not just be to the benefit of cyclist, but to other road users. That is why we continue to prioritise these matters in discussions around infrastructure.

You make reference to existing services. There is a claim in your letter that the current administration at the District Council had allowed services, infrastructure and

facilities to decline. I would dispute this as a matter of fact. If you look at District Council services in the local area you will find that in the past three years we have introduced 2hr free parking, we have maintained Wantage Leisure Centre and are out to tender for a new operator to secure long term improvements, we have invested in the Civic Hall and are due to relaunch the facility later this year. The Vale has supported the Wantage Independent Advice Centre, allowing it to grow, and have nurtured business in the town, introducing free wif-fi, increasing footfall and helping to keep empty units to a minimum. Our recycling services are amongst the top-rated in the country and we have increased the provision of grants for community groups. Looking ahead we are already working up plans for new leisure facilities over and above those that will be secured through these major housing developments.

The Vale has also secured the ability to borrow at favourable rates to help accelerate the delivery of infrastructure so that we are not left entirely at the mercy of house builders.

We will continue to use the levers at our disposal through the planning system to seek infrastructure improvements to be delivered as soon as possible in any development and thereby to limit and pressure placed on existing infrastructure. As you rightly point out in your letter on the Grove Airfield development the first house is not likely to be completed until 2017, the work is already well underway to secure and deliver the infrastructure that is required.

The Vale is developing an Infrastructure and Community Benefits Strategy and an Area Action Plan for the Science Vale area to ensure that all of the various strands of the infrastructure package required can be pulled together and properly managed.

There is a separate argument over the need for these large scale developments, largely as a result of underdelivery of housing in previous years. We may not like the fact of the high targets that we have to achieve, and I for one certainly do not, but it is a reality we must accept.

An alternative would be to refuse to plan for significant growth and refuse individual planning applications accordingly. The result of this course of action would be even more housing in the long term, without the required infrastructure and at significant cost to the tax-payer.

The course on which we are set is to make the best of the situation in which we find ourselves, to plan carefully for the future and to deliver the facilities and infrastructure that are required for our residents and future generations.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr Matthew Barber
Leader of the Council