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Not everything in the garden town is rosy

READERS may recall my column in January, in which I opined upon the unelected, unaccountable National Infrastructure Commission's plans for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc with Milton Keynes at its heart.

The NIC was established permanently, as an executive agency of HM Treasury rather than the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, in January last year. Its plans included doubling the size of Milton Keynes' population to more than 500,000 and increasing total travel times in the morning peak by 54 per cent. And at no point were the people of Milton Keynes asked what they wanted.

It seems that housing secretary Sajid Javid was not too happy with another government department apparently treading on his department's toes. So, in a poker analogy, he has decided to 'see' the NIC plans and 'raise' them by declaring five new Garden Towns to be built along the East West Rail link and planned East-West Expressway. Mr Javid has already announced he will give the green light to two new towns in the next few weeks and may push for up to three more which will apparently all be part of the soon to be published new National Planning Policy Framework.

The Secretary of State has already worked out how he will deal with local councils objecting to this house-dumping or raising reasons to block it. Apparently the NPPF will decide how many new homes a council should build a year - if they fall short, the government will strip them of their right to decide what is and is not built in their area. Instead, the decisions will be made by independent planning inspectors.

It makes me wonder why we would bother to vote for local councillors ever again if they are to have no power over planning, transport and population density issues. In a perfect irony, the opening lines in the government's description of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's job is "to create great places to live and work, and to give more power to local people to shape what happens in their area".

Now, considering that Milton Keynes Council has had such trouble even meeting its current five-year housing plan, it seems its councillors are metaphorically lying on the East West Rail track with their hands and feet bound to the rails, waiting for the Savid Javid Express. Indeed, several arguably

inappropriate or undesirable planning permissions have been acquired on legal appeal based on the council's recent inability to fulfil its five-year plan.

A NIC document explains: "Speculative development can remain a threat even when local authorities have prepared and adopted local plans. The current NPPF requires local authorities to identify and update annually a supply of specific deliverable sites to provide for five years' housing against their overall housing requirement. Where a five-year supply is not identified, 'relevant policies for the supply of housing should not be considered up to date' and speculative development is more likely to be approved."

Analysis by real estate plc Savills on planning appeals lodged between January 2014 and April 2015 found that over half of appeals upheld nationally cited a lack of a five-year land supply as a material factor, the document adds. It might have helped if the council had insisted on developers actually building houses for which they have permission rather than unnecessarily extending permitted development timescales. Surely it is time for Milton Keynes Council to take a serious look at its options and responsibilities.

So to summarise; let us assume that the NIC plan is still extant and goes forward. The outcome is doom for Milton Keynes and everything we love about this city. Or let us assume that Mr Javid's plans for a new NPPF enforced by independent planning inspectors applies. The outcome is doom for Milton Keynes and everything we love about this city.

Or let us assume that both the NIC plans and Savid Javid's NPPF plans will apply. Might it be time to pack our bags and quit Milton Keynes? You decide. Cheerio.

Hospital boost

CANCER services in Milton Keynes Hospital have received a boost after the hospital charity was named the first charity partner of recruitment firm Medical-Locums Group. The company, based at Challenge House in Bletchley, has set a £10,000 target. The hospital charity raises funds for patients, their families and the staff who treat them.

MLG's head of client engagement Felicity Kelly said: "It means a lot to us, as sadly we are all - or will be - touched by cancer at some point in our lives."



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