

Thank you for allowing me to speak tonight. My attendance tonight was triggered by the agenda item regarding UDC's MOU with BDC covering the proposed new settlement development at West of Braintree.

For too long, the UDC's dealings with BDC have been kept out of the public eye, and I'd like to draw your attention to these facts to support this statement.

1. In a PPWG meeting dated Nov 2015 – there was an action to inform all members of DtC meetings and to release minutes. Several times PPWG members have requested minutes of DtC meetings. However meetings with BDC have always been glossed over. Other councils including our neighbouring councils have been more open with their DtC meetings.

2. In December 2016, SERCLE submitted a freedom of information act to ascertain these meeting agendas and minutes – UDC failed even to respond and as such have breached FOI obligations. The same FOI was asked of BDC. They confirmed meetings had occurred but refused to release any information.

3. Oct 2016 – an aborted press release stated that UDC would be co-developing the West of Braintree. For the majority of councillors this was the first they had heard about a UDC / BDC agreement.

4. Now in the agenda of this meeting there is an item discussing a MOU with BDC. Indicating an agreement has already been reached without any councillor involvement or scrutiny.

In the Kerslake report we learnt that the four councils involved in the North Essex new settlements, could be sharing a minimum debt of £500m.

Additionally this £500m of debt is more than likely a conservative number. Why?

1. The shared debts don't include the costs to develop on the UDC side of West of Braintree
2. Major infrastructure projects never come in on budget and take longer than required
3. Worse of all. Repayment of that debt is dependent on developers to buy the land. Knowing the financial situation the councils have entered into, is the upper hand with the developers?

If deals are being struck with BDC, it will put an obligation on this council to take on a significant and risky debt that may not be paid off for decades.

Is this something the council and it's taxpayers can afford?

To summarise points, there is growing evidence points to three significant risks:

1. Councillors are not being informed of what is occurring with BDC and as such fails on the councils commitment to transparency.
2. UDC appear to be conducting secret meetings which could have significant consequences on the council and UDC tax payers
3. UDC risks breaching of section 25 of the Localism Act (pre-determination).

I put it to this committee that UDC needs transparency on their dealings with BDC. As when, and not if, this information becomes public, wouldn't it be better to have released it voluntarily rather than requested via a planning inspector appeal or in the courts.