



Anthony Browne MP
Member of Parliament for South Cambridgeshire
House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA
Tel: 0207 219 8089

Cllr Bridget Smith
Leader of South Cambridgeshire District Council
By email only

Wednesday 10th August 2022

Dear Cllr Smith,

Re: 21 High Street, Sawston.

High Streets and village centres should be vibrant places to visit, work and call home for generations. I know how proud the residents of Sawston are of their High Street, with its independent shops, well-loved pubs, and range of local services. There is just one exception.

As one resident put it in his response to my recent survey: “In the centre of the village is the derelict Barclays Bank which has been like it for several years. It’s an absolute blot on the landscape. It needs to be developed into something useful for the village.” I couldn’t agree more.

I am sure you are aware of the building’s complex history, but the end result is a disused eyesore ringed by ugly fencing at the heart of one of our largest, most vibrant communities. I have written to the owners demanding they use and maintain the site or sell it, but I hope I have your support in exploring how this site can be renewed or redeveloped for the benefit of Sawston and the surrounding villages.

I am asking that you consider three strategies to achieve such an aim: compulsory purchase, enforcement action, or financial disincentive.

To the first, I appreciate the complexities of compulsory purchase. It requires significant prior discussion with the landowners, and that is a high bar for such an intervention. However, there are notable local examples of similar schemes, such as Huntingdonshire District Council’s work towards purchasing the Old Falcon Hotel in St Neots.

Alternatively, the more rarely used Empty Dwelling Management Order would enable the site to be properly managed by the Council without the need to take over ownership of the property. I would be keen to understand if these options have been considered by the Council and, if not, gain your assurance that you will seek to undertake a feasibility study to see if such action would be possible and in the public interest.

I am pressing to secure the changes needed to help local authorities act in these situations. Recently, I wrote asking the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities how he plans to help local authorities to deal with empty high street properties with owners and leaseholders residing overseas. In answer to my written question, I was assured that plans for High Street Rental Auctions will seek to increase cooperation between landlords and local authorities, and a Register of Overseas Entities is being developed by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, through which district councils will be able to gather information on overseas landlords.



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Regarding enforcement action, any layman can see the site is poorly maintained. With access severely restricted by barriers, rubbish regularly builds up and the area around the property needs significant maintenance. The overgrown areas have been cited by residents, as has the potential for vermin in the area, and while there is fencing the area is still relatively accessible to any sufficiently motivated party. As the responsible authority with powers to require proper maintenance of land, I hope you would share my concerns and seek to contact the owners to enforce action on the site.

To turn to my final point, I would welcome a clearer look at the financial implications of maintaining the disused site. I understand residents have been told by their District Councillor that the building is exempt from paying business rates. The building has certainly not been occupied for years, falling well outside the three-month period for empty property relief, and the rateable value was last calculated as £28,250, well above the exemption threshold. I would be keen to understand the veracity of these claims, and the rationale behind any such decision.

To summarise my asks above, I would welcome an answer to the following:

1. Have Council representatives or officers contacted the owners of the property, Steki Investments Limited, or sought a dialog to improve the site in any way?
2. Has the Council considered taking steps towards a Compulsory Purchase Order or Empty Dwelling Management Order to renew the site?
3. Has the Council considered any enforcement action to ensure the street scene in Sawston is less impacted by the site?
4. Are the owners of 21 High Street, Sawston currently paying the correct amount in non-domestic rates, and if not, what is the reason for their exemption?

I would very much welcome your assurance that all the measures above have been taken into full consideration, and it would be most helpful if you could give me feedback on what is being done.

Soon, residents will be able to commiserate the tenth anniversary of this eyesore blighting their town centre. Together, I hope that we can give them a reason to celebrate instead.

Yours sincerely,

Anthony Browne MP