

Farmer who refused to sell to developers because of 'emotional commitment' to land now hit by water shortage



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A Cambridgeshire farmer who refused to sell his land to developers says building work has caused a water shortage which is putting his business at risk.

Clive Hayden, 65, owns Larksfield Nursery near the Northstowe development where he grows flowers, fruit and vegetables.

The new town, which will house around 25,000 people in 10,000 homes once complete, has been described by developers and South Cambridgeshire District Council as a “sustainable new development”.

Mr Hayden has been asked to sell his house and land to different developers over the past 10 years so it can be used for Phase 2 of the Northstowe development. He has refused each time, most recently last year in a discussion at the Homes England offices across the road from the nursery.

But he is now seeing the impact of the first phase of the development on his land and business.



Northstowe houses at the edge of Clive's land

He said: "I love getting out here in the morning and seeing things grow. We have too much emotional commitment to this place to leave now.

"We said no and that's it. I have told them I would like to carry on growing for Northstowe, it would be a challenge, but a challenge I'm looking forward to."

However, recent years have been more difficult for the nursery to keep producing crops at the same rate as 10 years ago. "The cause of my problems is Phase 1 of Northstowe," Mr Hayden said. "All the deep drainage works."

As part of Phase 1, developers working on the land nearby needed to 'dewater' the site by lowering water levels in gravel aquifers so that they could start construction. An independent report commissioned by South Cambridgeshire District Council found the 'dewatering' - also known as abstraction - was the cause of local village ponds running dry, after groundwater levels dropped to 16 feet below ground level.

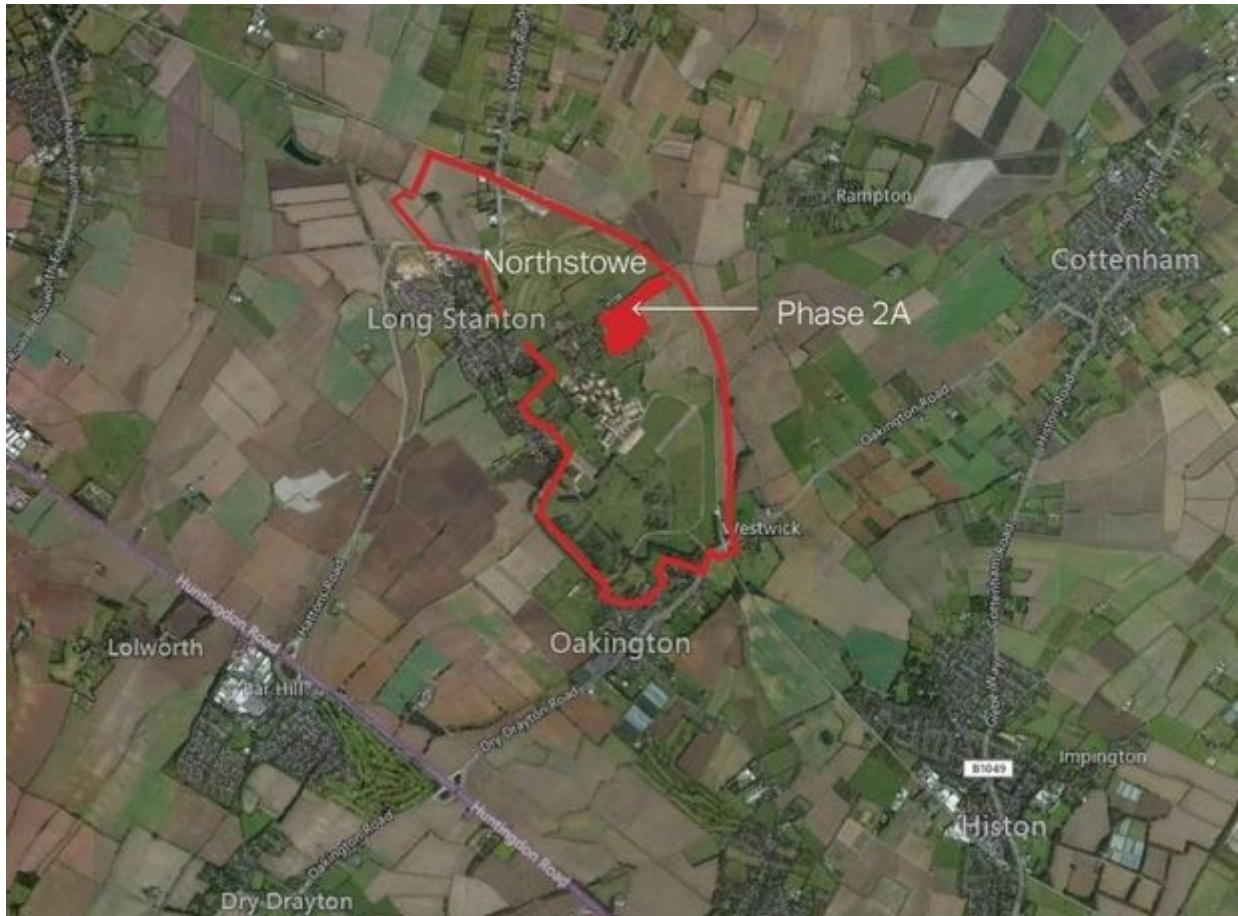
The drop in groundwater levels has had a massive impact on the business, which relies on a natural well to fill a reservoir from which flowers and vegetables are watered.

Mr Hayden, lives with his wife Julie, 60, and two of their three daughters. His family bought the land about 70 years ago, and moved to Larksfield 60 years ago, with Mr Hayden's father working into his eighties to grow and cultivate crops. He has a protected abstraction licence for the well which he has to renew every few years. The well, which "never had a problem" refilling the reservoir before Phase 1, is now taking much longer to refresh.

“I am doing everything I can to minimise water usage to keep what I can going,” Mr Hayden said. “Normally I would have at least one more crop in a year from that greenhouse, but that is the last crop that that greenhouse is going to have.”

The reduced water availability means that fewer crops grow, and, therefore, fewer crops can be sold and has had a "massive impact" on the farm's income.

Not only are their cultivated crops being affected by the lower levels of groundwater, but 30 silver birch trees on the property have died. The family believes other trees on the land appear weaker, and they are concerned that future storms could bring them down.



Phase 2A of the Northstowe development, forming a fraction of the 10,000 homes that have been planned

“There is a knock-on effect with everything else,” Mr Hayden said. Mrs Hayden added there have been fewer bats around since Phase 1, as well as fewer of the badgers, owls, foxes, and muntjac deer that they have lived among for years. They are concerned for what is in store.

Mr Hayden said: “It could be rectified, the problem that has occurred. Or it could be aggravated even more in the future. We are still to know.”

A spokesperson for Homes England said: “The small-holding in question is part of the Northstowe residential allocation in the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan. It lies within Phase 2 of Northstowe and has outline planning permission for housing.

“Nevertheless, the town has been planned in such a way that the small-holding could remain if that is what the landowner wishes.”

Cllr Dr Tumi Hawkins, South Cambridgeshire District Council Lead Cabinet Member for Planning, said: “We recognise the local concern about groundwater. On behalf of Longstanton Parish Council, we commissioned an independent report on this matter and are continuing to work with key organisations to understand the causes and next steps.

“During the Phase 1 works, the developers did remove water from the site as part of their initial construction works. At that time, the removal of water did not require consent from the Council or the Environment Agency.

“The position has subsequently changed, and consent would now be needed from the Environment Agency, to protect groundwater resources.”