

Infuriating': building of Cambridgeshire new town threatens wildlife habitat

Construction of thousands of new homes has sucked away groundwater, killed trees and emptied ponds



Clive Hayden: 'It's going to get a hell of a lot worse.' Photograph: Riverford Organic Farms

Clive Hayden's family has owned farmland at Larksfield Nursery in Cambridgeshire for about 70 years.

In recent years, the farm in Longstanton was growing tens of thousands of flowers and plants for sale at the New Covent Garden flower market, the colourful and historical wholesaler in the heart of London.

But the development of the biggest new town since Milton Keynes on his farm's borders is putting an end to that.

Northstowe, a flagship development being led by the government's housing agency, Homes England, will contain 10,000 homes when it is finished but campaigners claim the construction of the first 1,000 has already sucked away the groundwater from Larksfield Nursery and natural spaces surrounding Longstanton. It has killed birch trees and emptied ponds, depriving wildlife of habitat.

Hayden has been approached to sell his land but the 65-year-old refused, the emotional investment in the land his father farmed well into his 80s being too high.

The developer, L&Q, which worked with Homes England's predecessor on the first phase of the development, had to lower the water levels in order to build on the land, a process known as

dewatering. However, L&Q denies any of the work could have led to long-term issues with groundwater levels.

Hayden has reduced the amount of flowers he grows each year and is troubled by the impact later phases of development are likely to have on the groundwater in his property, which he says he has a legally protected right to access.

“We used to grow pot plants in the greenhouse twice a year, tens of thousands of them, we had the irrigation to do that,” Hayden said. “But now with the flow of the water coming across my property being taken away due to what they did on phase one, I’ve got no water. We’re trying to grow fruit and vegetables instead.”



New homes being built in Northstowe, South Cambridgeshire. Photograph: Julian Eales/Alamy

Hayden claims a future phase of the development – will lower the water level “upwater” of his farm by up to 2 metres. “It’s going to get a hell of a lot worse,” he said.

Hayden said the less profitable fruit and vegetables they grow – raspberries, gooseberries, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers – would provide a local, sustainable source of food for the future residents of the new town but this is in jeopardy.

An independent report, commissioned by South Cambridgeshire district council, concluded last year that construction work was to blame for emptying ponds in Longstanton of their water, which campaigners said had a knock-on effect on wildlife.

The same campaigners have been granted a judicial review of the development of 4,000 homes in a forthcoming phase of the new town’s development.

But as the water levels remain at record low levels, Hayden and the campaigners in Longstanton are desperate, claiming Homes England, the Environment Agency, South Cambs district council and private developers are ignoring their pleas for help.

Daniel Fulton, 41, an environmental campaigner and resident of Longstanton, said: “First, all the ponds in the village were drying up. We started fighting on that. People in the village are really angry. None of our elected office holders are responding, they are hiding.”



Construction work at Northstowe, north-west of Cambridge. Photograph: Julian Eales/Alamy

“We started noticing issues as far back as 2015,” Fulton said. “We’ve had three different MPs, all of whom have come to visit the ponds. None of them have done anything.”

As a resident of the village, Fulton said he has been left feeling angry. “What’s going on is so obviously wrong and none of our elected office holders are doing anything about it. It’s infuriating.”

Fighting legal battles through his campaign vehicle, Fewes Lane Consortium, had been stressful, he added. Fulton said the village wanted a long-term, environmental solution.

A spokesperson for Homes England said it was not responsible for the first phase of Northstowe, adding there was no abstraction of groundwater for phase two. They said the impact on water for phase 3A was considered by consultants and “the development is not anticipated to change groundwater levels in the surrounding area”, adding: “However, Homes England is committed to monitoring groundwater levels going forward as a precautionary measure.”

Tumi Hawkins, South Cambridgeshire district council’s lead cabinet member for planning, said she recognised “the local concern about groundwater”, adding the council was working with “key organisations to understand the causes and next steps”.

A spokesperson for L&Q Estates said the draining of water in phase one was “standard practice and an approved construction method”, adding: “We believe it is highly unlikely that the temporary work carried out over five years ago would have a long-term impact on water levels.”

An Environment Agency spokesperson said: “We are currently looking into reports of illegal abstraction on the development in question in Northstowe, Cambridge.”