**Central Bedfordshire Local Plan**

**Examination in Public December 2020**

**Hearing Statement on behalf of Biggleswade Town Council**

**Introduction**

Biggleswade Town Council knows that east Bedfordshire is facing huge growth through the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, East/West Rail and with the A1 and East Coast Main Line. The Town Council wants to take a proactive role in responding to this growth by encouraging sustainable development with the necessary infrastructure. Many of the decisions are not easy in that they relate to loss of green space and good agricultural land but they are necessary to influence the future growth of the town in a positive way.

The Town Council’s position on housing allocations in the Local Plan has not changed since the Pre-Submission version of the Plan was discussed in February 2018. Much of the parish is already developed but, if more houses are to be built, the Town Council sees this as being much more sustainable to the east rather than the north where there is a concern about coalescence with Sandy. Moreover, work undertaken by transport consultants commissioned by the Town Council has confirmed this position and shown that development to the north would cause several severe impacts to the public highway, including at junctions close to schools.

Biggleswade has already grown by a third over the last ten years, which has changed the nature of the town and the aspirations of residents. This has been very apparent with the public engagement undertaken by the Town Council to support the Neighbourhood Plan which is currently being produced.

Until now, the Town Council has not taken a strong position on further economic development within the Draft Local Plan, recognising that local jobs are needed. For this reason, the Council has always broadly supported the development of Stratton Business Park and the Retail Park. Whilst development on the edge of the town has consequences for our town centre, the Council has noted Bill Grimsey’s views as well as the advice of the Government and is helping the town centre to respond by providing a different offer based more on services and socialising together with individual shops. On its part, the Town Council has relaxed parking restrictions in the town and is running a ‘Buy Biggleswade’ campaign to encourage use of local businesses.

However, the Town Council has now looked more closely at the proposed development at Holme Farm and has various concerns. There is also strong concern over the possible future development of New Spring Farm. In light of this, the Council has asked to be involved in the further sessions of the Examination in Public and has produced this Hearing Statement.

In principle, the Town Council supports economic development to the south of the town which would bring the benefit of further employment, despite it being outside the town’s development envelope. The Council also recognises the national requirement for Strategic Warehousing. Holme Farm is a realistic site between the East Coast Main Line and the A1, with seemingly easy access to the road network. However, the scale of development now proposed as a Main Modification causes concern since the capacity of the A1S roundabout is already stretched and will soon become critical.

The Town Council is aware that Sir Peter Hendy is now to carry out a national infrastructure review for the Government and that he will be looking at the A1. However, a study of the A1 undertaken for the Road Infrastructure Strategy 2 (2020-2025) was not concluded in that a final report was not produced. It is difficult to upgrade the A1 through Bedfordshire and any re-routing would be complex as well as very costly.

Biggleswade Town Council is clear that any commercial development must be accompanied by significant enhancements to the A1S roundabout. The conclusion of the RIS2 Stakeholder Group was that the remaining roundabouts on the A1, including those in Biggleswade, should be grade-separated.

Furthermore, any commercial development must also be accompanied by substantially improved connections to existing amenities, including the town centre.

It is now proposed that the Holme Farm site has uses other than strategic warehousing – a service station, hotel and conference centre. It may make sense to have a service station to serve the employment site and it would be a far better access than the service station immediately to the south. The owners of that service station put a similar application a few years’ ago. In that application, there was a lorry park which also seemed sensible. However, Holme Farm is an unsuitable site for a hotel and conference centre or for leisure facilities. Such developments should be within the envelope of the town and easily accessible.

**Further Matters, Issues and Questions**

Biggleswade Town Council has considered the Further Matters, Issues and Questions in as far as they directly impact on Biggleswade and would like to offer the following observations:

**Matter 1 Issue 2 Employment Strategy**

Q.4 The Holme Farm site is definitely not in close proximity to Biggleswade Railway Station. It is correct that it is walkable but it is not evident how many people would walk from the station, particularly in winter. The shuttle bus would be critical.

Q.6 Development either side of the A1, south of the A1S roundabout, would be a ribbon development on arable farmland and would be highly visible. Of the two, development to the west of the A1 would be preferable given that the existing Stratton Business Park to the east already stretches south of the roundabout. The development should remain north of Holme Woods to help preserve what remains of the green corridor. It would also enable planting between the buildings and where the Green Wheel needs to be.

The Town Council does not object to further employment land per se but suggests that the site to the west as now proposed by CBC at 77 hectares should be reduced in size.

**Matter 2 Issue 2 Employment Needs**

Q.2 It would be preferable to get a Local Plan in place and then go forward with an early review.

Q.4 General employment land is likely to create more vehicle movements than warehousing and add to the congestion at A1S.

**Matter 3 Issue 4 East of Biggleswade SA4**

Q.1 The site now has outline planning permission.

On the basis of this development going ahead, the Government has awarded £69.6 million of Housing Infrastructure Fund monies for four projects within Biggleswade: an electricity super station to increase the supply to East Bedfordshire; a transport interchange at the station; a bridle bridge at Lindsells Crossing, north of the town; and funding for further secondary education provision.

Q.2 A second application has been submitted by the developer with two new access points. This further application has been approved by the Town Council since both accesses are viable and it is far preferable to have more than one access to a development of this size.

One of those accesses is being considered for the provision of an alternative transport system. Studies for this have been carried out by both the developer and CBC although they have not yet been shared with the Town Council.

Q.3 The Government has awarded Garden Communities funding to the site and there is a Garden Communities Project Board chaired by Homes England. The site will be a Garden Community exemplar.

Q.4 To some extent, the new community will be physically separated by Baden Powell Way and the linear wood. The facilities within the new development will complement rather than compete with those already existing. However, the development should be in keeping with the character of the town.

Through the Garden Communities programme, much work is being carried out to inform the detailed design of the 1,500 unit village. CBC, the developers and the Town Council are all involved through the Project Board.

**Matter 3 Issue 8 Holme Farm, Biggleswade SE3**

Q.1 The Main Modifications address the Inspectors’ concerns by increasing the area of the site to make it more cohesive. However, this will add to the burden on the A1S roundabout. CBC justify the increase of a further 17 hectares in terms of green infrastructure, particularly a bridge across the A1 to provide a link for the Biggleswade Green Wheel. The Town Council, as noted above, would prefer to see the site reduced in size to the northern part only but believes that a Green Wheel bridle bridge over the A1 and associated links and landscaping should be provided as a planning condition and within any S.106 agreement, particularly since the land involved is in public ownership.

Q.2 The Town Council is concerned about the spread of the development so far south and the incursion into good arable farmland. Again, the Council believes that only the northern part of the site should be developed and that for strategic warehousing.

Q.3 The requirement for any shuttle bus should be in perpetuity. Biggleswade has experienced previous provision on another development which ceased after five years on the grounds that it was not commercially viable.

Q.4 The shuttle bus, bridle bridge and associated works should be planning conditions and in place before occupation of the first unit.

Q.5 The provision of a bridle bridge over the A1 and bridleway links to the Green Wheel would be welcomed and should be enforced as planning conditions. It must be a bridle bridge – sufficient to carry a public bridleway.

Specification and delivery of the bridle bridge and links should be in liaison with Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity, the developers of the Biggleswade Green Wheel. (The Green Wheel is highly valued by residents in Biggleswade who want this connection to complete the Wheel. The importance of the Green Wheel for outdoor exercise has been very obvious during the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic and it has been well-used.)

Q.7 It is correct that the subway under the A1 is a 20-minute walk from the station but it would then be a further 10-minute walk to the centre of the proposed development for the average walker. The town centre is a further 5-minute walk beyond the station.

There is housing immediately adjacent to the subway but other housing would be up to an additional 30-minute walk, even more as further housing is built to the east.

With regard to cycling, there are restrictions on cycles on trains at certain times.

Q.8 These facilities would be in the wrong place and put an unwelcome burden on the A1S roundabout. This would only be appropriate if, at some stage, the Government were to re-route the A1. The site should be predominantly strategic warehousing with service station and lorry park support.

**Matter 7 Issue 1 Town Centres, Primary Shopping Areas and Shopping Frontages**

Q.1 For Biggleswade, the Town Centre Boundary and the Primary Shopping Area proposed match the boundaries that the Town Council has identified for policies within the draft Neighbourhood Plan.

Q.4 Within the Town Centre, the Neighbourhood Plan will propose two policies. The first is that residential will not be allowed at ground floor level. The second will be a design code for shop fronts. This is important since the Town Centre is closely aligned to the Biggleswade Conservation Area.

To further protect the buildings within the Conservation Area, the Town Council believes that an Article 4 direction is needed to restrict the scope of permitted development rights within the Conservation Area.

**For and on behalf of Biggleswade Town Council**