

James Jamieson
Leader
Central Bedfordshire Council
Priory House
Monks Walk
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Shefford
SG17 5TQ

14 August 2018

Sent by email

Dear Mr Jamieson

**Re: Planning Application CB/12/03613 Houghton Regis North Site 1(HRN1)
For 5,150 new homes. Decision Date: 02/06/2014
The scandal of "Land Banking" - 10 year delays to new homes for thousands of families**

I refer to my letter to you dated 12 July 2018 and the response to it which we received on the 24 July from your colleague, Jason Longhurst Director Regeneration & Business, who you asked to respond on your behalf.

I regret to say that Mr Longhurst's letter singularly fails to answer the majority of the questions asked in my letter to you regarding the scandal of "Land Banking" at HRN1.

At the end of this letter, you will find that I am therefore obliged to repeat the questions to you that your colleague has decided that he is unable to answer on your behalf.

Of the 7 questions posed in my letter, only 2 questions were answered by Mr Longhurst they are as follows:

Q3. Was the decision discussed or made at a CBC Executive Meeting and/or a CBC Full Council Meeting? - if so please provide details of meeting date(s) and Agenda item numbers together with details of background papers made available to Executive Members and/or full Council Members.

Mr Longhurst advises us that the decision to remove HRN1 from the 5 year Forward Land Supply was not taken at a CBC Executive or Full Council Meeting.

It follows from this that the decision that no building will take place on the HRN1 site, the largest single housing development site anywhere in Bedfordshire, until 2023/24 - 10 years after planning permission was provided, **was taken in secret** i.e. at meetings inaccessible to the general public!

This is not a small, insignificant development, HRN1 is +30% larger than the town of Ampthill - and new homes for around 5,000 families are being unnecessarily delayed by the action of your Council and developers.

By taking the decision in secret and not in public at a CBC Executive or Full Council Meeting, your Council has effectively excluded the majority of Councillors and the residents of Central Bedfordshire whom you represent, from being involved in the democratic decision making process.

They are not being told of the precise reasons why “desperately needed homes” are being inexcusably delayed yet again!

I take this opportunity to remind you that in September 2016 your Council stated that it expected development on the site to commence in 2017/18 or earlier.

One can only surmise that the reason this decision was not taken “in public” was because your Council did not want residents to be aware of the fact that not a brick will be laid at HRN1 for 10 years from the date of planning permission, or the reasons for that.

Q7. Why has planning permission not been withdrawn for the development of this site if Developers are unable or unwilling to move forward with it?

We are informed by Mr Longhurst that “There is a process for revoking planning permission but this includes compensation for the developer and the Council is not intending to explore this option.”

Our response is - why not move forward with the process, if some action by the Council would result in the developer going ahead with the development?

Or, is the Council in fact a party to the decision to delay the building of “desperately needed new homes” at HRN1?

This leaves the following questions from our letter to you dated 12 July that Mr Longhurst has failed to answer which we ask you to please respond to as soon as possible, namely:

We asked: Please provide:

Q1. Full and complete details of the reasons why CBC has accepted further very substantial delays to development of the Houghton Regis North Site?

Mr Longhurst has said simply:

“There were discussions regarding the quantum of planning work which needed to be done, land ownership and associated infrastructure.”

This is meaningless and designed to avoid the question. It is not acceptable - we asked for full and complete details - residents of Central Bedfordshire deserve to know.

Q2. Who at CBC took the decision to remove this site from the 5 Year Forward Land Supply and when was the decision taken?

Mr. Longhurst has refused to answer this very important question completely.

Q4. What due diligence did the Council undertake over deliverability of the development before removing this site from the Green Belt and granting planning permission?

What assurances were sought from the landowners, prior to the grant of planning permission, over deliverability such as ensuring a landowners agreement was in place?

Mr. Longhurst has stated simply:

“The Houghton Regis North Site 1 application was subject to the usual tests to ensure it was viable given all the infrastructure costs that were associated with the scheme and there were no planning reasons why the site could not be delivered.”

This does not respond to the question - what are the “usual tests” he refers to?

What specific assurances were sought?

Was there a “landowner’s agreement” to deliver the development or not - if not, why not?

Q5. What specific factors have changed since the grant of planning permission which are now causing the delay to development?

Mr Longhurst fails to answer this hugely important question which all residents of Central Bedfordshire will be asking themselves.

Q6. The Planning permission granted by Central Bedfordshire Council was subject to a large number of “conditions” as at the Decision Notice date of 2 June 2014.

Can you please advise which of the “conditions” have been met to date and which are still outstanding?

Mr Longhurst has not advised us of the planning conditions that have been met to date by the applicant and those which are still outstanding.

We look forward to receiving from you full and complete responses to our questions regarding this extremely important matter which impacts on the lives of thousands of families dependent on the housing that should have been built at HRN1.

Land banking at HRN1 will also mean that additional land in the Bedfordshire countryside will need to be released for development to compensate for the homes not built at HRN1.

We also look forward to the issue being debated in full at the next CBC Full Council Meeting.

We expect that this debate will be supported with background papers providing full and complete details of the reasons why housing for 5,000 families will be delayed for 10 years from the date that planning permission was given by your Council.

CPRE Bedfordshire is of the view that these development delays resulting in “land banking” at HRN1 are nothing short of a scandal.

A copy of this letter has been sent to the Chief Executive of CBC

Yours sincerely

Gerry Sansom
CPRE Bedfordshire