

27th January 2014

CPRE Bedfordshire's objection to planning applications 11/02686/EIA and 11/02685/EIA presented to Bedford Borough Council Planning Committee

CPRE Bedfordshire joins English Heritage, and the owner of the neighbouring shed, amongst many others in objecting to this application - the Borough's Conservation Officer has serious concerns. The grounds for our objection are:

- The substantial harm that this development will do to the setting of the sheds and the flexibility of the future use of the sheds
- Secondly, that the development will take place outside the Settlement Policy Area (SPA) in open countryside (as is the case with the extension to the eastern land parcel and the whole of the south eastern land parcel). This is just a matter of months after the Allocations and Designations Plan has been adopted by the council following a review by the Inspector.

These issues have been well covered in the planning officers report.

However, our purpose in speaking to the Planning Committee this evening is to raise the issue of the applicant's Viability Assessment.

The Viability Assessment is the most important part of the application and is central to it because it goes through in some detail the reasons why the applicant needs this enabling development - the release of land in open countryside - millions of pounds of public funds in the form of reduced S106 obligations - and a 70% reduction in social housing - providing the applicant with a three-fold increase in profitability on these properties - a further very substantial sum of money indeed.

This planning application was first submitted in August 2012.

At that time the applicant included a Viability Assessment which was open for all to see.

CPRE raised several issues concerning this first viability assessment such as:

- low rental values for the shed used by the applicant in the assessment
- the low market value of the shed which is an asset belonging to the applicant
- having already taken a profit from the development the applicant then allocated all refurbishment costs to be completely funded by the public purse.

In August/September 2012, following the receipt of our letter of objection detailing these issues the council commissioned an independent assessment which upheld many of our concerns.

The application was then not progressed to the Planning Committee but presumably held in abeyance.

Well, the application has been resurrected and it is before you now with one very big difference - the council has now decided that, at the applicant's request, the applicant's viability statement should be a secret document and that no part of it can be published.

Furthermore, the Independent Assessment of the applicant's viability statement commissioned by the council has also been deemed a secret document - no part it can be published for public examination even in a redacted form.

Perhaps the Committee can understand bearing in mind the history of this application and the issues relating to the applicant's first Viability Statement, why CPRE Bedfordshire is so concerned about this secrecy.

We hope that members of the Committee, unlike the general public, have had the opportunity to critically examine and ask questions of the Applicant's Viability Statement and the Council's Independent Assessment of it.

There is a considerable amount of public funding at stake in subsidising a privately owned building the value of which will be substantially increased upon its repair.

The applicant purchased the various land parcels in the full knowledge of their potential value and of the risks involved.

Planning permissions have already been granted in order to provide some funding for the repair of the sheds.

It is not for the public purse to underwrite all risk.

Chair, ladies and gentlemen,

This application is not in the public interest and should be firmly rejected.