

**Minutes of an Open Parish Meeting for the Residents of Staploe Parish
with the Mayor of Bedford (Dave Hodgson), Jon Shortland (Chief Officer for
Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Growth) and Gill Cowie (Manager for
Planning and Housing Strategy) from Bedford Borough Council**

held on Tuesday 23rd November 7.30-9pm at Wyboston Village Hall

Present: Dave Hodgson (Mayor of Bedford), Jon Shortland (Chief Officer for Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Growth at Bedford Borough Council), Gill Cowie (Manager for Planning and Housing Strategy at Bedford Borough Council). Cllr. J. Ibbett, Cllr. G. Meola, Cllr. E. Meola, Cllr. J. Thomson, Cllr. V. Zwetsloot, L. Crawford (Clerk) and 38 members of the public

1. Welcome and introductions (J. Ibbett – Chair of Staploe Parish Council)

Cllr. J. Ibbett welcomed everyone present and thanked the Mayor, Jon and Gill for attending and members of the public for coming out in such numbers. The Clerk pointed out that more than 10% of the parish were in attendance [the population of the parish is 331].

**2. Items 2, 3 & 4 (Eaton Bank, Dennybrook and Other Sites in the Parish)
were handled together**

Dave Hodgson: dismayed by the late submission of Eaton Bank and felt it was sensible to arrange a separate meeting in view of the turnout at Duloe Playing Field in October. He wants to answer residents questions.

Jon Shortland explained that Bedford Borough Council have been working on a new Local Plan since January 2020. They have been forced to follow a compressed timetable in order to submit the new plan by January 2023. They put out a call for sites which closed in September 2020 but Eaton Bank was submitted late (on the last day of the draft plan consultation in September 2021). Unfortunately, the rules of planning say that they have to assess all sites submitted. The site assessment for Eaton Bank will be available to view in April.

Dave Hodgson explained that South Cambs District Council faced a similar issue when preparing their last Local Plan. Promotors can submit sites right up to the time when the inspectors inspect the plan. He doesn't think it is fair.

Cllr. E. Meola – if the developer and landowner don't have to stick to the timetable then why are residents told they can't comment – it is not fair. Residents should have the right to have their comments to these late submissions recorded.

Dave Hodgson – doesn't disagree. However, for any sites that were not in the Local Plan consultation there will be a chance to comment in the Regulation 19 consultation in 2022.

Gill Cowie: she accepts that commenting at the Regulation 19 stage could be considered too late in the process. Eaton Bank was one of 14 sites submitted late. The inspector will want them to look at every site or the plan could be challenged.

Cllr. E. Meola: - then the Borough Council should allow comments from residents to be recorded as well.

Jon Shortland – Bedford Borough Council will be looking at the site from the residents' point of view. He has seen the comments from residents. If you re-consult on these late submissions people will submit more sites and the preparation of the Local Plan will become a never-ending process.

Dave Hodgson: - if there is no plan then planning applications will be submitted and approved with no infrastructure in place to support them. It is vital that we have a plan in place. He advised residents to make comments on Eaton Bank now anyway – send them informally. Although Bedford Borough Council can't publish them as formal responses as part of the consultation they will read them and it may help them in case something has been missed – eg. the developer didn't mention the high pressure gas main.

Thakeham developers have some history. They have been evasive over numbers of homes proposed and they put in a very late submission to South Cambridgeshire's Local Plan in the past. It leaves a bad taste. He has to assess the site but he is not happy with the way they have approached this first step. He believes access is an issue – particularly into St. Neots – this will need addressing.

Dave Hodgson urged those present to write in favour of other sites put forward in the plan if Dennybrook and Eaton Bank are not in the next stage of the plan.

Cllr. G. Meola: disappointed that this area was classed as brownfield and urban in the Issues and Options paper in summer 2020. Then the deadline for the call for sites – why have a deadline at all if it is not to be adhered to? And why was it not clear in the consultation that the deadline was not a deadline?

Jon Shortland – brown was a misleading colour to use in the issues and options paper. I apologise for not realising that at the time.

A resident from Staploe – it is not just the colour. The issues and options paper clearly states that our area (coloured brown) is brownfield, urban and under utilised land. This is clearly not the case.

Cllr. V. Zwetsloot – this mislead us and the whole Borough who of course chose urban and brownfield sites in the issues and options paper not realising our parish is greenfield and rural

Jon Shortland – they will look at the reasons why people have chosen a site not just the numbers choosing it

Dave Hodgson – regarding the deadlines they are trying to meet a deadline which is not of their choosing

Cllr. G. Meola – she does not accept these explanations – the Borough should have told the truth in the consultations.

A resident from Duloe: - When did the Eaton Bank developer (Thakeham) submit sites to South Cambridgeshire District Council and did the sites get approved?

Dave Hodgson – doesn't know – but he was aware that South Cambridgeshire found the developer very challenging

A resident from Honeydon: the government state that maximum use should be made of brownfield sites and they have made funds available towards meeting the additional costs associated with developing brownfield sites. Would it not be better for Bedford Borough Council to maximise the use of brownfield sites before building on greenfield sites?

Dave Hodgson: - the Council have already applied for some of this brownfield land funding and allocated brownfield sites but he doesn't believe it is appropriate to build at very high density in a county town such as Bedford so there are limits to the number of houses which can be achieved on the existing brownfield sites.

A resident from Honeydon: the current plan is for 1000 units on 189ha (5.3/ha) at Stewartby (a brownfield site) vs 10,800 units on 300ha (36/ha) at Dennybrook and they are calling Dennybrook "Low Density". So why can't they increase the density of housing at Stewartby?

Post meeting note. The application area for the brickworks is 52.28 ha. Some of the land will be used for employment, school and commercial units. Once the land for these has been taken off, the density of the residential areas will be quite high; higher than 36/ha to reflect the industrial history of the site.

Jon Shortland: also not all the land at Stewartby is deliverable because of the impact of the brick-making process and changes to the land following closure of the kilns (rehydration and instability over many years to come).

A resident from Honeydon: - she understands that the development cost of brownfield land was an issue in the past but now that the government have made more money available the Council should intensify housing on the site at Stewartby.

Jon Shortland: not all the land is deliverable even with the extra funding. Stewartby was a brickworks and some of the land is unstable clay which cannot be built on. They may increase the density near the new East West Rail station once this is finalised.

Gill Cowie: brownfield sites can be tricky. Ford End Road has been in the development plan for years but new government data on flooding now means that less of Ford End is developable. But the Council's policy is to develop brownfield sites first.

A resident from Duloe: wants to know why Bedford Borough Council don't challenge the process. It is clearly wrong that developers can sneak their sites in at the last minute and residents have no opportunity to respond. She moved here because it was rural. How can the rural identities of villages be protected? The planning process creates enormous mental strain and upset in people's lives and it will be going on for a long time.

Dave Hodgson: he acknowledges that a large new development would not protect the identities of these villages but the Borough Council do try to protect villages in principal. The Council cannot discount sites without considering them although he does acknowledge it is very stressful for people and it is a long process. He is aware of the negative impact on people but can't do much about it.

Even after the Local Plan has been made people can still apply for planning permission and the Council is legally obliged to consider and determine those applications.

A resident from Duloe: surely there must be something the Borough can do to challenge the process

Dave Hodgson: the Secretary of State may be looking at planning in a different way. Most local authorities say that the current planning process is unfairly stacked against residents.

Jon Shortland: Bedford Borough Council have challenged the process by challenging the rules. They have been given a target of 1275 homes per year. They have written to the government to explain that they have over-delivered in the past and that this has increased the numbers expected of them now. They have also said they think a deadline of January 2023 is unreasonable. It was justified by the inspector on the basis of the Oxford Cambridge Arc but that has been delayed. However, the government still say that they can't grant an extension for Bedford Borough Council's local plan or others would expect an extension as well.

Dave Hodgson: there was no mention of the Oxford Cambridge Arc in the latest budget, and there is currently no minister for it. There is yet to be an announcement of any change in policy on it but he thinks it may be broken down into three sections (Cambs, Beds / Northants and Oxfordshire / Bucks). We shall see.

A resident from Duloe: Duloe Brook floods in Staploe. If anything obstructs the flow in Duloe it will have huge implications for Staploe. Also, there are bats, owls, red kites all breeding in the area and an old English Walnut – what consideration is given to local wildlife?

Gill Cowie: those are the things that they look at in the site assessments. They work with agencies such as the Wildlife Trust and Natural England. They have flooding experts in the Council and in the Environment Agency and they are preparing an updated flood risk assessment using very recently published national data that takes into account the latest climate change predictions.

Lucy Crawford: the flood risk assessments don't appear to take the cross border effects into account. There are 5 water courses in our parish which all feed into the rivers in St Neots. St. Neots has experienced regular flooding and building in our parish will make this worse. Honeydon has also experienced flooding.

Gill Cowie: the flood risk assessments do account for cross border issues – they examine the whole river catchment.

A resident from Staploe: the Local Plan 2040 vision statement states that *“By the end of the plan period: The borough will have become a greener, more sustainable, more attractive and prosperous place to live. Tackling climate change and adapting to and mitigating its effects will be at the heart of new development throughout the borough, including facilitating sustainable food production.”*

How will this be achieved if you build thousands of houses on greenfield sites?

Are the Borough going to adhere to their current policies eg. 7S Policy 7S – Development in the countryside states that all development in the countryside must: xi. Recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside; and xii. Not give rise to other impacts that would adversely affect the use and enjoyment of the countryside by others; and xiii. Not give rise to other impacts that would have a significant adverse effect on the environment or biodiversity. Also Policy 46S – Use of previously developed land and use of undeveloped land *“The Council will seek to maximise the delivery of development through the reuse of suitably located previously developed land provided that it is not of high environmental or biodiversity value. Where significant development is demonstrated to be necessary on agricultural land, poorer quality land should be used in preference to the best and most versatile agricultural land (grades 1-3a).”* All the land for Dennybrook and Eaton Bank is grade 2 so if Bedford Borough Council decide to develop them then they will have to abandon their own policies.

Gill Cowie: the sites are judged against a site assessment methodology which uses similar criteria to those expressed in these policies. The assessment methodology will be transparent.

Dave Hodgson: we have to build 1275 homes per year. They cannot all be built on brownfield sites. The Council will make use of brownfield sites but large multistorey buildings are not appropriate in a county town like Bedford so there are limits to how much can be built on brownfield land. The Council have made their case for a lower target but the government have not listened. If we don't plan for this number of homes we will get them anyway but without the planning and infrastructure to go with them.

A resident from Honeydon: the first error in the Issues and Options paper which suggested our parish was brownfield and urban has led to 3 out of the 4 options for large scale development being proposed in our area. How did the Council arrive at this plan? They have led everyone to believe that our area is a brownfield urban site and this puts us in the centre of everyone's solution to the huge number of homes that need to be built. She believes that increasing the density on genuine brownfield sites and building other smaller sites would be much more appropriate.

Gill Cowie: these sites were not just brought forward as a result of this latest Issues and Options paper – a site was proposed at Wyboston for the previous Local Plan and there has always been an interest in the A421 corridor and near the Black Cat. The Borough Council can only assess the sites which come in. The technical reports and earlier consultation responses showed support for development in the A421 corridor but this extends beyond our area, it covers the south of Bedford too.

Cllr. E. Meola: the choice of this area as the preferred option (3 options out of 4) opened the floodgates for others to make applications and it has become a free for all.

Jon Shortland: the transport strategy drove the 4 options. It ruled out sites north of Bedford. East West Rail is in this area and it has a lot to recommend it.

A resident from Honeydon: Honeydon Brook floods regularly. The current sustainable drainage system is a huge area of agricultural fields. She is not sure that Bedford Borough Council will ensure the developers deal with the flood risk adequately if the Wixams railway is anything to go by. Dennybrook feels like a “done deal” – the developers are leafleting residents about how they can ease the situation for them and seem to be very confident.

Dave Hodgson: it is not a done deal. Developers will be trying to push their case and promote their site. Wixams rail will happen but the Council made a mistake in asking for a contribution to a station rather than asking for the developer to build a station. They have learned from this and would ask for the developer to build the infrastructure in future wherever possible. SuDS¹ will have to be done and these are being put into all developments.

A resident from Honeydon: an apology about the Issues and Options error (stating we were a brownfield, urban area) is not enough – something needs to be done to correct it.

Gill Cowie: she did clarify this to the people who asked

A resident from Staploe: but that is not good enough because it has massive ramifications for our parish. People outside our parish don't know that it is greenfield.

Dave Hodgson: he acknowledges residents' concerns and will come back to the Parish Council chair.

A resident from Honeydon: the error has led to a lot of upset and has led to 3 out of 4 options being in our area. Nothing you can do now can change the fact that this has led to a focus on our area.

¹ Approaches to manage surface water that take account of water quantity (flooding), water quality (pollution) biodiversity (wildlife and plants) and amenity are collectively referred to as Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS).

5. Solar Farms

A resident from Staploe: what will be done to protect rights of way when new solar farms are built? A footpath was moved when the Little Staughton solar farm was built and people were not consulted.

Lucy Crawford: it was only a permissive path, not a right of way so the landowner did not need to consult but the permissive path has been moved and is still accessible.

Jon Shortland: two requests have been made for environmental screening opinions in our parish. The developers are asking if they put an application in will they have to do an environmental assessment.

A resident from Staploe: can we comment formally on the screening opinions?

Jon Shortland: yes you can providing it is relevant to the screening opinion

Lucy Crawford: the Parish Council have responded to both of these requests and asked that the solar farm at High Wood be treated as an extension. Larger solar farms over 50Mw have to be treated as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project which commands a higher level of scrutiny. The High Wood solar farm would share a common access track, electrical substation and share boundaries with the existing solar farm on three sides. The developers want it to be seen as a separate entity to avoid this but we believe this could enable developers to build huge solar farms piecemeal without the level of scrutiny appropriate to a large development. We also responded to say that we are concerned about the extent of solar farms in our parish as we already have one large solar farm. We are also concerned about the amount of high quality agricultural land involved and, of the two applications, we would prefer the site at Cobholden as it is lower grade agricultural land, further away from residents houses and does not include such a popular footpath network.

Dave Hodgson: he has asked why solar panels cannot be added to all roofs in developments but developers say this is very expensive.

Cllr. V. Zwetsloot: when we met with Taylor Wimpey they said they couldn't instal solar panels because residents would be responsible for the upkeep and replacement in future but she pointed out that this was not a valid argument – residents would be responsible for the upkeep and replacement of all elements of their home in future.

Dave Hodgson: the government have announced that it is going to be compulsory to put electric charging points into new developments.

Cllr. V. Zwetsloot: why can't industrial sites put solar panels on warehouse roofs?

Dave Hodgson: he would encourage this. Some businesses got into solar farms when the feed in tariffs were high but they are not as high now.

Lucy Crawford: why can't Bedford Borough Council insist on solar panels on roofs by putting it in their design codes?

Dave Hodgson: the trouble is that developers talk about viability. If they have to install solar panels they may build less affordable homes in order to make the site viable. Bedford Borough Council have an increasing number of people in temporary accommodation and need the affordable homes. Or they say they will install solar panels and electric charging points but then they won't build the play area because it won't be viable. This was a huge problem at Great Denham. They lost loads of assets for the Borough due to viability – they went from £13 million to £7 million.

A resident from Staploe: developers are paying too much to farmers.

Gill Cowie: new planning consultations are being published by the government soon. One of the issues to be addressed is how you capture value from development. Watch out for the consultation and comment on it. We will make sure that parish councils are aware.

Dave Hodgson: the government asked Bedford Borough Council to contribute to the Black Cat roundabout. They managed to negotiate not to contribute as this would have left less money available for schools, health provision and other necessities.

A resident from Honeydon: by the time we have solar farms, Dennybrook, and Eaton Bank this would cover most of the parish. Does the Borough Council consider the holistic effect on the parish? Also, can solar farms be used as a justification that the development is environmentally friendly because there are solar panels nearby?

Jon Shortland: no the presence of solar panels nearby would not be taken into account when considering the environmental credentials of a development. If one solar farm was agreed then the next application would have to take the previous one into account. The Borough Council has to judge each on its own merits.

A resident from Honeydon: when determining sites do you calculate the CIL² money you will receive?

Gill Cowie: no. Government is looking at the whole CIL regime and has said that it is to be replaced. Bedford Borough Council think it is unlikely CIL will be levied on developments in future.

A resident from Honeydon: there is a high pressure gas main through our parish. Does that affect the deliverability of a site?

Dave Hodgson: can't build on top of it but the land can be used for green spaces. Same for a high pressure water main.

A resident from Staploe: how do you integrate with Central Beds re large developments proposed at Tempsford and Hunts District Council re Wintringham Park and Loves Farm and Cambridgeshire re Cambourne? If all the developments go ahead the infrastructure will be wholly inadequate. Planning in isolation will be a disaster.

² CIL is Community Infrastructure Levy. A payment made to the Council (and a proportion to the Parish Council) to cover infrastructure associated with the development.

Gill Cowie: the Council have a duty to cooperate with neighbouring councils. They will meet with all of them.

A resident from Staploe: will their plans affect yours?

Jon Shortland: they will look at how they all fit together

Dave Hodgson: in the past there were proposals to realign the A1 west of St Neots and remove the roundabouts in Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire. Central Beds are arguing that it should go east of the existing A1 and Dave Hodgson is supporting this and they are making the case for this to the Department for Transport.

Cllr. V. Zwetsloot: our sewage system is Victorian. With all these huge developments where would the sewage be treated?

Dave Hodgson: he is more concerned about how they would get water to people in the first place. There is a real shortage of water in this part of the country. It takes around a decade to build a new reservoir. Sewage works can be built in less time. His frustration is that Bedford Borough Council are building 50% more houses than the national average target and he doesn't feel it is fair.

A resident from Honeydon: we already get lots of power cuts. How will the electricity system cope?

Other residents concurred – there have been generator trucks parked in Duloe and Honeydon recently to prevent an outage. Power cuts are very frequent.

Dave Hodgson asked residents to e-mail him when they get power cuts and suggested we set up a separate meeting about it as he was not aware of the issue.

A resident from Duloe: he was told that the electricity line in Duloe was the test line for the Great Barford Power Station when it was built. It was never upgraded.

A resident from Honeydon: no more greenfield sites are being created. They are very precious. Please consider very carefully before building on them.

Dave Hodgson: please lobby your MP to tell him that the housing targets are too high. If there is no Local Plan we will get unfettered growth. We want homes for nurses and care workers – it is a complex issue but he feels it is unfair at the moment and our targets are too high.

6. Government commitments not to build on greenfield sites and the implications for Bedford Borough's Local Plan

Gill Cowie: this is not yet government policy but as discussed previously Bedford Borough Council do prioritise use of brownfield sites.

Dave Hodgson: As discussed previously there is a limit to how many houses can be built on the brownfield sites available. Some greenfield land will have to be used.

7. The draft Local Plan and the data used to support it – flawed transport data?

Jon Shortland has sent a response to the resident of Staploe who highlighted that the Dennybrook transport assessment suggested that there would only be 25 vehicle movements in Dennybrook in the morning rush hour. Jon explained that there was an error in the text (but not in the data) and it should have said 25 vehicle movements **per 100 homes** in the morning rush hour.

A resident from Staploe: an independent assessment is needed. He does not trust the data.

Another resident from Staploe: the draft consultation transport assessment said there would be 25 cars in the morning rush hour not 25 cars **per 100 homes** so this was a flaw in the consultation which means it was a misrepresentation and made it more likely that people would choose Dennybrook.

Cllr. V. Zwetsloot: have these mistakes been made clear to the whole Borough? People have formed their judgements about which sites to choose based on the incorrect information given.

Dave Hodgson. No they have not been made clear to the whole Borough but most people would not have gone into that level of detail.

8. The Oxford Cambridge Arc.

As previously discussed this does not appear to be quite so high on the government's agenda. Watch this space.

9. East West Rail. Residents still believe the Northern route is the wrong choice

Dave Hodgson: we are waiting for East West Rail to announce the route.

Cllr. E. Meola: if Wixams rail station is going ahead could the East West Rail connect with this?

Dave Hodgson: Wixams is on the main London line not East West Rail so no it won't

A resident from Begwary: two roads from Wyboston onto the A1 are closing. All the traffic from the villages and Dennybrook will be going along the Dennybrook pathway which will further increase the traffic issues with this development.

She also asked how the government can justify East West Rail if there is no money for HS2 and yet they talk about levelling up. Also, if East West Rail is cancelled is Dennybrook less likely?

Dave Hodgson: not all of HS2 has been cancelled. We are awaiting an announcement on East West Rail but the government funding for it has previously been agreed so it is unlikely to be cancelled.

A resident from Duloe: Seems likely that East West Rail will need to use diesel trains which is not environmentally friendly

Dave Hodgson: the new line has to be carbon neutral and Bedford Borough Council are asking for it to be electric from the outset.

A resident from Honeydon: the village roads from Honeydon into St Neots are so narrow and it is very dangerous for dog walkers, runners, cyclists etc. It is not safe to increase traffic on these roads.

Dave Hodgson: you may be able to get some benefit from the Black Cat to Caxton Gibbett scheme to improve roads.

A resident from Staploe: if we got wider roads they would just introduce more houses which we don't want.

Lucy Crawford: the consultation only said there would be 2,500 homes at Dennybrook and it was not clear that this was the first phase of a much larger development of nearly 11,000 homes. This was pointed out several times during our last online meeting and the Mayor said he would look at it. She asked if he could give us any feedback on this.

Dave Hodgson. No he did not have any feedback on this.

10.Waste and recycling – no access to St Neots recycling centre or bulky waste

Cllr. G. Meola: the issues and options paper referred to us as urban or edge of urban which suggests we can access the services provided in the urban area. However, because our nearest urban area is in a different county we often can't access the services there eg. the recycling centre in St Neots and the Ting bus service.

Also, how will building here meet the needs of Bedford residents? St Neots residents will move into the new houses, not Bedfordshire residents.

Dave Hodgson: he is trying to encourage cross border collaboration re the recycling centre but Cambs may want some money to allow us to use their tip. He is also trying to get cross border bus journeys but funding is a challenge. He suggested Cllr. G. Meola send him an e-mail re the Ting bus service. She pointed out that it was just an example – the issue is that we don't necessarily get access to services in the urban area even if it is close.

Dave Hodgson: urban areas get huge subsidies for bus journeys. He argued that we need the same. There is a shortage of HGV drivers and so bulky waste is not available at the moment. He is prioritising the black bin collections when there are shortages.

Dave Hodgson: thanked everyone for a polite meeting and said it was helpful that one question was posed at a time.