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Strategic Growth Team
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Dear Strategic Growth Team

**REPRESENTATION TO THE CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL DESIGN GUIDE
SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING DOCUMENT CONSULTATION
ON BEHALF OF VISTRY GROUP**

I write on behalf of my client Vistry Group, to submit a representation to the consultation currently running on the Draft Planning Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (SPD).

The SPD published for consultation, dated January 2023, seeks to provide additional guidance and information to support the policies set out in the adopted Local Plan 2015 to 2035 (July 2021).

Generally, Vistry Group consider that the Draft Central Bedfordshire Design Guide (January 2023) is a thoroughly comprehensive compendium of approaches, ideas and details that reflect relevant national and local policy requirements. There is though a general concern that, due to the volume of detail/material, the design guide is not a very useable document for developers and that it has a greater chance of becoming out of date sooner. Instead, Design Guide requirements for development should be set out clearly in tables, separated from the descriptive text providing the context; this will ensure that design principles are clear to developers reading the document and it will be easier to apply these as part of the evolution of development proposals.

Design has become a key point of discussion in the planning sphere in recent years, with the introduction of a National Design Guide and National Model Design Code in 2021. It is noted that these documents provide a basic framework for good design and are material considerations when making planning decisions, and, on this basis, the Council should make sure to avoid duplicating the information included in these documents and instead focus on building on the principles established in order to add value with this SPD. It is also noted that the planning policy context in which decisions are made is constantly changing - references to national planning policy documents and technical guidance should always state "or as superseded" to ensure that the SPD does not become out of date.

A key concern for Vistry is that the draft Design Guide SPD is silent on the use of design codes for strategic sites. My client considers that where there are strategic allocations (over 300 homes) that require the approval of a Design Code, once approved, the design guide should act as the basis for all

design principles for the scheme in question; the Design SPD should be amended to make this clear. This will ensure that there is a degree of certainty for developers who are delivering strategic sites over a long period of time.

My client has reviewed the document in full and their comments are set out in tables below against the relevant sections/paragraphs of the draft document for ease:

SECTION 5 – CONTEXT AND IDENTITY	
Paragraph Reference	Comment
5.6 Skylines and Roofscapes, 5.7 Built Form in Central Bedfordshire 5.8 Twentieth Century Development 5.9 Local Built Form Characteristics	<p>Provides generic and sometimes arbitrary descriptions that are vastly summarised and simplified over what is an expansive and varied area of rich history and urban form.</p> <p>It would be beneficial to separate the contextual analysis and scene-setting from the design guide considerations, and provide an analysis by character area or settlement.</p> <p>5.7.8 It is unclear which elements listed should guide new local centres to be developed as part of strategic mixed-use local plan allocations.</p> <p>Front gardens between housing and street edges are not always appropriate to the character and scale of development, see example of Fairfield Park.</p>
5.10 Traditional Materials Typology	<p>This is a generic palette and would benefit from being related geographically to the areas of the district where particular materials are more prevalent.</p>
5.11 Historic Context of Central Bedfordshire	<p>This section would benefit from further information on historical context broken down by distinct area types or geographical areas within the wider district.</p> <p>This section needs to be directly linked to national heritage policies and clearly referenced to local policies, and should not seek to go beyond the provisions of existing policy (only provide information to support policy).</p> <p>For example, at Figure 26: “...showing the important relationship between the farm buildings and the farmhouse, and its wider rural farmland setting. It is essential that this relationship between farm buildings and their setting is maintained.” This is not a reasonable statement as national heritage policy allows development within the setting of a heritage asset where it results in less than substantial harm and meets policy requirements.</p> <p>5.19 This section includes a number of figures, annotated with design guidance – it is unclear if these only relate to these specific examples or apply more widely. Any requirements should be clearly separated in the text.</p>
5.23 High Quality Design	<p>This should be a leading objective of the overall document and approach, rather than subsumed within detailed matters.</p>
5.27 Sustainability	<p>This provides no guidance on design of retrofitted sustainability / renewable technology measures.</p>
5.29 – 5.37	<p>These sections relate to existing local and national policies and are not applicable to a Design Guide.</p>

5.39	This provides a useful appraisal tool for development set within existing settlements, however it needs to be caveated that new strategic development on greenfield sites need to create their own distinctive identity through design, and this is proposed to be achieved through the requirement for an approved Design Code for new development above 300 homes.
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SECTION 6 – BUILT FORM

Paragraph Reference	Comment
6.2.2 Urban Grain and Contextual Development	States that “new developments should be designed to imitate and reflect the existing pattern...”. This is considered to be unduly restrictive as a statement and not at all reflective of best practice design that has emerged in the UK in recent years. It is important that proposals for new development assess the quality of the context within which they are proposed, however where the existing context is of poor quality, alternative patterns of development should be proposed.
6.2.3 Urban Grain and Contextual Development	<p>States that “main streets should be connected to other parts of a development or existing places by side streets”. There is insufficient detail in this statement within which to understand how a hierarchy of street typologies may function. “Side streets” is a particularly loose and undefined term that could refer to a number of different street typologies including secondary streets, residential streets and/or mews or lanes. Further detail would be welcomed.</p> <p>Moreover, the idea of urban grain being dictated by streets is a weak starting point. Urban grain should be defined by connectivity, not necessarily streets, with active travel permeability being promoted in order to meet sustainable targets. In this sense, the remainder of paragraph 6.2.3. is supported.</p>
6.4 Enclosure	This section would benefit from some diagrams to explain how enclosure is a positive placemaking tool. It would also be useful to understand where enclosure is not always a feature of well-designed places as the text states that “most” well-designed places have an appropriate sense of enclosure.
6.5 Consistency of Building line and Active Frontage	This section would benefit from some diagrams to explain how consistency of building line and active frontage are positive placemaking tools.
6.6 Hierarchy of Spaces and Enclosure Ratios	<p>This section would benefit from some diagrams particularly to explain how enclosure ratios should be interpreted and calculated.</p> <p>Paragraph 6.6.3 identifies that “in urban centres, high streets and secondary streets generally have an enclosure ratio of 1:1...”. In practice, this ratio will not always be able to be achieved on new larger developments where high streets (or primary routes) and secondary streets would, due to county highways requirements need to provide (in addition to the main carriageway) tree-lined verges (in accordance with the requirements of the NPPF), cycle lanes (in accordance with LTN 1/20) and in some instances private drives (where direct access is not permitted) that would widen the overall street typology such that the heights of adjacent buildings would not be able to be of sufficient height to meet the enclosure ratio requirements.</p>
6.7 Public and Private Space	Paragraph 6.7.4 states that back-to-back distances should “relate to the built context”. This is considered to be unduly restrictive as a statement and not at all reflective of best practice design that has emerged in the UK in recent years. It is important that proposals for new development assess the quality of the context

	within which they are proposed, however where the existing context is of poor quality, alternative patterns of development should be proposed.
6.9 Densities	It should be recognised that density is only one determinant of character along with a number of other factors including materiality, form, arrangement, hard and soft landscape treatments and many others.
6.10 Building Form	Paragraph 6.10.2 states that “a positive characteristic of local buildings in Central Bedfordshire is the use of shallow building forms...”. Further detail should be provided as to why this is a positive characteristic as well as some examples of this building form in settlements in the district.
6.15 Elevational Design Considerations	<p>Paragraph 6.15.3 states that taller, rather than wider, windows is a positive characteristic. Further detail should be provided as to why this is a positive characteristic as well as some examples of this building form in settlements in the district.</p> <p>Paragraph 6.15.3 also states that the use of larger windows to lower floors, and smaller windows to higher floors is a positive characteristic. Further detail should be provided as to why this is a positive characteristic as well as some examples of this building form in settlements in the district.</p>
6.22.3 Houses That Terminate Views	This section provides useful guidance on streetscapes and the role that the location of houses can play in enhancing them. It is though felt that there needs to be some recognition that views in themselves are material planning considerations in order to avoid creating confusion for those reading this section.

SECTION 7 – MOVEMENT	
Paragraph Reference	Comment
7.2 Design for Movement (whole section)	<p>The SPD could provide greater consideration of micro mobility such as:</p> <p>E-scooters – private use of these are likely to become legal at some point and development should be designed with this mode of transport in mind. From previous experience in the sector, National Highways are already asking developers to have consideration of these within their road designs. E-scooter parking is also a key point. Developments in the future will likely need to provide sufficient public realm at key locations/services to provide secure e-scooter parking racks.</p> <p>Autonomous deliveries - such as Starship Robots which are already in operation in nearby Milton Keynes and Bedford. Guidance on these would be beneficial for developers, especially around developments being robot friendly, as well as ensuring communities are within close proximity of smaller local shops which would benefit from autonomous deliveries, as opposed to larger supermarkets providing home deliveries by van. This also has carbon reduction/sustainability benefits.</p> <p>The above would rely on location, with much of the Central Bedfordshire area being smaller towns and villages, but some within close proximity of cities and larger towns that would be accessible via e-scooters. On the other hand, autonomous vehicles work in smaller communities where there is enough of a local population within the immediate area.</p>

7.2.6 Design for Movement - Vehicular Access	Paragraph 7.2.6 states that “a vehicle crossover is used for private driveways and small developments...”. Further detail should be provided as to what a ‘vehicle crossover’ is.
7.3 Key Design Principles - Pedestrian Networks	It would be useful to understand what proportion of all journeys in Central Bedfordshire are pedestrian in relation to the national percentage quoted. Similarly, the percentage of children walking to school is a useful figure to understand; it would also be useful to understand what the percentages are for other journeys (work/shopping etc) as a means to setting some benchmarks for the district.
7.5.1 Key Design Principles - Designing for Public Transport 7.25.10 Accessibility - Accessibility considerations	It is unclear as to whether bus stops are recommended to be within 400m (paragraph 7.5.1) or 800m (paragraph 7.5.1, 7.25.10).
7.7 Street Typology and Hierarchy - Street Character	It is noted from the street typologies shown (particularly the higher order ones) that there is no option shown including no direct access streets. This option, which is potentially a variant of the Avenue/Boulevard or Urban Street (Main Street) would be useful to see as it is quite often a requirement on more heavily-trafficked street typologies in new developments.
7.8 Street Trees	<p>The ongoing or future management and maintenance of trees in the public realm (including streets) should be recognised in this section as an important determinant of their location and specification.</p> <p>Similarly, it should be recognised that the positioning of new trees in the trees will also need to be considered in the context of visibility splays, underground utilities and lighting columns and their ability to spill light effectively.</p> <p>7.8.4 should be re-worded so that it encourages ‘all parties’ to enter into pre-application discussion where appropriate as opposed to making a blanket assertion that this should always be the case.</p>
7.9 School Streets and Play Streets	It would be useful to see images/plans of the schemes referenced (School Streets - Scotland, Camden. Play Streets - Bristol).
7.25.2 Accessibility	It is noted that the Planning Practice Guidance states that ‘ <i>Local Plan policies for wheelchair accessible homes should be applied only to those dwellings where the local authority is responsible for allocating or nominating a person to live in that dwelling.</i> ’ ¹ The current wording of this section is therefore inconsistent with National Guidance, and, on this basis, the SPD should be amended to clarify that the requirement for the provision of M4(3) adaptable homes should only be in relation to new affordable housing provision and not market units.

¹ Planning Practice Guidance, Paragraph: 009 Reference ID: 56-009-20150327

SECTION 8 – NATURE	
Paragraph Reference	Comment
8.1 Introduction	In accordance with national policy, this section could be worded more strongly to reflect a landscape-led approach to development, not just as a means to ecological benefits and biodiversity net gain, but as an essential starting point to formulate masterplans in such a way the preserves unique site assets, celebrates the landscape and directly responds to topography.
8.6 On-site Landscape Considerations - The Development Edge	Paragraph 8.6.5 states that “community and amenity use including sports pitches, allotments, pony paddocks and cemeteries could be considered as appropriate uses at development edges”. This may be appropriate for certain sites but equally, community and amenity uses can successfully be placed at the centre of new developments as a means to bring communities together in a focal space (i.e. village green concept).
8.98 Retaining Trees on Development Sites	This text should be amended to includes the words “where required” so that it acknowledges that there may be instances where there will be an absence of existing hedgerows and trees.
8.11 Design Considerations for all Applications	This section appears to be a random collection of issues that are not necessarily solely related to nature and could perhaps be placed more appropriately within other sections in the wider document. Also, in terms of the heading of the section “design considerations for all applications”, the issues covered are by no means exhaustive.

SECTION 9 - PUBLIC SPACES	
Paragraph Reference	Comment
9.2 Designing Public Open Space - The key Principles of Public Space - Landscapes and Greenspaces	Paragraph 9.2.2 states that “green infrastructure should be allowed to shape and structure developments”. As noted in relation to 8.1, this is seen as an essential component of all proposals for new development and in this sense should be elevated in the document as a means for achieving good design.
9.4 Criteria for Urban Public Spaces	Paragraph 9.2.2 states that “as a general rule, the quality of the design of public space is more important than the quality of the materials used”. This is a somewhat complacent statement that could result in new spaces not living up to their potential. It is also somewhat contradictory to the remainder of the paragraph.
9.16 to 9.20 Children’s Play Spaces	This section (and the Children’s Play Provision Guide 2022 should it be reviewed) should give more consideration to making play areas more inclusive, such as through sensory equipment and equipment which meets the needs of all users ² .
9.21.5 Requirements for Public Art Outline Planning Applications	The level of information that may be requested with an outline planning application in relation to public art provision is inappropriate for the stage that the proposal is at in the planning process. This type of application is focused on establishing the principle of development and general parameters. Matters of detail should be deferred to planning conditions and/or Section 106 Agreements.

² <https://makespaceforgirls.co.uk/>

SECTION 10 - USES	
Paragraph Reference	Comment
10.2 Mixed Use Developments	<p>Paragraph 10.2.2. states that “the performance and vitality of town centres, high streets and mixed-use developments is a visible indicator of how well a local economy is doing.” It would be useful to understand how, in this context, ‘performance’ is measured, as economic performance is just one indicator of success and as shown in Figure 267 and particularly in the context of new communities, the social cohesion and diversity of a development as well as the health and wellbeing of residents/users, which can be supported by a mix of land uses, are also important components of successful development.</p>
10.3 Design Principles for Mixed Use Developments	<p>This section does not address density other than to say that a ‘critical mass’ of housing should support centres. The section would benefit from examples of density ranges (and possibly illustrative material) that would be supported in certain locations.</p> <p>10.3.3 “Schools should be located within the centre of any new community to facilitate sustainable access” We agree that schools should be located where it they are accessible via sustainable modes of transport, however this may not necessarily be in the ‘centre’ of a new community, therefore this wording is overly restrictive.</p> <p>10.3.6 15-minute walking distances conflicts with ‘20-minute’ neighbourhood set out above. This needs flexibility whilst ensuring facilities are within reasonable walking and cycling distances.</p> <p>10.3.21 It may not be achievable or viable to provide balconies on all residential units above mixed-use development, therefore this needs to enable flexibility to consider provision of alternative amenity space to serve the dwellings, for example through rear communal spaces.</p>
10.4	<p>10.4.27 Health and Well-being – the overarching guiding principles here should be applicable to all development, therefore should be extracted to the front end of the document.</p>
10.6 – 10.8	<p>Vistry Group welcome the acknowledgement of the Council that extra care accommodation should be located in locations which are accessible and that densely populated areas make appropriate locations for such accommodation. It is noted that there is often a perception that older persons accommodation do not belong in lively or even noisy locations and agree with the conclusions of the SPD on integration, supporting sustainable commuting patterns for staff and encouraging family/friend visits. Vistry Group would encourage the Council to recognise such key characteristics in relation to other types of older persons accommodation.</p> <p>It is considered that the Council should qualify what is meant by ‘<i>is this an area that will be attractive to older people in terms of feeling safe?</i>’ As noted, above there are often misconceptions about the type of location that are preferred by residents (i.e. quiet, green sites) with locations which have activity for people watching and noise often found to be preferred by Extra Care providers. This question requires refinement in order to avoid significant differences in interpretation.</p> <p>Similar to the above, when discussing views from windows at care homes at 10.8.1, thought should be given to other types of activity that might be of interest to residents – those suggested are stereotypical.</p>

SECTION 10 - USES	
	<p>Vistry Group appreciate the level of flexibility provided in the SPD on key matters such as size and grouping of flats with Extra Care provision. However, internal specifications/size requirements for both Extra Care and care/nursing homes should be tied to the most up to date requirements/guidance at the time of consideration to ensure that this document does not become out of date.</p>
10.12.1	<p>The text in this section is generic and high-level, and therefore provides limited, detailed guidance to assist developers when designing new schools. A number of the considerations flagged such as the integration of sustainable technology, active design, safety, etc. are already covered by policies set out in the adopted Local Plan.</p> <p>The phrase '<i>The location should aim to provide the shortest travel distance to the greatest number of residents</i>' should be deleted. This a sweeping statement that is very hard to apply in practice. There are also many factors that go into deciding the location of schools, particularly on strategic sites. Instead, my client would recommend that the principle of a '20 minute' neighbourhood' should be the focus here.</p> <p>The assertions made on the timing of school delivery are beyond the remit of what a Design SPD should cover. Similarly, the expectations for serviced land, although important, do not belong in a design-focused document.</p>

SECTION 11 – HOMES AND BUILDINGS	
Paragraph Reference	Comment
11.3.3 Space Standards	<p>Whilst the aspiration for all homes to have home working spaces is a commendable aspiration, it is noted that different households have different needs for such provision and it may have an adverse impact on affordability. This is ultimately a matter of personal choice and should be guided by market demand rather than policy requirements. Development should continue to provide a wide range and mix of different types and sizes of homes, in accordance with local housing policies.</p>
11.6 Frontage Conditions and Setbacks	<p>Paragraph 11.6.2 states that "<i>the preferred approach for larger homes (3-bed plus) that are likely to accommodate children is a minimum 2 metre setback. Where there are no footpaths (i.e. shared minor streets) setbacks should be a minimum of 1.5 metres.</i>"</p> <p>This is considered to be an overly-restrictive measure in the context of denser forms of housing which may for example include family townhouses in more intimate mews-style settings.</p>
11.23.3 Garages	<p>There is no recognition in the supporting text at 11.28.2 whether the converted garages considered were fit for purpose i.e could fit in larger, modern cars. Garages should not inherently be discounted from the parking provision of schemes if they can accommodate modern cars. Please see Vistry's previous consultation response on the Parking Standards for New developments SPD.</p>

SECTION 12 – RESOURCES	
Paragraph Reference	Comment
12.2 Key Sustainability Principles - Greener Construction	Paragraph 12.2.4 states that well-designed buildings should “reduce embodied carbon”. It would be useful to understand the ways in which this could be achieved.
12.19 Noise and Vibration 12.20 Contaminated Land 12.21 Air Quality	This section should acknowledge that Noise, Contamination and Air Quality reports may not be required for all planning applications – this should be subject to site specific considerations.

GENERAL COMMENTS	
Paragraph Reference	Comment
CBC Highway Construction Standards & Specifications Guidance	CBC’s separate Highway Construction Standards & Specifications Guidance is referenced throughout the SPD (linking to Issue 5), however, CBC’s website shows that there is an Issue 8 of this Guidance.
Reference to other guidance documents/SPDs	The direct relationship and cross-referencing to other Local Plan policies needs to be further clarified, for example referring to highways guidance in relation to street hierarchy requirements, and Design Code requirements set out in the Development Brief guidance.
Terminology	There are a number of subjective terms used in the SPD such as “attractive” which should be avoided to enable development proposals to be effectively assessed against the stated requirements.

Conclusion

Vistry Group are supportive of this SPD and the efforts of the Council to provide clarity for those interpreting policy requirements through the provision of additional information. Hopefully, the comments provided in this representation will assist in the refinement of the Draft Planning Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document.

Should you have any queries in respect of this submission, please do not hesitate to contact me using the details included in the letterhead.

Kind regards



Mike Jones MRTPI
Partner, Planning

Signed for and on behalf of Bidwells LLP