

Your ref: CBC Design Guide SPD Consultation
Our ref: JB74717
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Date: 15/03/2023

Strategic Growth Team
Central Bedfordshire Council
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Bedfordshire
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Sent via Email

Dear Strategic Growth Team,

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

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

The SPD published for consultation, dated January 2023, sets out detailed guidance to support the Council's position on housing delivery as set out within the adopted Local Plan 2015 to 2035 (July 2021).

Overall, the Vistry Group is supportive of this SPD - it clearly sets out the expectations of the Council in detail and the provision of additional guidance is welcomed. My client also appreciates that the document itself includes clarification that is not designed to create new policy; we would though ask that further text is added to clarify that the SPD does not seek to override or alter specific policy requirements identified within site specific policies, such as that for allocated strategic developments.

My client has now reviewed the document and their comments are set out below against the relevant section numbering of the draft document below for ease:

Section 2

The Vistry Group welcomes and supports the Council's goals and objectives to meet its sustainability plan.

The Vistry Group was formed in January 2020 following Bovis Homes' acquisition of Linden Homes and Galliford Try Partnerships businesses. In November 2022 Vistry acquired Countryside Partnerships and became the top housebuilder in England by volume.

The Vistry Group has an HBF five-star rating and was awarded Large Housebuilder of the Year in 2021, testament to an ethos of doing the right thing across all operations and the company values of integrity, caring and quality.

A new range of high quality homes has been designed to meet the anticipated Future Homes Standard 2025. These are gas-free, and, through a fabric-first approach, seek to reduce energy demand within homes in the first place, as well as featuring air-source heat pumps and heat recovery systems.

The Vistry Group have a dedicated in-house sustainability team working to improve practices and materials across sites. By the end of 2025, Vistry Group will be diverting 100% of waste from its sites away from landfill, with an overall reduction of waste of 20% per plot compared to 2021. By 2025 the Vistry Group are aiming to achieve a 75-80% reduction in CO₂e (Carbon Dioxide equivalent, the metric measure used to compare emissions) compared to 2021.

The Vistry Group are committed to using modern methods of constructions (MMC) where possible, delivered via their in-house timber frame manufacturing plants around the UK. MMC reduces the amount of materials used by over 45%; reduces waste generation by over 50%; and reduces HGV movements at the construction site by over 40%; not to mention a reduction in the build time.

The Vistry Group recognises the high environmental and social value of green and blue infrastructure, and, ahead of the national mandate, is designing in a minimum of 10% Biodiversity Net Gain into all its new communities. The Vistry Group works in partnership with a number of wildlife groups, including the Bumblebee Trust, British Hedgehog Preservation Society and the Bat Conservation Trust, to help protect these important species through, for example, the inclusion of bee bricks, hedgehog highways and bat-friendly lighting schemes and foraging routes.

Section 3

Whilst the detail in respect to housing mix and the role of the 2017 SHMA is acknowledged, the clarity provided on the alternative approaches is welcomed.

Nevertheless, the Vistry Group would welcome greater clarity and indeed flexibility in respect to large major strategic outline applications where the delivery of homes will take place over a significant period of time, likely spanning local plan cycles. It is noted that such instances would benefit from detailed pre-application advice; the use of Planning Performance Agreements to help shape the approval and delivery of allocated strategic sites over a period of time where the SHMA is being updated or subject to change should be specifically referenced in the SPD. In particular, how such matters are dealt with by planning conditions and Section 106 legal agreements.

Section 4

The Vistry Group supports the clarity provided in respect to housing standards.

It is noted that the Planning Practice Guidance states that '*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.*'¹ The current wording of the SPD is therefore inconsistent with National Guidance, and, on this basis, the SPD should be amended in Section 4 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.

Section 5

The Vistry Group supports the comprehensive overview of the importance of housing for older people and the clarity and flexibility afforded within the draft guidance.

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

Section 6

Whilst Local Plan Policy H4 'Affordable Housing' makes reference to the need for intermediate tenures, the draft SPD indicates a clear preference for shared ownership.

The SHMA only refers to intermediate tenures with no analysis of different types and their relative merits. Therefore, the preference for shared ownership in the context of the wider definition of intermediate tenures is unsubstantiated. This should not be taken as opposition to shared ownership, which has been very successful in helping many first time buyers on the housing ladder. However, to remain silent on the alternative intermediate tenures and where/when the Council might consider them acceptable creates unnecessary uncertainty.

The Vistry Group is committed to working with local authorities, housing associations and investors to deliver affordable housing. The Vistry Group is the largest private sector provider of affordable housing in the United Kingdom.

Section 8

The clarity provided on self and custom build housing is welcomed, particularly the option for customisation. However, the Vistry Group question the simplification in respect to the requirements particularly on larger outline planning permissions, which will be subject to complex phasing and delivery over a longer period of time. In particular, where sites are subject to their own specific policy requirements. In this respect, it is felt that more flexibility and negotiation is needed through detailed pre-application discussion and/or Planning Performance Agreement(s).

Section 9

Whilst the section on First Homes is welcomed, the Vistry Group is concerned that the draft SPD fails to recognise other changes to national policy since the adoption of the Local Plan. It is accepted that the SPD cannot step outside the confines of the policies in the Local Plan, but this does not prevent interpretation of the new provisions of the NPPF within the context of these policies.

For example, the changes to the NPPF broaden the definition of affordable housing, particularly amongst intermediate tenures, which now include:

"b) Starter homes: is as specified in Sections 2 and 3 of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 and any secondary legislation made under these sections. The definition of a starter home should reflect the meaning set out in statute and any such secondary legislation at the time of plan-preparation or decision-making. Where secondary legislation has the effect of limiting a household's eligibility to purchase a starter home to those with a particular maximum level of household income, those restrictions should be used.

c) Discounted market sales housing: is that sold at a discount of at least 20% below local market value. Eligibility is determined with regard to local incomes and local house prices. Provisions should be in place to ensure housing remains at a discount for future eligible households.

d) Other affordable routes to home ownership: is housing provided for sale that provides a route to ownership for those who could not achieve home ownership through the market. It includes shared ownership, relevant equity loans, other low cost homes for sale (at a price equivalent to at least 20% below local market value) and rent to buy (which includes a period of intermediate rent). Where public grant funding is provided, there should be provisions for the homes to remain at an affordable price for

future eligible households, or for any receipts to be recycled for alternative affordable housing provision, or refunded to Government or the relevant authority specified in the funding agreement.”

Section 12

On housing mix, Policy H1 of the adopted Local Plan states that *“Dwellings should be delivered in various forms of tenure types, e.g. ... private rented...”* Notwithstanding reference at 12.1.2, the draft SPD is relatively silent on Build to Rent (BtR) and the specific affordable housing provisions included within the NPPF. BtR is becoming increasingly important across the country and not just in terms of high density apartment schemes. It can provide for a greater diversity of housing types and tenures on strategic sites, which the 2018 Letwin Review saw as key to unlocking faster onsite delivery. It is therefore fundamental that the SPD at least recognises BtR and the potential for it to deliver affordable private rent units to supplement the affordable rent unit supply.

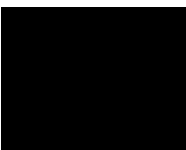
Similarly, both the Local Plan and draft SPD are silent on entry-level exception sites, which were introduced in the last major revision to the NPPF. However, the Vistry Group note that considerable analysis is provided in response to Policy H5 on rural exception sites. While there are differences between the two types, there are considerable similarities and it would be entirely reasonable for the draft SPD to use this analysis as a starting point. Again, this would provide greater certainty as to how the Council would consider these schemes, which are potentially a significant source of affordable housing in a planning area comprising several small towns and large villages.

Conclusion

The 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.

The draft SPD covers a wide-ranging of important topics. My client does feel like there are areas where additional content or clarification would be beneficial and hopes that the points raised in this representation will assist in reviewing these matters.

Kind regards



Mike Jones MRTPI
Partner, Planning

Signed for and on behalf of Bidwells LLP