



The countryside charity Bedfordshire

Briefing Document: Wixams residents frustrated by Bedford Council's failure to consult

Residents of Wixams are frustrated and angry about Bedford Council's 'hands off' approach to community engagement on the development of employment sites alongside existing residential areas.

Planning permission for the erection of up to 3 employment units, providing a total of over 50,000 square metres of floorspace was agreed by the Council in December 2019. The application was received by the Council in May 2019 with invitations for comments from residents by the end of June published in the normal way. This attracted very little attention and it is clear that resident's awareness of the application was not widely shared until a follow up application on 'reserved matters' came to the notice of the Wixams Community Group in January 2020. Only 3 letters from residents were submitted in response to the original application, compared to over 100 letters of objection from residents in February this year to the reserved matters application.

The three units are planned to be built on land which is currently open space and offers views across the Marston Vale. If built, the warehouses will be highly visible when entering Wixams via The Causeway, to residents as they move within the village along Brooklands Avenue and Bedford Road, and the biggest impact would be to those whose homes look directly onto the site. The closest unit will be within 90 metres of the closest home and will be over 18 metres tall.

Residents also have major concerns about the impact of this level of additional commercial activity will have on local roads.



Illustration showing the location of the 3 proposed warehouses north of Watson Road

Whilst the Council asserts that the original consultation process was advertised in compliance with Council policy, in view of the significance of the proposed development to local residents, CPRE Bedfordshire supports the case made by the Community Group that that greater efforts should have been made to make residents aware and to give them better opportunities to make their views known before planning permission was granted.

National planning policy states that: “Good quality pre-application discussion enables better coordination between public and private resources and improved outcomes for the community” (NPPF para 39) and continues (in para 40) that local planning authorities: “should.... encourage any applicants who are not already required to do so by law to engage with the local community.”

In the case of a development of such significance to local residents it is remarkable to learn that there was no pre application community engagement by the developer or the Council, to inform residents about the proposals so that their views could be made known and taken into account at an early stage.

CPRE Bedfordshire have highlighted these issues to the Chief Planning Officer, the Mayor and Chair of the Planning Committee but disappointingly, so far no one at the Council seems to see this as a matter of any great concern.

Bedford Council has an ambition to include the development of new settlements as a significant feature of its future housing growth strategy. The new Local Plan makes a commitment to promote high quality place making and states that “Development should add to what is locally distinctive or help to create a new sense of place where this is needed.”

Unfortunately, the Council appears to take the view that this can be achieved through its planning policies and standards, with scant regard to community engagement as a means to achieve this ambition. The reserved matters process could provide a valuable opportunity to involve local people in shaping the way that this development is delivered. CPRE Bedfordshire will continue to press the Council to reconsider its current position, and instead, make a concerted effort to engage proactively with residents.

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