

## **PROOF OF EVIDENCE – Cllr. David Parry, St Stephen Parish Council**

**Doc SSPC 1**

### **Background**

1.1 I am Parish Cllr. David Parry and am speaking against both proposals, on behalf of St Stephen Parish Council. I have no relevant qualifications but have previously made representations at Public Inquiries and, some 30 years ago, was the Chair of the Planning and Highways Committee of St Albans District Council.

1.2 St Stephen Parish Council covers the villages of Chiswell Green, Park Street and Bricket Wood, including both application sites, and has an electorate of approx. 14,000. We also led the St Stephen Neighbourhood Plan process, which was approved by referendum in May 2022.

1.3 We are a statutory consultee on all Planning applications and objected to both these applications, Cllr Ajanta Hilton presented the Parish council case to committee against the Polo Field application and Cllr David Yates made representations in person to committee with regard to the CALA Homes application.

1.4 The Parish Council supports the stance of KCG and the detailed work they have done regarding this appeal and I will not therefore duplicate their comments but instead concentrate on the fundamental issues regarding developing on Green Belt land, and what has been put forward as the 'very special circumstances' by the prospective developers of these sites.

### **Planning Policies**

2.1 Much is made in the evidence before you of the withdrawal of the previous Local Plan, and in particular the inclusion of the CALA homes site in that withdrawn plan as an identified site.

2.2 Mr Kenworthy, in his evidence (3.17) states that the reasons put forward by the Inspectors at the Examination in Public as to why the previous plan was unsound do not relate to this site. In the footnote he summarises the Inspectors reasoning for recommending withdrawal. This includes "Ability to accommodate housing needs outside Green Belt – lack of evidence for exceptional circumstances to alter Green Belt boundaries – failure to look at smaller sites – failure to address sustainability (this seems to have been cut short on the Proof of Evidence)

2.3 Surely these concerns go right to the heart of these appeals, with the appellants arguing that the lack of housing supply is precisely why there are very special circumstances to allow development in this Green Belt Location. The Examining Inspectors were clearly questioning the need to release sites such as this from the Green Belt and pointing out that St Albans had not provided the evidence for them.

2.4 The argument is made by the developers of the CALA homes site that weight should be given to the 2014 SKM Green Belt review, done for Dacorum, St Albans and Welwyn Hatfield district Council. This review was very much a 'broad brush' initial look at the 3 districts, indeed the Section 25 parcel of land, incorporating this site, stretches out to the M1 in the West and as far south as the M1 / A405 interchange. We cannot agree with Mr Kenworthy in his Para 3.9 assertion, nor Ms Toyne's evidence, or indeed the report to committee by SADC that this review puts this site 'at the front of the queue'. Indeed the SKM report identifies it as only one of 7 sites of similar status. Indeed Para 5.4.2 of the SKM review states "Land identified as contributing least has been recommended for further detailed assessment. .... It is therefore important to recognise that a decision for further assessment of land cannot be taken as a firm recommendation for a particular change to a Green Belt Boundary."

2.5 Turning to the weight that should be put to the identification of the CALA homes site in the previous withdrawn plan it is worth noting that the then Director of Planning, Tracy Harvey reported to the District Council in Feb 2021 that all the previously identified sites were now 'off the table'. In a similar vein, Mr Briggs assured the District Council Local Plan Advisory Group in Jan 2022 *"Regardless of what's been the consideration of land parcels in the past, Arup will take a new stance on it ... Every single piece of the now withdrawn Local Plan has been stripped back. There are no assumptions of 'it was in the previous local draft plan with this boundary, so, therefore, you know, that's a working assumption ... that's okay' ... Absolutely not."*

2.6 In view of these assurances, the Parish Council can see no evidence having been put forward as to why the District Council should have changed its opinion. Therefore in terms of the CALA homes application, we cannot see any reason for their recommendation to approve. Bearing in mind this, and the Examining Inspectors comments on the withdrawn plan, and the caveats in this SKM review, this site, like the Polo site to the north, have no special position. Therefore the recommendation to approve the CALA homes application could be seen as an error made by the District Council officers, corrected by the Councillors at committee.

2.7 This then brings us on to the issue of a lack of a 5 year land supply in the District and if other appeal decisions, particularly the approval at Bullens Green have a bearing on this. The Bullens Green Appeal and indeed some subsequent appeals have successfully promoted lack of current up to date plans as a 'very special circumstance' to allow development within Green belt Locations.

2.8 What is important, is to look at the context of these approvals, and in particular the timing in respect of Local Plan preparation. At the time of the Bullens Green approval, St Albans had withdrawn its plan but had not made any progress in respect of producing a new one, so effectively it had no sites identified to meet housing need. This is not the position now.

2.9 The District issued a new call for sites in 2021, and although no work has been done on suitability of the sites coming forward, and depending on what exactly the housing need is in the district, it appears something like 4 times the requirement has been put forward and confirmed by the District as 'available'. Bearing in mind the Examining Inspectors comments on the previous plan it is likely that some of the sites not previously identified and have now come forward will be considered suitable. Some of these sites, are already the subject of applications.

2.10 It is therefore clear that St Albans is not short of available sites, it just needs to determine which are the best ones. Therefore, this site should be assessed in terms of its suitability, not as the only solution to a current housing shortage.

2.11 I will turn to a detail in Mr Kenworthy's evidence (Para 4.10 & 4.11) which, in his summary suggests that the Neighbourhood Plan in some way supports this application. It quite obviously does not. It is just a pragmatic acknowledgement that if 'very special circumstances' are judged to exist, and permission is granted, the Parish wishes to see the type of development allowed to be as listed in 3.i. to 3.iv. As we do not believe VSC exist, in this particular circumstance this policy does not apply.

2.12 The argument put forward by Mr Kenworthy in 4.19 is somewhat disingenuous. I am sure you are aware that Neighbourhood Plans have only limited scope with regard to level of development and can only make limited revisions to Green Belt designation, and then only if there is a Local Plan in place allowing such alterations. The draft NP was prepared whilst the St Albans Local Plan was 'live' and, on instruction from the District Council, we included their site proposals. This in no way indicated we supported them, I was just a statement of fact. The withdrawal of the Local Plan occurred well before referendum and resulted in significant changes to the Neighbourhood Plan. It was this revised plan is what went to referendum. It therefore accurately reflected the position in 2022 and now, with no Local Plan in place.

### **Polo Field Application**

3.1 The Parish Council also objected to this application. Whilst having some sympathy with the stated objectives of this proposal, and to some extent referencing the issues in the St Stephen Neighbourhood Plan, we were of the view that the benefit of Key worker provision did not amount to the 'very special circumstances' and therefore did not overcome the presumption against development in the Green Belt.

3.2 We also had a few of concerns regarding the detail of the scheme:

1 We were concerned that a development of entirely Key Workers accommodation could create a community that would not integrate well with the wider community. Good Planning design should create a balanced mix of properties and tenures, and we feel that this proposal would not.

2 We feel that the indicative design and layout has a poor relationship to the rest of Chiswell Green and that the Highway access is not acceptable. This is an issue being dealt with by KCG.

### **Sustainability**

4.1 As I have set out above, the Parish Council is of the view that these sites do not in planning policy terms have any merit. Both appellants are in various ways claiming that their proposed developments are 'sustainable' however this does not stand up to scrutiny. I would ask you to look at sustainability and the claims being made, or indeed not made, in this respect.

4.2 There are 2 aspects of Sustainability, firstly there is the sustainability of the site – proximity to public transport – doctors, schools, shops, dental facilities, etc. and how reliant the occupants will be on the car. But the second aspect of sustainability is the nature of the development itself.

4.3 We certainly question the location on sustainability - Are we really expecting 5yr old children to walk 2km to school? In reality, if this proposal goes ahead, it is clear that this will be a car dominated development. I will however leave KCG to go into more detail on this.

4.4 The Neighbourhood Plan, the only up to date plan for the area, did however look at the sustainability of development, in terms of both location and the nature of construction, it appears that the Developers did not. The only reference I can find to sustainable development in construction and future energy usage are vague comments regarding 'higher standards of design' and 'beautiful scheme'.

4.5 It appears that Mr Kenworthy did not read the Neighbourhood plan beyond policy S1. If he had, there might be some reference to modest Carbon reduction commitments to comply with Policy S5.2. of that plan. This requires a min of 25% on site generation and construction standards 20% more energy efficient than Current Building regulation requirements.

4.6 This District Council, like many councils, have declared a Climate Emergency. Buildings account for over 35% of energy use in the UK, and our housing standards are the worst in Europe. Many residents are rightly concerned that we are rapidly destroying the planet by building on it. It appears that despite fine words, about beautiful sites and high standards, Development Companies such as these

appellants, are continuing to make no real measurable commitment to energy efficiency.

4.7 Finally - If our representations are all in vain, I would urge you to add a condition insisting on energy efficient buildings, well in excess of the current Building Regulation standard. There are houses being built all around the country that will require less than 20% of the energy needed to run a standard new home. If we can't save Chiswell Green, I suppose I will have to settle for saving the Planet!

Cllr David Parry.