Milton Keynes's Core Strategy
Opening Statement by Milton Keynes Council
10 July 2012.

The following statement will be delivered by the Council at the opening of the Hearing should the Inspector request this.

Welcome
Good Morning,
On behalf of Milton Keynes Council I would like to welcome all participants to this independent Examination into our Core Strategy.

My name is Nick Fenwick and I am the Assistant Director responsible for Planning, Economy and Development. I am the Chief Planning officer for the Council.

The purpose of this opening statement is to provide a very brief overview of the Authority’s Core Strategy and to set the scene for the examination hearing sessions that should take place within the next 3 weeks. I will also introduce the planning policy team members who will be leading on the subsequent matters.

The Core Strategy is a key document for the Council and its partners, setting out the spatial dimensions of our work. It is the second development plan document to be prepared by the authority as part of the Local Development Framework.

Milton Keynes in Context
Milton Keynes is one of 14 unitary councils in the South East of England. We share boundaries with Central Bedfordshire, Bedford, South Northamptonshire, Wellingborough and Aylesbury Vale. The council sits at the centre of the South East Midland Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership area.

Milton Keynes is one of the main economic drivers in the South East and will make an important contribution to the growth of this part of the country.

The Core Strategy recognises the borough’s important interrelationship with neighbouring authorities and the nearby growth areas. It is our view that a successful Milton Keynes is integral to the growth of the country as a whole and it is crucial to the rebuilding of the region’s economy and its future prosperity. This is supported by recent independent reports by the research and policy institute, ‘Centres for Cities’ (Submission documents SS16 and SS16A).

Milton Keynes has a clear local vision, articulated through our strong partnership of public, private, voluntary, community and faith organisations set out in the Sustainable Community Strategy. This is carried forward into the vision and objectives at the front of the Core Strategy.

Milton Keynes is more than just the most successful new town in the country partly due to the scale and design of the settlement as envisaged in the original masterplan. It has contrasts: whilst it has economic and housing growth ambitions - it also has employment and community regeneration and housing needs. The Core Strategy explains how these can be addressed.
Milton Keynes has grown at a fast rate since the 1960’s originally assisted by the Development Corporation. It has had many successes but given the time since the early parts of the city were developed there are now areas which will need reviving through regeneration in the next two decades. The main built up area has 4 district town centres at Bletchley, Wolverton, Kingston and Westcroft as well the regional shopping centre in Central Milton Keynes which also serves as a local centre for surrounding housing areas. Milton Keynes also has an important rural area predominantly to the north of the main urban area with the main towns of Newport Pagnell, Olney, Stony Stratford and to the south Woburn Sands.

The main development opportunities in Milton Keynes exist in bringing forward and continuing with the commitments throughout and adjoining the city carried forward from the Local Plan which was adopted at the end of 2005. That Plan had contingency built in with sites identified as strategic reserve sites. For the Core Strategy there is the new allocation proposed: the Strategic Land Allocation to the south east of the city (the former strategic reserve sites from the Local Plan as amended by the Core Strategy). A proportional element of housing is planned for the rural area but the more local identification of sites is guided by strategic policy in the Core Strategy. This approach means new development will be concentrated mostly within and adjoining the borough’s urban area. Within this context, the Core Strategy details how we expect Milton Keynes to grow in the future, through to 2026 and beyond, and sets out the planning policies that will be used to help to deliver these aspirations and objectives. The document being considered is the result of reviews of policy documents, evidence and analysis, consideration of alternative options, sustainability appraisal and extensive front loaded public consultation.

The Core Strategy
The Core Strategy goes beyond traditional land use planning and brings together policies for the development and use of land with other measures that influence the character and function of the Borough as a whole. It considers the interrelationship between social inclusion, protecting and enhancing the environment and economic prosperity in embracing the core principle of sustainable development.

The Authority believes it has submitted a Core Strategy which is ‘sound’. We have set out in our response to the Inspector’s legal compliance questions that we consider that the Core Strategy has been prepared in accordance with the legal and procedural requirements, including those relating to publicity and public engagement. That is not straightforward and I will say more about this in a moment.

We consider that the Core Strategy is consistent with a range of other plans at the national and local level, including the Government’s National Planning Policy Framework and guidance notes; and the council’s Sustainable Community Strategy. We also consider that the Core Strategy is based on robust local evidence and has been subject to a continuous Sustainability Appraisal.

On the legal and procedural requirements the evolving Government policy, legislation and legal cases published since the initial submission Core Strategy
was agreed by the council have not made things easy. The audit trail (Submission Document B 125 A) illustrates the history of the production of this important planning policy document. The announcement of the immediate revocation of regional strategies over two years ago made planning policy matters become less certain. The council decided to suspend work on the Core Strategy and to refresh the document. In summary this meant the February 2010 Core Strategy was replaced by the October 2010 (as revised) version. There seems to have been some confusion over the housing provision change between the two versions. I would like to clarify the council’s position in opening.

Within Milton Keynes administrative boundary the February 2010 figure was 41,360 homes over a plan period from 2006 to 2026. This results in an annual rate of 2,068 homes per annum.

The October 2010 (as revised) version proposes 28,000 homes over a plan period of 2010 to 2026. This equates to 1,750 homes per annum. Therefore the difference is a reduction of 318 per annum, or put another way -15%. Whilst less than the figure from the South East Plan we have explained that given the dramatic change in economic circumstances since 2008 and in the absence of any formal review of the South East Plan, the scale of development proposed is as close to the South East Plan as the council can realistically plan for. In so doing the council remains optimistic that the economy will improve but that level and rate of improvement remains very uncertain at the present time. This was reinforced by the recent announcement by the International Monetary Fund chief last Friday (6 July). She said the IMF’s forecast for global growth would be lowered.

The council have explained that in light of the current economic downturn which has continued since 2008, this change, whilst still a challenge, is more deliverable than the previous figure from the South East Plan. The South East Plan target has only been achieved once in the 6 years of the South East Plan to date. The South East Plan figure was predicated on a continuation of more favourable economic conditions and the more free movement of finance. The South East Plan required monitoring (Section D Chapter 26 highlights the need to focus monitoring on [inter alia] housing and the effectiveness of policy IMR 1). That has not occurred but the council believe if it had then the consequences of the recession would have meant a review of the RS targets as set out in the published South East Plan. If more land is proposed than currently in the Core Strategy there is a real risk of dilution - it will reduce the prospect of what will actually be built. To reach conformity with the South East Plan, reality must be taken into account.

We are in a completely different place now compared with where we were in 2007.

Since the revocation of Regional Plans was announced there has been the Localism Act which received Royal Assent in November 2011 and the National Planning Policy Framework published in March 2012. Various legal challenges have added further complications throughout this period. In addition there have been changes in the approach adopted by our immediate neighbours which have had to be reflected in the changes between the original submission Core Strategy and that version now for consideration at this examination.
Process
Given the events summarised above, the council has continued to view the Core Strategy as a priority and agreed to progress with the submission as quickly as possible in the circumstances. Each stage has been appraised through sustainability appraisal, but in reviewing the first submission Core Strategy it was highlighted that more SA work was necessary. That was undertaken and subsequently consulted upon.

As result of that consultation the council decided to review the previous decision to make changes to the initial submission Core Strategy and that was approved in September 2011. It is the October 2010 Core Strategy together with the changes agreed in September 2011 that we are now bringing forward for this examination. The process has not been smooth but we believe that that no one has been prejudiced by anything that has happened.

Examination.
This Examination represents an opportunity for us to explain the reasoning that has gone into shaping the strategy. Over the next sessions the Examination will explore the strategy in depth, and each day will bring a focus on different elements of the plan.

Whilst inevitably we will get into points of detail during the Examination it is hoped that the Inspector and participants keep in mind the overall vision and strategy for the borough that the Core Strategy provides, set within the context of the growth of the Milton Keynes and the wider area.

As will be discussed in Session 1 of the hearing, the Authority considers that the Core Strategy is sufficiently spatial in nature and will provide a strategic framework for the preparation of more detailed planning guidance, the Plan MK which is set out in an updated Local Development Scheme recently agreed.

The Local Infrastructure Plan through the Programme Management Board and Joint Delivery Teams support the delivery of the Core Strategy and demonstrates that the proposals in the Core Strategy are deliverable. There are clear mechanisms for implementation and monitoring set out in chapter 17.

Conclusion
In conclusion, it is our view that the Core Strategy addresses the key planning issues in Milton Keynes and sets out a clear and locally distinctive Spatial Vision for the future development of the Borough. The authority is firmly of the view that it has submitted a ‘sound’ Core Strategy and welcomes the independent examination of the document.

The team representing this Authority look forward to the discussion generated in the hearing sessions.
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Milton Keynes Council.

10 July 2012.