Hardingstone Action Group statement on sustainability for
APP/V2825/A/14/2228866 SUE on Land to the East of Hardingstone

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1 Introduction
1.1 Hardingstone Action Group will speak about the sustainability of the appeal site in its current use, and the impact on sustainability of the proposed development. This will be placed within the context of national and local planning policies.

2 Social sustainability
2.1 The site of the proposed development is currently easily accessible to the public through the footpath running across the site, giving existing residents, visitors and Brackmills workers easy access to this emphatically rural landscape. The appellant argues that public access to the site is currently poor because it is limited to the footpath, but access is not limited to just the earth you can tread on. Walking along this footpath people can see, smell and hear the rural environment across almost the entire site.
2.2 The land is very different in character to the parkland provided by the adjacent Brackmills Wood: this is an open, agricultural landscape providing supporting habitat to a different set of species. Brackmills Wood, as the name suggests, is wooded and highly landscaped.
2.3 The appellant argues that the development of this land would provide c.10 hectares of open space, accessible to the public and benefiting current as well as new residents. However, they do not mention:

• the net loss of c.35 hectares of valued open land; nor
• the reduction in variety of open spaces and linked educational experience, with the total loss of the open agricultural fields and replacement with road verges, play areas and small wooded areas, all of which are already plentiful in the area; nor
• the removal of the very reason for accessing the land, and therefore the lost associated health benefits of exercise. Under the current usage, walkers use the site to experience the countryside. Under the proposed usage, who will seek out an urbanised pavement passing through a housing estate to end abruptly at a traffic-saturated road? New residents may do so when accessing the local centre, but access to the countryside will have been removed for both new and existing residents.

2.4 The proposed development would not meet the required level of social housing (currently only 24% proposed rather than the required 35%), nor the locally assessed requirement for open spaces (30% less than required by Parks and Open Spaces Strategy for Northampton).

Policy Context
National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF):
• Policy 74 – protection for open space
• Policy 75 – protection and enhancement of rights of way

West Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy (JCS):
• Policy RC2 – protection for open space and its long term maintenance
3 Environmental sustainability

3.1 The fields form the visual and historic backdrop to Hardingstone village and conservation area, and the footpath may (according to village folklore) be the continuation of the Roman ‘Portway’ road to London. The fields are visible from Heritage Farm Close at the south east corner of the conservation area; from along the length of the public footpath; as glimpses through the strategic green openings along the Warren; and in swathes of rolling landscape from the Newport Pagnell Road. These fields are particularly valued because they are Hardingstone’s last link with its rural heritage of agricultural economy.

3.2 The appellant admits that the development would be visible from these vantage points, but argues that the rural fields already have a strong urban influence. This is simply not the case:

- The undulation of the land hides the modern Wootton Fields development to the south.
- Hardingstone is a village with ironstone cottages and narrow lanes. The Hardingstone Conservation Area assessment states that the conservation area has the character of a village, and that the part of the conservation area immediately adjacent to the development site is an important part of that setting (*Hardingstone Conservation Area Appraisal*, p.2 and p.9).
- It is difficult to see how the fields could appear more rural.

The appellant compounds the mistake by insisting on a strongly urban design style for the development area closest to Hardingstone.

3.3 The appellant also admits that the most urban part of the development would be visible from Hardingstone Conservation Area, and offers only a small area of amenity land and a few trees in mitigation to screen the development. This significantly underestimates the requirement to protect and enhance the character of the conservation area. The total loss of the conservation area’s visual and historic hinterland would have a severely negative impact, regardless of any screening by a buffer which provides no connection with Hardingstone’s distinctive character or history. The importance of agricultural views both into and out of the conservation area was confirmed at appeal for the site immediately to the north of this site, between Pittam’s Farm and Brackmills Wood (APP/V2825/A/97/282945). That appeal was rejected.

3.4 The fields were classified as ‘greenspace’ in the Northampton Local Plan (1997), preventing the coalescence of Brackmills Industrial Estate with Hardingstone and Wootton. The maintenance of settlement boundaries to prevent coalescence and urban sprawl remains a valid planning concern, and in this case the greenspace also forms a valuable part of a wider greenway leading from Northampton through Delapre Abbey parkland and out through our fields and Brackmills Woods to open countryside, and Salcey Forest beyond. This development would in-fill the buffer, isolating Hardingstone village as an island within a sea of discordant urban development, and forming a concrete plug to the greenway. The allocation of c.10 hectares of open space within the new development could not compensate for the loss of 35 hectares.

3.5 As open fields, the site currently provides environmental habitat for endangered birds including skylarks, fieldfares and lapwings. This is particularly significant habitat as it supports the Upper Nene Gravel Pits RAMSAR /site. The original application assessed the risk to species from the RAMSAR site as low and not needing further surveys, but whilst Natural England agreed with this assessment at that time, they advised “this issue may need to be reconsidered if a significant period of time, i.e. 1 to 2 years, elapses before the submission of a planning application for the land” (letter dated 9 January 2012 from Natural England, Appendix D of
Wootton, Northampton – Extended Phase 1 Habitat Survey February 2012, submitted with original planning application). As it is now well over 3 years from the date of the letter, and significant development has begun in the fields to the south of the site which were found to provide alternative habitat, the situation could well have changed and should be reviewed.

Policy Context

*NPPF:*
- Policy 118 – wildlife conservation and biodiversity
- Policies 126, 131 etc. – good design appropriate to local styles and protective of heritage assets and their settings

*Natural Environment White Paper (2011) –* reconnecting people with nature

*JCS:*
- S10 protection, conservation and enhancement of built & natural environment, and heritage assets
- BN5 – protection of heritage assets, settings and landscapes; importance of locally distinctive design styles
- SA Addendum

*Northampton Landscape Sensitivity and Green Infrastructure Study (2009)*

*Hardingstone Conservation Area: Conservation Area Appraisal & Management Plan (2009)*

4 Economic Sustainability

4.1 The fields are currently in agricultural use, an economically productive use which is complementary to the social and environmental functions outlined above. The WNJPUs Sustainability Appraisal found the land to be agricultural grade 2 and 3, and its loss would be a negative impact.

4.2 The appellant argues that the development would provide jobs, but the number of permanent jobs is negligible compared to the number of households that it would create in need of work.

4.3 The impact on an already unsustainably congested traffic network would have a significantly adverse impact on the local economy. The proposed public transport, ending in the early evening, would not provide sufficient coverage to compensate.

Policy Context

*NPPF:*
- Policy 32 – sustainable transport plans
- Policy 112 – direct development away from high quality agricultural land

5 Conclusion

5.1 The development site was included as a potential site for a sustainable urban extension in the JCS. However, the initial assessments for the JCS were considered by the Planning Inspectorate to be inadequate. The new SA was produced under such time pressure that an extension was
needed to complete it and, as a result, there was little opportunity to respond to community feedback before the final Hearing, or before this planning application was considered.

5.2 The planning application was an opportunity to assess the sustainability of the proposal in detail, and Northampton Borough Council’s locally knowledgeable, elected representatives concluded that the proposal was not sustainable.

5.3 As we have argued above, the further evidence provided in the appeal does not disprove the conclusion that the development proposal is unsustainable, and the appeal should therefore be rejected.