**Ashfield District Council Local Plan Examination Hearing**

**Council’s Opening Statement**

On behalf of Ashfield District Council, I would like to welcome the Inspectors Mr Philip and Mr Graham Wyatt, and all those attending this public examination. Thank you for the opportunity to give Ashfield District Council’s Opening Statement. My name is Christine Sarris and I am the Assistant Director of Planning.

Ashfield is at the heart of the East Midlands. It is exceptionally well located along the M1 corridor and within the sphere of influence of the freeport at East Midlands airport. It has excellent road, rail and tram links in part facilitated by its industrial past. The district benefits from some mature landscapes, excellent parks and open countryside which provide great opportunities for local residents and visitors alike. The Council aspires to achieve excellence for its local communities and businesses whilst protecting its most well-loved landscapes, heritage, and natural habitats. It is a place where people of all ages are proud to live, study, work, visit and aspire to stay.

Ashfield looks forward with positivity to the future and as such this Plan shows the depth and breadth of the ambition in delivery. Challenges are acknowledged however through partnership, innovation and by harnessing the talent of our residents, we believe we can progress. Opportunities will arise though the development of the Devolution deal and we as a district are best placed to work in partnership for the benefit of our communities.

The Ashfield Local Plan Regulation 19 Pre-Submission Draft, together with other supporting documents, explains the Council’s approach to guide development in the District for the period 2023 – 2040. It is an ambitious document which actively tackles the issues we face today in seeking to achieve sustainable growth.

We have adopted a spatial strategy that has listened and responded to the consultation on the Draft Local Plan. Public consultations have informed the approach to key issues and the evolution of policies which underpin the Ashfield Local Plan. Together with a robust and proportionate evidence base – on housing, employment, infrastructure and viability to name but a few, we consider that we have put together a sound Local Plan that tells Ashfield’s story. As such the Council considers that the Plan takes a balanced approach in promoting sustainable development, recognising what is valued in the district, whilst striking a balance to create flexibility and certainty.

Connectivity is at the heart of our Plan, whether it be the opportunities afforded by the M1 corridor to facilitate and meet employment needs, the promotion of sustainable travel through the creation of interconnected transport hubs, walking and cycling networks or through the timely delivery of new housing in accessible locations which support proportionate and sustainable growth.

The council has invested in strong partnerships with industry and education establishments to provide opportunities around robotics and engineering and is promoting an innovation park. This with its ideal location provides opportunities for not only Ashfield but for others further afield in Bolsover, North East Derbyshire and Mansfield. The council works hard with businesses to promote sustainable locations with good options around transport choice.

The Council considers that the plan provides for the delivery of the necessary number of new dwellings, including affordable dwellings, to meet the District’s Objectively Assessed Housing Need. Ashfield Council is proactive and directly intervenes with provision of affordable housing. Since 2022, the Council has delivered a total of 108 new-build homes for Affordable Rent on Council owned land, with a further 21 units on site due for completion in 2025 with a pipeline of subsequent projects being delivered. It is estimated that this alone will provide some 200-windfall housing over the next 3 years. Officers are currently in negotiation with private landowners to secure suitable sites which would provide up to 100 homes for Affordable Rent over the next 2 to 3 years.

We are investing in skills and learning, so whether it’s an apprenticeship, college or university, our residents don’t have to leave the District to make their next move, Like our fantastic Sutton Observatory, which houses the biggest optical telescope in the country outside of Greenwich, we’re raising our sights, looking to the stars.

To conclude, the Council considers that the Local Plan provides a sound and positive strategy for achieving sustainable development and meeting Ashfield’s identified needs. We therefore welcome this public examination.