1. Consultation

1.1 It appears that the current proposals have been drawn up under a veil of secrecy. To my knowledge neither my local Parish Council nor the residents of Tiffield have not been consulted on matters that will directly affect the day to day lives of the local community, in contrast the emphasis of the Council’s own Duty to Co-operate. As a minimum a presentation of the proposals to the Parish Council should have been held some time ago, and individual households mailed appropriately. The proposals would then have become more informed.

1.2 The recent Public Exhibition held at The Forum, Towcester, was less than adequate. It simply comprised various extracts from the Plan pinned to a board, without any further explanation or details of the evidence base. There was no satisfactory answer to my questions on “how much employment land is being allocated in Towcester?” and “what evidence of demand is there for such an allocation?”, the former prompting staff to consult the Plan to add up the figures! To my mind the vast allocation of 60.5Ha being seen as commensurate with the planned housing growth is naive and simplistic.

2. Employment Proposals

2.1 As I understand it, the proposals for the Bell Plantation (35Ha) and the Woolgrowers’ Field (4.5Ha) are prompted by the Towcester Masterplan, which again was not subject to any specific consultation with Tiffield residents, and the third allocation – 21Ha off Tiffield Lane – has simply been added at the last minute in response to landowners’ representations.

2.2 The West Northamptonshire Core Strategy (WNCS) deals with the larger employment proposals (40Ha or more). I fail to see how the three sites in Towcester, all juxtaposed and totalling 60.5 Ha, cannot be regarded as strategic. The WNCS suggests that small scale employment land should be considered at the local level (my emphasis) and that there is no specific identified need for additional employment to meet the needs of Towcester.

2.3 South Northamptonshire boasts one of the lowest unemployment rates in the UK (Local Plan, para.2.1.16). Existing employment land opportunities on Old Tiffield Road, dating from 1997, remain to be fully realised, and the current commitment at Towcester South identifies a further allocation of 15Ha for employment use. No evidence has been presented to demonstrate if these commitments are adequate or not, and certainly there is nothing to suggest that a threefold increase in the allocation is necessary or justified.

2.4 There is no rationale for making further land allocations at Tove Valley Business Park. The Local Plan accepts that there should be no “unrestricted sprawl” and that sites should be “well
defined” (para.13.2.1). It is quite clear that all three current proposals extend the urban footprint of Towcester into what is currently defined as Open Countryside, beyond the effective town boundary formed by the A43 corridor. None of these proposals can be regarded as a “natural expansion” of the town (para.13.2.5).

2.5 I query the acceptance of these proposals by the highway authorities. Towcester regularly becomes gridlocked at peak hours around the A43/A5 roundabout, and traffic movement associated with extensive development at the Bell Plantation and the Woolgrowers’ Field (Policies AL1 and AL2) will undoubtedly significantly adversely affect traffic flows around this junction. This would be inconsistent with Highways England’s aims to reduce delays on cross-country strategic routes such as the A43.

2.6 Indeed, I find it quite incredible the third allocation – Policy AL3, 21Ha on Tiffield Lane – is included without any agreement of the strategic highway authority (Local Plan, para.13.2.5). The proposal for a further roundabout on the A43 at the Hulcote turn does not square with Highway England’s strategic plans for the A43 corridor.

2.7 Policy AL3 will have an enormous affect on the traffic flows from Tiffield and villages beyond onto the strategic road network. Little or no consideration appears to have been given local desire lines; residents in this area depend significantly upon the services provided in Towcester, and the recent temporary crossover closures on the A43 adequately demonstrated the difficulties faced by the local community if direct routes into the town are compromised. There is, for example, a regular journey made by the Gayton and Tiffield Community Minibus to and from Towcester, a facility deemed essential by the less mobile in the local community in the absence of regular bus services.

2.8 I repeat my suggestion made recently to the Council and to Andrea Leadsom MP that earlier designs (1998) for a grade-separated junction at the A43/St Johns Road, Tiffield turn be resurrected to ensure safe and sustainable traffic movements between Towcester and its surrounding villages.

3 Conclusion

3.1 It is quite apparent that there is no evidence base to justify a proposed 60.5Ha of employment land at Towcester. Policies AL1, AL2 and AL3 must be deleted.