PHD
CHARTERED
TOWN PLANNERS

Mr M Moore - Inspector
c/o Lynette Benton, Programme Officer,
Wealden District Council,
Pine Grove
Crowborough,
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TN6 1DH

16 May, 2012

Dear Mr Moore

WEALDEN CORE STRATEGY EXAMINATION/ NPPF

Further to your invitation by way of letter dated 4 April 2012 we address the issues raised by the National Planning Policy Framework (Hereafter referred to as the Framework) in respect of the Wealden Core Strategy Submissions Document (hereafter referred to as CS).

At the outset we state that the range and nature of issues raised by the Framework are such that there are only two options either to find the CS unsound or to re-open the Hearing to hear participants.

As a matter of fact the Draft Core Strategy was not prepared in accordance with the Framework given it pre-dates this document. No criticism is obviously made in this regard but it is important to note the chronology of events.

- The Draft Core Strategy Submissions Document was published in February 2011
- The Consultation Draft of the Framework was published on 26 July 2011
- The Framework was published on 23 March 2012

The Framework therefore wholly pre dates the consultation draft and final draft of the Framework. In this context it is important to note the very first paragraph of the Framework implores that accountable councils should produce:

> *"distinctive local and neighbourhood plans, which reflect the **needs** and priorities of their communities" (**my emphasis**)*

Central to the approach of the Framework is that local plans should meet the needs of their communities. In this regard it is not at dispute that the needs within the Wealden and South Coastal Sub Area (Wealden) is for significantly more housing than was proposed in the South East Plan (SEP). The response of the CS is to provide even less housing than was proposed in the SEP. As such, it cannot be said that the CS reflects the needs or priorities of the community.

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Paragraph 6 sets out the purpose of the planning system, which is stated to be to "contribute to the achievement of sustainable development." Paragraph 7 then sets out three dimensions to sustainable development, the Council's approach in the EiP and supporting documents was to concentrate all efforts in supporting their strategy on the basis of their perception that they are exercising an environmental role in terms of repressing growth and new housing.

The Council's arbitrary use of a growth figure without testing any higher numbers that would still have been below the SEP requirement (as accepted at the EiP) must mean that their approach to this dimension of sustainability would and could not be considered to be robust.

However, when looked at in the round it is clear that the CS would not ensure sufficient land of the right type is available at the right time and in the right place to support growth and it would not support strong, vibrant and healthy communities as it would not provide sufficient housing to meet the needs of current nevermind future generations (150 - 152).

The approach to the environmental role is not robust and the approach to the social and economic roles of sustainable development are manifestly found wanting. Therefore, any singular, cumulative or joint and simultaneous approach to achieving such aims is not supported by the approach of the CS.

Accordingly, the CS would not contribute toward the achievement of sustainable development (9) and in particular it would either fail or be found wanting in respect of (in particular and not limited to):

- making it easier to create jobs
- improving the conditions for living, working and leisure and
- widening the choice of high quality homes

The CS fails to set out the strategic policies to deliver the homes needed in the area (156) or to respond to or seek opportunities for achieving sustainable development and meeting the development needs in the Wealden area (14). At the centre of the Council's restrictive and negative approach to the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development is their approach to housing growth in an area with acute housing needs. The level of existing need is recognised to outstrip the rate of growth proposed by the SEP and underprovision below these levels (as has historically been the pattern in Wealden) will widen the gap meaning that the needs of both current and future generations for housing and homes would not be met. Accordingly, the CS is unsound and not fit for purpose.

The Council's justification for failing to meet the development needs and in particular the housing needs of the district are predicated on their case that inadequate infrastructure is provided to support growth. The CS does not provide any framework to improve infrastructure (insofar as it relates to sewerage treatment and the housing growth in the southern coastal sub area). In this context the CS will simply accommodate only the existing headroom in the South Hailsham and North Hailsham WWTP and not provide any incentive or positively plan for increasing headroom over the plan period. As such, the CS would manifestly fail to plan positively for the development and infrastructure required in the area (157). Instead the Council rely on a situation where they expect commercial undertakers to plan (without the certainty they require as outlined at the EiP) to improve infrastructure on the basis that the Council may or may not bring forward increased capacity at some non-defined moment in the future. This chicken and egg game has been played out in the District for years and the result is the existing acute levels of housing need.

The CS fails to employ sufficient flexibility to respond to changing circumstances or sufficient certainty to allow infrastructure providers to bring forward needed infrastructure enhancements to facilitate economic growth and much needed housing in the southern part of the District. The CS would not enshrine the Government's presumption in favour of sustainable development. The key element to plan making in terms of the presumption in favour of sustainable development is that "*Policies in Local Plans should follow the approach of the presumption in favour of sustainable development so that it is clear that development which is sustainable can be approved without delay".* The approach of the CS would be to restrain development and inhibit the need for in particular housing being met during the life of the CS.

A provision to review the CS would not respond efficiently enough or indeed swiftly enough to allow sustainable development to be approved without delay. In this regard it is material to note the plan making history of this authority that last approved a local plan in 1998 and commenced work on the draft CS in 2006. On their past performance a review of the CS undertaken in 2015 may not bear fruit until 2021 and as such would in-build failure into the CS.

Despite the general wish that certainty needs to be provided within this district it should not be at the expense of sound plans and responsive policy making that is based on robust evidence and policy making that has inbuilt flexibility to respond swiftly to changing circumstances to make provision for the needs of the community.

The CS fails to meet many of the Core Planning Principles set out at paragraph 17 of the Framework including (but not restricted to):

- A failure to be creative and enhance and improve the places in which people live their lives.
- A failure to drive and support sustainable economic development to deliver jobs and homes against an objectively based level of need that is recognised by the Council as being greater than the SEP housing allocations for the district. The CS is neither positive in responding to opportunities nor is it providing sufficient land to meet the needs of the residential and business communities.
- Failing to recognise the vitality of Hailsham as a target for housing growth in preference to less sustainable locations such as Stone Cross.
- Failing to actively manage patterns of growth to make the fullest possible use of public transport, walking and cycling, and focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable by providing strategic growth in Stone Cross a dormitory settlement with few facilities in preference to Hailsham the highest tier settlement in Wealden.

It is interesting to contrast the aim of the Framework with the approach of the CS, paragraph 47 sets out Government policy to boost the supply of housing whilst the CS seeks to restrain housing growth without exploring how planning policy can facilitate greater growth. The CS fails to meet the full objectively based need for either market or affordable housing, indeed the total proposed annual housing growth figures fail to provide much more than half the annual affordable housing need of the District.

This is a District that has consistently and persistently under delivered housing and as matters stand its buffer does not meet the tests of paragraph 47 second bullet point *to provide a realistic prospect of achieving the planned supply and to ensure choice and competition in the market for land*.

The range and nature of the conflicts between the emerging CS and the Framework are such that either the CS should be found to be unsound and not fit for purpose or the Hearing should be re-opened in order that participants can be heard in order that such matters are fully explored ahead of the formal deliberations of the Inspector. Failure to hear these representations would, in our respectful view substantially prejudice participants and undermine participation in the planning process.

We trust the above information is of assistance to you, however if we can be of any further assistance, with this or any other matter, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely

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For PHD Chartered Town Planners