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Stacey Robins
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Wealden District Council
Vicarage Lane
Hailsham
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By Email

29565/A3/JM/sjo

31 July 2020

Dear Mr Robins

DOWNLANDS FARM, UCKFIELD
PRE-APPLICATION MEETING REQUEST

We write on behalf of our client, Gleeson Strategic Land, to request a pre-application meeting in respect of land at Downlands Farm, Uckfield (the Site) and emerging proposals as detailed below.

The Site

The Site at Downlands Farm is located to the north-west of the town of Uckfield, predominately between Snatts Road and the A22 (Area A) with a smaller area west of the A22 covered by woodland (Area B).

Area A comprises circa. 67 hectares of land either in agricultural use or covered by woodland. The majority of woodland associated with Site A is classified as either Ancient or Semi-Natural Woodland, albeit there are areas of more recent planting. Agricultural Land within Area A, largely confined to the south of the Site, has previously been confirmed to be non-best and most versatile agricultural land as Grade 3b and 4. Snatts Road runs partly along the southern/south-eastern boundary of Area A, alongside existing residential development of Uckfield.

Area B comprises circa. 13 hectares of land predominately wooded, some of the which (<50%) is classified as Ancient and Semi-Natural Woodland. Site B is separated from Uckfield by the A22.

To the south west of the Site is Lake Wood which is managed by the Woodland Trust. West Park Uckfield Local Nature Reserve (LNR) is located approximately 150m to the south of the Site.

Uckfield

Uckfield remains one of the Main Town settlements of the District, being centrally located with good transport links to the wider District and other areas (including rail connections to London).

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Uckfield's town centre serves its residents and acts as a hub and service centre for the surrounding villages and settlements. The town centre has a good range and variety of facilities and services including a leisure centre, independent cinema and a variety of food and drink outlets.

The Local Plan 2019 (now withdrawn) did not seek to direct any additional growth (above commitments, including circa. 1,000 dwellings to the south-west of the town, now being delivered) to Uckfield. However, as a consequence of this Plan being withdrawn, the Council will now be re-looking at the spatial strategy to meet its full housing needs, a significant uplift from the Local Plan 2019 proposals. Uckfield, as one of the largest settlements in the District, in a location away from the Ashdown Forest and outside of any Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, is a logical location where further growth can be accommodated to meet this requirement.

Site History

The Site was subject to a previous planning application for 750 dwellings plus 9,600sqm of non-residential uses considered by the Council and refused consent in 2007 (application ref. 2006/2855). This decision was subsequently appealed and dismissed in 2008, following a conjoined inquiry with 2no. other development sites at Bird in Eye North and Bird in Eye South.

Whilst the National and Local planning context has changed significantly since this date, these previous decisions highlight key considerations that are being carefully and positively responded to in the emerging proposals, including in respect of matters of landscape character, ancient woodland and sustainable movement.

Emerging Development Proposals

Detailed technical and environmental work has been undertaken to assist in formulating the emerging proposals for the Site, which are considered to provide a positive response to the 'key considerations' raised in the appeal decision detailed above.

We are pleased to enclose at this stage a high-level Masterplan, which has been informed by identified Opportunities and Constraints and prepared in response to the previously mentioned appeal decisions and the technical and environmental work undertaken to date.

The emerging proposals for the Site seek to deliver, by way of a hybrid application, circa. 550 new homes including affordable housing (Outline, with the exception of access to be submitted in detail) and an area of Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANGS) (to be submitted in detail).

The emerging masterplan:

- Demonstrates how development is proposed to be focused within the southern portion of Area A (alongside public open space and drainage features) – the emerging masterplan for this area has been informed by technical requirements including provision of appropriate buffers from Ancient Woodland and mitigation for ecology.

- The provision of a substantial area of SANGS, located to the north of Area A, alongside a generous area of open space/play pitches;

- Primary vehicular access into the development site will be achieved by way of a new roundabout on the A22, within an area currently occupied by woodland (non-Ancient); and

- Connectivity will be enhanced, with several existing and new routes for pedestrians and cyclists achievable from the Site. As well as enhancement to existing routes to the nearby existing facilities, including the Local Fuels Service Station (inc. convenience store) on London

Road and Tesco Express on Browns Lane, which will serve day-to-day needs of residents, the development will promote and enhance existing routes from the Site to the Town Centre. This includes routes along Snatts Road and The Drive, alongside provision of a new strategic pedestrian and cycle route alongside the A22 and B2102. In addition, the proposals will include measures to enhance the accessibility credentials of the site.

Further information will be provided on the emerging proposals and technical work undertaken to date in advance of the pre-application meeting.

The Principle of Development

The Core Strategy (2013) accepts that development boundaries within the 1998 Plan will need to be breached to deliver the level of housing required. The Council, in its consideration of applications outside existing development boundaries has confirmed that the principle of this is not at odds with the spatial strategy in the Development Plan when taken as a whole.

Furthermore, the Council's latest monitoring data (January 2020) identifies a 3.67 year supply against its Standard Method requirement of 1,231 dwellings per annum. Recent committee reports acknowledge that, despite a number of decisions recently being made (in the last 6 – 9 months), the figure is likely to be worse owing to the slowdown of construction arising from the COVID19 pandemic. As such, subject to the requirements (inc. footnote 6) of Paragraph 11 of the NPPF, the tilted balance applies.

Technical and environmental assessments are continuing for the Site, however work to date has not identified any adverse impacts that would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits arising from the proposed development. As such, we hope the Council will support our emerging proposals for the Site.

Next Steps

Overall, it is considered that the proposed development is capable of progressing in a sustainable way that makes efficient use of the Site, delivering much needed new homes including affordable housing, while carefully and sensitively responding to the environmental constraints and opportunities identified.

It would be very much appreciated if your pre-application feedback could please take account of the following:

- The principle of the development;
- The concept design information, including the overall arrangement of built development;
- The proposed scope of application documentation, including feedback on the proposed viewpoints (as attached), which will inform the emerging Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment being undertaken to support the forthcoming Hybrid application for the Site; and
- The extent of likely S106 Agreement requirements.

We hope this information assists, additional information will be available in advance of the meeting for review. We look forward to meeting with you in due course to discuss further.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

JOSHUA MELLOR
Associate