Kember Loudon Williams
PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANTS

Our Reference: 19/115

Planning Policy
Wealden District Council
Vicarage Lane
Hailsham
BN27 2AX

By email: Nplans@wealden.gov.uk

6 December 2023

Dear Sir/Madam,

Wadhurst Neighbourhood Plan 2016-2039
Response to Examiner's Note 1

Please accept this submission as formal response to Examiner's Note No. 1, dated 30 November 2023, on the submission draft of the Wadhurst Neighbourhood Plan. These submissions have been prepared on behalf of Elite Leisure, Salmons UK ltd, who have a controlling interest over the Bewl Water Estate and who wish to respond to the matter raised by point 6.d. in the Examiner's Note 1.

We have made formal representations questioning the need for draft Policy WAD14, given the extent of national and local plan policies that seek to protect the countryside and the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB): such as the High Weald. Moreover, we have submitted previously that the fundamental premise of Policy WAD14 is one of unqualified and unjustified restriction: essentially imposing an arbitrary restriction limiting development proposals to local community uses at Bewl (including those falling within Use Class F2(b) and F2(c)), which if accepted will have a significant and negative on the viability and flexibility of recreation and leisure activities currently occupied from the site.

Bewl is privately owned and to maintain the site, the water resource, landscape, woodland areas and to support the benefits of public access, the site must remain financially viable. It is essential that the operation of the site is able to respond sensitively and positively to changing economic and environmental conditions.

Given recent pressures and uncertainties in the economy, our client has been exploring a strategy of providing limited, carefully designed and managed overnight accommodation to support the recreational use of the site and to encourage sustainable tourism at Bewl. This strategy falls in line with the NPPF and the Wealden Local Plan: both contain policies which support development for new and extended tourist attractions and facilities that respond positively and sensitively to the countryside location and the High Weald AONB. Indeed, there a longstanding policy controls in the Wealden Local Plan and in national guidance through the NPPF, that provided the highest possible protection of the AONB, such that draft policy WAD14 is not necessary in our view.

Since taking on the management of the site, our client has worked extremely hard to support sailing at Bewl and to make it accessible to as many people as possible. Meanwhile the company has also invested heavily in other water-based activities including windsurfing, fishing, wing-foiling, stand-up paddle boarding and open water swimming. Like sailing, membership numbers have demonstrably increased across the board in all of the above-mentioned water-based activities.

To maintain Bewl Water as a site that can be enjoyed by all water users (formal and informal), walkers, cyclists and members of the public, the Neighbourhood Plan should be supportive of the whole business by allowing sensitive expansion and diversification and other forms of sustainable development on site. Development should not be exclusively restricted to local community uses only, as suggested in draft Policy WAD14. This is unrealistic and fails to understand the relationship between the need and benefit of supporting and encouraging recreation and leisure uses at the site, whilst providing the facility to fund the maintenance and management of the site and its environs.

On this basis, and for the reasons provided above and repeated in early representations, it is our client's view that Policy WAD14 is not necessary and fails the basic condition tests and should be removed in its entirety.

It is not the purpose of the planning system to unilaterally designate private land for non-profit community-based activities. Particularly when both national policy and the local development plan supports sensitive expansion and diversification and other forms of sustainable development on site.

Conclusions

Once again, we express our concerns that the Neighbourhood Plan is seeking to restrict development at Bewl by designating the majority of the site as a Local Green Space and showing support for development opportunities relating to local community uses only. There has to be acknowledgement in the Plan that this is a regionally important site and that it is run as a commercial business operation.

Along with the changes our client has previously suggested for the Neighbourhood Plan, we respectfully invite the Examiner to remove draft Policy WAD14 from the Plan.

Yours faithfully

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[redacted]
Associate Planner
Kember Loudon Williams