

Chapter 16

Heathfield (Inset Map No. 31)

Context

16.1. Heathfield is a small, mainly residential town, lying in the heart of Wealden District. It occupies a prominent and elevated position on one of the main ridges crossing the High Weald, which permits extensive views both to and from the surrounding countryside. The town has a population of approximately 7,000 people and is an important local shopping, employment and service centre, serving a wide rural catchment.

Strategy

16.2. The Structure Plan sets out broad policy guidance for future development in Heathfield. Within the constraints imposed by the town's setting within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Structure Plan recognises that only limited allocations of land for housing should be found.

16.3. In the light of Structure Plan policies and Local Plan distribution strategy, the objectives for Heathfield are:

- (1) *to strengthen Heathfield's role as a residential and local employment, shopping and service centre;*
- (2) *to regenerate the town centre, increasing accessibility and improving the range and quality of shopping and other services;*
- (3) *to provide additional local employment opportunities to serve both existing and future residents;*
- (4) *to ensure that development respects the character and qualities of the town, and makes a positive contribution to its townscape and local environment.*

Housing Allocations

16.4. In line with Government guidance in PPG3, the Council has followed a search sequence to identify in the first instance through

an urban capacity study the potential for new housing within the urban area. However the study has only highlighted one site for a specific housing allocation, although it is recognised that small sites will continue to come forward as infill sites. The site in question at Ghyll Road is a proposal for mixed housing and business use as put forward below.

16.5. The plan's distribution strategy outlined at Chapter 2 shows that Heathfield is not expected to make a contribution to the housing land requirements through urban expansions. This is because of the significant landscape constraints imposed by the closely surrounding High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Business

16.6. Heathfield contains a number of established business areas, including the Browning Road Industrial Estate off Station Road, the Ghyll Road Industrial Estate on the southern edge of the town and the business area at Burwash Road. These areas provide a valuable source of local employment and a range of premises, by size and type, to meet the needs of local businesses. In addition, there is an area of established business and commercial activity at Station Road to the south of Heathfield town centre, which provides a range of employment opportunities and local services.

16.7. Outside these established areas, opportunities for new business development are very limited. The Plan makes one allocation for new business development in Heathfield, on a site adjacent to and south of the Ghyll Road Industrial Estate. The site is allocated for a combination of B1 and residential uses. The environmental constraints referred to above, have however precluded the allocation of further land for new business development. The protection of existing business sites from redevelopment for other uses is therefore of particular importance in Heathfield, to maintain and increase opportunities for residents to work locally and to maintain a diverse economic base for the town.

The Ghyll Road Mixed Business and Residential Area

16.8. The adopted Wealden Local Plan allocates about 1.8 hectares of land adjacent to the Ghyll Road Industrial Estate for business purposes, however no proposals for business development on the site have come forward. The Government has advised local planning authorities to review employment allocations which have not been taken up, to assess whether they remain appropriate. In view of the limited opportunities for new business development in and around Heathfield, reallocation of the whole site for other purposes would not be appropriate. However, in recognition of the physical constraints associated with the development of this site and given that there is good evidence that a business only development would not be viable, a combination of business (B1) and residential uses is now considered more appropriate.

16.9. The balance between the two uses will depend upon detailed viability studies to determine the minimum amount of residential development required to support business uses on the site. It will also depend upon achieving an acceptable design solution for accommodating mixed uses on the site.

16.10. Access to the site should be taken from Ghyll Road. In the case of the business element it may be possible to achieve access via the existing Ghyll Road Industrial Estate. Special consideration will need to be given to the implications for the safety of pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians crossing Ghyll Road to use the Cuckoo Trail. Public open space, including a children's play area should be incorporated within the development in accordance with the Plan's standards.

16.11. The western edge of the site contains an area of woodland, some of which is protected by a Tree Preservation Order. This woodland is an important landscape feature and provides a valuable edge to the site and its boundary with the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In granting planning permission for development of the site, appropriate conditions will therefore be imposed or obligations sought requiring the implementation of an approved woodland management plan.

16.12. In June 2003, Wealden District Council resolved to grant planning permission for a mixed use development on the site subject to the satisfactory completion of a Section 106 Planning

Agreement. The scheme comprised 55 dwellings (of which 14 would be affordable) together with 720m² of business floorspace.

Policy HE1

Land at Ghyll Road, as defined on the Proposals Map, is allocated for a combination of business (Use Class B1) and residential purposes. Proposals for development will be permitted when provision is made for all of the following:

- (1) a satisfactory demonstration that the number of dwellings proposed is the minimum necessary to facilitate business development on the site;**
- (2) a significant proportion of the developable area is for business (B1) purposes;**
- (3) appropriate measures to mitigate the potential disturbance from adjacent activities in the Ghyll Road Business Area are incorporated within the design;**
- (4) access shall be taken from Ghyll Road, unless it can be satisfactorily demonstrated that a separate access for the business uses can also be secured via the Ghyll Road Industrial Estate;**
- (5) trees covered by the Tree Preservation Order will be retained.**

The Burwash Road Business Area

16.13. The Burwash Road Business Area is situated outside of the development boundary for Heathfield and lies wholly within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In recognition of its contribution to the local economy and to the supply of land and premises for business and employment purposes in the town, the area has been defined as a Business Area.

16.14. Proposals for redevelopment for business purposes within the Burwash Road Business Area will be judged against the criteria set out in Policy BS1 of this Plan. In view of the site's prominent position within the AONB, particular consideration will be given to the siting, scale and design of any new buildings. Adequate landscaping will need to be provided along the

external boundaries of the site, to limit the potential impact of development on the High Weald AONB and where possible, to enhance the appearance of the site.

16.15. The outward expansion of the Burwash Road Business Area would be resisted, to limit impact on the High Weald AONB and to maintain the Countryside Gap between Heathfield and Broad Oak.

16.16. There is currently a multiplicity of access points to the Burwash Road Business Area from the A275. Given the poor safety record of that road and the proximity of the B2096 junction, the Highway Authority would require any proposals involving an intensification of use or a net increase in floorspace to make provision for the rationalisation of the access arrangements. This will include the need to provide a right-turn facility into the site from Burwash Road and to make improvements to the A265/B2096 junction.

The Station Road Commercial Area

16.17. The Station Road Commercial Area, which is located to the south of Heathfield town centre, contains a variety of business and other commercial activities. The area contributes to the supply of employment land and premises in Heathfield, particularly for smaller businesses. Given the lack of suitable alternative sites for business development in the town, the employment value and potential of the Station Road Commercial Area warrants special protection.

16.18. Re-development and intensification of uses for business and similar commercial “sui generis” uses would be supported, where it would not result in a net loss in the total amount of business floorspace within the Commercial Area. In this instance, sui generis uses are taken to include car showrooms or petrol filling stations, which are already present in the Commercial Area.

16.19. Unlike more conventional business areas, the Station Road Commercial Area is also an appropriate location for mixed use development including residential and community uses, given its proximity to the town centre and the characteristics of neighbouring land uses. Mixed use development would be supported where it includes at least an equivalent area of business space as part of the development. Residential uses would be acceptable as part of a mixed use development, but only above ground

floor level, to retain the commercial character of street frontages. While the Commercial Area currently includes a number of retail operations, the Area is outside the main shopping centre and an increase in the total amount of retail space would not be supported, in line with the relevant shopping policies of this Plan.

16.20. In assessing proposals for development within the Station Road Commercial Area, particular consideration will be given to the impact of development on residential properties within the locality, and to ensuring that the development would not create unacceptable traffic conditions.

Policy HE2

Within the Station Road Commercial Area, as defined on the Proposals Map, proposals for re-development or intensification of uses falling within classes B1 or B8 of the Use Classes Order or similar commercial “sui generis” uses will be permitted. Proposals for uses falling with Use Class B2 will be permitted subject to the criteria of Policy BS1 of this Plan. Redevelopment or changes of use for other purposes, including residential or community uses will be permitted above ground floor level where the development would not result in a net loss of business floorspace.

Heathfield Town Centre

16.21. Heathfield has an important role as a local service centre, providing a range of facilities for a wide rural catchment. The town centre provides for day to day shopping and services, including food and convenience shops. While the town includes a range of other shops selling durable goods, competition from other towns, particularly Tunbridge Wells, Eastbourne and to a lesser extent from Uckfield, has limited its potential to attract larger high street chains and multiples.

16.22. The main shopping centre is focused along the High Street and Station Approach, as defined on the Proposals Map. Within this area, new and improved shopping facilities will be permitted which maintain and enhance the role of the town centre. Much of the main shopping centre has been classified as having a Primary Shopping Frontage. These frontages should remain predominantly in retail use, at least at

ground floor level, to ensure that Heathfield's role as a local shopping centre is not undermined. This would not however preclude proposals for "living over the shop", which would be supported to help promote greater town centre vitality.

16.23. Heathfield has four off-street car parks in and around the town centre. While the car parks are well used, surveys have indicated that there are enough spaces to serve the needs of the town and no further car parks are proposed. The situation will continue to be monitored.

16.24. The Heathfield Partnership, which is a joint initiative by the public, private and voluntary sectors, has prepared an Environment and Design Strategy for Heathfield Town Centre. The Strategy includes a package of measures to promote the revitalisation of the town, including environmental enhancements, traffic management proposals and proposals to foster investment, which are being implemented as funding opportunities arise. The strategy has been approved by Wealden District Council as supplementary planning guidance, which will be taken into account in determining applications for planning permission within the town centre.

Community Facilities

16.25. Given the constraints on future development in and around Heathfield, the population of the town is not expected to increase significantly over the plan period. Accordingly, there are no requirements for community facilities to serve new development. However, it is acknowledged that there are currently deficiencies in relation to the amount of recreational open space provision and formal playing pitches and a burial ground in Heathfield. Additional provision will therefore be supported where opportunities arise, and existing recreational open space and facilities, as defined on the Proposals Map will be safeguarded from development in accordance with Policy LR1 of this Plan. The Council will continue to consult with the Parish Council on future needs.