

AGENDA ITEM 8.0

TO CONSIDER A LETTER TO WEALDEN DISTRICT COUNCILLORS FROM SABRE and SABRE OWL ACTION GROUPS (STOP ASHDOWN BUSINESS PARK)

Referring to a major extension to the Ashdown Business Park, Planning application No. WD/2022 /3319/MAO and a proposal for a new “neighbourhood” at Owlsbury Farm.

Sent 21st December 2023

Dear Councillor

We are writing to you from SABRE and SABREOWL, two linked action groups that were formed at the beginning of this year to fight possible development on two potential sites. The first is a major extension to the Ashdown Business Park, Planning application No. WD/2022 /3319/MAO which the previous Council leadership with Officers brought forward at the end of 2021 in an opportunistic attempt to push through before the May elections. The second is a proposal for a new “neighbourhood” at Owlsbury Farm. Owlsbury is currently a 370 acre agricultural working farm situated on the western side of the A22 Uckfield opposite the Ridgewood development, where only 250 houses have been built of the 1,000 approved several years ago. It is mainly in the parish of Little Horsted, but some part also lies in Isfield Parish and possibly a very small area in Fletching Parish. The Developer is proposing a new “settlement” on the totality of the site comprising between at least 2,000 to 2,500 houses, with a community infrastructure including sports facilities, a school, shops, a community venue and employment space as well as a new SANG. It is approx. 2 miles from the proposed extension to the Ashdown Business Park which intends to create 3,000 jobs. Officers have promoted the new neighbourhood and then introduced it to a specific Developer and their Agent, who have already contacted various Parish and Town Councils to outline details, despite no formal Planning Application having yet come forward.

On behalf of many concerned residents we are urging your support in opposing the possible inclusion of these two clearly linked sites within the emerging draft Local Plan which we understand may be presented at the Extraordinary Full Council meeting on February 8th. You will be very aware of the situation the previous administration had got itself into on Town planning and overdevelopment because of its failure to put in place a Local Plan in 2019, which was a key issue in the May elections. These provided stark and compelling evidence of a generationally significant shift in public sentiment throughout Wealden. The substantial swing of votes to Alliance and Independent candidates indicated a very loud collective desire for change away from the previous council. The local population came to realise that the planning strategy that was being followed was ill thought out, unsustainable and unreasonable and was not aligned with the aspirations of our communities.

In particular with respect to the Ashdown Business Park extension, where a Planning Application has actually been submitted, over 650 residents across the District, let alone Parish and Town Councils and statutory consultees, have written specifically objecting and challenging the proposal. This substantial and detailed response underscores the gravity of sentiment against the application. The residents have spoken clearly and passionately, highlighting the importance of addressing their apprehensions regarding the proposed development and the principles which it represents.

Our major concern is that Officers may not be reflecting the change that residents are expecting resulting from the May elections, in that they may continue to bring these two sites forward in the forthcoming Draft Plan. Both were conceived by the previous administration and reflect the short-term opportunism and convenience arising out of the 2019 draft plan failure, and it should be noted that neither site was considered suitable for submission in that Plan. Residents want and expect to see a change in stance by Officers and the Council that reflects the priorities in the public interest of properly managed change in Wealden in a truly sustainable way. Should these two sites come forward in the draft Local Plan, there will be deep concern that the stance taken in the past by Officers and the new Council has not fundamentally changed since the May elections.

There are a number of other factors that we hope you will take into account: -

1. The evidence presented on the Ashdown Business Park simply does not support the application as per the critique attached with this letter. With respect to Owlsbury Farm, there are no details that have been made available by Officers to the public (and possibly elected Councillors) or for interested Consultees, yet inclusion will blight the site and only strengthen the Developer’s position.

2. In the last few days Michael Gove has stated that previous housing targets will be reconsidered and changes in the NPPF are imminent. Issuing a draft Local Plan at this stage until full details of Gove's proposals have been published is surely unnecessary and premature.

3. We note that WGOD have highlighted that some 50 Local Authorities are pausing their draft Local Plans in anticipation of the Government changing housing targets and the NPPF. We understand that cooperation with other authorities was suggested to the previous administration but was rejected by them. Safety in numbers should assist in the remote possibility of any action being taken against WDC by central Government over any delay in issuing a draft Local Plan, especially with the prospect of a General Election next year.

Given that the evidence does not support the Ashdown Business Park extension, such a draft allocation would not only be the wrong thing to do but would also be likely to fail before the Local Plan Examination. This would leave Wealden with another failed local plan and thus continued development chaos.

If the wrong and unsustainable sites are published, even in a draft Local Plan document, there is an extremely high risk that, in practice, it will be very difficult to later reverse the decision and remove them, as landowners and developers will respond to the draft allocations and promote those sites, especially so in the vacuum of any up-to-date Local Plan.

In light of these points, we urge you not to let your electorate down. The community has placed its trust in your commitment to environmental sustainability and responsible development. By rejecting the extension to the Ashdown Business Park and the site of Owlsbury Farm within the draft Local Plan, you have the opportunity to champion a properly considered approach to long-term sustainable planning and development while promoting a more balanced and considered approach to measured growth in the region. We firmly believe that your leadership and influence can play a crucial role in shaping the future of our community, and we implore you to consider the points in this letter carefully.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We trust that you will make a decision that reflects the best interests of our community, the wider public interest and the environment.

On Behalf of SABRE and SABRE OWL