

The Parish Council of Leckhampton with Warden Hill

Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

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18 November 2015

Dear David

Land off Kidnappers Lane, Leckhampton

At the Pegasus community consultation event on 29 October you and I discussed how to ensure that any development on the Orchards/Nurseries site east of Kidnappers Lane is sufficiently sympathetic to the location. The site is close to the AONB and has a big impact on the nationally important view from Leckhampton Hill. I suggested the possibility that as part of the current neighbourhood planning for Leckhampton with Warden Hill Parish it might be sensible for Pegasus and the Parish Council to jointly examine what sort of development might be feasible and sufficiently sympathetic. I said that I would raise this possibility formally at the next Parish Council Public Meeting. I have done this and the Council passed a unanimous resolution that this would provide a sensible way forward and be consistent with the neighbourhood planning objectives. Neighbourhood planning also of course involves Cheltenham Borough Council and I am copying this letter to Tracey Crews, CBC Head of Planning.

The issue is how to make any development on the Orchards/Nurseries site sufficiently rural in character so that it does not look as if it is part of the Cheltenham urban area. Trees and hedgerows that screen the site are also very important. Currently the urban boundary is along the A46. As we discussed on 29 October, the concept in the revised Local Green Space (LGS) is to potentially bring that boundary an average of about 250 metres closer to the Hill, but certainly no closer than that. The original Local Green Space (LGS) application submitted in August 2013 included all of the Leckhampton Fields within the LGS and preserved the A46 as the boundary of urban Cheltenham. However, in Annex 2 of the August 2013 Neighbourhood Plan Concept we set out three other options (2, 3 and 4). The revised LGS that we put forward in January 2015 at the request of Cheltenham Borough Council was based on option 3.

In the revision we also removed from the LGS the Orchards/Nurseries site east of Kidnappers Lane. This has an area of about 3 ha and, of course, it includes the 1.3 ha of the nurseries site which is the subject of your proposals. We removed the Orchards/Nurseries site on advice from Gloucestershire Rural Communities Council, acting on behalf of CBC, because we felt that some development there might be acceptable provided it was sufficiently sympathetic to the location

and impact on the views. Of course, at that time we understood that any development would involve just one developer, namely the consortium of Bovis Homes and Miller Homes that had included the Orchards/Nurseries site in their planning application 13/01605/OUT submitted in September 2013. We would certainly not have removed this land from the LGS had we known that Bovis Homes and Miller Homes did not control development over the whole site and that the land might consequently become the subject of two or even three separate applications from different developers for individual parcels of land. To achieve sufficiently sympathetic development it is necessary to be able to plan the site as a whole. Cheltenham Borough Council has been arguing very strongly for the necessity to have a masterplan approach for the entirety of development on the Leckhampton Fields and that very much applies for any development on the Orchards/Nurseries site. As I said to you, we shall be drawing attention to this problem in the submission that we are due to make at the beginning of December to Inspector Elizabeth Ord who is considering the LGS as part of the Examination in Public of the Joint Core Strategy.

As you know, Natural England objected strongly to application 13/01605/OUT on various grounds including the damage it would do to the view from Leckhampton Hill. On this, Natural England said: 'There are viewpoints of the highest sensitivity along the Escarpment of the Cotswold AONB, such as the Devil's Chimney. The view from the Devil's Chimney gives panoramic views across the Vale which would be interrupted by the proposed development. The scale of the potential development would significantly change the view from an open, rural expansive view to a predominantly urban view of the edge of Cheltenham'. To keep the view rural and open and to avoid it being 'interrupted', as Natural England says, we need to retain sufficient rural foreground on the Leckhampton Fields. Currently the rural foreground is sufficiently large and the edge of urban Cheltenham is sufficiently distant from Leckhampton Hill that the overall appearance is rural. The view is not interrupted because the eye can skip from the rural Leckhampton Fields across Cheltenham (with the help of its abundance of trees) to the rural Severn Vale beyond and then to the Malvern Hills and more distant Herefordshire and Shropshire Hills. As I mentioned, this was an issue raised by Inspector Clark at the recent inquiry on the 13/01605/OUT appeal.

To preserve the rural foreground on the Leckhampton Fields, we need to ensure that any development allowed on the Orchards/Nurseries site is well screened and that it looks like a small rural hamlet. It is essential that it does not look suburban and the sort of development you are currently proposing would seem very unsuitable. As I said to you on 29 October, an example we have in mind of the sort of housing that might work is the recent development at Leckhampton Farm Court, east of Farm Lane. This is based substantially on farm buildings and the old listed farm house and it blends in well with the surrounding area and as viewed from Leckhampton Hill. The area of Leckhampton Farm Court is much smaller than the 3 ha of the Orchards/Nurseries site and there is a question of how effectively it could be scaled up, but there are many examples of rural hamlets and of sympathetic developments in rural villages that might also serve as models. It is worth noting that Leckhampton Farm Court includes one large building that has 2.5 stories, yet looks in keeping. This, or one of the other buildings at Leckhampton Court Farm, also contains six dwellings. The point here, as I mentioned to you on 29 October, is that one might be able to achieve a reasonable density of dwellings per ha for a rural-looking development with an overall building footprint that leaves good space on the site for large trees to soften and screen the development. The housing density proposed in 13/01605/OUT for the Orchards/Nurseries site is around 20 dwellings per hectare. Also, as I said to you, the problem of traffic congestions on Church Road and on the A46 imposes a major constraint on the amount of development that can be sustainable on the Leckhampton Fields. So, for traffic as well as landscape reasons, it is not realistic to think in terms of very high housing densities.

The problem of traffic congestion is another reason that a firm masterplan approach is required, as argued by Cheltenham Borough Council. Traffic congestion and landscape were the two main reasons that CBC refused application 13/01605/OUT and these factors would certainly apply to any development you were proposing.

I think this covers the most of what we discussed on 29 October. I look forward to hearing from you whether you think it would be useful to explore opportunities further through the neighbourhood planning.

Best wishes

Dr Adrian Mears CBE
Chairman

Copy: Tracey Crews, Head of Planning, Cheltenham Borough Council