

Planning Policy & Economic Development Service
Test Valley Borough Council
Beech Hurst
Weyhill Road
Andover
SP10 3AJ

By email only

28th March 2024

Our Ref: IJ/19019
Your Ref:

Dear Sir / Madam

Representations to the Test Valley Draft Local Plan 2040 Regulation 18 – Stage 2 Consultation

I write on behalf of my client, Westcoast Developments Ltd, to submit representations to the Test Valley Draft Local Plan 2040 Regulation 18 – Stage 2 consultation document and associated evidence.

These representations seek to object to the overall spatial strategy for the delivery of housing in Southern Test Valley, principally through too much reliance being placed on housing delivery at Land South of Ganger Farm and Land at Velmore Farm, Valley Park (through draft Policies SS1, SA4 and SA6), the policies failing to adequately assess development constraints to propose sufficient housing land to meet the Borough's needs, the failure to demonstrate a consistent supply over the Plan period and the lack of a consistent and equitable site assessment process in the Sustainability Appraisal to consider the suitability of sites. In this regard, we consider the draft Plan is at risk of being found unsound under the relevant tests, as set out at Paragraph 35 of the NPPF (December 2023):

- 'a) Positively prepared – providing a strategy which, as a minimum, seeks to meet the area's objectively assessed needs; and is informed by agreements with other authorities, so that unmet need from neighbouring areas is accommodated where it is practical to do so and is consistent with achieving sustainable development;*
- b) Justified – an appropriate strategy, taking into account the reasonable alternatives, and based on proportionate evidence;*
- c) Effective – deliverable over the plan period, and based on effective joint working on cross-boundary strategic matters that have been dealt with rather than deferred, as evidenced by the statement of common ground; and*
- d) Consistent with national policy – enabling the delivery of sustainable development in accordance with the policies in this Framework and other statements of national planning policy, where relevant.'*

In order to help improve the soundness of the draft Plan, in particular through boosting the supply of housing both in terms of numbers and phasing we strongly encourage the Council to review the spatial strategy and site selection process and include the **Land at Corner of Highwood Lane and Botley Road, Romsey** (SHELAA Ref. 282) as a draft allocation. This site is in a highly sustainable location, has been assessed in the SHELAA as an achievable site that has no significant development constraints and is within the control of our client and is immediately available, achievable and deliverable for residential development.

Objection – Spatial Strategy Policy 1 (SS1): Settlement Hierarchy

The overarching aims of draft Policy SS1 are supported, which sets out the ‘presumption in favour of sustainable development’, in accordance with the aims of the NPPF. Furthermore, the recognition of Romsey as a ‘Tier 1’ settlement, as the most sustainable settlement in Southern Test Valley is also supported, appreciating its range of employment, facilities, services and public transport to support the residents of the town and wider area and as a focus for strategic growth in the south of the Borough.

It is considered however that there is a significant deficiency in Policy SS1, in that development at Velmore Farm, Valley Park forms a major part of the Council’s housing delivery strategy in Southern Test Valley (draft Policy SS6), yet there is a lack of consideration/reference to justify why a mix of sites suitable for residential development and in sustainable locations could not better help meet Borough’s housing land supply requirement, in particular in the early years of the Plan period and without the risk of delayed delivery often experienced on larger urban extensions.

Paragraph 69 of the NPPF requires the Council to identify through its strategic planning policies a sufficient supply and mix of housing sites, taking into account their availability, suitability and likely economic viability. It also states,

‘Planning policies should identify a supply of:

- a) specific, deliverable sites for five years following the intended date of adoption; and*
- b) specific, developable sites or broad locations for growth, for the subsequent years 6-10 and, where possible, for years 11-15 of the remaining plan period.’*

This is a significant omission and consequently this policy and the whole spatial strategy for Southern Test Valley has not been appropriately justified. The draft Plan is therefore inconsistent with the tests set out at Paragraph 35 of the NPPF and at risk of being found unsound.

Objection – Policy 6 (SS6): Meeting the Housing Requirement

Overall Strategy in Southern Test Valley

We object to this policy as it fails to allocate the Land at Corner of Highwood Lane and Botley Road, Romsey for residential development and consequently to ensure a sufficient supply and mix of sites to meet the Borough’s housing requirement and to direct development to the most sustainable locations.

The Council has sought to outline an overall housing strategy for the southern housing market area that heavily relies on the delivery of two large strategic allocations at Velmore Farm, Valley Park and South of Ganger Farm, Romsey rather than to propose a range of sizes of housing allocation to ensure a continuity of housing supply over the Plan period, including in the first five years. The plan proposes the following sites:

- Land South of Ganger Farm, East Romsey – 340 dwellings
- Land South of the Bypass, South Romsey – 110 dwellings
- Land at Velmore Farm, Valley Park – 1,070 dwellings
- Land at King Edwards Park, Chandlers Ford – 44 C2 units dwellings
- Land at Upton Lane – Approximately 80

The Plan therefore relies on two sites (of 340 and 1,070 dwellings) to deliver more than 85% of the total number of draft site allocation dwellings in Southern Test Valley, with the Land at Velmore Farm accounting for the vast majority.

It is well established through experience of delivery in this Borough and elsewhere that there are significant time delays involved in delivering large strategic sites and securing residential occupations to help meet local housing needs (including affordable housing need). These delays are caused initially through planning timescales – for example community consultation, masterplanning, pre-application discussions, outline planning application, reserved matters consent and the discharge of planning conditions. These timescales are often further exacerbated through discussions/negotiations required between landowners, statutory consultees and developers to acquire sites, additional land and / or additional consents to enable a start on site with often significant levels of up-front infrastructure required on large sites before housing development can commence.

The likely delays caused through an over-reliance on large strategic sites is demonstrated by reference in the Strategic Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment January 2024 (SHELAA). The SHELAA identifies the Land at Velmore Farm, which accounts for over 65% of dwellings on the draft site allocations, as delivering all of its proposed 1,070 dwellings in the latter part of the Plan period. Whilst the Land South of Ganger Farm is suggested as possibly delivering housing in the short term, the likelihood of a single developer delivering 80 dwellings in years 3, 4 and 5 has to be questioned. It is also interesting to note that the reference is made in the SHELAA to both the draft allocations being unlikely to commence in 5 years.

It is considered that a strategy that relies to such an extent on just two large strategic site is likely to result in delays to housing delivery and a 'back loading' of delivery into the latter stages of the Plan period. Furthermore, such a strategy only requires a delay/non-delivery to these sites to cause significant issues with the Plan's overall strategy to meet housing needs and maintain a deliverable housing land supply. At present it is considered that this Policy is unsound as it is not sufficiently justified to meet the tests set out in the NPPF, due to its over reliance on two large housing sites that can affect the maintaining of a continuous housing supply throughout the Plan period in the most sustainable locations. It is considered that an alternative strategy to allocate smaller housing sites to bolster and help maintain a supply of deliverable housing sites, especially in the shorter term would be more sustainable strategy and improve consistency with the NPPF.

The site is situated immediately adjacent to the Settlement Boundary of Romsey, which is the most sustainable settlement in Southern Test Valley. The site is well located in terms of access to primary and secondary schools, convenience store, employment opportunities and bus services to Romsey town centre. This promotes the presumption in favour of sustainable development set out at Policy SS1, in accordance with the NPPF and as such is a sound basis for an alternative location for a housing allocation..

The site has been promoted for development in the SHELAA and confirmed by the Council as available for development, without any significant constraint on the principle of development in this location, for around 170 dwellings (SHELAA Reference 282). The constraints identified in the SHELAA could be overcome as follows:

- **Local Gap:** Whereas the site is located within the Romsey / North Baddeley Local Gap designation it does not contribute visually to the separation of these settlements, mainly on account of existing development on Botley Road extending further east than the site boundary. Careful masterplanning and landscaping would further protect the integrity of the gap.
- **Listed buildings:** Whereas there are listed buildings to the south of the site their setting could be protected through careful masterplanning.
- **TPO trees:** A sensitive landscaping strategy and layout would seek to protect all trees and mitigate impacts where required.
- **SPA / SAC / Ramsar:** A suitable package of measures to mitigate recreational impacts on sites of nature conservation importance could be agreed with the Council and Natural England.
- **Infrastructure / Utilities:** The site is served by utility infrastructure.
- **Mineral Safeguarding:** The site is not of a sufficient size or is suitably located for viable mineral extraction prior to development.
- **Location outside the settlement boundary:** This could be addressed through the allocation of the site for development.

It is also important to note that the SHELAA has recognised that the site could deliver all of its housing in the 1-5 year period, as such contributing to the housing supply early in the Plan period. Furthermore, the site allocation is principally controlled by Westcoast Developments and as such represents a deliverable form of development.

It is not considered that the draft Plan sufficiently recognises the important contribution that this sustainable site could make to the housing land supply. In order to improve the soundness of the draft Plan it is considered that the site should be allocated for 'minimum of 170 dwellings' to reflect the 'minimum' wording in the Borough's housing requirement at draft Policy SS3, the NPPF and to reflect the capacity set out in the SHELAA.

Objection – Southern Area Policy 4 (SA4): Land South of Ganger Farm, Romsey

The Sustainability Appraisal identifies the Land South of Ganger Farm as comprising 27.7ha with a development capacity of 340 dwellings. It is considered that this large strategic allocation is a less sustainable

option for meeting the housing requirement in Southern Test Valley when compared with the Land at Corner of Highwood Lane and Botley Road, Romsey for the following reasons:

1. The Land South of Ganger Farm is immediately adjacent Ganger Wood, a designated ancient woodland and SINCR which is functionally linked with the Mottisfont SAC, as recognised in the draft policy text. Any reliance on a new pedestrian link with Winchester Road to access bus services would require a new pedestrian access through the woodland.
2. Draft Policy SA4 states there is the need for a Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) in addition to a 50m buffer to the ancient woodland (ref. Sustainability Appraisal Site Assessment Objective 10d) and a sequential approach to direct development away from areas at high risk of surface water flooding. It is clear therefore that there are significant constraints on this site which reduces the extent of the developable area and questions the suitability of the site for the delivery of 340 dwellings.
3. The site is considerably less accessible to key services and facilities than the Land at Corner of Highwood Lane and Botley Road, Romsey. This is particularly with regard to pedestrian access to the nearest primary school, secondary school, employment opportunities and bus stops. In this respect the Sustainability Appraisal has failed to equitably assess the site (Objectives 2 and 10). The accessibility of the whole draft allocation should be assessed and not the distance to services and facilities from the closest edge of the site. This has resulted in the Council unequally scoring this site within the Sustainability Appraisal. In the event however that this site is maintained as an allocation, it is considered that the quantum of any development should be reduced in recognition of the furthest locations of development would be outside of a comfortable walking distance to a range of services and facilities, in particular bus stops and destinations that generate higher levels of traffic during peak periods, such as local schools.

Objection – Southern Area Policy 6 (SA6): Land at Velmore Farm

The Sustainability Appraisal identifies the majority of the Land at Velmore Farm as comprising 67 ha with a development capacity of 850 dwellings, which is noted to increase to 1,070 dwellings in Policy SA6 with the inclusion of the adjacent land to the north and abutting Castle Lane. It is considered that this large strategic allocation is a less sustainable option for helping to meet the housing requirement in Southern Test Valley when compared with the Land at Corner of Highwood Lane and Botley Road, Romsey for the following reasons:

1. Consistent with comments in relation to Policy SA4 and the need to assess the accessibility of the site as a whole (i.e. for all future residents) and not just the closest edge of the draft allocation. If this site is to be maintained as an allocation, it is considered that the quantum of any development should be reduced in recognition of the western extent of the site being outside of comfortable walking distance to a range of services and facilities. In this regard the site is less accessible to key services and facilities than the Land at Corner of Highwood Lane and Botley Road, Romsey, particularly with regard to pedestrian access to the closest secondary school and bus stops.
2. It is also noted that Objective 2d) in relation to accessibility to Romsey or Andover by sustainable modes of transport is scored as 'strongly positive' due to its proximity to a bus service. Romsey is 7.5km from this

site. It is considered that this scoring is misleading as the same score is given to the Land at Corner of Highwood Lane and Botley Road despite being within 3km of Romsey town centre and also served by a frequent bus service within 400m.

3. In a similar respect, both sites are scored the same under Objective 8a) in terms of landscape impact and in 8c) in terms of impact on Local Gaps. The land at Velmore Farm is located within a landscape of 'high overall sensitivity' due to parts of the site being elevated and relatively remote. This is not the case for the Land at Corner of Highwood Lane and Botley Road that is largely influenced by adjacent residential areas, part used for aggregates storage, road noise and human activity. The Land at Velmore Farm would have a far greater impact in the integrity of the Local Gap. Whereas the presence of Hut Wood provides a degree of visual containment to Velmore Farm, there would be views into the site from the northern boundary with Castle Lane resulting in a greater degree of perceived coalescence.
4. We have serious concerns regarding the suitability of this site to accommodate the scale of proposed housing development due to significant constraints to development that questions whether 1,070 dwellings are achievable and deliverable. Draft Policy SA6 states there is the need for a SANG and a sequential approach to direct development away from areas at high risk of surface water flooding. Sustainability Appraisal Objective 10a) states the site includes a designated SINC and a further SINC immediately to the south both of which would require landscape buffers. Objective 12d) states just over a third of the site is subject to high levels of noise from the M3/M27, there are visual impacts from PRowS that will require mitigation. The site's capacity is also constrained by the sloping topography, high voltage power lines and route of a Roman Road that dissect the site. It is clear therefore that there are significant constraints on this site which reduces the extent of the developable area and questions the suitability of the site for the development of 1,070 dwellings.

Vision and Rationale for the Development of Land at Corner of Highwood Lane and Botley Road

The Land at Corner of Highwood Lane and Botley Road, Romsey relates well to the urban edge of Romsey and is accessible by walking and cycling to a wide range of facilities and services, including Halterworth Primary School, Mountbatten Secondary School, convenience store, children's nursery, employment opportunities and public house. Furthermore, the site is also well located in terms of accessibility to public transport, with bus routes operating providing access to Romsey town centre and railway station.

The site has been assessed by the Council as part of its SHELAA and identified as a deliverable site for housing development. The site is not constrained by any statutory landscape designations and is not largely visible from its surroundings, as is the case of Velmore Farm. The site can be distinguished from Ganger Farm as it does not adjoin an area of ancient woodland/SINC, it is at low risk of flooding and accessible to a range of key services and facilities.

It is considered that there are serious uncertainties about the suitability of the Land at Velmore Farm and South of Ganger Farm to accommodate this scale of development. Furthermore, there are significant issues associated with the soundness of these sites in terms of suitability to deliver the level of development proposed due to the combination of significant constraints, in particular the potential for impacts on sensitive landscape character and the integrity of the Local Gap (Velmore Farm), flood risks, accessibility and impacts on nature conservation designations.

Conversely the Land at Corner of Highwood Lane and Botley Road is not located within an area of high overall landscape sensitivity. It is well contained and defined by strong defensible boundaries to the east, west and south that would create a rounding off of the urban edge of Romsey that already extends further east to the south of the site. The eastern boundary with Highwood Lane would prevent uncontrolled sprawl into the wider 'gap' with North Baddesley, and would include an appropriate landscape buffer to minimise adverse impacts on the landscape and form part of a network of interconnected green spaces to promote biodiversity and informal recreation.

The allocation of this site for housing in the draft Local Plan could assist in bolstering the housing supply to deliver a range of housing types, sizes and tenures, including much needed affordable housing, especially in the early part of the Plan period. This would help address many of the issues identified to improve the soundness of the strategy set out at Policy SS6 to allocate large strategic sites and address likely delays to delivery likely to be experienced with this strategy, in accordance with the tests set out at Paragraph 35 of the NPPF – ensuring it is positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy. Overall, the site is available, suitable and deliverable under the terms of the NPPF and should be considered positively for a housing allocation to provide a minimum of 170 new homes in the Council's emerging Local Plan.

The opportunity to comment on the Regulation 18 – Stage 2 draft Local Plan is appreciated and it is respectfully requested that the Council takes into account the comments made and support this proposed allocation in order to help accommodate the Borough's housing need and improve the soundness of the plan. We would welcome the opportunity to meet to discuss these representations, however in the meantime please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries.

Yours faithfully



Ian Johnson
Managing Director
Luken Beck mdp Ltd

