

Maidstone Borough Local Plan- Inspector's Interim Findings - additional employment matters.

Submission by

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to the request by the Inspector under :

1- WIDER EMPLOYMENT NEEDS/PROVISION Interim Findings

It is necessary to establish both whether there is likely to be sufficient land overall to accommodate the employment needs and also what effect there may be in travel patterns, including net flows to London and elsewhere.

An assessment is therefore needed which updates the position on job targets and employment land provision in Maidstone and the adjoining boroughs/districts within the same economic area relative to the anticipated housing and population growth in these areas.

1 .My particular concern is the allocation of land for industrial (B1c/B2) and warehousing (B8) -

41,000 sq.m and for office (B1a/b) -7,500 sq.m. at Woodcut Farm within Policy EMP 1(5). I have submitted quite lengthy comments on Q6 as originally posed by Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) as to whether the Local Plan was consistent with National Policy. In that submission I gave my reasons why the economic case for such development did not warrant the proposed development and certainly therefore did not outweigh the adverse effects on the environmental and social aspects of the proposed development.

2. I continue to stand by the statements contained in that submission but will make some additional comments here: 1.General pertain to any attempts to predict the future as regards employment numbers and spatial land requirements; 2. With specific reference to the allocation of Woodcut Farm within the Maidstone Local Plan development proposals.

General Observations

3. Much work has obviously been carried out by MBC's consultants GVA but it is difficult to give much credence to any results more than about two years hence such is the uncertainty within the business environment, not only the extent of further economic development but its location. There is also the difficulty of relating proposed increases in dwelling numbers within Maidstone Borough to the requirement for employment, given that most of the incomers will have jobs elsewhere to be able to purchase dwellings in Maidstone, and will continue out-commuting; that some of the increase is the result of people living longer well beyond working age; that many of the children will not reach employment age until well after 2031. Thus many of the seemingly carefully produced figures are "best guesses".

4. Other factors are related to technological developments that are revolutionizing the way many aspects of employment are being carried out. Therefore it seems particularly important that development proposed in the Maidstone Borough Local Plan is concentrated on land already allocated for economic development or on previously developed brownfield land so that the green countryside is not destroyed unnecessarily. After all, the Inspector has acknowledged within a comment on Woodcut Farm that future allocations of office space might need to be made "*pending*".

a recovery of office values later in the plan period” suggesting that such values are not now in place. This is borne out by the amount of empty office space not only within Maidstone Borough but in neighbouring boroughs/districts.

5. The amount of land required for offices in relation to employment numbers is particularly difficult to calculate as so much communication is by email. Almost every worker who might at one time have had a desk space or be called into an office to receive work tasks has an IPAD or the equivalent. Hot desking is becoming the norm related to more working from home. Even well qualified professional advisors are going out to clients in rural areas if not so much in urban ones, and boardroom space is replaced by conference areas in specialist facilities often linked with refreshments. Therefore the old assessments of space no longer apply.

6. The use of the term “employment land” for warehousing and industrial development is almost a misnomer because of the amount of automation/use of robots now involved in the activities within such buildings. Therefore the amount of employment of people is very low. An example of modern warehousing almost completely operated by robots was given on February 8 on the BBC website News- Business namely a very new warehouse for Ocado in Andover. For industry there are the recent comments that redevelopment of America’s “rust belt” factories would introduce working by robots not lots of people.

Specifically related to Woodcut Farm.

7. Given the degree of automation/ robotic usage within modern warehouses it is evident that the large-scale warehouse development proposed for Woodcut Farm will do little for the employment prospects for the people of Maidstone. Yes there will be some maintenance workers and some to check on the robots but not many. Indeed it is unlikely that there will be the demand for much additional employment so far out from the centre of Maidstone. Indeed the few on-site jobs are as likely to attract workers from Medway, Swale and Ashford via the M20 as from Maidstone.

8. Given the change in the use of office space, and the amount of office space still available in Maidstone Borough and the adjoining districts plus Medway, (see submissions from CPRE Kent, the Bearsted and Thurnham Society and the Joint Parishes Group) it is evident that the “vanity project” that is MBC’s proposed “prestigious” office development at Woodcut Farm has no economic validity. Indeed such office seekers are very unlikely to choose a site close to unsightly warehouses with the constant noise of lorries and cranes operating 24/7. So offices proposed for Woodcut Farm might not be built and therefore would contribute little to the economy of Maidstone Borough.

9. However, should the totality of the buildings proposed for Woodcut Farm be built “on spec” those buildings would despoil a large swathe of the green countryside that forms the foreground of the scarp face of the Kent Downs escarpment, would deprive the residents of Bearsted, Thurnham and Hollingbourne of their proximity to the countryside and would do irreparable harm to the setting of Leeds Castle, one of the most important tourist attractions in England. Leeds Castle contributes much to the economy of Maidstone and indeed of Kent, at a time when tourism is being touted as of great significance to the UK’s economy now and in the future. The importance of Leeds Castle receives little prominence in the MBC Local Plan but with its varied activities, it is likely that employment would exceed that of the proposed warehousing for Woodcut Farm and quite likely that of the proposed offices as the demand for new offices at Eclipse Park has been zilch, hence the large retail shop and the proposed hotel.

10. However the reality check comes into the MBC Local Plan with the proposed changes to Policy RMX1(1), the medical campus, whereby initially 25,000sq.m was allocated for associated offices and research and development. However there seems to be an

awareness that this might be unrealistic and unrealisable, as has been the situation at Eclipse Park despite the aspirations expressed in Maidstone Borough Local Plan 2000 Policy ED4 (see para. 7 of my submission to MBC Q6). So the proposed addition to Policy RMX1(1) states **“Through the first Local Plan Review the Council will assess the site’s suitability for an element of non-medical related B1a/b uses. Factors which will inform this assessment will be progress with, and prospects for, the implementation of medical-related office development on the site and an updated assessment of the need for additional A1a/b floorspace in the borough to the end of the Plan period.”**

11 .**A similar reality check is needed for Policy EMP1(5) namely withdrawal.** The proposed built development will contribute little employment because it is not required in the light of changes to employment practices in the industrial, warehousing and office sectors whereas such building would do very considerable harm to the countryside environment, to the quality of life of local people and to the very significant tourist attraction that is Leeds Castle.