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18 November 2013

Dear Mr Roberts

THE PLAN FOR STAFFORD BOROUGH – RESPONSE TO ‘HOMEWORK’

We write on behalf of Commercial Estates Group (CEG) and further to your email (dated 11 November 2013) providing notification that the Council's homework pieces have been completed and are available for brief comment.

We welcome this opportunity and set out our comments below, with reference to the relevant homework.

Ref: N2.3

We briefly discussed with the Council where an appraisal of the wider Stafford East (as a reasonable alternative which should have been evaluated) site was contained within the Sustainability Appraisal.

Having had an opportunity to review this information (contained in Document H4: Sustainability Appraisal), we have concern that the basis on which the wider Stafford East site was dismissed is fundamentally flawed for the following reasons:

- The Council asserts that the wider Stafford East site would require a major new road scheme (the Eastern Distributor Road) at significant cost to both the public and private sector. We note that the EDR is no longer being promoted by the Council (at least not in full) but the first phase of the alignment is actually being delivered by virtue of the already consented schemes north and south of Tixall Road. A further phase of development in this location would enable the second phase of the road improvements to be provided, which the Council is seeking to secure and deliver.
- The proximity of the site to the Branscote Sewage Treatment Works is given as a reason for dismissing a larger scheme, yet given the extent of land in CEG's control in this location and by adopting a careful design solution, the proximity of the works does not impact on overall deliverability.
- Similarly, the proximity of the site to the Baswich Meadows SSSI and

Kingston Pool Covert do not represent constraints to the development.

- Similarly, development can be sensitively designed around the St Thomas' Priory Scheduled Ancient Monument and need not impact on the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal Conservation Areas which are some distance from the site also.
- Finally, reference is made to the Environment Agency proposing further flood risk investigative work. Again, it is unclear why this is a reason for not bringing a larger site area forward at Stafford East.
- The Council has not therefore properly evaluated the possibility of bringing forward a larger site for the Eastern Extension as a reasonable alternative. Accordingly that the Sustainability Appraisal is flawed and does not comply with the SEA Regulations.

Ref: N2.8

The Council's note serves to highlight that three out of 10 of the adjoining plans were adopted pre-NPPF and with the exception of Telford and Wrekin, carry forward the draft preferred option housing figures promoted through the former West Midlands RSS Phase II Revision. Telford and Wrekin has adopted the former adopted RSS (2004) figure. The remaining seven plans are yet to be adopted and there has been a varied approach to establishing the level of 'objectively assessed housing need'.

Given this wider context coupled with the approach taken by Stafford Council to identifying its future housing requirement, more work is needed by the Council to consider the wider housing market area and the level of objectively assessed housing need that ought to be met through this plan.

The Table N28 starkly demonstrates that the level of need has been addressed amongst the neighbouring authorities. In doing so, it shows that the Duty to Co-Operate has not been substantively and therefore lawfully engaged.

Ref: N2.11

We support the Council's proposed approach to the removal of the settlement boundaries from around Stafford and Stone, for the reasons set out by the Council.

Ref: N2.16

Having reviewed the Council's proposed housing trajectory for delivery of development in the plan period, we have the following observations. Achievement of the proposed quantum of development in the remaining plan period will require:

- The level of annual completions to significantly increase to levels higher than those pre-recession;

- It relies on existing extant permissions being built out to 'plug the gap' before the northern and western SDL's start delivering;
- The delivery rate for Stafford North, in particular, remains optimistic for the reasons set out in our evidence previously.

Ref: N2.17

Our main concern here is the way the Council has tried to remodel the need for affordable housing to show a lower level of need over the plan period and hence to suggest that no additional uplift is required in the overall housing targets.

The Council has in effect thrown out the SHMA as a data source for measuring the backlog of need and is now modelling this on the basis of typical levels observed by its consultants in other areas (which might be quite different to Stafford). Hence the Council's new justification for no uplift in housing numbers due to affordable need is entirely unsupported by the SHMA (which is meant to be the primary source for such information) and local evidence.

The SHMA itself uses local data to establish the need (including the backlog) and concludes that because the Housing Register is refreshed every year the backlog can be assumed to be an annual figure (of 270 per annum) – see para A.12. There is no justification in reducing this level after the first five years of analysis. The annual need shown by the modelling for 210 homes per annum is therefore relevant for the whole plan period and at 30% affordable housing delivery provision of up to 700 homes each year would be a justified figure.

Overall, the Council is now introducing new evidence into the inquiry which cannot in the timescales be properly tested but does appear to not specifically relate to Stafford Borough. In doing this they are essentially removing the SHMA as an evidence base for determining affordable needs and as a result do not have the required evidence to support the Local Plan.

Ref: N2.18

We note that the Council now accepts that the current boundary for the Stafford North site cannot deliver the full 3,100 dwellings that are anticipated during the plan period. As a result and following a meeting with the sites' promoters, the Council is proposing to extend the current site boundary to include additional land in order that the full quantum of development can be achieved. We note that this will still require delivery of some off-site green infrastructure including SANG's. This is a major modification which requires a full sustainability appraisal and in turn consideration of reasonable alternative options.

Rather than extending Stafford North further (and notwithstanding the need for the overall housing requirement for the Borough to increase which will likely require additional land to be identified in any event), it remains our view that additional development can be accommodated at Stafford East and *inter alia* this will help deliver the second phase of highway improvements that the



Council refers to elsewhere in its submitted draft plan.

Ref: N.34

We welcome the clarity brought about by the Council's proposed changes to Policy Stafford 4.

We trust that these comments will be taken into consideration and ask that we are duly kept informed of progress on the plan accordingly. In this regard, please could you ensure that my details are added to the Council's mailing database (sarah.wozencroft@indigoplanning.com).

We look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sarah Wozencroft', written in a cursive style.

Sarah Wozencroft

cc: Commercial Estates Group (CEG)
Mr D Walton, Walton & Co