

MB/GAJ

27 November 2013

For the attention of Forward Plans Section

Chief Planner
Stafford Borough Council
Civic Centre
Riverside
STAFFORD
ST16 3AQ

cc Programme Officer, Roger Bedson, David Bowers

Dear Sir or Madam

Re: Bowers Land Parcels at Stone

Thank you for your response in the "homework" response Document/revised Stone inset map arising from the Local Plan Hearings.

As the Inspector emphasised on the second day I attended, the approach on all sides is consensual and one should move expeditiously but not rush fences. I understand the Hearings are still technically open but the Inspector is now deliberating his Interim Report. One is highly appreciative of the pressures on planning departments at the moment and we continue to look to work with you to achieve overall soundness in the Plan. The world continues to turn whilst the deliberations are in train and we have some thoughts to put to you.

What no individual planning consultant can hope to advise his client on fully is, of course, the full context of the Plan as it develops through the Hearings and proposed modifications. Your help in keeping me right on that and advising me of anything I may have missed will be appreciated.

On the other hand, writing planner to planner, we can take things in comparatively short order. Let me, therefore, propose the following as potentially "Sound" and putting the Bowers family in a position where I can advise them to tell the Inspector/ any future re-consultation that they now support the Plan.

- a) The two parcels 1084 and 0182 are now proposed to be in their obvious use and incorporated into the industrial area; which may or may not be subject to the moratorium.
- b) We should agree the area within the blue line for this part of the SDL. The Stone Policy speaks of "at least 18 hectares" at the present and those words

are echoed in the Statement of Common Ground. Before coming to a view on whether that quantity needs to be amended, let us agree our mensuration. I have not seen the area now proposed to be "blue" on the Inset Plan precisely measured in any document to date. Is there an accurate area calculated please?

- c) The Bowers would have to become a signatory to a revised Statement of Common Ground. Other than repeating the point about an industrial area being developed, the Statement of Common Ground, so far as the economic area is concerned, does not do what the box on the front of the SCG says. That is, it does not produce any guidance on milestones and timings. Do I take it I should contact Mr Stoney at Hallam Land about this? Is he the lead on the overall SDL?
- d) Shall we confirm together for the avoidance of doubt that the Plan envisages the SDL as a single entity? That is how I read the policy and I note the cross-referencing in vii and xii of the policy.
- e) The Bowers' farm has no long-term future but they will continue to farm it to quit and gain the value they can from using it to the exclusion of all others until a better planned solution comes forward. The future of what we can continue to call for ease parcel 1011 is critical. I will use 1011 as a shorthand for that developable land above flood level.
- f) We accept immediately that, until my representations within the statutory time on this Plan, the Bowers' land was being promoted primarily for retail. I also say immediately that the Bowers' family file has quite a lot of commercial feedback but nothing like the degree of updating on planning matters one would expect of a quality planning agent acting for them. Only you know what informal representations were made to you at what time and how they were put.
- g) Be that as it may, the discussion on retail policy at the Hearing, and the non-allocation of a retail site in this Plan have been heard. The Inspector will offer you his guidance in due course. We can add little consensual on that at this stage I suspect but if there is anything you think we can directly agree for the Inspector, I will obviously listen to any wording.
- h) It seems to me more important in these discussions to face the question "how can this prime gateway site contribute to positive planning for Stone's future ? This issue must face the possibility that the retail required for Stone ends up located elsewhere. Whilst nothing is ruled out, a high quality B1 or B1/B8 use comes first to mind. One notes the general constraints around Stone. One notes the position at the conjunction of the road system. One notes the comparative ease of access to existing housing, future housing and the town centre. One notes particularly that the SDL -and not least its ways of being

accessed -mean it will present commercial land of a different type and quality to parcel 1011. My colleagues at Hinson Parry, for example, would see themselves promoting this site (liaising with your economic development colleagues of course) as a prestige site for a major quality employer. I am told that a major local employer did make an approach some time ago but the lead agents then were focussed on retail and nothing came of it.

- i) You will recall that my starting point in the formal representations, re-emphasised in the Hearing Statement, was about the Development Boundary for Stone. The obvious first step is to agree that the Development Boundary for Stone when redrawn under SP7 – so far as anything is predictable and can be guaranteed – should include the developable land above flood level. I would want to discuss with you then whether you brought in to the Settlement Boundary the other Bowers' fields south of the A51 because a change of use to riverside park is still 'development'.
- j) The fields north of the A51, through which walkways and access are shown on the incipient plans for a green infrastructure park perhaps need to be referenced and given an explicit plan-led context. I can think of a number of ways of doing that but you know your own Plan best and what you have said at Stafford and elsewhere about linked hard development/green infrastructure proposals and masterplans. Perhaps you would like to propose some Plan wording to us or we can get round a table if you could propose a suitable time.

It seems to me there is a wonderful opportunity to show the value of good planning here. Your vision for the future looks to Stone's unique position as a river/canal town. The Bowers have land which they should not be left farming to quit but which should move into use for the new park. Your Plan envisages that happening as part of a development-led package. Everyone is on board with such an idea. The withdrawal of the Stone development line gives a prime opportunity for reconsideration. The 'Westbridge Park or not' issue will probably settle itself on other arguments. Whichever way that goes, we know the retail use of the Bowers' site will only come after a sequential test analysis compared to at least one other competitor site. Given the interim criteria in SP7 then, as I read it, the Bowers' site could get on with promoting itself for B1 use or even apply with a reasonable prospect of immediate success, moratorium or not on the SDL.

Are we on our way to consensus?

Yours sincerely

Dr Malcolm Bell

MA, MRTPI, FRAgS, MIEnvS, AIAgMgt